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Advancing integrated research on European River – Sea systems: the DANUBIUS-RI project

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Abstract

European research at the interface between terrestrial, riverine, estuarine and marine environments is frequently constrained by significant disciplinary and geographical boundaries. This article outlines an international initiative, DANUBIUS-RI which aims to address these problems by facilitating biogeochemical monitoring and inter-disciplinary research on river-sea systems. The scope of the project spans the environmental, social and economic sciences and was accepted onto the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures roadmap in 2016. When operational, DANUBIUS-RI will offer researchers access to interdisciplinary expertise, facilities and to European River–Sea systems, providing a comprehensive platform for multi-disciplinary research and training.

Keywords: Research infrastructure; Environmental Research; River-Sea systems

Introduction

In this commentary, we summarize the vision for a pan-European Research Infrastructure (RI), DANUBIUS-RI, to address wide-ranging research and societal challenges that confront European River – Sea systems. The RI will comprise 'facilities, resources and services used by the science community to conduct research' (ESFRI, 2016). It seeks to link freshwater and marine research by advancing the study of rivers and their wider landscapes, transitional areas (including deltas and estuaries) and seas as a single entity. In so doing, the aim is to reduce the constraints on inter-disciplinary research that have hitherto hindered attempts to develop holistic approaches to the study and management of River Sea systems. The consequences have included a geographically and academically-fragmented approach to freshwater and marine research that have wide-ranging societal implications. This is evident in the current European regulatory regime where the Water Framework Directive (WFD – 200/60/EC) covers rivers and coastal zones while marine waters are subject to directives on the Marine Strategy Framework (MSFD – 2008/56/EC) and Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) (2014/89/EU). The difficulties posed by the disjunct in regulatory structures are compounded by the multi-dimensional, diverse and dynamic process drivers, both natural and anthropogenic, that govern River Sea systems, the study of which requires new approaches to cross-disciplinary research spanning the freshwater and marine sciences.

DANUBIUS-RI was conceived at a meeting, on the Danube Delta, organised by the Romanian National Research and Development Institute for Marine Geology and Geoecology (GeoEcoMar) and the US Army Corps of Engineers in September 2006. The meeting brought together people from Europe, North America, and Asia working in freshwater, marine and deltaic systems, and identified the need for more integrated studies of river catchments, transitional zones (deltas, estuaries) and coastal seas. The initial focus was on the Danube, the Danube Delta and Black Sea, and led to a workshop in 2010 which brought together Romanian academics working in these areas (the Diaspora 2010 National Conference). Two subsequent developments led to a widening of the initiative to develop research infrastructure across Europe where there were opportunities to advance holistic approaches to the research and management of River – Sea systems. First, in 2013 Romania provided funding to advance the concept of a distributed research infrastructure, which was designated a flagship project of the EU strategy for the Danube Region, and led to the establishment of an International Initiative Committee to advise on developing the consortium. Second, the EU provided support,through the Framework VII project‘ DANube macroregion: Capacity building and Excellence in River Systems: basin, delta and sea’ (DANCERS). While largely focused on the Danube – Delta – Black Sea region, this project highlighted the extent of environmental problems across the freshwater – marine continuum. This culminated in the current vision for ‘DANUBIUS-RI’ as proposed to the European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures (ESFRI), and accepted on their 2016 roadmap for research infrastructures.

Thus, notwithstanding the scale and complexity of the Danube River Basin and Black Sea (a catchment spanning 19 countries; a wetland Biosphere Reserve; a semi-enclosed sea impacted by riverine nutrient inputs), the problems of this region are common across Europe and globally. Hence, while the title, DANUBIUS (the Sanskrit for fluid and the Proto-Indo-European term for river: *dãnu)*, reflects the initiative's history, in this article we highlight its wider compass by exploring the key challenges currently confronting River Sea systems which motivated the project and outline the proposed structure of the RI. Despite the focus here on water resources, it is intended that the RI will have a wider scope across the environmental sciences, with the overarching aim of enhancing interdisciplinary research, and management, across the freshwater – marine continuum.

The Scientific Challenge

Rivers, lakes, deltas, estuaries, coastal wetlands and coastal seas are the dynamic product of interacting environmental processes. Their management presents significant challenges: both in understanding the shorter (e.g. climatological) and longer (geological) 'natural' environmental dynamics, and in quantifying the magnitude and consequences of anthropogenic impacts against the naturally changing background. Physically, their boundaries extend from the '*aqua incognita*', or 'unknown waters', of the catchment headwaters (Bishop et al. 2008) to coastal seas which rely upon riverine nutrient and sediment fluxes to maintain fisheries, provide flood protection and sustain deltas. Freshwater and marine systems face multiple pressures from anthropogenic drivers (urbanization, hydro- and wind-power generation, and shipping / navigation) at scales ranging from local to regional and global (Omerod et al. 2010). These pressures are ubiquitous. They interact in various ways and contribute to problems including eutrophication, hypoxia, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and habitat depletion, with far-reaching implications for ecosystem services

(Hering et al. 2014). In future, these pressures are likely to increase with consequences along the continuum from catchment – to coast – to sea that have yet to be fully quantified. For example, coastal deltas and estuaries may be at 'tipping points' as they evolve from their 'natural', early Holocene, state, to a heavily modified, Anthropocene, state (Sivitsky et al. 2009). The concern is that at some point these systems may 'collapse' due to rising sea levels, land subsidence and changing river flow and sediment regimes (Renaud et al. 2014). The difficulty is that in many cases our knowledge of environmental functioning is insufficient to: (i) determine environmental resilience; (ii) identify 'trajectories of change'; or (iii) identify how these systems may be managed against a continually changing background, to ensure management is effective whilst also ensuring an equitable use of resources.

In many cases, societal responses to the challenges confronting River – Sea systems have been fragmentary and constrained by disciplinary and geopolitical boundaries. The challenges are compounded by the uncertainties of environmental functioning, particularly at disciplinary interfaces: longitudinally (freshwater to marine), laterally (catchment to river; coast to sea), and vertically (surface to groundwater). Here we illustrate the problems of current approaches by first considering the situation with respect to catchment management, before examining the implications for freshwater-marine transitional zones and shallow seas downstream.

Globally river catchments are experiencing ongoing changes in catchment water balance, with anthropogenically-driven climate change modifying the partitioning of rainfall between individual catchment water stores and fluxes (Overeem et al. 2013). In some catchments, higher temperatures have contributed to increases in rainfall quantity and intensity, while elsewhere elevation dependent warming has led to reduced snowfall and streamflow (Berghuijs et al. 2014). These effects have been exacerbated by increased evapotranspiration, groundwater and river abstraction, and river engineering that have heavily modified riverflow regimes (Nilsson et al. 2005). In many cases, however, river and catchment management has followed an overly sectoral approach with limited integration and a lack of holistic focus. The consequences are evident in large international river basins such as the Danube River Basin where there are problems in reconciling competing requirements of flood management and navigation with conserving or restoring geomorphological and ecological diversity (Habersack, et al. 2016; Hein et al. 2016). These concerns are compounded by poor water quality arising from inadequately treated waste-water, urban runoff and agricultural effluent (Chapman et al. 2016). Here, there is an urgent need for chemical and effect-based monitoring tools to inform new models of exposure and risk assessment. Ultimately though, the success of this work depends upon holistic, basin-wide, approaches to catchment management and governance to resolve competing management priorities through the basin.

The problems are cumulative with implications downstream: in the freshwater – marine transition zone, in transitional estuarine environments and shallow seas. Transitional and marine systems have been impacted globally by reductions in catchment sediment fluxes as a result of river regulation (Paola et al. 2011). Deltas, estuaries and coastal seas are further affected by increases in relative sea level and temperature, by changes in salinity, acidification and de-oxygenation that impact marine pelagic and shallow benthic ecosystems. Potential effects are magnified by the changing quantity and quality of freshwater inputs to marine areas, by algal blooms and eutrophication, and by the bioaccumulation of environmental pollutants in food webs. For most catchments, shallow seas represent the ultimate fate of emerging pollutants with consequences for public and environmental health that have yet to be fully quantified. At the same time, there are potential impacts from oil and gas extraction, the development of renewable energy (wind farms; tidal barrages) and uncertainties over the consequences of new initiatives, for example, relating to methane hydrates (Ruppell, 2011). Given the increasing global population, with particularly marked increases in coastal populations, there is an urgent need to ensure sustainable food production by integrating fisheries and aquaculture research with environmental, social and economic research (JPI-Oceans, 2015). This requires improved understanding of processes and fluxes that link freshwater and marine systems.

From a wider perspective, many of the ‘Planetary Boundaries’ such climate change, changes in phosphorus and nitrogen cycling, global freshwater use, land-use, loss of biodiversity, chemical pollution and ocean acidification require a more holistic approach to research and management (Rockstrom, et al. 2009). Some river basins have effectively become ‘closed’ with insufficient water available to satisfy anthropogenic demand or sustain ‘natural’ ecosystems. Water is critical in determining the resilience of socio-ecological systems, with emerging challenges over increasing food and biofuel production, highlighting the importance of environmental stewardship in protecting ecosystem function. In response, the case for a new paradigm of water governance has been advanced that accounts for the many faceted uses of water and interactions at different scales (Rockström et al. 2014; Steffen et al. 2015). This requires new and innovative approaches from the research community to identify sustainable solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Integrated management of River Sea systems is challenging given their multi-disciplinary nature, the difficulty in defining their physical boundaries and in attributing cause-and-effect. These systems are potentially characterized by significant instability and their response to current and future pressures are, to a certain extent, unpredictable; yet they perform key ecosystem services which are vital in achieving the sustainable development goals (Green et al. 2015). Hence River – Sea management should be regulated by three interlinked principles: (i) being well-informed and based on in-depth system understanding; (ii) conforming to the accepted ideals of adaptive management; and (iii) following a participatory approach (Brils et al. 2014). Ultimately this requires environmental research that has societal relevance and which spans traditional disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

The rationale for a new and more holistic approach to River Sea systems can be illustrated by considering the consequences of river and catchment management for sediment and nutrient fluxes. Most rivers now show evidence of reduced sediment discharge as a result of river regulation and reservoir sedimentation which have significant implications for coastal and marine systems (Milliman and Farnsworth, 2013). In southern Europe, deltas and coasts are potentially vulnerable to changes in sediment supply, variations in discharge, local river / coastal engineering works, and changing sea level to the extent they may shortly enter a 'destruction' phase following a period of sustained progradation (Anthony et al. 2014). In northern Europe, these problems are compounded by the pressures to maintain (and deepen) navigable channels in the Rhine and Elbe, and continuing to protect against coastal flooding and storm surges. These problems are compounded by the effects of changing nutrient loads, such as the drawdown of silica by phytoplankton in reservoirs, which is contributing to changes in the ecosystem of the northwest Black Sea (Humborg et al. 1997) and may affect hypoxia or anoxia in shallow seas.

Given these widespread, and inter-related, problems, the following scientific challenges have been identified, relating to:

System Characterisation: Quantifying and modelling hydrodynamic processes, ecosystem assessment and function.

Environmental Change: Applying advances in in-situ and earth observation science; understanding extreme events within a wider assessment of environmental hazards and risks.

Adaptive and sustainable management: advancing inter-disciplinary and holistic approaches to manage European River Sea systems.

DANUBIUS-RI: the architecture of the Research Infrastructure

DANUBIUS-RI aims to address these challenges, by providing a platform for the integrated study of River-Sea systems. The RI seeks to advance enhanced process understanding of: (i) environmental system dynamics; (ii) the impact of multiple catchment and marine pressures on system function; (iii) the consequences of human activities as drivers; and hence, iv. safeguard the ecosystem functions and services provided by River Sea systems. The RI seeks to quantify environmental system dynamics across disciplinary boundaries and enhance environmental management across freshwater and marine systems. Significantly, recent developments in analytical and observation technology, from space-borne to *in-situ* monitoring, and more advanced modelling capabilities, provide new opportunities to monitor River Sea systems at the entire basin scale and in real-time. There are challenges, however, in developing and applying new technologies, for example, quality control to ensure comparability and consistency in environmental monitoring and in analytical procedures. This requires greater collaboration and coherence in developing (and using) available observational, analytical, modelling and data management facilities. The RI aims to provide a platform to achieve this integrate this knowledge and understanding to help address these problems.

The infrastructure is envisaged as a pan-European distributed research infrastructure dedicated to research in the freshwater and marine sciences. In its present form, the RI extends across ten European countries supported by institutions in a further eight countries. Physically the RI will comprise a 'Hub', 'Nodes' and 'Supersites' distributed across Europe (Figure 1). The 'Nodes' will be facilities, some 'virtual' in nature, offering observational, analytical and modelling capabilities across the biological, physical and social sciences. The intention will be to identify and apply monitoring, analytical, and modelling best practice, to provide a step-change in research spanning River Sea systems:

The **Observation Node** will be coordinated by the Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML) in the UK. The Node will comprise operational data processing (PML) which builds on the Calimnos processing chain developed in partnership with Brockmann Consult and the University of Stirling (UK). Calimnos exploits algorithms developed for optically complex waters by the GloblLakes project (Tyler et al. 2016). The node will recommend procedures for standardization of instrumented buoys across sites associated with the RI delivering standardised measures of water quality across the continuum of optical water types within river sea systems (Spyrakos et al. 2017).

The **Analysis Node**, led by Bundesanstalt für Gewässerkunde (BfG), Germany, will work to ensure consistency in analytical techniques through standardized protocols for field sampling and laboratory analyses of key environmental determinants. Quality Control standards will be developed to ensure comparability between data collected in different environments. While the Node will be the designated 'lead laboratory', 'partner laboratories' will provide additional services and expertise in key areas: both geographically and with respect to different suites of analytical analysis.

The **Modelling Node**, coordinated by ISMAR-CNR, Italy, will draw upon the enhanced environmental data availability to develop transferable modelling tools to simulate specific processes, interpolate between observation points, and investigate model scenarios. Appropriate numerical modelling tools are key pre-requisites in identifying sustainable solutions to environmental problems spanning River Sea systems and their transitional environments and this work will build upon ISMAR-CNR's expertise in hydrodynamic and biogeochemical modelling, including oil spill scenarios.

The **Impact Node**, to be developed by Deltares, The Netherlands, aims to integrate technical knowledge on River Sea systems with developments in environmental governance and policy making. The node will develop and test concepts, methods and instruments to identify innovative and sustainable solutions, for example, using a 'decision theatre' to enhance spatial planning across the River – Sea continuum and consider how to address uncertainties in the decision-making process.

The RI will also comprise 'Supersites' situated across Europe (Fig. 1) dedicated to observation, research, and modelling across the River – Sea continuum. These environmental field observatories will encompass environments ranging from relatively pristine sites (such as the **Danube Delta, Romania**) to areas significantly impacted by anthropogenic processes (**the Thames Estuary, UK**; **the Elbe, Germany**). Freshwater supersites include **Szigetkoz** on the Danube floodplain in Hungary which will characterise surface-water – groundwater interactions in reaches impacted by river engineering works, and **Lake Lunz and the Upper Danube** catchment in Austria. The latter offers an Alpine focus with long-term observation sites, including floodplain reaches and impounded sections along the Upper Danube, to study carbon cycling and ecosystem response to climate change and attribute 'cause-and effect' in the context of multiple pressures on freshwater environments. Finally, the **Ebro Delta** (Spain), **Nestos** (Greece) and the **Po Delta and North Adriatic Lagoons** (Italy) offer transitional field-sites impacted by climate change, rising sea level and changing catchment land use.

In addition to the nodes and Supersites, the RI will include a **Technology Transfer Office** at University College Cork, Ireland, to enhance technology transfer and commercialization of Intellectual Property (IP). It is intended that this will create an enabling environment for collaboration between industry and researchers and will help in identifying and exploiting any IP generated. There will also be a **Data Centre**, in Bucharest, Romania that will draw upon existing European e-infrastructures to provide data access and ensure data inter-operability. A distributed data archiving infrastructure will be developed to foster sharing of data and computer resources at different levels: from data acquisition, to data processing and storage, through to data access by end-users.

The overall vision of DANUBIUS-RI is that the Nodes will ensure disciplinary rigour whilst benefitting from the potential for inter-disciplinarity provided by the Supersites. The **Hub** of the RI, to be situated in the Danube Delta, Romania, will have primary responsibility for coordinating the institutional partners and exploring opportunities for wider international collaboration thereby promoting the EU goals for research and innovation: open science, and open innovation.

DANUBIUS-RI was accepted onto the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) roadmap in 2016. The initiative is currently (2017) in its implementation phase and plans detailing the architecture and funding model(s) for the RI are being developed with the expectation that the infrastructure will be operational within ten years. Realistically, the success of the project will depend upon the degree to which individual countries are able to provide funding: both capital funding, and recurrent funding to support operational costs. Some progress has already been made, however, with the completion of the first construction phase of the research hub at Murighiol on the edge of the Danube Delta in Romania. Similarly, other elements of the RI, notably Lake Lunz and the Upper Danube catchment in Austria, have also been completed. However, it is anticipated that as the preparatory phase proceeds, the form of the RI will evolve in response to funding opportunities and the commitment of individual countries to engage in the project. Ultimately the hope is that by enhancing our ability to undertake integrated, cross-disciplinary, environmental research, management and education on European Rivers and Seas, DANUBIUS-RI will assist in developing new scientific approaches to cross-disciplinary research spanning the freshwater and marine sciences.

Discussion

The success of DANUBIUS-RI will to a large extent depend upon the degree to which inter-disciplinary research questions of key societal importance are addressed, with support from national funding agencies. It is important also that the RI fosters cross-disciplinary research and breaks down the traditional, disciplinary, barriers to environmental research and management. Here a common language, or ontology, will need to be developed to ensure research questions are framed appropriately, with data (field, analytical, model) and environmental samples collected and archived according to agreed protocols to ensure disciplinary rigour. Hence stakeholder engagement is vital in ensuring that the architecture of the RI satisfies user community needs and has sufficient flexibility to respond to future pressures.

The expectations are that over the coming ten years, as the project progresses towards the implementation phase, DANUBIUS-RI will provide opportunities for the European research community to work with catchment and river managers in advancing new and transferable solutions to emerging environmental problems that span freshwater and marine systems. Europe has considerable experience in this area, evidenced by past actions in response to poor water quality, and developments in integrated water resources management, adaptive management and ecosystem-based approaches for conservation and restoration (Falkenmark, 2017). However, while the WFD and MSFD provide the legal framework to protect water bodies, advocating management approaches focussed on the drainage basin, increasingly a drainage basin focus in itself may be insufficient to resolve wider environmental problems. ‘Wicked’ problems of this scale and complexity require novel approaches to understand, quantify, and manage, including a sustainable platform for communication between the research and user communities to ensure opportunities for knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange are utilised wherever possible.

These broad goals must be supported by sound science. Here the situation is further complicated by the nature of the River - Sea continuum which is characterized by process discontinuities at different scales through fluvial to marine systems (Bentley Sr et al. 2016). Globally River - Sea systems are increasingly important, both with respect to conventional hydrocarbon exploitation and production, and to explore the full potential of emerging development in renewable energy including offshore wind farms, tidal energy (barrages and turbines and wave energy converters) and aquaculture (Buck et al. 2004). At a time of extensive human modification of freshwater and marine systems it is essential that the full potential benefits accruing from cross-disciplinary projects are realized. This presents significant challenges in which adaptive management requires an accommodation between potentially multiple users as well as recognition of the significance of autogenic process response at different spatial and temporal scales. The latter describes the extent to which River - Sea systems self-regulate as they evolve over time, although there are uncertainties with regard to their resilience, for example, over their capacity to assimilate material fluxes (e.g. nutrients, carbon, emerging pollutants, sediment) given ongoing, widespread environmental change.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there are considerable benefits in ‘working with nature’ to support the natural capacity to deliver key ecosystem services. Examples include developing concepts in natural flood management and green engineering, which can replace traditional ‘hard’ engineering approaches to catchment, river and coastal management. These changes in approach have been likened to a paradigm change (e.g. Petts et al. 2006), but there are considerable practical problems in using these innovative approaches to advance the basis for integrated water resource management. These include the difficulties in reconciling competing demands for water, in sustaining the complexity of freshwater and marine habitats, and quantifying the inter-relationships between biotic and abiotic processes. The problems are further complicated by the potential for non-stationarity in process-response (Milly et al. 2015), by increases in human-mediated changes in water storage and flux (Konar et al. 2016), and by the pressing need to focus more on identifying solutions to environmental problems (Pahl-Wostl, et al. 2013).

For a number of reasons this is a timely opportunity to develop an interdisciplinary pan-European RI on River – Sea systems. Given the global context of pandemic water problems, and the need to identify solutions, Pahl-Wostl et al. (2013) advocated the setting of 'global water testbeds' for interdisciplinary research, in which integrated methodologies can be developed to enhance interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge and build upon new and emerging ideas in the environmental sciences. These include: advances in Earth Observation that build upon the European Commission and the European Space Agency's Copernicus Programme and multiple platform capability due to the technical convergence of Ocean Colour Satellite missions across a number of space agencies (Tyler et al. 2016); increasing capabilities in in-situ monitoring technologies (e.g. Blean et al. 2016); recent developments in citizen science (Bonney et al. 2014); and the developing potential for near-real time processing and management of Big Data. These advances provide opportunities to model River - Sea systems at spatial and temporal scales that were previously unrealistic given, for example, that our ability to develop complex hydrological models has been constrained by limitations in data availability (Gleick et al. 2013). The challenge for the future lies at the intersection of the pure and applied sciences, in ensuring appropriate quality assurance and control of the new data, in practical applications of our improved scientific understanding, and developing cross-disciplinary communication. The ultimate challenge is then in applying these new techniques to provide sustainable solutions to new and emerging environmental problems.

Conclusions

Globally Rivers and Seas are confronted by a suite of environmental problems: the dynamics of the water cycle have been increasingly affected by human activities, with effects that in some cases are being compounded by ongoing changes in climate and land use. The scale of these problems is such as to require a stronger inter-disciplinary focus, to develop and apply new ways to integrate environmental research and stakeholder communities. In this article we introduce a pan-European distributed research infrastructure, DANUBIUS-RI, which seeks to address this need at the freshwater – marine interface. The proposal envisages **nodes**, focussing on **observation**, **modelling**, **analysis**, and **impact**, with **Supersites** in 8 countries, a **Technology Transfer Office** a **Data Centre** and **Hub**. Further development of the proposal provides opportunities for community engagement to ensure that the RI provides the facilities required to strengthen trans-disciplinary research on European River – Sea systems.

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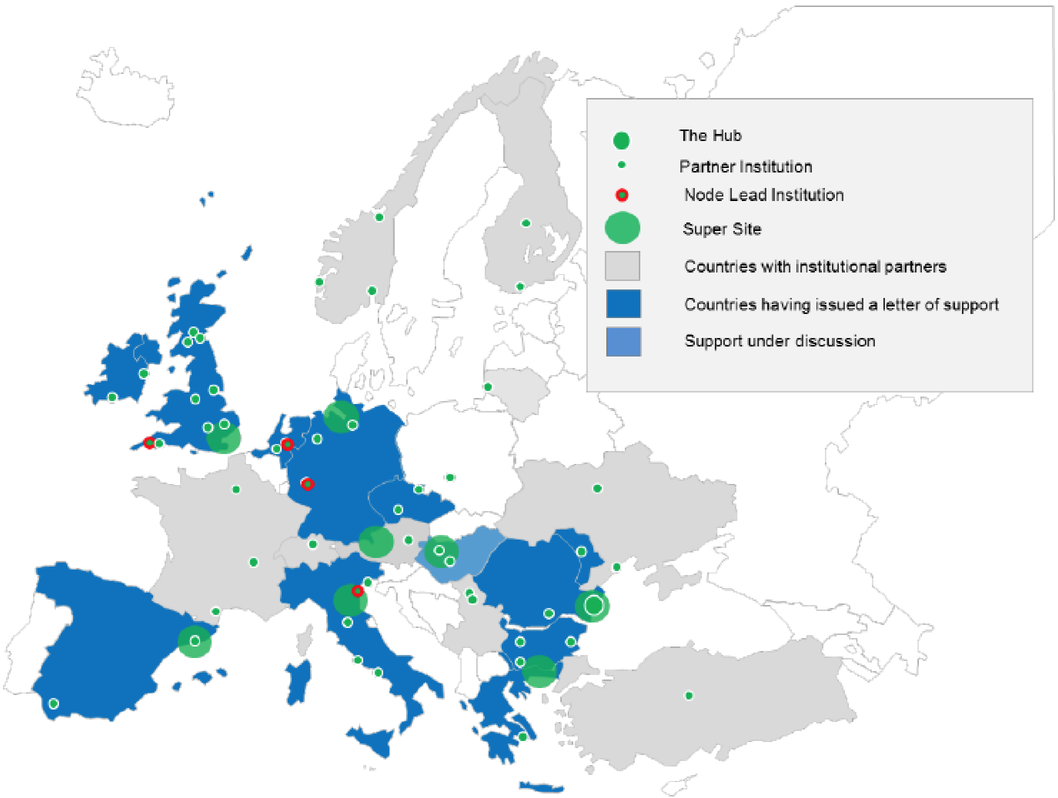
Figure 1. DANUBIUS-RI: the distribution of facilities across Europe giving the location of the Hub (Romania), Nodes, Supersites and institutions supporting the development of the infrastructure.



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