



The Iron Curtain Trail

Awareness-raising Workshop for
Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Norway

19th November 2009, Warsaw, Poland,
Hotel Sofitel Victoria



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Report

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January 2010



Workshop:

83 participants took part in the first workshop in a series of three that was held in Warsaw (Poland) on November 19, 2009.

Content and conclusions

Content:

From part of the Polish government, **Katarzyna Sobierajska**, Undersecretary of State, opened the workshop and welcomed the participants. She pointed out, that a broader cooperation in cycling tourism in Europe could start and that Poland wants to use funds from Structural Funds of the current and next financing period in order to build a system of cycling routes in Poland of which the Iron Curtain Trail could be part.

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 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. **Eke Eijgelaar** introduced the results of a European Parliament study that showed the economic relevance of cycling tourism in Europe. He underlined the necessity of stakeholder involvement to create added value. The Iron Curtain Trail could be part of the EuroVelo network, as EuroVelo Route 13. **Adam Bodor** presented the ECF quality criteria and admitted that the Iron Curtain Trail still needs improvement in details like exact routing, infrastructure, etc.

Lee Dudley 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. But he also mentioned the need for careful detailed planning of the trail, when passing or crossing protected areas.

The interventions from the audience referred to the possibilities to take the bike on trains, on the issue of common signposting and the issue of security (how to prevent that bikes get stolen).

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

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. **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.

Elke Körner introduced the Baltic Green Belt Project, its financial support from the EU Interreg IVb means and the connection between Green Belt project and 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.

Jürgen Krenzer had to cancel his participation at short notice.

The following discussion was related to the projects presented and focused on the issues of (the quality of) signposting, costs for infrastructure development and the relation of tourism and protected areas. The main outcome were the following:

- ADFC and EuroVelo had published quality criteria for cycling trails.
- Detailed planning for the route is needed, the quality of the route will vary from region to region, and improvements could be done step by step.
- The Iron Curtain Trail will have different target groups, serious monitoring is needed to develop suitable offers.
- It is important to define, which organisation and which stakeholder could contribute with what kind of service.

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 next steps and supporting frameworks for the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail.

Krzysztof Florys introduced the Amber Trail, which is a part of the European Greenways and its efforts to create open network of cooperation between civic, communal, business, and governmental organisations that could provide complex and diverse support for efforts of local people to build and revitalize publicly beneficial trails. Key for success of the Amber Trail is its connection with ancient trade routes – and the relevant information for the tourists. **Elke Körner** 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.

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. **Matti Hirvonen** presented the Iron Curtain Trail and cycling tours in Finland. The Iron Curtain could be linked to 20.000 km existing cycling routes and 72 so called national cycling routes. Facilities for cyclists are generally good, but nevertheless the Iron Curtain Trail would lead through very

sparsely populated area, though offering great untouched nature.

Frank Wurft and **Lee Dudley** participated in the panel and focussed their discussion on optional roles of NGOs, international organisations and regional authorities in the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail: It needs a good and structured cooperation between national authorities and regional respective local actors, “in the best case laid down in a real contract.”

The following discussion focused on the implementation of European programmes and showed the opinion that European Programmes are quite bureaucratic and although the co-financing rate is rather high (75 % - 85 %), the own contribution is sometimes difficult to bring in, both with regard to financial terms and administrative requirements.

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

Inga Kramarz and **Aleksandra Rapp** explained basic characteristics and guidelines of the South Baltic Cross-border Co-operation Programme 2007-2013 and the Central Baltic INTERREG IV A Programme 2007-2013, both giving some opportunities for financial support of development and cooperation for the Iron Curtain Trail project. **Christian Weinberger** reported from his experiences in the implementation of projects under the Territorial Cooperation Programme in Lower Austria.

Margit Säre and **Jacek Zdrojewski** introduced their projects along the Iron Curtain Trail in Southern Estonia and Pomerania and compared their needs with the possibilities offered by the structural funds. Both 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 – national or international – sources.

The discussion concluded that lead partners have to be established under public law (as they have to pre-finance the project), so an NGO can't take the lead. The financial possibilities are there, but it is not easy to apply for them. Activities have to be defined and cooperation will be a key.

The **closing session** was started by **Michael Cramer** who mentioned that it took 10 years 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. Finally, he thanked the organisers and especially the host country.

Katarzyna Sobierajska concluded by stating the high interest of Poland to continue the implementation of the Iron Curtain Trail.

Final conclusions:

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

- The idea of the Iron Curtain Trail is of interest for the countries present, especially the Polish host. Professional cycling organisations, linked with European umbrellas like the ECF, are existing and capable of giving know-how to the development of the Iron Curtain Trail.
- The Baltic Green Belt Project and existing cross-border cycling tourism projects could be starting points for the development of the Iron Curtain Trail.
- The possibility of the cooperation with Russian regions along the former Iron Curtain as well as with Russian NGOs and other stakeholders was not yet further investigated. To complete the Iron Curtain Trail, this point should be taken into consideration.
- Tourism businesses in this part of the Iron Curtain Trail should take advantage of good examples existing in Central Europe with regard to the development of cyclists' friendly accommodation. As train services do not serve the whole route of the Iron Curtain Trail, a special focus should be the development of transport services for bicycles (e.g. included into tour packages).
- 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 for funding via the EU Structural Funds.

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.