



The Iron Curtain Trail

Concluding Awareness-raising Workshop
with special focus on South-Eastern European countries

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Holiday Inn Sofia



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Report

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Workshop:

More than 90 participants attended the third – and final – workshop that took place in Sofia (Bulgaria) on March 16, 2010.

Content and conclusions of the Sofia-Workshop:

Content:

Ivo Marinov, Bulgarian Deputy Minister for Tourism, opened the workshop and pointed out in his welcome speech that cycling tourism has the potential to contribute both to sustainable development and economic prosperity. **Katarzyna Sobierajska**, Undersecretary of State for Tourism of Poland and **Hanna Bozzay**, Head of Tourism Department of Hungary, followed by linking this workshop to the previous ones in Warsaw and Sopron. These interventions were concluded by the welcome address of **Franco Ianniello**, Head of Tourism Unit, who presented at the end the video clip 'Discover Europe by bike', produced by the European Commission, DG Enterprise and Industry.

The morning sessions focussed generally on cycling tourism in Europe and its contribution to sustainable tourism development:

The presentations and the **first panel** focused on the economic dimension of cycling tourism in Europe, the potentials of the Iron Curtain Trail, links to the Green Belt project and local added value that could be created by the development of a cycling route.

Michael Cramer, promoter of the project presented the idea of the Iron Curtain Trail as means to overcome historical borders – which still exist in some minds. He mentioned the two starting points for the project, the Berlin Wall Trail and the German-German Border Trail. Especially the Berlin Wall Trail has become a touristic event which encounters a 20 % increase each year. He spoke about the importance of cycling tourism and that the EuroVelo routes became part of the trans-European transport Network (TEN-T).

Eke Eijgelaar introduced the results of a European Parliament study ('The European Cycle Route Network EuroVelo: Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Tourism') that showed the economic relevance of cycling tourism in Europe. He summarized that the Iron Curtain Trail has considerable strengths and opportunities. A weakness is the low population density in the Northern and Southern parts of the route, causing an uneven distribution of the expected total revenues. The project needs a management framework, as a lack of cooperation between single projects would be a threat to overall success. The integration of interfacing sectors like tourism, sport, transport and local economy, cross-border cooperation and strong ties with local communities need to be encouraged to increase visibility and functioning of the project.

Bernhard Ensink presented the quality criteria of the EuroVelo network. The Iron Curtain Trail will be part of the EuroVelo network as EuroVelo Route 13, but it still needs improvement in details like exact routing, infrastructure, etc. He underlined the necessity of stakeholder involvement to create added value.

Alois Lang added in the panel discussion the aims of the Green Belt project and highlighted possible synergies with the Iron Curtain Trail. The development of cycling tourism could be a contribution to the protection of sensitive areas

(Natura2000, a.o.) e.g. by awareness raising both for tourists and locals and the creation of economic benefits for the regions. Therefore the Iron Curtain Trail has to create links with other ongoing regional development processes.

The panel discussed possibilities to take bikes on trains and came up with the following conclusions:

- The EuroVelo guidelines provide quality standards, according to which paved routes would be optimal (but not feasible e.g. in some protected areas). At least guidebooks should provide information about the state of the route (ground cover, steepness, etc.).
- A close cooperation between Iron Curtain Trail and Green Belt is welcome and envisaged: nature and culture should go together; nevertheless, careful detailed planning of the trail is needed, when it passes or crosses protected areas.
- Taking your bicycle on a train has become one of the new passenger rights: "Bicycle carriage: The railway companies shall enable passengers to bring their bicycles on to any train, if they are easy to handle, if it does not adversely affect the specific rail service, and if the rolling-stock so permits." (according to European Commission: 3 December 2009 – Entry into force of Regulation 1371/2007 on rail passengers' rights "Railway passengers in the EU have new rights as from today" Summary of EU legal provisions on rail passenger rights.)

But nevertheless one has to face difficulties in reality, especially, if travelling with a group of cyclists.

The presentations of the **second morning panel** discussed different European good-practise examples: experiences, success factors, challenges and obstacles in European long-distance cycling routes or destination based projects with a focus on cycling.

Lukas Stadtherr described the example of Veloland Switzerland and focused on the systematic logical approach in the marketing strategy: easy recognisable and consequently used signal colours and corporate design for the different modes of gentle mobility: cycling, hiking, canoeing, rollerblading and mountain biking. In the second part of his intervention he referred to the positive partnership with both the Swiss railways and the bus companies. Finally, he presented ideas how 'Europe' could use the Swiss example to develop a similar European system: from 'Switzerland Mobility' to 'Europe Mobility'.

Juraj Flamik looked at the benefits for tourism businesses that could be created by the Iron Curtain Trail or other cycling routes. He presented the success story of 1.300 businesses that are certified as cycle-friendly in the Czech Republic, Lower Austria and Slovakia.

Jens-Erik Larsen presented the experiences with long distance cycling projects in the North of Europe. He underlined that signing and mapping are two essential tools for developing leisure cycling and bicycle tourism and the importance of involving the networks of local and regional authorities along the route in the planning and implementation.

Carmen Aycart Luengo introduced the Spanish project 'Via Verde de la Sierra' as a good example for sustainable cycling tourism in an isolated rural area. She highlighted the simultaneous and complementary work on infrastructure, facilities, information and promotion, management and employment as key factors.

Finally, **Daniel Mourek** showed with the example of the Naturathlon, how the Iron Curtain Trail could be used for attractive and successful (cycling) events and that nature conservation and sport activities are no contradiction.

The following discussion was related to the projects presented. The main outcomes of this discussion were:

- Involve local communities (and their existing cycling networks, attractions, etc.) in planning and implementation and link it to the European level (ECF).
- A management and coordination entity for whole national cycling systems is more effective than management and marketing units for specific routes.
- A consequently used corporate design is needed for the signalisation and mapping.

The **afternoon sessions** focused on the Southern part of the Iron Curtain Trail and tried to link experiences from cycling projects in South-East Europe with possible funding options to discuss next steps in the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail:

The **first round of afternoon presentations and the panel discussion** looked at the creation of touristic offers. It discussed next steps and supporting frameworks for the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail.

Radu Mititean presented the planned Romanian Cycling Network that should consist of national, regional and local road and mountain-bike cycling routes with the same logic signalisation.

Jovan Erakovic presented the process of implementation of the Danube cycling route in Serbia and highlighted the involvement of different stakeholders, the know-how transfer between those partners and the integration into tourism promotion. He underlined the importance to strengthen local cycling associations and to focus marketing efforts also on the domestic tourism market.

Radostina Marinova introduced the Danube Greenways Day – a festival of culinary specialities and cultural traditions as example how local culture could contribute to successful tourism product development. For the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail she especially claimed improved transport infrastructure along and across the borders.

Dusko Medic talked about the cross-border cooperation in the implementation of the Pannonian Peace Trail. He concluded that cycling routes contribute to rural development, improve communication between decision makers, small businesses and local inhabitants. Finally, he suggested launching a grant for small projects on product- and project-development along the trail.

Alois Lang participated in the panel and focussed his contribution on optional roles of NGOs, international organisations and regional authorities when it comes to the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail. He underlined the need for developing different regional USPs (Unique Selling Propositions) along the route.

The panel delivered the following key messages:

- The Iron Curtain Trail could be an important international brand, but nevertheless the regions along the trail need to develop specific USPs – as

a key for success.

- One could identify the lack of existing and easy accessible information in English on cycling relevant issues (transport connections, accommodation etc.). However, one has to be aware that the Iron Curtain Trail will attract domestic tourists first.
- National cycling programmes or strategies could be of help for the creation of synergies between the Iron Curtain Trail and national cycling networks and national tourism marketing, but are depending on the commitment of national governments.
- The Iron Curtain Trail will enrich the Danube cycling trail and vice versa!

The **last panel** compared and discussed funding instruments for the support of cross-border and international projects. Several EU- financial instruments were introduced:

Michael Förchner started by explaining practical approaches and application procedures. He put his finger on the European Social Fund that could be an additional funding source (besides the Territorial Funds).

Roberta Calcina explained basic characteristics and guidelines of the South-East European Territorial Cooperation Programme 2007-2013 that gives some opportunities for financial support of development and cooperation of the Iron Curtain Trail project.

Margarita Velcheva and **Evdokia Dimitorva** presented the opportunities that are provided by IPA (Instrument for Pres-Accession Assistance).

The conclusions of the following panel were:

- Within European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) 52 cross-border programmes exist (including the IPA instrument between new MS and candidate countries: Bulgaria – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Greece – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Hungary – Serbia; Hungary – Croatia) which are given priority over 13 transnational programmes, such as the Programme for South East Europe. Many of them could be used for contributions to the Iron Curtain Trail implementation – but it is necessary to understand their specific objectives and to design projects accordingly.
- The basic idea of the Iron Curtain Trail would make a good European project eligible for funding under the Structural funds and other European instruments. However, a better networking amongst culture, nature and cycling tourism is required. A project under ETC is feasible, once a more firmly network has been established.
- The EU Danube Strategy, which is currently under preparation, could be of relevance for the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail.
- Infrastructure measures should be accompanied by soft measures focusing also on product development, marketing, education and training; all relevant actors of the area across border shall become engaged and combine their resources and their will into one common strategy.
- Structural funds require that an organization under public law takes the lead in a project proposal, as only this can ensure that sufficient funds are

available for the necessary pre-financing.

- Mountain areas in general tend to develop towards the centres (i.e. towards the valleys and planes). From the point of sustainability and regional identities those centripetal forces need correction – the Iron Curtain Trail could contribute to the development of the mountain regions themselves. This is relevant for the border regions between Bulgaria and Greece, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia.

The **closing session** was opened by **Michael Cramer** who mentioned that it took 10 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall to implement the German cycling trail along the (former) German-German border. He is confident that after 10 more years the Iron Curtain Trail will be completed.

Franco Ianniello highlighted that financial means are available at Community level to implement the trail. However, it is the national, regional and local stakeholders who have to take the initiative now, in order to decide on the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail. The tourism unit will try to find the best synergies with other Commission services and will continue to focus its support for networking and promotion for the Iron Curtain Trail. He proposed that the Iron Curtain Trail could be promoted also as a cultural route. Moreover, the promotion via the European Travel Commission (ETC) and their website www.visiteurope.com could be envisaged. On 27 September 2010, when the Commission celebrates the European Tourism Day, further visibility and promotion could be given to this project.

He thanked the organisers and especially the host country.

In the **closing remarks**, the representatives from Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria expressed their commitment and strong support for this project. Mr Nikola Minic representing the Ministry of Economy & Regional development of Serbia announced that his Ministry will support the development of the Iron Curtain Trail also with necessary funding.

Conclusions of the moderators for the South-East European part of the Iron Curtain Trail:

- The Iron Curtain Trail is a fascinating idea that is trying to turn history into future and to create a new understanding of Europe and its regions. At the same time it is a very complex project as it combines local, regional, national and European activities and is both a tourism- and cycling-project and a means of regional development.
- This is an even more complicated challenge in the South-East of Europe with its mixture of member states and non-members of the EU (some with candidate status). Especially in the border regions in the far south of the Iron Curtain Trail historical barriers still exist, that need to be overcome.
- The mountain area alongside the borders between Bulgaria and Greece, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, is challenging and substantially different from most of the other parts. The long time political as well as the topographical border quite naturally supports a development towards the next centres in the valleys (or along the coast). Strong initiative will be needed to create a 'counterweight' – a cross border and cross-mountain development - to the centripetal forces of these centres.

- The southern part of the Iron Curtain Trail is less likely seen as a cycling destination – both from the perspective of the local leisure activities (only providing a niche product for the - anyway small - domestic tourism market) and from the actual international tourism image of those destinations. Public transport is more based on busses than on trains (compared with central and northern Europe) and the transport of bicycles in means of public transport in many places is rather difficult.
- Furthermore the Iron Curtain Trail passes some of the least developed regions in Europe, any development and investment has to face high regional emigration rates and brain drain.

General Conclusions valid for the Iron Curtain Trail:

- The Iron Curtain Trail is a fascinating idea that is trying to turn history into future and to create a new understanding of Europe and its regions. It has potential for a successful international cycling and tourism project, for its international implementation it needs the following steps:
 - A management framework and a European coordination unit with national focal points are needed: A unit (authority, organisation) that takes the responsibility for the overall, cross-border and transnational project planning, its implementation, operation and quality assurance.
 - National focal points / responsible persons – or better institutions – for the coordination of the national and cross-border, bilateral implementation. At regional and local level multi-stakeholder groups should be formed.
 - Concrete action plans for its implementation, best both on European and national level have to be elaborated: smart project applications – fitting to the aims of the different funding programs.
 - The implementation needs ‘cross-border thinking’ of all stakeholders and concrete ‘cross-border project development’.
- The implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail needs trust and cooperation – between different sectors and stakeholders and also between representatives of different political hierarchical levels. The Iron Curtain Trail and the Green Belt Project of IUCN, BUND and several other stakeholders show similar goals, a close cooperation therefore is recommended. Professional cycling organisations, linked with European umbrellas like the ECF, are existing and capable of giving knowhow to the development of the Iron Curtain Trail.
- In order to contribute to the development of sustainable regional tourism and to create regional economic benefit the Iron Curtain Trail could be a starting point, not the final aim. Networking with and development of suitable regional cross-border projects in the fields of nature-, cultural- and historical tourism are needed.
 - Connection with existing regional cycling trails / networks and synergies with national cycling and tourism strategies.
 - Development of concrete tourist packages (for groups and individuals) for cyclists based on the local resources of nature, culture and history.
 - Involvement of (existing) tourism marketing organisations from the very

beginning for the preparation for appropriate marketing concepts for the domestic and international market.

- Cycling tourism / tourists need special facilities
 - An analysis and overview about possibilities for transport of bicycles on the existing train services should be conducted. The development of bicycles transport by public bus and additional private transport services for bicycles (e.g. included into tour packages) could fill possible gaps.
 - Cyclist friendly accommodation (e.g. no single night fee, possibilities for bike maintenance, etc.)
 - Guiding systems (maps, signposts, ...)
 - The implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail needs communication – a clear sign-posting and corporate design for marketing purposes.
- Most of the cyclists will not go along the whole Iron Curtain Trail, the majority will do 3-5 days along the trail, so marketing should both focus on day trips and leisure tourists (families with children, young couples, 50+) but not forget the minority of the long distance cyclists.
 - But even the market niche of long distance cyclists requires an easy access to the accommodation offers, as well as stimulation to spend more time in the respective border areas. Therefore one of the most important topics on the to-do-list is to identify (in cooperation with the above mentioned partners) all attractive places along the route and to link them with the Iron Curtain Trail as such, thematically and logistically.

The Iron Curtain Trail idea was developed as contribution to overcome historical resentments and to concrete sustainable cross-border development. This fits into several programs of the European structural funds, just to mention the cross-border programmes and the ETC-Programmes (European Territorial Cooperation Programmes). But the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail needs also competence – qualification for and training of the different involved stakeholders.

“Make the Iron Curtain Trail a part of your community and a part of your commitment”.

Christian Baumgartner