



IDENTIFICATION OF KEY ELEMENTS FOR CREATING THE TOURISTIC CROSS- BORDER FUNCTIONAL AREA AT THE LITHUANIAN – POLISH BORDER

Final report

KREATUS

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ABSTRACT AND SUMMARY

Abstract

This project served to assess whether it is possible to establish on the Polish-Lithuanian borderlands a tourist cross-border functional area (TCBFA), dynamizing the cooperation of local governments, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders, as well as local communities.

The studies conducted (desk research, interviews, questionnaires, workshops, and research walks) have confirmed that this peripheral, sparsely populated and troubled region has sufficient resources to ensure the development of tourism through better coordination of cross-border cooperation. The research also enabled the delimitation of TCBFA borders on the Polish and Lithuanian side.

The result is a model for coordination of cooperation, which helps commit to joint action in the field of tourism. The added value of this model is assuring conditions for the development of intersectoral cooperation and networking, which is a pre-condition for the development of cross-border tourism.

The effective use of the model entails the need to implement cross-border projects, ensuring the development of a coherent tourist offer on both sides of the border. The tangible result of cooperation within the TCBFA will be the creation of a cross-border tourist destination, combining the elements of history and culture as a basis for developing active tourism, thereby establishing a recognized brand of this region.

In the long term, it is recommended to support the activities of the TCBFA on more advanced institutional solutions, e.g. The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, which would facilitate the management of the TCBFA. Particularly relevant for the progress of the TCBFA is motivating stakeholders from outside the public sector to engage in cross-border cooperation. These stakeholders should play a greater role in the development of tourism in the borderlands.

Executive summary

Objective and approach

The objective of this project is to identify the factors and processes for the development in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland of **a tourist cross-border functional area (TCBFA)**, as well as to set out a roadmap of actions which are likely to serve the development of the cross-border tourist destination and creating a brand in this area. TCBFA is a new formula of cross-border cooperation that serves to enhance the development of tourism, i.e., to improve territorial and socio-economic coherence of the Polish-Lithuanian borderland. Improved coordination of cross-border cooperation in the TCBFA framework will allow to plan and build on joint projects in a more effective way. The process of establishing the TCBFA and other components of the report can offer inspiration for other border regions interested in better exploitation of their resources and capabilities.

The process of creating the TCBFA involves the use of such research methods as: desk research, in-depth and focus group interviews, questionnaires, research walks, an expert panel and workshops with stakeholders. The research covered representatives of Polish and Lithuanian stakeholders (local government units, public institutions, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations, local community) who participated in all stages of TCBFA establishing.

The identification of the TCBFA was made based on **four assessment criteria**: problems, needs, potentials and the objectives of developing tourism; the level of interest in cross-border cooperation in tourism; territorial cohesion and administrative boundaries of local government units; functional links between TCBFA participants.

There are nine Polish self-government entities in the borders of the TCBFA (city of Sejny and communes: Sejny, Giby, Krasnopol, Puńsk, Jeleniewo, Rutka-Tartak, Szypliszki and Wiżajny) and three Lithuanian local government units (Vilkaviškis, Kalvarija and Lazdijai districts).

Background

The Polish-Lithuanian borderland belongs to the least populated peripheral areas of the European Union. The region suffers from numerous socio-economic challenges, which cross-border cooperation should make easier to address. However, cooperation is currently hampered by factors such as incompatibility of institutional solutions in Poland and Lithuania and insufficient administrative capacity on both sides of the border. So far, the area had no strategy for cross-border cooperation. Polish-Lithuanian ties were maintained mainly by local governments, with limited involvement of other entities and the local community. Major obstacles for the development of cross-border cooperation include: low cross-border mobility, low interest in the neighboring country, poor social integration and mutual prejudices, resulting e.g., from historical occurrences.

In 2018, Polish and Lithuanian local government officials began with joint activities leading to the creation of the TCBFA as a future catalyst for the development of tourism in the borderland. With the support of the European Commission, the project described in the report contributed to finalizing the process of creating the TCBFA. In February 2021, the local government officials signed the document titled: **"Agreement on the Creation of a Touristic Cross-Border Functional Area 'Yotvingia - the Land of the Yotvingian Tribe' on the Polish-Lithuanian border"**.

Main Findings

The very first step in the process of creating the TCBFA was assessing the tourist potential of the Polish-Lithuanian borderland.

Many distinctive values and resources conducive to the development of cross-border tourism have been identified on both sides of the border. One of the key strengths of the area is its strategic, cross-border location and peripheral nature, which offers excellent opportunities for the development of the "slow tourism" offer. TCBFA is characterized by unique natural values, a low urbanization rate and interesting cultural qualities, including the heritage of the medieval Yotvingian tribe, living in areas currently located within the Polish and Lithuanian parts of the TCBFA. The heritage of the Yotvingian tribe clearly distinguishes the TCBFA from neighboring tourist destinations.

At the same time, the weakest components of the current tourist offer that were identified include: poor quality of tourist infrastructure, insufficient professional qualifications of tourism management and asymmetrical tourist information system on both sides of the border. There is also a noticeable lack of cross-border information and promotion activities, encouraging people to take advantage of the attractions on the other side of the border. The local tourist offer is substantially less competitive than that of neighboring Polish and Lithuanian destinations. It is characterized by poor quality, attractiveness and a lack of cross-border tourist products.

Assessment of the tourist potential has exposed the weaknesses of the offer and tourism infrastructure on both sides of the border, but at the same time confirmed that the area has unique values and resources on which to build an attractive tourist offer.

As a result of the assessment of the tourist potential, **four leading concepts for the development of tourism within the TCBFA were identified.** Each of these concepts is based on thematically coherent cultural or natural values related to the complementary elements of the local tourist potential. The concepts take into account tourism products already available on both sides of the border and future tourism products that will be created through the cooperation of TCBFA stakeholders. The concept of "The Mysterious Land of the Yotvingian Tribe" has the largest potential for the development of cross-border tourist products. It is already partially present in the local tourist offer and enjoys the greatest interest of tourists. There are also two other concepts related to cultural and historical heritage: "The Magical Borderland" and "Common Heritage", but they have smaller potential for the development of the tourist offer. The last concept "Green Retreat - Slow Tourism and a Healthy Life" is based on natural qualities that are highly valued by tourists and includes the development of the tourist base and complementary forms of leisure. It provides the necessary complement to the other three concepts.

The subsequent measures, i.e., analysis of the needs of key stakeholders and identification of factors impacting on the development of tourism allowed to define the model of coordination of cooperation in the TCBFA framework. The structure responsible for coordinating cross-border cooperation in the TCBFA framework includes the Council, the Presidium and Secretariats on both

sides of the border. In order to enhance networking and intersectoral cooperation within the TCBFA, the model also includes summoning stable cross-border taskforces and workgroups.

In order to overcome the differences in administrative structures and areas of competences of local governments in Poland and Lithuania, as well as different systems of organization and promotion of tourism in both countries, assumptions on the development and co-management of the future cross-border tourist destination were prepared. The management of the destination could ultimately lie on the side of the **European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation** established on the initiative of the TCBFA in the future. This grouping i.a. is authorized to implement **Integrated Territorial Investments**, which could become another catalyst for the development of the area. The use of a proven instrument of territorial support, i.e., the **Community-Led Local Development** also provides considerable opportunities. Creation of local action groups in the TCBFA framework would foster combining complementary fields of the economy and cooperation of various interest groups for the development of cross-border tourism.

The key geographical areas for the destination that will constitute sources of tourism within the TCBFA are: Northern Europe (the Baltic republics and Scandinavia), Eastern Europe (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine) and selected countries of Southern and Western Europe.

One of the significant elements of development of the tourist destination is **creation of the TCBFA brand**, which is planned in several stages, including building the TCBFA brand identity, identifying TCBFA branded tourist products and developing a visual identity system for the brand. The brand was given the working name "Yotvingia - The Land of the Yotvingian Tribe".

To provide the expected development of the tourism product offer, Polish and Lithuanian stakeholders have prepared four proposals for joint activities towards a comprehensive improvement of the quality, accessibility and attractiveness of the TCBFA tourist offer. The program includes approx. 50 proposals for projects supporting the development of current TCBFA tourism products and creating new ones. The majority of the proposed projects are in the conceptual design phase. They require continuation of the design and cost estimate works, as well as inclusion in financial plans and development strategies on both sides of the border. The key component for growth of the tourist destination and the TCBFA brand is the completion of the cross-border project related to the Yotvingian heritage.

The financial feasibility and timely implementation of planned joint activities and projects **may be adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic**, which has already had a negative impact on the financial condition of local governments and entrepreneurs, including an extensive decline in tourist traffic. The pandemic has also increased interest in individual tourism and leisure in peripheral destinations, which may constitute a competitive advantage for the TCBFA.

Lessons learnt and recommendations

The creation of the TCBFA is a **multistage process**, which has been carried out jointly by Polish and Lithuanian local governments. However, the success of these efforts largely depended on the involvement of other stakeholders on both sides of the border, including enterprises and non-governmental organizations. TCBFA boundaries are designated based on the established criteria.

Evaluation of the tourist potential of the area was an essential part of creating the TCBFA. It reaffirmed the existence of resources and values enabling the development of the tourist function of the area, which was a precondition for the continuation of activities related to the process of creating the TCBFA. The key, distinguishable component of the tourist potential on which to base the development of the destination and the TCBFA brand (heritage of the Yotvingian tribe) was identified.

The analysis of the needs of key stakeholders and the **identification of factors influencing the development of tourism** built central activities for defining **the model of coordination of cooperation** in the TCBFA framework, taking into account the differences in organizational structures and competencies of partners. The model includes organizational solutions enabling day-to-day coordination of cross-border cooperation of local governments and the dynamization of multi-sectoral cooperation and networking of other stakeholders involved in the development of tourism on both sides of the border.

The task complementing the process of creating the TCBFA was to **plan future activities aimed at the development of the cross-border tourist offer**. Two measures of differentiated impact on the development of the destination and the TCBFA brand were proposed, i.e., joint activities

implemented in a comprehensive manner across the entire area and projects carried out by stakeholders individually or in partnerships for specific tourism products.

The following recommendations for further activities of the TCBFA were made in the report:

1. Developing detailed organizational solutions tailored to the specificity of the TCBFA, including establishing TCBFA bodies, teams and task forces, and securing financial and other resources necessary for the activities of the TCBFA.
2. Coordinating the preparation and implementation of joint activities and projects planned in the TCBFA framework, including the inclusion of these activities in local strategies, securing funds for this purpose (e.g., preparing technical documentation, obtaining the necessary permits, investment works) and monitoring of work progress.
3. Motivating Polish and Lithuanian stakeholders from outside the local government sphere to a greater involvement in cooperation within the TCBFA and open intake for subsequent endeavors and projects in accordance with the designated directions for the development of the tourist offer.
4. Reservation of the name of the destination and the TCBFA brand, determination of the target structure of destination and brand co-management, development of the brand's visual identification system and brand development strategy, taking into account the objectives and tasks of its co-creators.
5. Forwarding information on the creation of the TCBFA to the Joint Secretariat of the INTERREG Lithuania – Poland Program in Vilnius, in order to include the TCBFA in the work on the INTERREG Lithuania – Poland Program for 2021-2027, including in the field of socio-economic diagnosis of the borderland and directions of planned activities supporting the development of tourism in a strategically integrated manner.
6. Forwarding information on the creation of the TCBFA to national and local government administration bodies and other units responsible for:
 - development policy (to be included in the update of strategic documents at the regional and national level and at the international level),
 - development of operational programs for the use of EU funds in 2021-2027 (to take into account joint activities and TCBFA projects in the future direction of spending).
7. Ensuring the consistency of the organization and promotion system of tourism in the TCBFA area.
8. Undertaking actions to harmonize the provisions on the construction of cross-border cycle lanes and routes and to harmonize spatial development plans in the TCBFA area, taking into account the projects planned for implementation.
9. Cooperating with operators of pedestrians' and cyclists' paths and canoeing routes in the TCBFA area in order to eliminate barriers to cross-border mobility of tourists and residents by defining the possibilities of their coherence and expansion, as well as links with international and interregional cycling initiatives and other communication routes.

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