

Will the Fiume Delta return?

At first glance, the Fiume Delta appears to be an endless and unfriendly concrete slab. It does not promise much. However, at its peak, it is adorned with a small garden, bordered on both sides by the azure blue strip of the Recsina River and a tree-lined avenue, with a romantically blue motorboat marina.

The air is slightly salty, but the sea is not visible. The city was established at the end of the Delta by the Baross port, in front of which a long breakwater has blocked its waterfront for over a century. It is difficult to say whether the Delta is beautiful or ugly. It is an industrial landscape, yet it also contains nature, and even a Mediterranean town with its colorful houses. But above all, it pulsates with everything that is commonly referred to as history. When the river mouth was regulated in the 1890s, it generated fictitious border disputes between Croatia and Hungary. The First World War then brought the real border issue, now between Italian Fiume and Yugoslav (Croatian) Susa. There is perhaps no museum in the city where there is not at least one "delta" photograph hanging on the wall, with a zigzagging white line running across it, the new border. It looks as if a child had vandalized the picture with chalk.

Like all Hungarian royal investments, the Delta wooden pier was conceived in the spirit of engineering rationality in the 1890s. The railway was led down to the shore on a serpentine track built in the belly of the mountain, a solution that is now mostly used only by model railroaders. The remaining backwater of the river delta became the new sailing port. To facilitate embarkation and disembarkation, the railway bridge leading to the marina was capable of rotating 180 degrees, which was considered a marvel of engineering. The bridge still exists today, but even the elderly have never seen it rotate. There are no sailboats. There are more motorboats, but they can fit under the bridge, although passengers have to bend down considerably. The serpentine road, the marina pier, the rotating bridge, none of these, either together or separately, convinced the Croatian press of the time Croatian press of the fact that purely economic and technical interests, and not Hungarian nationalism, were pulling the strings here. In the columns of the newspapers, the previously no man's land of the marshy Delta suddenly became valuable motherland, without which the Croatian nation could not be a complete and prosperous country.

This conflict was, so to speak, inevitable. The Croatian-Hungarian compromise of 1868 did not bring real peace to the matter of Fiume. Although the Hungarian government did not actually claim the entire city, only its narrow coastal strip. However, who knows, perhaps it was

precisely this one-sided approach that was to blame. On the coast, it relentlessly imposed its will. As there was hardly any space between the city and the sea, land was reclaimed from the sea in the "Dutch style." In the absence of a sheltered bay, long piers to block the waves, naturally following the "most modern foreign examples," this time from Marseille. From a Hungarian perspective, everything that happened in Fiume around the port could only be good, and anyone who questioned or doubted it was considered backward and anti-Hungarian.

In her book published last year (*Fiume's Long Shadow*), Veronika Eszik lists the lesser-known downsides of Fiume, a city that thrives on superlatives. In just over a decade and a half, traditional sources of livelihood linked to the sea have vanished into thin air. Not only was there no place left for fishing nets (which would have been a tolerable loss for the local power groups, as the fishermen were poor people anyway), but sailing and with it the traditional patrician class also came to an end. The sailing port, created as a "side branch" of water management, was stifled by growing poverty. Nevertheless, the Bedekers of the dualist era painted a charming picture of the situation. The romantic image persisted. Today's Croatian information board also suggests that the people featured on the archival postcards were just as carefree as tourists preparing for a boat trip.

The text on the information board could have been signed by the Hungarian government, which closed down more than a hundred years ago. The government was extremely satisfied with its willingness to compromise, as if a modern chain store were setting up farmers' stalls in its parking lot. The reality is that the marina was merely a friendly and harmless competitor to the much larger Baross-type wooden pier opening onto the sea. A frequently heard argument was that the old seafaring families did not want to move with the times, and even seemed to want to hinder progress. On the contrary, it was more a case of the steam ship's rapid and relentless triumph surprising even its most blind followers, and shocking the sailing captains outright. Let us not forget that two centuries ago there were no campaigns to teach grandparents how to use technology. The experience gained with graying temples was still considered wisdom, and it was fitting for a young sailor on a steamboat to listen to the words of the generation that served on sailing ships in the tavern. Moreover, the technological revolution in the 19th century was still cautious. The other day, I was looking at the blueprints of old ships, where there was room not only for stokers but also for a sailor among the crew cabins.

However, the clash between the different ways of life that were forced to coexist in the Delta was hardly avoidable. Amid rapid and unpredictable changes, nationalism was the only trump card that could be attached to any argument. Ultimately, the conflicts that had been established in the 19th century split the 20th century in two. After the young Yugoslavia had managed to

acquire the Delta but not yet Fiume, the winding road through the tunnel took on national significance, and Zagreb sought to further develop the port. As part of this, an imposing main railway station was built on the other side of the river, in Brajdica (unfortunately, it was demolished in the 2000s). After 1945, the Delta finally lost its border character. The twin cities of Fiume and Susa were to merge here under the name Rijeka. In his plan published in 1949, Vladimir Turina dreamed of an imposing spa complex set in a park, from which a small sea beach was also realized. Of course, if there was a system that was enthusiastic about industry with almost religious faith and without criticism, it was socialism. The beach was closed in 1964, and the coastline of Rijeka and its surroundings was transformed into an endless industrial zone.

In fact, it is even more surprising that Barosskikötő survived the decades of deindustrialization that began in the 1990s. It has survived to this day. A few years ago, I was sitting in my favorite café next to the market. The market in Fiume is today's "sailing port": where old faces from the past still greet you and count their change with fingers accustomed to digging. Looking at a Croatian daily newspaper like a child, I tried to guess the news from the pictures. On the last page was an idyllic visual plan, with sparkling boats, smiling people, and above it the headline: Porto Baross. In 2021, even the Hungarian press reported that the city would get a high-end yacht marina, one that even "the poor can enjoy," as the beach would finally be freely accessible. Then nothing happened for a long time.

This year, however, I saw the harbor already emptied. The fence has been cut through. Not officially yet, but the bravest are already coming here to stroll. The last crane still stands on the pier, but the guardhouse is empty, without doors or windows, looking almost like a skull. The otherwise unremarkable little building has gained a patina characteristic of ruins, almost crying out for preservation in its decay. Not far from it is a shipwreck, too theatrical. I climb onto the embankment and see what the city hasn't seen for a good hundred years: the sea. Groups of young people on the breakwater rocks. Some are not looking at the sea, but scanning for new paths where they could go next, where there might be another gap in the fences, whether the container terminal is accessible yet. My democratic self is happy to see this popular conquest, which is of course dirty and chaotic, full of contradictions and trash, as popular movements usually are. It would be good if time stopped or the money ran out, if the well-planned future with the yacht marina never arrived. The city would simply grow into the old port, like plants that cover the concrete with colorful flowers over time, trees sprout in the cracks, sinking their roots into the life-giving swamp of the covered estuary. People could do the same. The literature has already given names to such spontaneous rehabilitations: "reversion" or "orderly retreat." A

century and a half has proven that every era, every nation, and every social system can build.
However, only nature can live, with us humans in it.

(Translated with DeepL translation AI)