

Romania – Bulgaria. The Interconnectivity Problem ¹

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Lower Danube as a key connector

Lower Danube has long occupied a place in the Romanian collective memory as a frontier, resource and a point of contention. After 2022, however, it acquired a new significance: a strategic asset that connects the wider Black Sea region with Central and South-East Europe, while also serving as a source of resilience for both the European Union and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Danube has ceased to be merely a shared administrative waterway between Romania and Bulgaria; for Bucharest it has become an asset essential to the economic stability of the entire region.

In that context Lower Danube has emerged as a key logistical artery for military mobility, energy, agriculture, trade as the war against Ukraine continues. At the same time, Bucharest is reassessing many of its past policies and attitudes toward the river and its strategic role.

The past is never gone: the Danube in Romanian-Bulgarian relations

Historically, cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria on the Danube has been characterised, as several experts have noted, as »rather a ‘boundary’ phenomenon than a possible development corridor« – it was an element of discontinuity and not an element of cooperation (Stoychev et al. 2016).

The border delimitation established along the Danube in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained largely unchallenged and gradually transformed itself into a protective barrier (Ioana-Toroimac and Vîrghileanu 2025). The interwar period saw the emergence of a political debate on the creation of a Danubian confederacy (Sebe 2011), but these ideas never materialized. Under the auspices of the Warsaw Pact, the situation remained unchanged, with a limited interest in developing the Danube region or enhancing cross-border connectivity (Stoychev et al. 2016).

The foundations of the contemporary bilateral relations in infrastructure were laid by the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Good-Neighbourliness between Romania and the Republic of Bulgaria, signed in Sofia on 27 January 1992. The treaty established a framework for political, economic, and cultural cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria and paved the way for effective coordination in promoting common interests at the regional, European, Euro-Atlantic, and international levels, including in the field of infrastructure development (Romanian MFA a, n.d.).

¹ Working paper: Please do not cite without permission from the author. This paper will be published in a collective volume "Lower Danube: A Shared River, A Shared Security", Fall 2026

Following the 2007 EU enlargement, however, relations between Romania and Bulgaria remained relatively shallow, as accession did not act as a catalyst for rapid interconnectivity. Much of the bilateral dialogue during this period took place in the context of mechanisms such as the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), which was often used domestically to highlight institutional divergences and Romania's perceived progress in governance reforms (Vachudova and Spendzharova 2012).

It was, in many aspects, a period of missed opportunities as we witnessed a slow momentum in advancing common projects, due to a stronger focus on domestic political priorities rather than on cross-border cooperation. The Danube was more a border than a connector (US Department of State 1965). It was a period when the lack of physical connectivity emerged as a strategic vulnerability. Technical measures such as dredging and routine maintenance could not overcome that.

A notable achievement was the opening of the Calafat-Vidin Bridge in 2013. Built at an estimated cost of approximately €250 million, mostly through European Union funds, the project aimed to improve connectivity and stimulate local economic development on both sides of the river (Hotnews 2013).

Another important, albeit more limited, initiative was the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), endorsed by the Council in 2011. Conceived as a first attempt to create a macro-regional framework for the entire Danube basin, the strategy sought to strengthen regional connectivity and cooperation. Its impact was and still is constrained by its structural limitations – based on the principle of the »three no's«: no new EU funds, no additional EU structures and no new EU legislation. These limitations affected its ability to generate transformative infrastructure projects across the region (EUSDR, n.d.).

The 2022 watershed moment in bilateral relations

The 2022 Russian Federation aggression against Ukraine generated a reconfiguration of the logic of connectivity along the Lower Danube. Transportation infrastructure is no longer an economic factor but increasingly is perceived as a strategic lifeline, integrated with broader logistical and security systems (Kravets 2026). The new security landscape and its far-reaching consequences at the regional, European, and global levels compelled both Romania and Bulgaria to adapt their strategic objectives in order to address emerging challenges.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov visited Romania in April 2022 and both sides emphasized their interest in improving road and river connections along the Danube in order to ensure navigability and facilitate regional trade.

»At the bilateral level, President Klaus Iohannis and Prime Minister Kiril Petkov (...) discussed shared goals to improve road and river connections along the Danube and to take the necessary measures to ensure the river's navigability. In this regard, they emphasized the need for the rapid implementation of the European Fast Danube Project, designed to improve navigation in the Romanian-Bulgarian section of the Danube. Both leaders highlighted the important role of

the communities on both banks of the Danube, noting that establishing these connections contributes to economic development and the creation of new opportunities for them« (Administrația Prezidențială 2022).

In this broader context, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and his Bulgarian counterpart, Rumen Radev, agreed to elevate bilateral relations to the level of a Strategic Partnership. Thus, on 15 March 2023 in Sofia, the two heads of state signed the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the Republic of Bulgaria (Romanian MFA b, n.d.).

These developments reflected a broader paradigm shift in regional thinking, with the concept of »dual-use« infrastructure taking the lead. As Stober (2026) notes, » (...) investments in rail, road, and port infrastructure – often co-financed with EU funds – have pronounced dual-use relevance. They underpin both military mobility and the civilian flows (...)«. The cooperation was and still is potentially challenged by fiscal pressures and geopolitical shocks.

At present, the most significant initiative is the FAST Danube 2 project, which represents a substantial departure from the more ad-hoc approaches of the past. Its main objective is to »ensure unimpeded navigation for at least 340 days/year, by maintaining a fairway of adequate width and depth with an appropriate alignment«. The total allocated budget is of approximately €230 million, with 85 per cent financed through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). Implementation began in April 2024, and completion is scheduled for December 2028 (Ionescu 2026; Soare and Zanev 2025). Beyond its technical dimensions, FAST Danube 2 illustrates a more proactive Romanian role and a higher level of trust between the two states, as the two national organizations involved in the administrative aspects (procurements etc.) must work closely together. The project can therefore be interpreted as evidence of both enhanced cooperation and increased assertiveness on Romania's side.

Physical infrastructure, however, must be complemented by a digital one. An example is the Romanian-Bulgarian Cooperation for Green Fit Danube System, launched in August 2024, which seeks to develop a »pilot system for monitoring, prevention and reaction to water pollution, caused from shipping on the Danube river« (European Union 2026). One of the key documents that underline this cooperation is the Memorandum of Cooperation in the fields of innovation, digitalization, start-up ecosystem, high-tech development, digital connectivity and research signed in October 2023 meant to promote the digital cooperation (ANC, 2023). Also, one of the main frameworks of cooperation with a digital component is that of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) which is supposed to promote also the bilateral and regional digital cooperation. One such project is the flagship and multi-country project title 5G Corridors (Black Sea–Adriatic Highway) where financing is given for providing high-quality 5G communication services across the main transport corridors and across the Romanian-Bulgarian Border (MFEA Croatia 2026 & EC, 2026c)

From this perspective, the pipeline of planned projects also is equally ambitious. Among the most important is the proposed Giurgiu-Ruse 2 Bridge, which will be built as part of the Bucharest-Giurgiu motorway project and followed by additional crossings intended to improve connectivity across the Danube. The estimated value of the contract for the preparation of the feasibility study is 60.87 million lei (excluding VAT), financed through CEF 2 under the

Military Mobility component. The study, which must be completed within a maximum of 23 months, is expected to determine:

- the location of the Giurgiu-Ruse 2 Bridge,
- the type of bridge (road-only or combined road and rail),
- the estimated construction cost.

The construction of this new bridge aims to increase the technical and economic efficiency of transport network between Romania and Bulgaria, while also strengthening the broader North-South European transport axis in the new geopolitical context (Dobreanu 2026).

Another document meant to strengthen cooperation as regards the transport links: the Memorandum of Understanding signed by Greece, Bulgaria and Romania in December 2025. It established a Black Sea–Aegean Sea Corridor Platform (BACP), providing a new political and technical framework to accelerate the modernization and interoperability of strategic rail, road and inland waterway connections (European Commission 2025a).

As of June 2026, any assessment of Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation must consider the Romanian domestic political crisis. This may add some uncertainties regarding the continuity of multi-year infrastructure projects and policy commitments. The national economic context marked by a high public deficit, may constrain future investment ambitions (Ferrero-Turrión 2026).

Some experts also raise the possibility of a gradual shift from strategic engagement toward a more transactional approach to partnerships (Șerban and Trandafir 2026). From a stable and predictable partner, toward a more reactive and less proactive in pursuing regional initiatives. The pace of projects such as FAST Danube 2 and the Giurgiu-Ruse 2 Bridge may see some slowdowns, as the administrative and political instability and potential legislative deadlock may slow down decision-making and project execution.

Table 1. SWOT analysis: The cooperation potential between Romania and Bulgaria. Own creation

Strengths	Cohesive legal and institutional framework Major infrastructure projects (Fast Danube 2, the Vertical Gas Corridor) EU and NATO membership
Weaknesses	Political instability in Romania and Bulgaria Administrative and bureaucratic burdens for new projects Operational bottlenecks in some projects
Opportunities	EU funding New energy sources

	Regional cooperation mechanism Geographical location
Threats	Geopolitical crises Economic shocks that may limit the investments Outside interferences

EU and NATO impact on bilateral cooperation

Romania-Bulgaria bilateral relations have been profoundly shaped by membership in the NATO (2004) and EU (2007), which have provided the overarching framework for integration and cooperation, among others in the area of infrastructure development.

NATO membership has provided the strategic rationale for building up Romanian–Bulgarian cooperation in the field of connectivity. It has transformed the Danube from a historical point of separation into a corridor of integration and connectivity. Military mobility, a long-overdue European priority, is now at the forefront of both NATO and EU agendas, turning the Danube into a key corridor with a »dual-use« function that aligns with the concept of a »military Schengen zone«. This development has become an important driver of infrastructure modernization and investments required to support military mobility) (Gaubert et al. 2025).

On 10 July 2024 a Letter of Intent was signed between Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece for the creation of a Military Mobility Corridor. According to the agreement, »The project aims to enhance transport corridors to meet the military mobility requirements by creating certain supply routes (road and rail) among the participating states, reducing bureaucracy during peacetime and maximizing efficiency in emergency and crisis situations, in accordance with the NATO and national initiatives« (Romanian Ministry of National Defence 2024).

From this perspective, however, the most meaningful impact comes from EU membership. First and foremost, the EU is the principal source of the multi-billion-euro funding required for navigability improvements and bridge construction, as mentioned above. In this regard, particular attention should be given to the Interreg VI-A Romania-Bulgaria Programme, financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and approved by the European Commission on the 30 November 2022. Among its priorities is Priority 1: A Well-Connected Region, with a total budget of €27.15 million, including €21.40 million from the ERDF (Interreg a, n.d.). The programme is currently implementing two projects. The first, »Danube Integrated System for MARKing« (2024 – 2027), (aims to modernize and optimize river navigation through the introduction of cutting-edge, sustainable technologies (Interreg b, n.d.). The second, »DANRISS 2: Enhanced Danube River Inspection through AI and Data Integration« (2026 – 2028), seeks to modernize and improve ship inspection processes along the shared Romanian-Bulgarian stretch of the Danube River (Interreg 2026).

Secondly, the accession of both Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area, initially through air and maritime borders and subsequently through land border, has created important synergies

for cross-border cooperation. Accession has fostered more intensive inter-institutional cooperation at the national level, as well as closer cooperation with neighbouring countries, Hungary and Bulgaria. In the year following Romania's entry into the Schengen Area through its land borders, customs waiting times reportedly decreased by a factor of six to twelve. It is estimated that logistics costs for carriers and SMEs have been reduced by approximately €2–3 billion. Border crossings have also become significantly easier for tourists, creating opportunities for further development of Romania's tourism sector, which accounts for about 3–4 per cent of GDP (European Institute of Romania 2026).

The EU framework has also played a major role in the energy sector. In this context, one of the most visible recent initiatives is the Vertical Gas Corridor, a strategic natural gas transport route connecting the networks of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary, with extensions to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. This project could enable both Bulgaria and Romania to move beyond the bilateral energy trade and develop into regional hubs for U.S. LNG and Black Sea gas (United States Energy Association 2025; Gongoroi 2025). The Vertical Gas Corridor is complemented by the BRUA Project (Bulgaria–Romania–Hungary–Austria), a strategic gas interconnection initiative linking the natural gas networks of the above-mentioned member states. The project, developed by Transgaz, aims to enhance EU energy security and facilitate the two-way transport of natural gas (State Inspectorate for Constructions, n.d.).

A recently approved initiative is also the CARMEN Project (Carpathian Modernized Energy Network), which seeks to improve electricity market integration, support the large-scale integration of renewable energy sources, and enhance energy security and system flexibility in Romania and Bulgaria. The project has received a total grant of €103.69 million (Spotmedia 2026).

A further project with substantial connectivity benefits is the proposed Turnu Măgurele-Nicopole Hydroelectric Power Station, which is currently awaiting approval. The project aims to make optimal use of the Danube River's hydropower potential and has an estimated cost of €6.37 billion, supported by EU funding (European Commission 2026a). As noted by Nicuț (2004), »this is a cross-border project in which the hydroelectric power plant represents only a small part of the benefits—it is a major infrastructure project that will provide significant connectivity between the two countries—through roads, railways, and energy networks, as there will be a substation, and it will also improve navigation and flood risk management«.

Another policy development is the 2025 »European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region«, which frames the Black Sea as a key area for connectivity. The strategy emphasizes the importance of »infrastructure development: Improve connectivity by developing transport, energy and digital infrastructure aligned with Trans-European Networks, linking Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean« (European Commission 2025b). Despite its strategic significance, critics note that the initiative lacks dedicated funding and therefore remains dependent on existing sectoral policies for implementation (European Parliament 2025).

Another important layer for connectivity within the EU – the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) (Three Seas Business Council, n.d.), where Romania and Bulgaria are participating states. By promoting flagship and multi-country projects of regional relevance (such as the Baltic–Black–

Aegean Corridor, Via Carpatia, and the Rhine–Danube Corridor) (The Three Seas Initiative Research Center, n.d.), the 3SI places particular emphasis on strengthening the North-South connectivity axis across Central and Eastern Europe (Croatian MFA 2026).

Romania – Bulgaria impact on their immediate vicinity

The Bulgarian–Romanian interconnectivity does not only benefit the two countries directly; it also shapes connectivity patterns and opportunities for neighbouring states.

One notable example is Ukraine, with which Romania has a long land border. Beyond existing bilateral connectivity projects, Romania plays a crucial role in plans for a passenger rail connection linking Ukraine and Bulgaria. According to several officials, this route, which would transit through Romania, could establish a new international railway link along the Ukraine–Romania–Bulgaria corridor at a time when the region is seeking improved transport connectivity and greater integration of transport networks. The service could become operational as early as this summer (Dumitru 2026).

The Republic of Moldova is another country that stands to benefit from a stronger Romanian–Bulgarian connectivity. In this regard, Romania’s acquisition of the Port of Giurgiulești, Moldova’s sole maritime gateway (Digi24 2026), represents an important step toward a more integrated regional logistics network. This development also supports the consolidation of the »Danube Action Plan 2.0, created under the European Commission’s Solidarity Lanes initiative, to strengthen cooperation for efficient and safe navigation on the Danube River, promote effective communication between ports in Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova, optimize information exchange to support transport operations and offer swift responses to address possible traffic disruption in Black Sea / Danube river« (European Commission 2026b). The cultural dimension should also be envisaged given the existence of ethnic Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova, especially in the Taraclia District. A strong common cooperation can help improve the ethnic relationships and better promote the European values (The New Union Post, 2025). Energy plays a key role and Romania and Republic of Moldova have done a lot of efforts toward improving the connectivity. For instance, on 23 April 2026, the Romanian government approved the legal framework for the Aerial Electric Line 400 kV of interconnexion with the Republic of Moldova Suceava – Bălți (the Romanian section) (Dorombach, 2026). Also new gas interconnection projects are on the agenda such as the projects Vulcănești-Smârdan, Comrat-Smârdan și Vulcănești-Artsyz within the trilateral Romania – Republic of Moldova – Ukraine, that would also increase the potential of Republic of Moldova to become a key element for the Vertical Gas Corridor (Ministry of Energy of Republic of Moldova, 2025). This will just be added to the already working gas interconnector Iași – Ungheni – Chișinău. At the end of the day the energy connectivity is also a prerequisite for the European Union integration of Republic of Moldova in order to become a full participant to the European network ENTSO-E and eliminate historical dependencies (Popescu, 2026).

Developing more connectors is key as the ongoing conflict and its subsequent destructions affect Republic of Moldova energy security – for instance, the Isaccea – Vulcănești electrical

land line and the main interconnector with the EU was affected by bombardments and this resulted in an energy crisis in the spring of 2026 (Mold Street, 2026).

Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation also has a direct impact on Serbia, particularly in the field of energy interconnection. Bulgaria and Romania are key transit and connectivity countries for Serbia's integration into the EU energy market, especially given the growing importance of the Vertical Corridor (International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies 2025). One factor that affects the cooperation is the structural asymmetry generated by our differing positions within Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture. This may act as both a barrier or as an opportunity given Serbia status as an official candidate for EU membership. The robust economic relationship between Romania and Serbia shaped by geographic proximity and the Danube corridor, has the greatest potential in the energy sector, industrial manufacturing and electrical equipment, and agriculture and food processing. From that perspective, the recommendations given to the bilateral relationship Romania – Serbia can be extended to a trilateral format given the shared Danube connector. Any future cooperation "should be anchored in a connectivity-driven framework built on three mutually reinforcing pillars: the Danube corridor as a strategic artery of regional logistics and future Ukraine reconstruction flows, the modernization of rail and intermodal links within a broader Trieste–Constanța axis in the context of the IMEC corridor, and a more ambitious partnership in the gas sector focused on diversification, resilience, and long-term energy security" (Kakillioglu, Velebit, Ivic and Jovanovic, 2026: 6-7).

Going forward

Romania and Bulgaria currently have a historic opportunity to further advance interconnectivity projects and move beyond simple coordination toward a genuine model of integrated regional governance. Such a model could provide both countries with the leverage needed to strengthen their voice at the European level.

One potential solution would be the formalization of the Black Sea–Aegean Sea Corridor Platform (BACP) through the establishment of a permanent secretariat. Going from a ministerial format toward a permanent, staff-based structure capable of monitoring technical aspects such as environmental standards, permitting procedures, and procurement processes, could help overcome many of the obstacles that have hindered infrastructure development in the region.

From a practical perspective the work on the new Giurgiu–Ruse Bridge should be accelerated. The project should be designated a »strategic interest project« under the next EU budget cycle in order to secure uninterrupted financing insulated from domestic political fluctuations (Economedica 2024). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the »dual-use« specifications required by NATO standards should be incorporated from the outset.

Physical infrastructure should also be developed in parallel with its »digital twin«. Digital connectivity is becoming just as important as physical connectivity, and the deployment of

high-capacity cross-border digital infrastructure will be essential for future economic development and competitiveness.

Moving beyond the current pipeline projects should also be considered. A common Romanian-Bulgarian energy strategy could and should be envisaged over the medium and long term, with particular emphasis on the offshore wind potential of the Black Sea. For example, even a low-intensity scenario for Romania envisages the deployment of 3 GW of offshore generation capacity by 2035, sufficient to meet approximately 16 per cent of the country's electricity consumption. The scenario is projected to generate substantial economic gains, with associated supply chain activities expected to add around €1.4 billion to the national economy (World Bank Group 2024). Combined with the potential of the Bulgarian coastline, offshore wind development could become a genuine regional game changer.

The trilateral Declaration of Intent signed in Athens on 19 January 2026, by Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, establishes a framework for cooperation in offshore wind development, renewable hydrogen, and electric vehicle charging infrastructure. Among its key objectives are the joint assessment of offshore wind resources in the Black Sea and Aegean Sea basins, the preparation of feasibility and technical studies, and the gradual alignment of regulatory frameworks. The three countries also plan to seek recognition for these initiatives as cross-border renewable energy projects under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). It also proposes the establishment of a regional renewable hydrogen cluster bringing together public authorities, transmission system operators, and private-sector actors (Petrović 2026).

Several policy and institutional measures could be pursued to strengthen bilateral cooperation. Options like: enhanced bilateral coordination within existing regional mechanisms; accelerated implementation of the Strategic Partnership in the area of connectivity; the establishment of a permanent intergovernmental coordination mechanism for strategic planning and infrastructure project monitoring, or the optimisation, through a bilateral dialogue, of the EU funding and private investment opportunities may be discussed and potentially implemented.

Other methods like the intensive involvement of public local administrations; the use of parliamentary diplomacy through the existing friendship group, or the facilitation of the private sector networking can all contribute to broader support, legitimacy, and project sustainability.

The democratic governance also plays a role: if the governments are able to deliver large-scale infrastructure projects that benefit the citizens and bring prosperity that this can consolidate their legitimacy.

Creating social cohesion through bilateral projects should be regarded as a key indicator of progress. As Romania and Bulgaria face significant demographic challenges, including population decline and brain drain, their border regions can achieve sustained economic growth through enhanced connectivity, and therefore bring demographic stabilisation while also promoting the EU values, as enshrined in the Treaties in a strategically important yet often vulnerable region.

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