

STRATEGIC APPROACH TO THE ECONOMIC RECONFIGURATION OF RIVER TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract: *This paper examines the potential of river tourism in the Republic of Moldova in the context of the sustainable valorization of its hydrographic network. Although the national river system totals approximately 16,000 km, its economic use remains limited, being concentrated mainly on major rivers, while smaller watercourses are insufficiently integrated into the tourism circuit.*

The findings highlight the evolution of river tourism from traditional navigation-based forms to integrated approaches that combine water-based and riverside activities, in line with sustainable development principles. The European examples analyzed demonstrate the role of river tourism in stimulating rural economies, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting environmental conservation.

The case study of the Republic of Moldova reveals an early stage of development, characterized by insufficient infrastructure, institutional fragmentation, and a limited tourism offer. However, significant opportunities are identified, including access to European funding and the growing demand for alternative tourism.

The paper concludes that river tourism can become a viable tool for territorial development, provided that an integrated strategy is implemented, infrastructure investments are made, and cross-border cooperation is strengthened.

Key words: *river tourism, inland waterway network.*

JEL: L83, L89, M29, O10, O52

Introduction

The hydrographic network of the Republic of Moldova is made up of 3,621 rivers and streams, 8 of which are over 100 km in length—such as the Nistru, Prut, Răut, Bâc, Botna, Ichel, Cogâlnic, and Ialpuș—and 247 are over 10 km long. The total length of rivers across the territory of the Republic of Moldova is approximately 16,000 km. Moldova's hydrographic network is part of the Black Sea basin, due to the general slope of the terrain from northwest to southeast.

Analyzing data from the National Bureau of Statistics and the "Apele Moldovei" Agency, we have synthesized the following functions of the Moldovan river network:

- Maintaining biodiversity;
- Supplying drinking water;
- Irrigating agricultural land;
- Sources of industrial and domestic water;
- Disposal of wastewater;
- Waterway transport routes.

Most of the above-mentioned functions are carried out by the main arteries—the Nistru and the Prut, which are navigable over a stretch of 410 km, according to NBS data (2026).

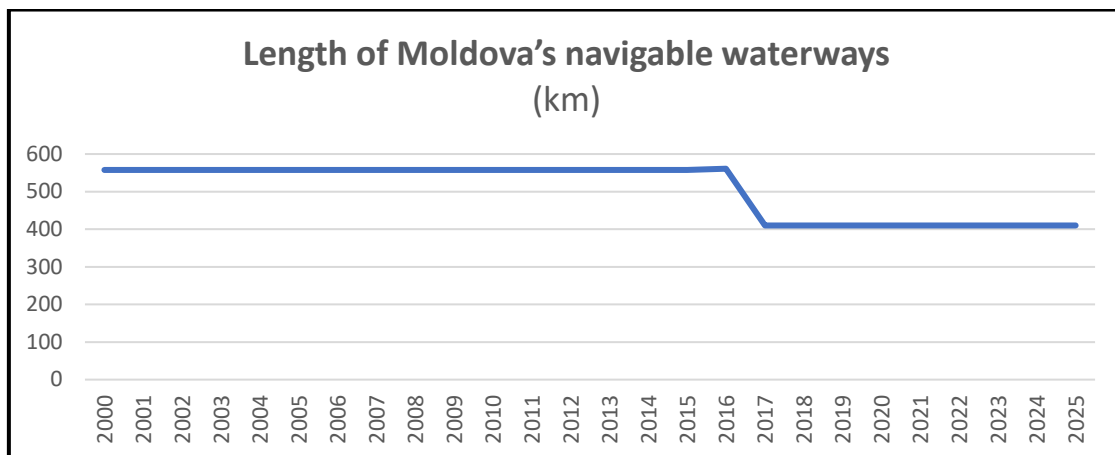


Figure 1. Length of Moldova's navigable waterways, 2000 - 2025

Source: Created by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics <https://statistica.gov.md/ro/banca-de-date-statistica-78.html>

The smaller rivers—accounting for approximately 15,500 km of watercourses—serve primarily to shape and sustain the biodiversity of the territory and are excluded from the country's economic circuit, as their geographical characteristics do not support their traditional use, leaving them abandoned. An alternative way of utilizing Moldova's rivers is imperative.

From Traditional Waterway Use to Modern River Tourism: European Trends and Transformations

In the 1960s–1970s, Europe experienced a trend of specialization in tourism offerings, both due to the emergence of new motivations in demand and the exhaustion of traditional tourism models (Woessner, 2006).

The new social structure, the consequences of mass tourism, and environmental awareness favored the European trend of specialization in tourism offerings, turning it into a social and market reality in the 1980s. The ecological movement of this period, which spread throughout society as a lifestyle, and the crisis of mass tourism, caused by the oversaturation of traditional destinations, highlighted the need for new forms of tourism that would not threaten the environment. Thus, in the 1990s, with the infiltration of sustainable development principles into tourism and the emergence of the concept of sustainable tourism, the trend of developing alternative tourism was established.

Alternative tourism is a concept introduced by sustainable tourism theory to describe new forms of tourism intended to offer an escape from modernity, seeking authenticity, unspoiled natural environments, and living in contact with local cultures in underdeveloped areas.

Existing literature indicates that alternative tourism offers tourists a unique, differentiated experience and reflects the increase in "experiential learning" vacations. In other words, alternative tourism refers to tourists—usually in small groups—who travel to learn about and experience the characteristics of a specific area. Alternative tourism represents forms of tourism that oppose conventional tourism, opting for marginalized destinations.

According to Woessner (2006), the early period of river tourism is the 19th century, with the development of river transport in Europe and the organization of cruises on the Danube and Rhine rivers by river entrepreneurs, gaining momentum in the 1970s and 1980s with nautical river activities—river excursions and river cruises. The renewal came from the United Kingdom. Its aging and inconvenient river network would have disappeared in the 20th century if a specific culture had not taken hold on its waterways. After World War I, the magazine *The Yacht* followed river cruise chronicles, and in 1927, the work *The River Yachting* confirmed the British tendency for river tourism.

Tourist and sports activities have allowed the maintenance of watercourses in satisfactory condition, even reclaiming abandoned sections. British river activities are structured and coordinated in England and Wales by the Canal & River Trust (www.canalrivertrust.org.uk) and in Scotland by Scottish Canals (www.scottishcanals.co.uk), together with specialized associations and the private sector, which quickly turned toward the United States, a major source of tourists, and France, with its well-maintained river networks suitable for small vessel navigation. The British invested in the French Freycinet networks and the Canal du Midi, building new and renovating old boats, then expanded, focusing particularly on historical waterways.

Irish authorities adopted the British model of river tourism development and created Waterways Ireland in 1994, reopening the Shannon-erne system. Today, the United Kingdom and Ireland are reference countries in the development of river tourism (Cooper & Pridaux, 2009).

River tourism in the 1980s–1990s is characterized by interest in nautical activities (river cruises, river yachting, river excursions) and the development of river areas to support these activities (Cooper & Pridaux, 2009).

After 2000, there was a shift in the philosophy of river tourism development, with the scene reversing. The issue of river tourism no longer resides in adapting the river for tourism activities but in adapting tourism practices to the river. Classic river tourism, based on the watercourse, evolves into modern river tourism that values both the watercourses and the riverbanks (Cooper & Pridaux, 2009).

VNF, an organization established in 2001 with a significant contribution to monitoring and studying river tourism in France and Europe, states that this form of tourism encompasses a wide range of activities on waterways, canals (river cruises, boat tours, proximity yachting, etc.), and their banks (recreational fishing, hiking, cycling, etc.) within a 20 km radius.

Table 1. The main forms of river tourism

Place where the tourist activity takes place	Tourist activity		
Tourist activities practiced along the watercourse	Recreational river navigation	River cruises	River angling
		River barge cruises	
		River excursions	
		River Yachting	
	Proximity water sports	Kayaking-canoeing	
		Rowing	
		Water Skiing	
		Other water activities (banana boat, catamaran, etc.)	
Tourism activities practiced along the riverbanks	Rafting		
	Hiking		
	Trekking		
	Cycling		
	Riverside equestrianism		
Visiting riverside tourist attractions, etc.			

Source: created by the author

After 2009, the importance of river tourism became widely acknowledged, with more quantitative studies on the subject, such as reports from the tour operator TUI, the Danube Management Commission, etc. However, river tourism is often perceived as primarily river cruises. In an attempt to define it, Pierre Peyret states that modern river tourism is not limited to river navigation, but fits into a broader range of activities across an area that exceeds the linearity of the watercourse (Peyret, 2006).

Thus, by expanding its scope of activity, river tourism can be considered a solution for all types of watercourses, regardless of their hydro-morphological characteristics and the level of development of navigation infrastructure, and it can enhance the value of riparian areas.

River Tourism Best Practice

European countries offer several exemplary models of river tourism development. In France, the Canal du Midi has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a hub for cultural and recreational tourism. Local authorities, in collaboration with VNF, have developed cycling trails, restored historical locks, and promoted houseboat tourism.

In Germany, the Elbe River corridor integrates natural and cultural tourism, combining canoeing with visits to historic towns like Dresden and Meissen. Public-private partnerships ensure the maintenance of infrastructure and environmental conservation.

In the Netherlands, river tourism is integrated with broader water management strategies, including flood prevention systems that double as recreation zones. Dutch river tourism emphasizes eco-tourism principles and includes electric boats and floating lodges.

Ireland's Shannon-Erne Waterway, restored in the 1990s, exemplifies transnational cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Managed by Waterways Ireland, the waterway supports boating, angling, and festivals, revitalizing rural economies.

These international examples demonstrate the potential of river tourism not only as a recreational activity but also as a sustainable development strategy. Moldova can adapt elements of these practices, such as infrastructure reuse, stakeholder engagement, and tourism-environment synergies. In addition to Western models, it is also relevant to analyze best practices from Central and Eastern European countries, such as Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine, which also possess hydrographic networks in need of economic revitalization through tourism:

- *Romania* – Through the “2030 Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy of the Danube Delta,” Romania has prioritized the development of slow and ecological tourism in the Danube Delta region, focusing on birdwatching, ecotourism, and slow cruises. Studies show a significant increase in local income and a higher degree of biodiversity conservation (Panagoret, D.M., et al., 2020).

- *Serbia* – Ecotourism corridors have been developed along the Sava and Tisza rivers, utilizing EU funds via IPA Cross-Border Programmes, with local communities involved in the development of guesthouses and thematic tours.

These examples highlight the importance of cross-border cooperation and the integration of river tourism into regional sustainable development strategies.

The expansion of river tourism in the European Union, particularly in Western Europe, has compelled regional decision-makers to develop integration and development projects that take into account the physical continuity of waterways, transcending administrative borders and involving neighboring riparian regions. As such, river tourism, through its transversal nature, stimulates cross-border cooperation.

The economic impact of river tourism is relatively modest at the national level. Its value lies in its capacity to stimulate local economies that lack alternative development options due to spatial and mental discontinuities created by river corridors. It generates increased income and commerce in rural areas, creates business opportunities, and boosts other sectors such as construction and transport. Public investments in river tourism tend to yield a high medium-term return and are often sourced from domestic funds. Leakages in river tourism are low.

River tourism has positive cultural, social, and environmental effects. It contributes to raising the standard of living, improving local infrastructure, public health, and safety, revitalizing cultural and religious traditions, enriching the tourism heritage with new cultural facilities, regenerating abandoned watercourses, restoring riverbanks, preserving habitats for plants and animals, and maintaining the scenic and aquatic quality of the river network.

In his 2006 article “*L’émergence du tourisme fluvial en Europe*”, Raymond Woessner identifies the British model of river tourism development as having had the greatest influence on the emergence of this form of tourism, and he outlines the following key aspects:

- The pre-existing canal culture, reinforced through artistic representations. The works of painter John Constable contributed to the early aestheticization of British waterways and their multiple uses, culminating in the writings of Thomas Caswall Rolt in the 1960s, which marked a turning point;
- A fundamental shift in the use of narrowboats: the economic function of transporting goods was replaced by a touristic function;
- The conservation of the industrial heritage associated with canals;
- The emergence of a recreational conception of waterways, particularly through sport.

Benoît Pin synthesizes these ideas and those of other scholars by describing the process of European river tourism development through the following sequence:

Aestheticization → Heritage-making → Institutionalization → Touristic development

(Pin, 2004, p.145). This formula emphasizes the need for strong political intentionality in order to enable the successful evolution of river tourism. River tourism mainly utilizes natural and artificial river networks originally built for other purposes. In some cases, promoting river tourism involves restoring locks, bridges, tunnels, towpaths, and other related infrastructure.

Table 2. Infrastructure and Equipment Required for River Tourism

Activities	Tourist Infrastructure and Technical Base	Equipment
Recreational navigation	Navigable waterways and leisure river networks	Cruise ships, yachts, rafting equipment
Proximity nautical Tourism	Marinas, rafting routes, signage, rafting clubs	Canoeing, kayaking, rafting gear, catamarans, water skis, etc.
Cycling	Cycle itineraries, campsites and rest areas, signage	Bicycles and cyclist gear
Hiking and Trekking	Towpaths, campsites and rest areas, signage	Walking gear (tracksuits, boots, backpacks, etc.)
Recreational Fishing	Signage, small boats	Fishing tools and equipment

Source: Created by the author

River Tourism in Moldova – An Alternative Approach to Reviving Abandoned Waterways

In the Republic of Moldova, river tourism remains an occasional and underdeveloped form of tourism. Although the country possesses significant fluvial potential, it is insufficiently capitalized. Current activities manifest in two main categories: water-based tourism (such as river cruises and short-distance navigation) and riverside recreational tourism (including walks, picnics, leisure stays, fishing, swimming, and sunbathing).

An analysis of Moldova’s official tourism information platforms (<https://turism.gov.md> and <https://moldova.travel>), as well as field observations conducted in locations such as Vadul lui Vodă, Orheiul Vechi, Zăluceni, Vărăncău, Țirgul Vertiujeni, and Florești, revealed the following river-based tourism products:

- **River cruises on the Nistru River** aboard the vessel *Legenda*, which has a capacity of 300 passengers and offers overnight stays in two cabins equipped with convertible sofas. The boat is also available for private events.
- **One-day river excursions** on the Nistru (Rezina – Saharna – Țipova), lasting 4 to 6 hours, include visits to major tourist attractions: in Țipova, the “Assumption of Mary” Monastery and the

rupestrian monastery of the same name; in Saharna, the "Footprint of the Virgin Mary," the Holy Trinity Monastery, Saharna Cemetery, the Saharna Waterfalls, the "Annunciation" rupestrian monastery, and the sacred spring – all visited aboard the *Moscova* ship.

- **Canoeing and kayaking trips** lasting 2–7 hours, on stretches of 10–22 km along the Nistru near Chişinău.
- **Proximity navigation**, including leisure boat rides and catamaran excursions.
- **Riverside events** such as the “Nistru Fest” held in Zăluceni (Floreşti District) and “Beleu Bio Fest” in Slobozia Mare (Cahul District).
- **Walking tours** along riverbanks and floodplain areas.
- **Visits to riverside cultural and natural attractions.**
- **Picnicking and swimming** in natural settings.

Table 3. SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Unspoiled natural environment – Rich tourism potential – Favorable geographical location – The fluvial identity of the country's capital – Lack of natural resources for traditional tourism development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of transport and tourism infrastructure – Poorly developed accommodation infrastructure – Absence of public initiatives in river tourism – Limited awareness of river tourism concept – Poor ecological condition of water bodies
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Access to European funding (Interreg, ENI CBC, IPA, etc.) – Integration into European tourism networks (e.g., Danube, Nistru, Prut) – Growing global interest in ecological, slow, and adventure tourism – Reuse of old infrastructure (bridges, towpaths) for tourism activities – Strategic positioning between Romania, Ukraine, and the EU markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Low tourist flows – High seasonality – tourism limited to warmer months – Low incomes of the local population – Political instability and lack of administrative continuity – Frequent floods or droughts affecting navigability – Weak connectivity between river zones and major urban centers

Source: Created by the author

River tourism in the Republic of Moldova is in its early stages of development, characterized by a lack of organization and poorly developed infrastructure. Nevertheless, Moldova’s status as a Danubian country offers a unique opportunity for integration into the broader European tourism circuit of the Danube hydrographic basin. Cooperation with the European Union opens up access to funding opportunities and cross-border partnerships, which are essential for the sustainable development of river tourism in Moldova.

Strategic Outlook on the Development of River Tourism in the Republic of Moldova

The lack of access to the sea and the impossibility of developing coastal tourism presents an opportunity for the advancement of river tourism in the Republic of Moldova. Due to its dense hydrographic network, Moldova has the potential to develop most river tourism activities, with the exception of rafting, which requires a mountainous or hilly terrain.

To ensure the competitive development of river tourism in Moldova, investments in both river and general tourism infrastructure are essential. Furthermore, since the country's main navigable arteries constitute state borders, the tourism valorization of Moldova’s hydrographic network requires cooperation with neighboring countries that share the same watercourses of touristic interest.

The historical analysis presented shows that river tourism in the European Union has developed through intentional actions—either public or private. Therefore, the development of river tourism in the Republic of Moldova can only be achieved through a concerted and sustained effort.

Feasibility studies and the elaboration of a tourism development master plan for the river network are necessary. Given that river networks and their banks represent vast territories with dispersed resources and complex infrastructural needs, a uniform tourism development approach is required. However, due to the scope and thematic limits of this paper, as well as the author's available resources and specialization, a full-fledged plan cannot be proposed here. Instead, we suggest a medium-term territorial development framework based on four priority axes:

1. Encouraging riverside activities – hiking, trekking, etc., by identifying the most attractive trails and locations, especially for domestic tourists, and equipping them with the necessary infrastructure (tourist signage, maintenance of towpaths which often accompany rivers);
2. Development and promotion of recreational fishing;
3. Organizing artistic events in rural riverside communities to promote river destinations;
4. Enhancing the attractiveness of the Giurgiulești port as a docking point for river cruise ships.

The directions outlined above are indicative and schematic. A much broader study is needed for their proper implementation. However, they offer a roadmap for initiating activities with low costs and minimal effort.

Conclusions

River tourism development varies across Europe. France, Germany, the UK, Ireland, and the Netherlands have integrated their river systems into multifunctional development models. Moldova, though currently underdeveloped in this regard, possesses similar structural characteristics.

River tourism represents a viable strategy for reactivating Moldova's neglected hydrographic network. Policymakers should prioritize the creation of a National River Tourism Strategy aligned with EU frameworks. Investment in basic river infrastructure, awareness campaigns, and transborder projects would enhance regional cohesion and economic diversification. The paper advocates a theoretical repositioning of rivers—from utilitarian channels to vectors of territorial resilience.

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