The role of ports in developing Danube cities: perspectives and future possibilities

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Abstract: Over time, the Danube has been a significant transportation hub, with a key role in developing a specific category of urban settlements: port cities. Several factors influenced the expansion of these cities, each with a different intensity and impact. Based on the historical context, port cities have experienced both times of evolution and periods of decline. This paper aims to analyze two port cities in Romania by highlighting the role of ports and related activities in the economic development of cities. The port cities of Galați and Brăila were chosen as case studies; in these cities, the role played by their ports as engines of development in the two cities was investigated. The analysis revealed that after 1990, the change of political regime and transition to an open market economy affected the economic situation in the two cities studied. Nowadays, ports have much smaller importance in the economies of both studied cities. This research is important as a starting point for understanding the current issues of the two cities and finding potential solutions.

1. Introduction

Inland navigation had a crucial role in the world's history, being the oldest and one of the cheapest transport modes (Radmilovic and Maras, 2011; Boșneagu and Coca, 2015). Over time, the Danube has been a significant transportation hub (Sârbu et al. 2016), with a key role in developing a specific category of urban settlements: port cities. A port city is not just a place for trading goods but also a place where industry and tourism have significant roles in the city's development (Zheng et al., 2020).

The port city is a more recent category of cities in Romania’s urban network, even if port activities have been carried out in some areas since ancient times. Besides the economic function, the port cities also had military importance, some of them serving in the defense of areas considered strategic (Atanasiu-Croitoru, 2006; Petrișor et al., 2020). Over time, several factors influenced the expansion of these cities, each with a different intensity and impact. Some factors influenced only in certain periods, while others had a constant impact on the evolution of port cities. Understanding the elements that shaped development can help find solutions to the current problems of port cities. Based on the historical context, port cities have experienced both times of evolution and periods of decline. The Danube had a significant influence since medieval times, but the economic situation of port cities changed a lot over time (Tache et al. 2014).

This paper aims to analyze two port cities in Romania by highlighting the role of ports and related activities in the economic development of cities. We chose the port cities of Galați and Brăila as case studies; in these cities, we investigated the role played by the ports as engines of development in the two cities.

The study has three objectives: the first objective is to identify the factors that affected the evolution of port cities. By studying the literature, we outlined an image
regarding the stages through which the two analyzed cities passed throughout their history. Thus, several factors were described in this analysis. The second objective of this study is to pinpoint the present economic situation for the two selected case studies. For a better understanding of the social and economic phenomena faced by the two cities, we consulted various statistical data. These data revealed the existence of problems with major ramifications for the future. The third objective of this study is to highlight future development prospects and opportunities. This objective has underlined the importance of accessing EU funding, as well as implementing infrastructure works.

This research allows us to understand the economic, social, and demographic processes of the two cities examined. The study presents the overall situation in Brăila and Galați and the importance of understanding the historical evolution to propose coherent measures for the future. For this purpose, the research also highlights the future perspectives of the two studied cities by emphasizing the value of European funding to attract investments, which can lead to economic growth and improve the inhabitants’ quality of life.

2. Materials and Methods

In this research, we used several methods. The statistical methods helped us understand how the two cities developed over time and what was the impact of different political regimes on the economic situation. To identify the changes encountered by the two cities, we analyzed the data from Tempo Online, the National Institute of Statistics database. The last three censuses in Romania (in 1992, 2002, 2011) outlined a clear picture of the demographic and social trends of Brăila and Galați. Given that the most recent census occurred in 2022, and we do not have the results yet, we also use the data estimated by the National Institute of Statistics for the two cities.

To understand the economic situation, we also considered the statistics on the number of employees per year, the natural balance, and the migratory balance for each city. In addition to the statistical data, we have examined several official documents (for example, development strategies), which discuss cities’ weaknesses and plans for improving the economic situation.

For this research, we also studied several historical documents to explain how the port shaped the evolution of the two cities. Given the interest in the Danube in Europe, many historical events also affected in different ways Brăila and Galați. Because of this, we examined the agreements signed after wars related to the Danube (for example, The Treaty of Adrianople, the Paris Convention of 1921, and The Paris Peace Treaty of 1947).

3. Results

3.1. Factors

The analysis pointed out that several factors, each with a different intensity and impact, have influenced the development of the port cities of Galați and Brăila. These factors include historical circumstances, political context, hydro-technical and infrastructure works, and the development of industrial activities.

3.1.1. Historical factors

Throughout history, port cities have played an important role, fulfilling different functions: defense, commercial, transit, industrial, etc. The Danube was a vital route, its potential has been known since ancient times (Baltălungă, 2008). In this context, port cities are regarded as true “nodes of the aquatic network of communications and relations” (Gheorghiu, 2002).

Flowing waters had a significant role in shaping cities. As for the Danube, a lot of archaeological evidence proves the existence of the inhabitants since ancient times. The
Danube cities were some of the most developed human settlements of that period in the current territory of Romania (Petrescu, 2020).

The antiquity and historical importance of the Danube cities have been emphasized in the specialized literature. These cities stand out for their genesis, constituting a distinctive type of city in Romania’s urban network (Cucu, 1970). Brăila and Galați were first detailed in documents proving the commercial activities performed here (Oancea, 1973). It demonstrates the commercial interest of both cities. Throughout this period, some merchants benefited from tax exemptions offered by the rulers for goods arriving in the ports of Brăila and Galați.

In the medieval period, the great powers influenced the evolution of port cities. Those at the intersection of trade routes have been particularly developed. One of the best examples is Brăila, which was at the cross of two important roads: the one connecting Brașov with the Danube and the one connecting Moldova with the Danube (Tufescu et al., 1969), a matter that led to remarkable growth of goods traffic and expansion of the city.

3.1.2. The political context

Because of its geographical position and the multitude of territories it crosses, the Danube served as an important axis in the economic life of the continent and, above all, in the political life of many states. Over time, certain moments have significantly influenced navigation on the Danube, as well as the development of the port cities. The ambitions of some states to impose their dominance on the Danube sometimes led, to the emergence of diplomatic conflicts, which affected navigation. During the Middle Ages, trade was practiced on the Danube. It was regulated by two acts issued in 1368 and 1413 (Petrescu, 2020). The Ottoman conquest meant a suspension of the commercial function of the Danube between the east and west (Baltălungă, 2008). However, trade between the Romanian Principalities and the Balkan Peninsula continued to take place, favoring the development of port cities.

The establishment of Ottoman rule led to a fortification of the port cities “in a modern, bastion manner” (Gheorghiu, 2002). The transformation of some port cities in the Turkish realm determined an increase in trade and an intensification of economic life. A good example is Brăila, a Turkish stronghold in the period 1544-1829, during which it continued to develop “as an urban settlement, as a port” (Oancea, 1973).

The involvement of Russia in taking control of Bessarabia in 1812 led to significant changes in trading on the Danube. In 1815, the Vienna Congress occurred, and it established the free circulation on the river, from the navigable area to the mouth (art. 109 of the Treaty of Vienna of June 9, 1815). In addition, the taxes will be uniform over the entire length of the Danube, having as a reference value the taxes levied in the course of the Rhine (art. 111 of the Vienna Treaty of June 9, 1815).

The Treaty of Adrianople, signed in 1829, meant that free trade could be practiced on the Danube. The Romanian countries could decide over the Danube navigation. Russia had full control of the Danube. The port cities had an increase in activity, because of the expansion of the grain trade. During this time, the ports of Brăila and Galați had a crucial part in setting the prices of goods, being “the largest markets of the principalities” (Oancea, 1973). In some studies, this period is recognized as the “golden age of port life” (Tufescu et al., 1969), because of the introduction of the free port status for Brăila (since 1836) and Galați (since 1837). Imports and duty-free storage have increased the number of goods exchanged at these ports. The development of trade has led to the emergence of a commercial court in Brăila, the only one of its kind in the country (Petrescu, 2020). Its role was to mediate disputes between traders. Getting the free port status had immediate effects on the number of ships entering Brăila port. Thus, the number of ships arriving in Brăila port increased during 1837-1847 by over 200%.

The possibility of free navigation also influenced the spatial expansion of the two cities analyzed. Thus, during this period, several rural settlements appeared around the
city, which was gradually included in Brăila’s urban area: Piscu, Islazu. As for Galați, it extended, especially to the north, but also along the Danube. The economic development of these cities has also determined the construction of a few structures. In Galați, a land where garbage used to be stored is being cleaned up. After planting trees, the authorities opened the Mihai Eminescu Park. In Brăila, were also carried out important construction works: the stone paving of a part of the Central Square, the landscaping of the Belvedere public garden, and the landscaping of the road leading down to the port.

The liberalization of navigation led to establishing foreign consulates, protecting the interests of shipping agencies operating in the port (Petrescu, 2020). Countries such as England, Russia, Austria, and Greece had consulates in Brăila, while in Galați, besides those already mentioned, there were also other consulates: France, Sardinia, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Spain, and Belgium. The time when Brăila and Galați were free ports had a certain influences for the entire economy of the country. Thus, between 1836 and 1861, over 80% of Romania’s exports were made through Brăila (Munteanu, 2013).

During the First World War, free navigation on was stopped. The Danube was used to transport grain and oil from Romania to the Central Powers. After the war, the Allied Powers and Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles. Article 331 stipulates the Danube is an international river from Ulm until it empties into the Black Sea. This article also highlights that the Rhine-Danube canal will have the same regime.

The status of the Danube was changed by the Paris Convention of 1921. Navigation on the Danube is free, and the equality of ships along the river is promoted. To support these principles, there were established two institutions. The European Danube Commission (EDC) continues to operate in the maritime sector, while the International Danube Commission (IDC) was established in the Ulm-Brăila sector. This institution also wanted to reduce or eliminate issues due to natural obstacles along the Danube course.

From 1930, interest in Germany for the Danube increased. In the following years, several conferences and agreements described the administration of Danube: the Sinaia Agreement (1938), the Bucharest Agreement (1939), and the Bucharest Conference (1940). Other treaties followed, signed after the Second World War. The peace treaty signed in Paris in 1947 brought free navigation on the Danube, regardless of the nation to which the ship belongs. Later, in 1948, a protocol was signed at the International Conference in Belgrade. This included the removal of the European Commission from the Danube and the creation of the Danube Commission, whose role was to regulate shipping. The commission consisted of the states along the Danube, except for Austria and Germany, which would later join. The regulation activity concerned the area between Ulm and the Black Sea, including Sulina Inlet (art. 2 of the Belgrade Convention of August 18, 1948). In areas where Danube is a border area, the states will establish navigation rules by mutual agreement, considering the general rules of the commission.

3.1.3. Hydro-technical and infrastructure works

Given the number of states crossed by the Danube, numerous works have been carried out to improve navigation or, later, to get electricity. A major role in the development of the cities and economic activity in ports has been played by the work undertaken by the European Danube Commission. In addition, one of the arguments for creating of this commission was to improve navigational conditions (Petrescu, 2020). Among the most important works carried out are those related to the works on the Sulina branch. These works proved to be more difficult than anticipated, and the estimated two-year period was extended several times (Turnock, 1989). At the entrance of Sulina Inlet, two breakwaters were built, allowing vessels of higher tonnage to transit.

The increase in traffic on the Sulina canal also had a positive effect on the ports of Galați and Brăila. Besides an increase in the number of ships arriving at the port, several companies related to navigation appeared: the Romanian River Navigation, which made regular runs between Brăila and Galați, and the Romanian Maritime Service, which carried out runs between Brăila and Constantinople (Oancea, 1973). Brăila specializes in
the trade of cereals. There were also works to build docks, silos, warehouses, and a pool (Drăgan, 2016). The importance of the grain trade was also highlighted by creating the Grain and Goods Exchange in Brăila. As a result, large quantities of cereals were exchanged. In the years following its creation, more and more cereals were traded, as the stock market became known worldwide (Munteanu, 2020).

The construction of a railway connection boosted the development of several port cities. Brăila and Galați had, since 1872, a link with the national railway network. Because of the railway, the transport time was reduced. The area cultivated with cereals increased because of the rise in profit, by minimizing the transport price (Giurescu, 1968).

3.1.3. Development of industrial activities

Starting with the second half of the 19th century, influenced by the expansion of the railway network and the various hydro-technical works carried out along the Danube, the first industrial units appeared around port cities. After the nationalization in June 1948, the country’s industrialization process strongly influenced the industry development in the Danube cities. Initially, the government made substantial investments in the development of the heavy industry. Thus, like many other cities in the country, the cities of the Danube have also experienced an intense process of industrialization.

The influence of Danube on port cities varies. There are many industries that depend upon river transport, but also industries not directly related to the river (Baltălungă 2008). Galați and Brăila are also part of the category of cities whose industry largely depends on the Danube. Famous for its timber storage and export activities, Galați has gradually diversified its industrial activities. Thus, slaughterhouses, milk factories, bread factories, wood processing factories, and soap factories appeared. Similarly, in Brăila, the expansion of port activities led to the emergence of new industrial activities: steam mills, oil refineries, breweries, cement factories, brick factories, soap factories, and sawmills (Giurescu, 1968). Also, quartzites excavated in the Măcin Mountains were stored in Brăila port. From the port, they were sent by rail to Turda. Initially, this port specialized in the export of cereals and import of raw materials: raw iron, metals, and coal (Oancea, 1973). This represented the basis for the development of the heavy industry. For Galați, iron ores were the basis for developing the steel industry. The Steel Plant is representative for the port city. Its establishment was favored by a location on the Danube banks, considering the low cost of river transport. Founded in 1960, it still operates today and is considered “the most representative industrial unit of Galați” (Baltălungă, 2008).

Thanks to the heavy industry, Galați and Brăila became sales centers for raw materials arriving from different parts of the country: Reșița, Oțelul Roșu, Călăjan, Hunedoara, Copșa Mică, Baia Mare. The Oțelul Roșu steelworks made a significant contribution to the production of raw materials. From there large quantities of raw materials arrived at the Laminorul plant in Galați. The finished products from Galați and Brăila went to other important industrial areas of the country: Bucharest, Craiova, Brașov, Bacău, Arad, Timișoara. The steel plants of Galați and Brăila influenced the development of the shipbuilding industry. Shipyards operated in several Danube port cities: Brăila, Galați, Giurgiu, Oltenita, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Sulina, Tulcea, Orșova, Hârșova. These were supplied with steel and chemical raw materials. From Galați, large quantities of raw materials arrived in Oltenița, Giurgiu, Tulcea and Sulina, while the raw materials from the plant in Brăila were sent to the shipyards in Drobeta Turnu Severin, Giurgiu and Tulcea. After 1990, the shipyards were privatized, with periods of increased activity and stagnation, also determined by the external political context.

3.2. Present economic situation

This analysis revealed that after 1990, the change of political regime and transition to an open market economy (Yaskal et al. 2018) affected the economic situation in the two cities studied. The closure or reduction of production for industrial units caused economic decline and changes in the demographic situation of these cities. The cities are
characterized by a negative natural increase, caused by the reduction in the number of births, and the increase in the number of deaths (Figure 1).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1.** Problems identified in Brăila and Galați.

There is also a negative increase in migration caused by the massive layoffs of employees in the industry.

After 1990, the decline in industrial activity was obvious. Previously, the industry was at the center of the country’s economic development process. After this period, the decay of the industry deeply affected the economic and social life of the port cities. The regime change has resulted in the loss of some important markets for industrial goods (Murgescu, 2010) as well as economic reform measures.

The new economic conditions affected Brăila and Galați. The cutback of industrial activities also meant a significant decrease in port traffic. Thus, currently, ports have much smaller importance in the economies of both studied cities. For industries dependent on imported raw materials, supply problems arose, which contributed to the worsening of the economic situation of some factories. Few enterprises now influence the port traffic: The Steel Plant and the Shipyard in the Port of Galați, and the Shipyard in the Port of Brăila. The decrease in port traffic can also be associated with the economic problems of industrial units’ dependent on the Danube. From this point of view, two categories of industrial units can be identified: those that have permanently interrupted their activity, and those that survive despite the existence of times of instability.

Regarding the units that continue to operate, the best example is the Steel Plant in Galați. The Steel Plant directly influenced the port’s activities. It was built in 1975 and is equipped with special equipment for handling, storing, and transferring steel products. The periods of reduction in the plant’s activity also affected the port traffic. Between 2002 and 2004 there was an increase in the traffic of goods, which can be associated with an improvement in the economic situation of the heavy industry in Galați, after overcoming the problems regarding the loss of export markets and the various financial problems faced by the steel plant. The port traffic increased because of the increase in steel production, from 3.7 million tons to 5 million tons, due to the takeover of the company by Mittal Steel. During the 2008-09 economic crisis, the steel plant was affected, and there was a drop in demand for steel products around the world. Some production units have suspended their activity. It also led to a decrease in port traffic, and between 2008 and 2010, there was a 28.4% decrease (Figure 2).
The shipyards in the two analyzed cities play an important role in the evolution of port traffic. Privatized in 2002, the Brăila Shipyard has changed owners frequently. Currently, it is owned, together with the Tulcea shipyard, by the Fincantieri-Vard group. Among the facilities of the yard, there is also the possibility of simultaneous fitting and repair of twelve ships. The influence of the shipyard on port traffic in Brăila is noticeable. There were several periods in which port traffic decreased, times that corresponded with a decrease in the shipyard’s activity. We can observe several periods of reduced traffic: 2002-2004, 2010-2014, and 2016-2020. The most significant time of growth took place between 2004 and 2006 when the volume of orders raised because of the modernization of production lines and equipment.

The Galați shipyard was established in 1897. One hundred years later, it was privatized and taken over by the Dutch Damen group. Ships up to 55000 DWT, cargo ships, drilling platforms, barges, research vessels, and patrol vessels are built here (Baltălungă, 2008). There have been many investments in infrastructure upgrades and employee training. In recent years, the yard has received many orders to build various types of ships. Thus, the company’s turnover has steadily increased, and the construction site has a significant role in the local economy.

The Brăila Chemical Plant can be included in the category of units that have ceased their activity. It capitalized on softwood resources (willow, poplar) and reeds, which were brought from the Danube Delta directly to the complex’s port. After privatization, the plant increased its losses, was shut down, and many people were fired.

At Galați, one of the most representative industrial units closely linked to the port was the Galați fishing enterprise. The raw material needed for the operation of this factory was brought on the Danube. Near Docuri Port, the factory had refrigerators, ice warehouses, and a station for loading fish into wagons. The bankruptcy of this industrial unit contributed to the decrease in the traffic of goods from the port.

The increasingly difficult economic situation of the two analyzed Danube cities was also reflected in their demographic situation (Table 1). Brăila and Galați had, on average, a population decrease of over 30% between 1992 and 2021.

Table 1. Population of Brăila and Galați between 1992 and 2021

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Brăila</td>
<td>234110</td>
<td>216291</td>
<td>180302</td>
<td>150619</td>
<td>-35,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Galați</td>
<td>326141</td>
<td>298861</td>
<td>249432</td>
<td>226019</td>
<td>-30,7</td>
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1 appraisal NIS. Data source: NIS
Both a negative natural increase and a negative migratory increase (Figure 3 and Figure 4) caused the decreases in the two cities. After the change of the political regime, the population growth trend changed considerably. The elimination of the law prohibiting abortion contributed to a decrease in the number of births. Unemployment and the lack of coherent development prospects have pushed more and more people to move to other cities. The departure of young people, in particular, has also led to a decline in the number of births. Both cities analyzed show a demographic aging trend that contributes to the increase in mortality.

The authorities did not take concrete measures to attract investments that would create jobs, given the closure of many industrial units. As a result, the population has continued to decline and continues to do so today. In particular, young people have left these cities to study or to seek better-paying jobs in other major cities across the country or abroad.

The decrease in industrial production determined the closure or reduced activity of numerous industrial units, resulting in a continued decrease in the number of employees (Figure 5). This was determined by both the decline of the industry in the two cities and the modernization works carried out in some industrial units, which led to an increase in mechanization and a decrease in the number of employees needed. For example, the Steel Plant in Galați has reduced the number of employees. The number decreased from 27,000 in 2001 to less than 5,000 today. Another cause is the aging of the population correlated with the increase in migration phenomena of the young people.

**Figure 3.** The evolution of the natural balance and migratory balance in Brăila between 1992-2020. Data source: Tempo online

**Figure 4.** The evolution of the natural balance and migratory balance in Galați between 1992-2020. Data source: Tempo online
Figure 5. The evolution of the number of employees in Brăila and Galați between 1992-2020. Data source: Tempo online

The reduced volume of investment has the effect of worsening the difficult economic situation. One of the largest investments in recent years in Brăila belongs to the Japanese group Yazaki, which inaugurated a car wiring plant. Opened in 2015, this factory created over 3000 jobs. In Galați, the Steel Plant, now known as Liberty Steel, made the biggest investments to open new production lines.

After 1990, the Romanian authorities wanted to create some tax facilities by re-establishing free zones. There were several reasons behind this decision: existing large areas of free land, the workforce in the targeted areas, and the potential to attract many economic agents (Enache, 2012). The law on creating free zones in Romania was adopted in 1992. Free zones were opportunities to attract investment into the country's traditional trading areas. In Brăila and Galați, the free zones were established in 1994. These areas were considered poles of development of the two cities (Enache, 2012), and their establishment and operation were supported by the local authorities.

Regarding the evolution of the turnover of the two analyzed free zones, it can be observed that both had periods of growth and periods of decline. The economic agents operating here have problems with bureaucracy, lack of transparency, and the slow speed of reaction of the local authorities regarding the changes in the free zones. Despite the increase in the turnover of the two areas in recent years, there is a risk in carrying out their activity because of the withdrawal of some previously existing tax advantages (Aivaz, 2021; Aivaz and Micu, 2021; Stan, 2021; Stan et al. 2021). Despite positive developments, the investments expected by the authorities have not been made in these areas. There was low interest in all those involved in carrying out the activity of these areas, highlighting, in particular, the existence of deficit management (Baltălungă, 2008). This has resulted in attracting much less investment than first planned.

Concerning environmental pollution, the two analyzed cities have different situations. In Galati, problems with air pollution are frequent. Industrial plants and uncontrolled burning play a significant role. One of the most important sources of air pollution is the Steel Plant. In recent years, pollution has decreased due to investments in upgrades brought to the filtering systems. An indicator of high air pollution in Galati is the fact that the city was included among the settlements listed in Law 279/2020. This legislation will reduce the retirement age by two years for those who have lived in a polluted area for at least 30 years. In Brăila, the cutback of industrial activity led to a reduction in pollution. The thermal power station in Brăila, one of the city's biggest polluters, has been shut down. Also, the Cellulose and Paper Mill, another major polluter, stopped its activity. Now the main source of pollution remains car traffic.
3.3. Future development prospects and opportunities

For the two analyzed cities, we have identified a series of objectives that can improve the economic situation (Figure 6). Brăila and Galati must take concrete measures to help attract investments. In this sense, the development of the light industry, by creating an industrial park, can be an opportunity to increase the number of jobs.

On the other hand, Romania's membership in the European Union represents a huge opportunity to attract investments and modernize the country. European policies aim to reduce existing economic gaps between states and stimulate cross-border cooperation (Kezai et al., 2022). The European Union emphasis the importance of a better connection between different regions. This led to the establishment of the European Transport Network (TEN-T). It comprises several elements, targeting different transport: air, rail, road, sea, and multimodal. Ports are the real engines of European economic development because 74% of the European Union’s trade is carried out on the water (European Commission, 2013).

The European transport network consists of 319 ports. Of these, 83 are part of the core network, and the other 236 are part of the comprehensive network (European Commission, 2013). There are extensive gaps between these ports in the volume of cargo traffic and existing infrastructure and facilities. Of interest in this analysis is Corridor 9 Rhine-Danube, where the two analyzed port cities were also included: Galați (core network) and Brăila (comprehensive network). As a result of being a part of this network, the two cities can access funding programs or carry out projects with other authorities.

![Figure 6. Major development objectives in Brăila and Galați](image)

Under the CEF Transportation Programme, implemented between 2013 and 2020, we identified only one funded project in Galați. The project pursued the upgrade of the waterside infrastructure. Launched in 2016 and completed four years later, the project had a budget of over €25 million, of which the EU contributed 85%. For Brăila, we have not identified any projects financed through this program. CEF Transport represents only one source of European funding. The European Union also provides other categories of funds, which can help finance projects for the development of the port city. The difficulty of accessing European funding is an obstacle to the development of the two analyzed cities. While some ports accessed funding to improve infrastructure, digitize some port services or reduce the impact of port activities on the environment (Buhociu et al. 2013; Bănică et al. 2020; Stan, 2022), Galați and Brăila capitalized to a small extent on the opportunities offered by the TEN-T network.

For future projects, authorities attach great importance to the development of the infrastructure (Figure 7). It is necessary to continue the large investment projects, to increase the accessibility of the two cities and capitalize on the geographical position. The
existence of an expressway connecting these cities could help increase the volume of investments. Work on this project started in 2021, with a completion date of 2024. The express road would facilitate the connection between Brăila and Galați by increasing the safety and speed of transport. The construction of the bridge over the Danube from Brăila, due in 2023, is part of the same big project to improve the connection in the region. This bridge will play a significant role in the southeast by facilitating connections between Brăila, Galați, Tulcea, and Constanța. Also, the bridge facilitates the connection between Moldova and the Danube Delta and Constanța areas, a connection that is currently made via the ferry.

Improving the railway will reduce the journey time to Bucharest from 4 hours to 2. Moreover, the implementation of this project would have a positive impact on the environment by encouraging the use of rail freight transport instead of the road. Improving rail services between Brăila and Galati will facilitate the movement of people between the two cities (e.g., employees and students).

By increasing regional accessibility, tourism can be a major contributor to the local economy. Tourism is known for its effect on the economy, being capable of bringing improvements to different sectors of the economy (Baltălungă, 2008). There are potential tourist areas within the region, some of which are not being exploited to their full potential. Among these areas is Balta Mică a Brăilei Natural Park, Munții Măcinului National Park, Salt Lake, Danube embankment, numerous buildings of historical value, and Natura 2000 sites. At present, tourist attractions are insufficiently promoted. There are also weaknesses in age or absence of tourist infrastructure (Voica et al., 2014). It also must be considered the preservation of local heritage, the improvement of public spaces, and the opening up of the waterfront to the public (Daamen and Vries, 2013).

Besides the infrastructure projects, the two studied cities need to implement projects in the social and educational fields. The construction of Brăila-Galați Regional Hospital is an intensely debated topic in both cities. The hospital would have an important role in treating patients from the southeast region. Until now, the authorities have not started the implementation of this project.

Industrial parks are a way to stimulate investments and improve the business environment. The first industrial park in Brăila will be in the Free Zone, benefiting from its fiscal advantages. In September 2021, the construction of the first phases of the project began, which will create new jobs for the people in Brăila and the nearby area.

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**Figure 7.** Major development projects in Brăila and Galați
4. Conclusions

The Danube represented a vital axis in history, many powers of the time attempted to impose their gain. The interest in the Danube has allowed the emergence and development of many cities. Brăila and Galați have been engaged in commercial activities since the early stages of their evolution. In the historical context, the way the Danube is operated has changed significantly. From a commercial activity, with a long history, and a small industry, which emerged later, Brăila and Galați became true industrial centers. Their situation has changed a lot in the last three decades. This research is important as a starting point for understanding the problems faced by both cities after the political regime change. After 1990, Brăila and Galați faced an industrial restructuring. Under these conditions, economic, social, and demographic changes have been stressed. Significant changes in the population were highlighted by the closure of some industrial enterprises and the worsening economic situation. In addition, the importance of the Danube has declined. In many cases, the port traffic is affected by the closure or reduction of industrial activity. Despite the closure of many privatized industrial units, this process led to the extension of activity for important units, such as the Steel Plant in Galați or the shipyards in the two cities.

Despite the favorable position within the European Rhine-Danube corridor, Brăila and Galați have numerous problems. To date, the government has taken insignificant measures to encourage investment, increase employment and improve people’s quality of life. The free zones did not achieve their aim, the hoped-for investments were not attracted. Today, free trade zones continue to operate with increasing revenues. However, the withdrawal of tax concessions in these regions may threaten their future development. Access to EU funding can help with some strategic objectives, such as building the bridge over the Danube from Brăila. It will improve access to both cities, also facilitating connections with other important areas, such as the Danube Delta or Constanța.

The two analyzed cities, like other nearby areas, have a touristic potential (Cândea et al. 2009), which has not yet been used due to accessibility problems and lack of tourist infrastructure. However, tourism cannot be the only sector leading to better economic conditions in cities. In this regard, it is highlighted the importance of existing industrial units. While there are fewer employees than in the past, these units are still important to the region’s economy.

Throughout history, port cities have shown their ability to adapt to new economic and political situations. It is still possible today, with the cooperation between the authorities and economic players. Brăila and Galați can be strong economic centers, where the contribution of different branches can lead to an improvement in the economic situation and an increase in the quality of life of the inhabitants.

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