

## THE BEGA CHANNEL – A LANDMARK IN THE BANAT REGION

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**Abstract:** *The Bega Channel represents a landmark both for the Banat region and for the city of Timișoara, being the proof of progress and of civilization in a century when this area could compete with Western areas from many points of view. Timișoara had had many benefits from the river as a means of transport, before the railroad was built in 1857. The river used to be the only link to Central and Western Europe, as goods were transported by ship to Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Moreover, the first hydraulic pump that was installed in the Fabric neighbourhood allowed the households to receive drinkable water. In 1869, the ships started to transport passengers on the Bega channel. Thus, Timișoara becomes the first city on the territory of present day Romania to use this means of public transport.*

**Keywords:** *Bega channel, Banat, navigation, tourist potential*

The moment when the Ottoman domination ended in Banat, the Vienna Imperial Court considered that this province should be part of the Empire. Thus, for some decades, Timișoara and the entire Banat region was under the administration of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Count Claude Florimond Mercy d'Argenteau, who was an excellent organizer with vision, planned a massive restructuring of the city of Timișoara and of its surrounding area. In order to make the province profitable and to align it to the standards of the Empire, he prioritized the draining of swamps, which were a source of diseases. He also sought for a solution to transport agricultural products, manufactured products and wood, as it was “essential that all surplus provided by nature and craftsmen should be carried with minimum effort to the Danube, so that it could be exported to Austria” (Griselini 1984: 131).

Thus, the canalization of the Bega River became a priority. The building of the channel began at Făget, passing through Răchita, Belinț and Chizătau, following as much as possible straight directions, until the channel reached Timișoara, where four smaller channels opened up, with locks used to provide water for water mills, for factories and plants and to transport construction materials, wood and salt (Griselini 1984: 131).

Once the channel opened for navigation, Timișoara also had access to drinking water. It was possible to navigate down the Bega River from Timișoara for about 70 km.

A few years after the project finished, the Dutch engineer Maximilian Fremaunt draw up a plan to perfect the channel started by Mercy, establishing a link

between the rivers Timiș and Bega, in order to ensure the necessary flow for navigation (Griselini 1984: 147).

Between 1728 and 1732, the stream of the Bega River was modified, and a channel suitable for navigation was built. Thus, the city was connected to the rivers Tisa and Danube, suitable to become part of the Central European water transport network. As a consequence, the works on the rivers Bega and Timis and the draining of swamps changed radically the image of the city.

Along time, the construction work and the maintenance works on the channel implied a great amount of effort, both financially and organizationally. The biggest challenge was ensuring the workforce necessary for such a huge undertaking. Hard labour was one of the basic obligations of royal subjects, this labour force being used especially for military work.

An important contribution was brought by Swabians (colonizers of German origin coming from the present territory of the German Land Baden Württemberg), who continue to arrive in this region during the reign of Carol the second. Construction works went rapidly, taking into account the technical and material characteristics of the time. In 1732, navigation on the Bega Channel begins, as the first ship sails from Timișoara to Pancevo.

Against the stream, especially in case of a high level of water, vessels were tugged from the riverbank. In December 1732, the Administrative Office of the village Becicherec stated that it was necessary to hire people to tug boats on the channel from „Salankement” to Timișoara, the payment being 12 coins a day. In December 1739, the same office requires the Administration to command people from the districts of Timișoara and Ciacova to tug numerous vessels loaded with food for animals and flour (Baróti 1893: 325)

The fact that the first hydraulic pump was built in Fabric put Timișoara on the map of European cities that were the most developed at that time (London, Paris and Augsburg). They all had a centralized system of drinking water due to the fact that the pump took water from the river into a reservoir and then, through a system of pipes made of pine wood, the water went to all the pumps in the city.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new institution was set up, led by a representative of the government. His task was to take care and to develop navigation downstream from Klek.

If the water itinerary was not always shorter than the land itinerary, it definitely represented the advantage that it offered the possibility to transport a larger quantity of products with less effort, and implicitly with lower spending.

The Bega Channel became a navigable route for boats and small ships to the Danube River and further, to the Rhine River, taking the waters of the Bega River south from Timișoara, and directing them to the south of Beba Veche. The Steam Navigation Society Danube (Dunagızhajozási társaság), which used to take care of most of the traffic on the river Bega, opened an agency in Timișoara. Transport of people was not regulated. Goods transport was mostly on the area that began after Zrenjanin.

Timișoara had many advantages until the rail road was constructed in 1857, as it was the only gateway to Central and Western Europe, so that good could be transported to Rotterdam. For 200 years the waters of the Bega River have served these purposes.

In 1869, the first passenger transportation boats appear on the Bega channel. Thus, Timișoara becomes the first city in Romania to use this form of public transport.

The modernization of the Bega channel continued and it saw a considerable development by the modernization of locks, the reconstruction of dams, consolidation of banks, all these complex works continuing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (D.J.A.N.Timiș). Passenger transportation on the channel reached a peak at about 500,000 passengers in 1944. Unfortunately, passenger boats were no longer in use starting with the year 1967. A small part of the channel was still navigable in Timișoara being used by a small number of boats. Until 1988, Bega was the only inner waterway suitable for navigation in Romania.

In 2008, the Tăriceanu government decided that Timișoara should become the only developing area in the West region (formed of Arad County, Caraș-Severin County, Hunedoara County and Timiș County). Thus, Timișoara had access to European funds of about 70.5 million euros. One of the projects that benefitted from this financing was „Rehabilitation of public urban infrastructure of the Bega channel banks”. The project was estimated at 51,650,114.49 lei. From the value of eligible spending, 80.35% accounts for non-reimbursable financial assistance, 17.65% accounts for governmental co-financing, and 2% accounts for funds coming from the local budget.

Even if, Bega is 10.6 km long in Timisoara and it represents the link among the three historical neighbourhoods Fabric, Cetate and Iosefin, the modernization is not yet completed. Both the alleys and the urban furniture have degraded and they need major investments. The concept is not a unitary one; construction materials are different in different parts of the city. As far as the modernization concept is concerned, the City Hall has planned to remove the silt and to clean the Bega Channel so that water transport could restart. A vaporetto will be used for every day transport and for entertainment so that a better fluidization and connectivity of public transport is created.

According to the project, landscape projects of the banks include rehabilitation works. The water transport also implies pontoon bridges, toilets, leisure activities, and emergency intervention ramps. The built surface will be around 167,928 square metres.

In addition, the County Council has won European funds for the project that proposed building bicycle routes from Timișoara to Serbia, along the Bega Channel. The first 40 kilometres will be built in the next few years based on a partnership between Timis County Council and Ziliste Council (Serbia). Another partner in this project is Administrația Bazinală de Apă Banat (Banat Water Administration). Thus, the tourist potential of the Bega River will be exploited.

The rehabilitation of the Bega channel and its integration in the navigable circuit imply that tourism in Banat could offer more trips at the weekend on water to Budapest or even to Vienna or Holland.

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