

Michael Förschner

Regional Development Initiatives: Successful Project Proposals

A) Content

From a regional development perspective, the area passed through by the Iron Curtain Trail alongside the border between Bulgaria and Greece, Macedonia and Serbia, respectively is definitely challenging and substantially different from most of its 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), as can be easily detected from the maps. To create a "counterweight" to the centripetal forces of these centres, a strong initiative will be needed that puts the focus right at the mountains themselves.

There are not many industries or services that can be considered to provide realistic development perspectives for the villages in the mountain areas. Besides exploitation of endogenous strengths (e.g. local craftsmanship or local farming industry) and energy (e.g. hydro-power-plants), it is probably tourism that offers the best perspectives.

What the Iron Curtain Trail stands out for especially in this area, is the fact that it is intended to exactly follow the border and to cross it frequently. That means that it shall not provide stronger linkages alongside and between the centres in the valleys of the neighbouring countries, but between the villages in the mountains. That means that the communities profiting most shall be exactly those closest to the border, and therefore highest up in the mountains, which are usually characterized by high emigration rates as they offer no income perspectives.

If one tries to look for best practice where such an approach is operating successfully, the closest might be found in the Alps or similar locations, with mountain biking being a main summer attraction for ten thousands of tourists and local people alike each year. This clearly distinguishes this part of the Iron Curtain Trail from others, but makes it also a very special section attracting a different kind of tourists.

B) Structure

To secure the best effects for the region and the highest value added from the investments, it will be necessary to combine all forces. That means to engage all local actors not only in a cross border, but also a cross sectoral partnership structure to commonly develop a strategy and then realise it. To make this initiative work in this specific area will not only require a certain quality of roads or tracks, but also the whole infrastructure regarding accommodation, boarding, services related to biking, emergency care, plus the related qualifications for the people engaged in these professions (starting from language skills to all kinds of modern tourism knowledge), plus international PR activities and booking possibilities, etc.

This will not work if only a few communities or people representing one sector are interested, but only if all relevant actors of the area become engaged and combine their resources and their will into one common strategy and thus become visible internationally.

C) Proposal

In a first step, feasibility studies will be needed to put such a strategy on realistic terms, especially by looking at international examples, and by comparing them with the situation in the region. These analyses will help to identify the criteria needed to make such a strategy work, and to quantify both objectives and resources required.

In a second step the idea should be put to test in a selected priority region, as it will not be feasible to establish the project in one piece. This limits the costs and enables to learn from experience, but on the other hand enables to present a first offer to the international biker community in a comparatively short term. Funding opportunities for such a trial-project, as it is targeting regions in several EU member and non-member states, could come from the EU-Programme on Transnational Cooperation.

If the initial initiative is providing promising results, additional and in principle much larger budgets could be obtained from the Structural Funds and the IPA, respectively, if this is in line with national priorities.