



# The Iron Curtain Trail

Awareness-raising Workshop for  
Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary,  
Slovakia and Slovenia

9<sup>th</sup> December 2009, Sopron, Hungary  
Liszt Ferenc Conference Centre



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## Report

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## Workshop:

128 participants took part in the second workshop in a series of three that was held in Sopron (Hungary) on December 9, 2009.

## Content and conclusions

### **Content:**

After a short welcome by **Tamas Fodor**, Mayor of Sopron, **Dr Miklos Kovács**, Secretary of State for Tourism, welcomed the participants. In his welcome address, he pointed out, that a cycling trail along the former Iron Curtain contains an important political message especially from a city where the demolition of the Iron Curtain has started. He emphasised the potential of the Iron Curtain Trail project which could help to turn a once upon a time historically dividing route to be a tourism product that unites people and countries of Europe in a sustainable manner.

This intervention was followed by the welcome address of **Franco Ianniello**, Head of Tourism Unit, who presented 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 of the **first panel** focused on the economic dimension of cycling tourism in Europe, the potentials of the Iron Curtain Trail and local added value that could be created by the development of such 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 have become part of the Trans-European Networks (TEN) recently.

**Adam Bodor** presented both the results of a European Parliament study that showed the economic relevance of cycling tourism in Europe (replacing Eke Eijelaar at short notice) and the quality criteria of the EuroVelo network. The Iron Curtain Trail could 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 Natura 2000 and other protected areas, e.g. by awareness raising both for tourists and locals and the creation of financial benefit for the regions. Therefore the Iron Curtain Trail has to create links to regional development processes. He mentioned the Neusiedlersee region in Austria including the cross-border national park Neusiedlersee-Fertőd that benefits a lot from the existing cycling trails.

The panel discussed funding for implementation and maintenance, quality standards and possibilities to take bicycles on trains and the combination of the cycling route with other touristic offers, e.g. horse riding trails 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, when passing or crossing protected areas is needed.
- 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 groups of cyclists.

- Political will (e.g. support by mayors) is important; only local and regional offers can motivate cyclists to stay and visit the local destination and thus creating added value for the local economy.
- Cycling trails and other touristic offers (e.g. horse riding trails) should complement each other; same facilities could be used. However, careful selection of appropriate routes is recommended.

The presentations of the **second morning panel** discussed experiences, success factors, challenges and obstacles in European long-distance cycling routes or destinations with a focus on cycling.

**Christian Weinberger** described the example of Veloland Switzerland and focused on systematic links to public transport, high quality standards of infrastructure and one central focal point with individual and group booking options. **Raitis Sijats** discussed the Estonian-Latvian cross-border project 'Go cycling through Vidzeme and Southern Estonia' and the 'Tour de LatEst'. He focussed on the joint project plan, joint infrastructure development and joint promotion as a single tourism destination.

**Karin Kowol** presented touristic packages that are developed in three model regions along the German Green Belt – Elbe-Altmark-Wendland, Harz and Thuringian Forest & Slate Mountains / Franconian Forest – and combine nature conservation with sustainable tourism, bringing history back to life. Specific nature experience offers, special guided tours and events, cycling and hiking tours, events for young people and much more. **Nebojša Matijašević** presented the process of implementation of the Danube cycling trail in Serbia and highlighted the involvement of different stakeholders, the know-how transfer between those partners and the integration into tourism promotion.

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

- Monitoring of the user frequency and revenue of cycling trails is important.
- E-biking is becoming a new trend and gives access to a new target group. Some countries, e.g. Austria have special support programmes for those new forms of mobility.

The **afternoon sessions** took the general experiences from the morning examples and adopted them to the challenge of the Iron Curtain Trail implementation:

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

**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. **Zoltan Pámer** reported about the challenges in the cross-border implementation of the 3 river cycling route including the rivers Danube, Drau and Mur.

**Juraj Flamik** and **Jürgen Krenzer** looked at benefits for tourism businesses to be created along the Iron Curtain Trail or other cycling routes. **Juraj Flamik** presented the Success story of 1.300 businesses that are certified as cycle friendly in the Czech Republic, Lower Austria and Slovakia. **Jürgen Krenzer** presented the development of his hotel into a regionally networking business and highlighted the importance of the use of local products and resources.

**Sztaniszlav Tamás** emphasized the Hungarian Cycling Tourism Strategy as national framework.

**Alois Lang** and **Darinka Jug** participated in the panel discussion and focussed their contribution on optional roles of NGOs, international organisations and regional authorities in the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail.

The panel passed the following key messages:

- The Iron Curtain Trail could be an important international brand, but nevertheless the regions along the trail need to develop a specific USP (Alois Lang: "Given that ICT is developed, convince me in one sentence that I should start cycling exactly in your area!")
- National cycling programmes or strategies assist the creation of synergies between the Iron Curtain Trail and national cycling networks and national tourism marketing, but depend on the commitment of national governments.

The final panel compared and discussed financial instruments for the support of cross-border and international projects.

**Nathalie Verschelde** introduced the general ideas and outlines of the EU structural funds programmes. Within the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) 52 cross-border programmes exist (including the IPA instrument between new MS and candidate countries) which are given priority over 13 transnational programmes, such as the Programme for Central Europe or the Programme for South East Europe. She also underlined that the EU Danube Strategy, which is

currently under preparation, could be of relevance for the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail as well.

**Walther Stöckl** and **Danilo Krapec** explained basic characteristics and guidelines of the Operational programme "Central Europe" 2007-2013 and the Slovenia-Hungary Cross-border Co-operation Programme 2007-2013, both offering opportunities for financial support of development and cooperation for the Iron Curtain Trail project.

**Christian Weinberger** and **Rudolf Brídžik** reported about their experiences in the implementation of ETC projects in Lower Austria and Slovakia. The public was informed about a new bridge for pedestrians and cyclists being opened in 2011 linking SK and AT (Bratislava Devinska Nova Ves – Schlosshof). Both speakers highlighted the good choice to have a public authority as lead partner and concluded that soft projects (development, marketing and promotion, small infrastructure, etc.) could be easily implemented, but financial support for large infrastructure projects has to be found in other sources.

The conclusions of the panel were:

- All presenters underlined that the basic idea of the Iron Curtain Trail would be a good European project eligible for funding under the Structural funds and other European financial instruments. However, a better networking with regard to the issues of culture, nature and cycling tourism is required. A project under ETC is feasible, once a more firmly network has been established.
- Infrastructure measures should be accompanied by soft measures. It is important to develop a governance structure and define who takes the lead.
- Structural funds require that an organization under public law takes the lead, as only this can ensure that sufficient funds are available for pre-financing.

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

**Franco Ianniello** highlighted that financial means are available at Community level to implement the trail (esp. Structural Funds). 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 thanked the organisers and especially the representatives of the host country.

**Dr Miklós Kovács** concluded by stating a large interest of Hungary to continue the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail which is in line with the Hungarian national cycling tourism strategy being finalised in early 2010.

## Final Conclusions

### A. Specific conclusions of the moderators for the Central European part of the Iron Curtain Trail:

- The idea of the Iron Curtain Trail is of interest for the countries and regions participating in that Workshop. 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.
- Cycling trails along the rivers March, Thaya and Danube and other existing cross-border cycling tourism projects could be starting points for the development of the Iron Curtain Trail. But especially along the Austrian-Czech and Austrian-Slovak border careful planning of the route details is needed with regard to the protection of rare nesting bird species. Cross-border cooperation along this part should be improved.
- 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 in travel packages) could fill possible gaps.
- Further discussions are needed to clarify different roles of stakeholders and a structure for the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail, e.g. to create national focal points. This is especially valid for the role of the lead partner in any application.

### B. General conclusions for the Iron Curtain Trail:

- The Iron Curtain Trail is a cycling route following the former border of the Iron Curtain. The route should be:
  - as close as possible to the former border
  - on comfortable paths
  - avoiding highly frequented roads
  - frequently crossing the former border
  - integrating numerous historic monuments
- The Iron Curtain Trail has potential to become a successful international cycling and tourism project, for its final implementation it needs the following steps:
  - A unit (authority, organisation) that takes at European level the responsibility for the overall 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.
  - Concrete action plans for its implementation - best both on European and national level.

- The Iron Curtain Trail and the Green Belt Project of IUCN, BUND and several other stakeholders have similar goals, a close cooperation therefore is recommended.
- In order to contribute to the development of sustainable regional tourism and to create regional economic benefit the Iron Curtain Trail should 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 is needed.
  - Connection with existing regional cycling trails / networks and synergies with national cycling and tourism strategies.
  - Development of concrete touristic packages (for groups and individuals) for cyclists that use the local resources of nature, culture and history.
  - Involvement of (existing) tourism marketing organisations and other relevant stakeholders from the very beginning.
- Cycling tourism / tourists need special facilities
  - Possibilities for transport of the bicycles with means of public transport (esp. trains)
  - Cyclist friendly accommodation (e.g. no single night fee, possibilities for bike maintenance, etc.)
  - Guiding systems (maps, signposts, ...)
- Quality criteria for the Iron Curtain Trail should be in line with the existing EuroVelo guidelines for long-distance cycling routes.
- 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 develop sustainably cross-border regions. This fits into several programs of the European Structural Funds, just to mention the cross-border programs and the European Territorial Cooperation Programmes. But the implementation needs 'cross-border thinking' of all stakeholders, concrete 'cross-border project development and especially lead partners, that should be local, regional or national public authorities.