

## Sustainable Use of Natural and Cultural Resources in the Cross-Border Region Slovenia – Croatia

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*Abstract:* - One example of cross-border cooperation is between the two neighboring Balkan countries of Slovenia and Croatia. Recently, the quality and intensity of this cooperation have been significantly affected by the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. In this context, this article examines the quality of balanced cross-border cooperation between Croatia and Slovenia, the exploitation of hitherto unexploited potential for increasing the utilization of the region's natural and cultural resources, and the possibility of rebuilding and developing the tourism sector; in fact, it was in decline as a consequence of the pandemic. Besides, improving the quality of the environment and raising the standard of living and quality of life for the people living in the border areas was another objective. Slovenia and Croatia are promoting a sustainable, safe, and vibrant border area by supporting smart approaches to the protection, mobilization, and management of natural and cultural resources. People living, working, or visiting the area have seen many benefits from this. To provide innovative, smart, and practical solutions that help preserve and enhance the quality of the environment and its diverse identity as well as activate its socioeconomic potential, the main focus has been on harnessing the natural and cultural values of the area. It has been achieved by increasing opportunities for institutional cooperation at all levels to ensure a safe and vibrant environment.

*Key-Words:* - Climate changes, Natural Resources, Cross-Border Cooperation, Funding, Risk Management, Tourism

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## 1 Introduction

Since 2003, cross-border cooperation between Slovenia and Croatia has been supported by several EU instruments. Management and implementation arrangements introduced in each planning cycle progressively improve the conditions for cooperation, for example through joint calls for proposals, joint projects, and the lead partnership principle. They've helped remove some major barriers. With Croatia joining the EU on July 1, 2013, a new cooperation period from 2014 to 2020 has opened up new opportunities and challenges, [1].

Cross-border cooperation aims to solve common challenges in border areas and tap the untapped growth potential in border areas while strengthening the cooperation process and promoting the overall harmonious development of the alliance, [2]. The Interreg V-A Slovenia-Croatia Cooperation Program aims to contribute to the development of sustainable, safe, and dynamic border regions by supporting innovative approaches to the protection, mobilization, and management of natural and cultural resources for the benefit of people living and working in the local region, [3]. The mission statement emphasizes an overall focus on sustainability. The main focus is to develop the natural and cultural values of the area and to provide innovative, smart, and practical solutions that, on the one hand, contribute to the protection and improvement of the quality of the environment and its diverse characteristics, and, on the other hand, activate its value for others. Socioeconomic potential. Ensuring a safe and vibrant area is vital for residents. This will be achieved by increasing opportunities for collaboration between authorities at all levels. Contextually, the article will introduce the border region of Croatia and Slovenia. It will show how the region's natural resources have been used to date and what opportunities there are for development, thus making it possible to answer the research question: "*Whether in the Croatia-Slovenia border region, the natural and cultural resources are used in a balanced way?*".

## 2 Methodology

The study had to use a variety of research methods, including indirect and direct research methods and tools.

The authors invested considerable time and effort in developing the methodological framework. The approach is divided into four main phases, culminating in smart management and governance planning processes to achieve territorial success in selected border areas. These stages include data collection, case study selection criteria, case study analysis, and identification of processes and factors. Therefore, the data for the study were obtained through prior analysis of the selected sites, through analysis of the planning and design process of each case study, and even through interviews with technicians, experts, key players, and stakeholders across fields and Collected from informal conversations. Border sector cooperation process.

Informal interviews and conversations were conducted to identify the most relevant questions that needed to be answered in this study and the interest in such research. The literature search covered several issues, including not only the current state of understanding of cross-border cooperation processes in EU integration but also cross-border cooperation at regional and local levels. After a detailed analysis, the author focused on the EU project Interreg Croatia-Slovenia, which has a high impact on the selected border region, as follows:

The INTERREG V-A Slovenian-Croatian cooperation program includes 17 NUTS 3 regions - statistical areas in Slovenia and counties in Croatia:

- **Slovenia:** Pomurska region, Podravska region, Savinjska region, Zasavska region, Posavska region, Jugovzhodna Slovenija region, Osrednjeslovenska region, Primorsko-notranjska region, Obalno-kraška region;
- **Croatia:** Primorsko-goranska County, Istarska County, City of Zagreb, Zagrebačka County, Krapinsko-zagorska County, Varaždinska County, Međimurska County and Karlovačka County.

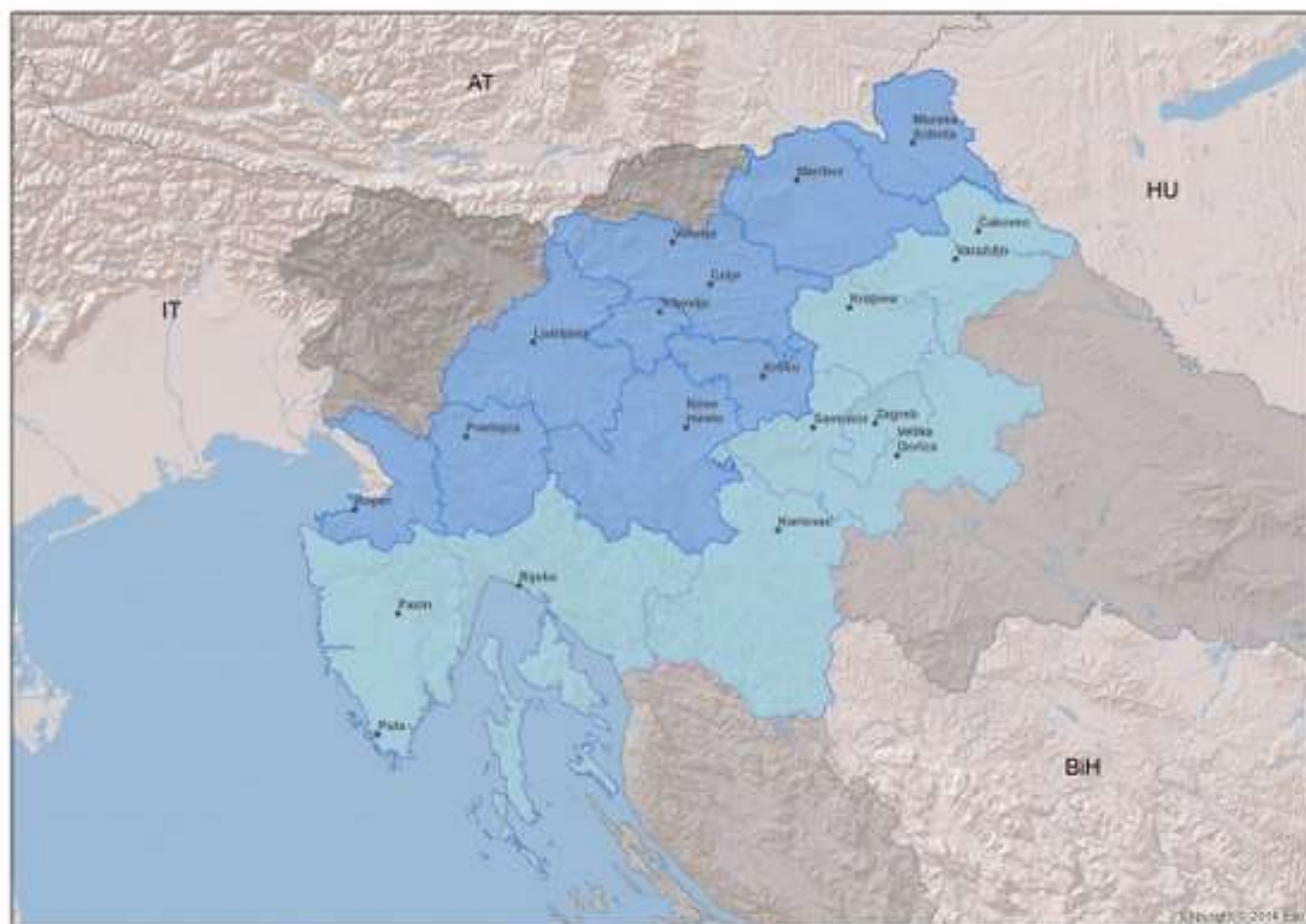


Fig. 1: Programm area, [4]

Plans to develop and strengthen cooperation between Slovenia and Croatia focus on the following three priorities:

- 1) Integrated flood risk management in transboundary river basins
- 2) Protection and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources
- 3) Healthy, safe, and accessible border areas

Flood risk is considered the most significant risk with the greatest transboundary impact and requires joint risk management. The cross-border plan focuses on watershed and flood risk management issues that can only be solved through joint intervention by Slovenian and Croatian water authorities. Through Priority Axis (PA) 1, Integrated Flood Risk Management in Transboundary River Basins, this collaborative program provides a unique opportunity for these authorities to improve transboundary flood risk management and reduce flood risk. This project (Flood Risk Slovenia-Croatia Action - Strategic Project 1 - Non-Structural Measures (FRISCO1)) has two main purposes: to improve coordinated flood risk management and to reduce flood risks

through the implementation of non-structural measures and the preparation of documentation (Learning and draft) to implement the best structural measures in one or more subsequent strategic projects, [5]. The main deliverables of the project will be a set of standard models, maps, and tools for each of the six target transboundary river basins (Kupa/Kolpa, Sutla/Sotla, Drava, Mura, Dragonja, and Bregana) and the latest Relevant project documents for optimal structural measures, improved physical alarm systems and results of awareness/capacity building activities. The project targets a wide range of target groups, and the ultimate beneficiaries of the project are the affected people, [6]. The project's goals can only be achieved through cross-border cooperation. Under the Flood Directive, flood risk management planning should follow a catchment approach to determine the best measures. The project is uniquely comprehensive in terms of spatial coverage (all transboundary river basins) and scope of activities (all key non-structural activities, including preparedness, prevention, and response), [7].

The project aims to implement structural flood risk reduction measures - the modernization and improvement of the Vounaye Dam, a key element of structural flood risk reduction in the Sotra River basin. The Vonarje Dam was built over 40 years ago above the confluence of the Sotra and Mestinschitsa rivers and provides flood control for downstream towns on both sides of the border. The dam poses significant downstream hazards due to severe damage to the concrete portion of the structure and wear and tear on the KM, electrical equipment, and machinery, [8]. If the dam fails or is even removed, the impact on the lower reaches of the basin could be catastrophic. Especially the economic and agricultural infrastructure and residential infrastructure of the region, [9]. The proposed modernization (the main outcome of Project P) will reduce flood risks and ensure efficient operation and comprehensive monitoring (including seismic monitoring) in accordance with applicable regulations (main outcome of Project P). In this way, the project contributes to the overall specific objective of "Reducing flood risk in the transboundary Sotra/Sutra basin through structural flood risk management measures" as the main outcome of the project directly reduces exposure to flood risk proportion of transboundary watersheds. Flood (5b4). The project is supported by a communication campaign (WPC) aimed at local, regional, and national level stakeholders (e.g. the public, national, regional, and local authorities and sectoral agencies, etc.) to raise awareness and understanding of the awareness of the project. Flood risk and flood prevention measures. Cross-border cooperation is crucial to this project. Any measures to reduce flood risks in transboundary rivers must be coordinated bilaterally to avoid unilateral approaches that could endanger the other party.

In the past decade, the highest water levels in the Mur were measured twice, in 2005 and 2014. Improvements to flood control systems are necessary as climate change predicts greater extreme water levels as part of the planned Frisco 2.2 project, [10]. Their common challenge is to protect the settlements of Benica and Sweeti Martin on the Murree River and their inhabitants from flood risks by improving environmental conditions and adapting to climate change through the construction/reconstruction of embankments. In the settlement of Benica, taking into account the Ledava floods, this measure will reduce the area of flooded agricultural land by 96 hectares and protect an additional 3.2 kilometers of local municipal roads and 28 houses of agricultural construction, in

which a total of 95 people live. In addition, the embankment in the village of Sveti Martin na Muri protects a total of 62 buildings (single-family houses and farm buildings, football fields), 200 people living there, and approximately 45 hectares of farmland that is 100 years old population, Annual floods, [11]. Reducing catchment flood risk is comprehensively addressed as part of the FRISCO 1 project; a detailed description of the identified sites can be found in the draft study 'Identification of alternatives - Phase 1'. A comprehensive hydrological and hydraulic study will be carried out in the Mugla catchment area to identify necessary measures to reduce flood risks in densely populated and urbanized areas. The project will contribute to the overall objective SO "Reducing flood risk in the transboundary river basin of the Mur River through structural flood risk management measures", with the main outcome of the project being a direct reduction in the proportion of transboundary river basins at risk of flooding ( 5b4). Cross-border cooperation is crucial as any measures to reduce flood risks in cross-border rivers must be coordinated bilaterally to avoid unilateral approaches that could endanger the other party, [12].

The project will contribute to the overall target of the program "Reducing flood risk in the transboundary river basins of the Drava and Kolpa/Kupa rivers through structural flood risk management measures" as key project outcomes directly reduce the transboundary Proportional flood risk (5bRI) for river basins. The FRISCO 1 project comprehensively addresses the issue of reducing flood risk in the catchment. Cross-border cooperation is crucial because any measures to reduce flood risks in cross-border rivers must be coordinated bilaterally to avoid unilateral approaches that could endanger the other party, [13]. Levees are the most commonly used flood control measure in the Delaware watershed and have been built in most of the affected areas. Areas of mutual interest between the Republic of Croatia and Slovenia concern areas of the proposed road section which are not adequately protected against flooding and need to be addressed to prevent damage. The study on flood protection in the transboundary catchment of the Drava River is considered the most effective structural measure for the reconstruction of the Virje Otok - Brezje floodplain and the construction of distribution canals on the right bank of the Drava River. Malavasa, [14]. Existing models and collected data were used to create a cross-border, unified flood risk management study for the Kupa/Kolpa river

basin, in which the sites with the highest losses (Hrvacko, Kuzeli, and Otok). Flood risk reduction measures focus on protecting the most vulnerable areas, based on average annual damage to the catchment, [15]. It is recommended to reduce damage at key locations by building protective walls in the Hrvacko region of Croatia and the Kuzeli region of Slovenia.

The main objective of the project is to preserve, protect, promote, and develop the maritime heritage of the border area by strengthening the principles of sustainable tourism. The project will conserve natural and unrealistic maritime heritage throughout the coastal border area and use it to develop and create a standard tourism product. Cross-border cooperation multiplies the effect, as joint development promises better quality and more efficient tourism exchange, [16]. Maritime heritage holds huge untapped tourism potential for both countries, taking into account that tourists' habits are changing and they are increasingly mobile, wishing to visit more cities and countries during their stay, between destinations Short distances satisfy their needs. This way we become a unique tourist area. Comprehensive cultural tourism products will integrate content to enhance economic, social, and cultural cross-border exchanges. Tour operators will develop the two border regions into integrated cross-border destinations by promoting their similarities and complementarity of shared cultural offerings, [17]. The main outcomes will be an increase in the number of visitors to the border area and an increase in the number of real and non-authentic maritime heritage artifacts permanently protected (including interpretive centers, virtual museums, maritime heritage databases, and ship technical features). In addition, tourism infrastructure based on maritime heritage has been increased (Nerezine Interpretation Center, Krk, Izola, and Piran, reconstructed boats will serve as "living" examples and display specimens in small ports and rowing competitions), and Increased awareness of crafts and maritime arts among educated people, children and tourists (Academy of Crafts and Maritime Skills) and recognition of the entire coastal area as a single tourist destination, [18].

The offer in rural areas has nothing to do with the scheme; for today's savvy traveler, it is both mediocre and boring. Common challenges this project addresses: Connecting dispersed supplies and "detoxifying" stressed-out people. The project will teach cultural heritage in a fun and "detoxifying" way. The overall goal of the project is to actively protect the national heritage of rural

areas and integrate it into sustainable CB tourism packages, [19]. The anticipated change is a connected and attractive proposition - a resurgence of ethnic tourism, with an increase of 8,000 heritage visitors. Main results: Detox package combining four lifestyles of our ancestors: modern technology (holographic 3D live virtual life show - as a "3D adventure room"), electronic library (preserved old books), ethnic outdoor cinema (ancient SI) -HR Film) and six restored heritage sites hosting detoxification workshops (hands-on demonstrations of ancient life) in natural settings. A COMMON CB APPLICATION will bring together in one place data on heritage, tourist offers, and SMEs, among several other examples. (currently available data is very sparse, unconnected, and scattered on different websites). It will also enable a virtual walk around traditional farms. The products will be USED by local people (more employment opportunities), tourists (attractive and diversified offers), heritage owners and SMEs (included in the supply and common application), and partners (better visibility and connectivity). The PLANNED APPROACH is aimed at the DEVELOPMENT of heritage conservation. A simple local or national approach would not unite the offer, so CB COOPERATION is required. Joint promotion of the DETOX package will create synergies in developing the CB area and its economy. The project is innovative as it introduces a new 3D holographic concept that shows life in a traditional house. The project is expected to create the first 3D experiential Ethnic House in the project area.

### 3 Results and Discussion

Cross-border cooperation in the Croatia-Slovenia region takes place on many different levels, and therefore we can name several possible results that can be achieved (or have already been achieved). The most important and notable results of the project include:

- Developed 6 additional transboundary river basins using common tools, models, and maps for flood risk management
- 800,000 new visitors to natural and cultural heritage sites in the planned area
- 250 people improved their practical skills and abilities to implement biodiversity implementation measures
- Support 31,000 hectares to achieve better conservation status

- A further 45 institutions are involved in cross-border structures
- 300 additional staff to improve skills in delivering health, safety, and social care services across borders.

The project area covers the border area between Slovenia and Croatia and has a unique natural, cultural, and geological history. It represents a link between the Pannonian, Alpine, and coastal worlds, a unique space that has connected us since ancient times. The development of man (the Krappian Neanderthal) and Europe (the archaeological sites discovered from the period of the genesis of Europe and the migration of peoples) began in this area. Hence the common challenge for the future: is man, nature, and landscape. The areas are bounded by a considerable similarity of structural features and a similar geography, which allows a high natural and biological diversity, abundant waters and rocks, and diverse cultural landscapes. The areas involved have a large proportion of virgin nature that is unknown and whose potential is untapped. The inhabitants of these areas are mainly farmers, wine producers, or people involved in tourism. They share a common desire to preserve inland settlements and protect natural and cultural resources. They share a shared vision of the relationship between the various dispersed heritage elements and of redirecting visitors from the most visited sights to those worth seeing inland. Fundamental to preserving and protecting the environment is raising public awareness of natural sustainability. It is essential to acquire these skills early in life. Throughout the project, we will be looking for ways to invite people, especially young people, back to nature, as this is where they spend less and less of their free time. We want to inspire them to live in rural areas to recognize and take advantage of development potential and new employment opportunities. We want to achieve our objectives in an innovative way that builds on existing knowledge and disseminates new approaches widely, [20].

The project is based on the preservation of regional heritage. It complements the integrated tourism product developed within the framework of the 365 DAYS RIVIERY project - Riviera 365 Cultural Tourism, by integrating natural and cultural heritage as well as rural activities into newly created routes. A common challenge among the project areas to which the Cross-Border Cooperation Project works is the promotion of active conservation of cultural and natural heritage through the promotion of sustainable ecotourism, [21]. This approach is based on the fact that

Portoroz and Opatija are the cradle of Central European tourism with a rich tradition. Through events and small investments in urban and rural areas, an attempt is made to tap this potential in the most visited areas of the region to directly increase the number of tourists traveling to common cross-border destinations. Educational workshops will be organized to educate stakeholders on sustainable management, promote green employment, and increase international recognition in the cross-border online destination market, [22]. The project includes innovative ways to strengthen the integration and joint presentation of destinations on the Internet market (joint portals, routes, events, and promotions). Since the tourism pressure will be reduced in favor of environmentally friendly and sustainable rural tourism, the main beneficiaries of the project will be residents, tourists, non-profit organizations, companies, employees, and potential start-ups related to natural resource development and cultural heritage.

### 3.1 A Sustainable Model of Cooperation

The rural regions of the program area face common development challenges such as weak economic activity, unemployment, migration of young adults, and an aging population, which ultimately leads to poverty and social exclusion. Traditional agriculture still plays a vital role in these areas, but local resources are not exploited. The general purpose of the project is to link existing sustainable tourism initiatives and create a sustainable cooperation model for tourism operators by increasing the value of natural and cultural heritage. The aim is to strengthen sustainable tourism, entrepreneurship, and economic cooperation by building the capabilities of local actors. 325 people from border areas participated in capacity-building activities. We will jointly develop new shared cross-border tourism products, including 17 new heritage services. This will enable us to increase the number of visitors to the area by 15,000 over the entire project period. By developing and implementing engagement and marketing models to control joint ventures and appropriate ICT support, we can achieve sustainable project results. Local businesses and residents, schools, visitors, and stakeholders will also benefit from further integration into the provider network, [23]. A "bottom-up" approach to local development, allowing authentic natural and cultural values resulting from long-term harmony between different peoples and cultures to become part of sustainable tourism. The partners will seek to develop their projects by adopting a common

methodology that will allow for a unified cross-border approach. The project will include innovative approaches to activate, educate, and connect providers, and manage and market the cross-border venture sustainably. We will develop innovative services that offer visitors unique and authentic adventures.

From museums to natural parks, the area between Prekmurje and Istria is rich in cultural and natural monuments. Its diversity and its connection to intangible heritage, including culinary heritage, customs, and craftsmanship, make heritage vital to the development of tourism. The main challenge is that due to the unilateral and non-professional management of cultural heritage, the development potential of the local environment is very high, so the environment has not been developed, which is not enough to attract it for harsh modern visitors. The main goal is to create a gastronomic route from Pannonia to the Adriatic and to offer visitors local Unique experiences of traditions, customs and gastronomy: Trška Gora Vineyard Cottage, Ljubljana Botanical Garden and City Museum, Trubal Farm in Laška, Filovci Ceramic Village - Open Air Museum, Žumberak Nature Park, Prezid Village, V. Ersar Historical Center, Museum of Krapina. The project's unique approach will allow us to create a culinary trail – a themed tour that combines the traditional history and gastronomy of the project area, [24]. This result will bring critical benefits and innovative cross-border changes to the following target groups: - stakeholders in the local environment will be connected through the heritage community and educated to pass on the traditions to young people and visitors, - representatives of public institutions, education, NGOs and companies will work together in a multi-day program offering a range of services, - visitors from children, families, elderly to foreigners will be actively involved to experience the traditions in a unique environment, - the innovative cross-border approach will increase general knowledge about the heritage and create jobs in the local environment.

### 3.2 The Role of Tourism

Tourism is one of the most important industries in the SLO-HR border region, which is dominated by large cities and coastal areas. In contrast, rural areas are underdeveloped, unsustainable, and uncompetitive. Rural areas are unable to provide potential tourists with innovative and engaging content to attract and retain them. Rural areas near old border crossings in particular face serious problems - neglect of the population and existing cultural and tourist infrastructure, [25]. These areas

have great tourism potential, as existing archaeological sites currently have no function, are not adequately signposted, are not fully explored, are unattractive, and are excluded from existing tourism boundaries. The project aims to contribute to sustainable tourism development in the SLO-HR CBC region by diversifying, improving, and strengthening the competitiveness of the region's existing cultural tourism content. This will be achieved by awakening and valorizing existing new archaeological sites in the municipalities of Goričan & Šentilj, establishing Regional Tourism Centres (RTCs), and developing innovative and attractive CBC tourism products. All this will ensure an increase in the number of tourists, contributing to the development of tourism and the revitalization of the region. The project's innovativeness is evident in establishing 2 RTCs, as no similar organizations are working together on sustainable tourism development in this part of the SLO-HR border area. The innovation of this project lies in the collaborative work of the RTC, local authorities, development agencies, tourism associations, small and medium-sized enterprises, and other stakeholders in the tourism sector. This intersectoral cooperation and exchange of knowledge and experience is a prerequisite for achieving project goals and ensuring long-term sustainability.

The intervention area, i.e., the area of Dubrovnik and Veržej municipalities, as well as the towns of Varaždin and Ludbreg, is rich in heritage and diversity of rural products (crafts, agricultural products, culinary offerings, etc.), customs; however, the problem is the ability to use and exploit all these potentials through tourism. Moreover, the existing heritage is hardly recognized, and many rural products are not adequately presented through storytelling, for which producers lack the capacity. There is, therefore, a lack of an entire area with many opportunities for including heritage and interesting rural products in the tourist offer. The main goal of the project is to create and implement new tourism products based on the integration of the heritage associated with rural products, on the one hand providing new tourism experiences to target groups while increasing market efficiency and developing sustainable tourism. The changes we hope to achieve through the project will be achieved through the project results: increasing the attractiveness of cross-border areas based on a new tourism product, including cultural heritage and related contextual products. The direct impacts of the project will be an established common cross-

border tourism product, an increased number of visitors to the heritage sites, three small-scale investments in heritage-related infrastructure, and the actors involved in the training. Innovation in the project will be ensured through a universal offering based on four micro-products that together will create engaging content for the masses. Each separate micro-product will be based on a unique foundation, depending on the existing area-specific offer. On this basis, we will create a shared unique product in the intervention area. Cross-border cooperation significantly improves the quality of joint products, provide more diverse and engaging content, and exchange experiences and best practices.

The Maribor-Pohorje region and the Istria Peninsula have become tourist destinations, with well-known attractions attracting the majority of tourists. The project taps into the potential of the hinterland of Bistriško Pohorje and central Istria, an area that has not yet been discovered but has huge potential. Attracting visitors to these attractions will ensure better dispersion of visitors and reduce pressure on the most visited attractions. Both hinterlands are rich in natural and cultural heritage, with unique mythological stories, human legends, and natural and historical heritage waiting to be developed to improve an already very diverse tourism product and to protect sensitive intangible heritage. The main objectives of the project are to actively preserve this mythical folklore, increase the visibility of the neglected site, and create development opportunities. This is achieved through an innovative integrated cross-border cultural and tourism product called “Living Magic – Stories from Pohorje and Istria”. The offering offers innovative ways to experience natural and cultural heritage through stories visitors discover in guided tours, digital media in personal explorations, participation in Living Magic Festivals, and other engaging ways to explore. People who value, care about, and pass on intangible heritage from generation to generation are crucial to the protection of intangible heritage. The product has been developed in collaboration with all stakeholders in the region connected through the Living Magic platform. The product will continue to operate on this platform even after the project ends. Living Magic will connect the different suppliers and destinations of the areas and enrich their overall attraction. It will attract new visitors to the hinterland of Maribor-Pohorje and Istria, creating a favorable environment for development and job creation for the inhabitants of the two border areas.

The area is a border region between Slovenia and Croatia and has a unique natural, cultural, and geological history. In this region, water has created many paths above and below ground, creating a history that has united us since ancient times. Discoveries in the cave date back to the Neolithic Age and more have been discovered in the past two decades. The common challenge for the project partners is to elevate the region from the present to the future and show how the region combines millions of years of secrets of the karst world and karst caves, beautiful natural scenery, and a diverse cultural landscape. The common goals of the project are to connect the unique natural and cultural heritage of the project area, increase its attractiveness, and develop green, cross-border, and sustainable products that allow visitors to have a different experience of the mysteries of water. This is achieved through increased awareness and visitor numbers, as well as the involvement of residents and SMEs. The innovative features of the tourist heritage presented in Bela Krajina, from Semitsa to Metrica to Kamanje, known for its outstanding natural and cultural heritage, are unique and have never been shown anywhere before. The project will introduce the last found on the role of the evolution of man (archaeological excavations) and life in the mysteries of water by revealing the only living bivalve in the world, Kušcarjeva Kongeria, which is only accessible to divers and will be presented together with the mysterious proteus. Thanks to the high and modern technical equipment of the museum and archaeological park, the presentation of monuments, and organized educational paths between the three municipalities, the heritage and tourist products with mysterious feelings are different from all to date and outstanding. The experience opportunities will increase the number of visits of all target groups, create green jobs, and prevent depopulation.

### 3.3 Human Interaction with Nature

The project focuses on the karst fringe area, which includes a series of cliffs and limestone slopes. Humans' long-term interactions with nature have produced specific biological, cultural, and aesthetic values, [26]. The area is rich in natural resources but is increasingly under pressure from tourists and other human activities due to its proximity to densely populated areas such as Koper, Trieste, and Opatija. Common challenges are to create the conditions for formal conservation, improve existing joint management plans, and develop monitoring plans for the most important habitats and species on both sides of the border. The overall



goal is to establish an effective management and monitoring mechanism in the N2000 area to reduce pressure on biodiversity. Rock climbing is very popular in Slovenia and now also reaches high proportions in Croatia, causing damage to protected areas. Current mechanisms are insufficient to regulate conflicts between residents, climbers, and conservationists. Climbers and other recreationists are nature lovers, and the project will encourage their activities but balance them with conservation measures. The project will establish transboundary mechanisms for sustainable management of karst areas, reduce pressure on biodiversity, and create conditions for the establishment of formal protection. The results mainly benefit residents and all visitors to the area. To address these challenges, partners will take an approach primarily focused on recreational threats. Some projects address problems caused by the conversion of traditional land uses. However, physical recreation is not taken into account when studying the conservation of species and habitat types. The joint management and monitoring system in the N2000 area will be further developed through citizen science, one of the planned innovations, along with the use of drones and the creation of volunteer networks.

The continental population of the common tern breeds on gravel islands in rivers and lakes. Pebble habitats are established in small sections of the Sava and Drava river courses in Slovenia and Croatia, primarily in the Natura 2000 areas. These areas are under human pressure, including gravel extraction from the riverbed, river regulation, hydroelectric power plants, water pollution, and sport fishing, among others. Croatia and Slovenia have already conducted separate monitoring of terns and taken habitat management measures but without satisfactory results. The project aims to maintain the stability of tern populations in gravel habitats along the Sava and Drava rivers and to improve their conservation status in the Natura 2000 area. By applying appropriate habitat management, we will preserve the gravel island where tern colonies are located and ensure its long-term suitability for tern nesting. The nesting platform will enable nesting in areas where natural habitats are not safe due to flooding. As part of the project, we will prepare a proposal to expand Natura 2000 sites in Croatia (HR1000002). The main results include increasing the area of sustainable habitat for tern nesting, developing a protocol for transboundary monitoring of the continental tern population, and developing a transboundary action plan for tern conservation. A prerequisite for achieving these results is the

correct interpretation of colony population dynamics. Therefore, using PinPoint tags, we will monitor the birds' movements during the breeding season to investigate their foraging range, habitat use, and inter-colony linkages in the project area. Genetic analysis of blood samples will show whether the Sava and Drava birds belong to the same population and allow comparison with other European populations. Using popular lectures, films, exhibitions, and information boards, we will raise awareness of the need to protect the tern and its habitat.

Through collaboration in a project with a similar theme (PO SI-HR 2007-2013: RIDE&BIKE), the partners' vision has emerged for the intelligent integration of natural and cultural heritage, especially elements of dispersed heritage (e.g. castles on tourist routes ruins.) is worth a visit, as are tourist transport options (biking, horseback riding). New mutual challenges were identified related to insufficient connections between natural and cultural heritage, active tourism, and disconnected services in rural areas. Therefore, the main goal of the RIDE&BIKE II project is to develop selective tourism products based on the interpretation of natural and cultural heritage by creating a management system for active tourism development. The main outcome of the project is to increase the number of tourists to cross-border destinations (up to 3600 tourists). The direct results of the project are: (i) the creation of a unified tourism service unit based on protected nature (NATURA 2000, other forms of nature protection) and cultural objects (old town monuments, castles, museums); (ii) RIDE&BIKE standards (hotels, accommodation); (iii) Raise awareness of the importance and possibilities of enhancing natural and cultural heritage for tourism and integrating it meaningfully into active tourism. A cross-border approach is necessary as this unique destination offers a complete range of professional tourism services. The planned approach aims to make the most of the surrounding resources while retaining the socio-cultural authenticity of the destination and creating long-term sustainable economic activity. The innovative strength of this project is reflected in the creation of a common destination for cross-border tourism: the creation of cross-border characteristic tourism products, common destination standards, and the overall innovative promotion of cross-border regions.

### 3.4 Revitalization of Industrial Heritage Towns

A common cross-border challenge is the need to revitalize industrial heritage towns and activate them through sustainable tourism, [27]. The images of the town centers of the former mining and factory towns of Trbovlje, Labin, Rijeka, and Slovenska Bistrica are sad images of deserted, dilapidated buildings. At the same time, these towns are rich in unique industrial and cultural heritage - abandoned mine shafts, chimneys, former mining quarters, remnants of factories and workshops innovative for the time, and various cultural events. Despite these riches, these cities suffer from an adverse social profile, brain drain, high unemployment, and a wholly dispersed approach to serving visitors. The aim of the project is therefore to revitalize the participating cities' dilapidated industrial areas so that their revived unique industrial heritage increases the city's attractiveness to residents and tourists. The contemporary information center on important cultural monuments provides a fascinating interpretation of the region's shared history. The content is delivered to visitors in the form of a comprehensive sustainable cultural tourism product INSPIRATION, which brings together four revitalized heritage sites under a common brand, creating a world from the sawmills and mills of Pohorje to Trbovlje and Labin mines and finally the port of Rijeka; comprehensive programs for different target groups; unique opportunities to experience industrial culture: mine/factory escapes, joint industrial heritage festival, and biennale. This joint boundary approach is innovative because we bring together local knowledge, combining it with input from senior experts. Local tourism providers and entrepreneurs will build on their expertise and combine across borders to create a unique cultural and tourism product. There will also be a groundbreaking joint entry into international markets based on interactive media, visitor integration, and digital presentation.

The project addresses a common challenge across the Asia-Pacific region to protect and enrich tangible and intangible cultural heritage that is currently underutilized. The joint main goal of the project is to actively protect and enhance the cultural heritage of the mythical landscape from the perspective of sustainable tourism in the municipalities of Mošćenička Draga and Hrpelje-Kozina. The Cross-Border Mythological Park (CMP) provides visitors with a unique experience, adding to the area's appeal and increasing visitor numbers. The main direct impacts of the project are

tourist arrivals to the new tourist destination CB (5000); a company that provides interpretive knowledge and animation program development in CMP; tourism products that sustainably utilize the mythical and traditional heritage; individuals trained in CMP content; infrastructure Small Investment: Visitor Centers in HKM and MDM Regions. All target groups will benefit from the direct impact (public - tourists/visitors, mainly children, SMEs, local and regional institutions, interest groups, non-profit organizations, and others). The innovative approach is to create new CB tourism products that combine new CMPs with a range of services to promote economic and sustainable tourism development. The park has a unified appearance; by visiting one of the two sites, visitors see a virtual representation of the other site, which motivates them to visit the other site as well. CMP will replace traditional information boards with eco-stone indicators. CB tourism products can only be created and successfully marketed with the support of active cooperation between participants from both countries. Heritage revitalization, combining heritage with CB tourism products to generate rich connotations, can only be achieved by creating a CB tourism destination - a cross-border mythical park.

Carnivora Dinarica aims to improve the conservation status of large carnivores (LC= lynx, wolves, and bears) in the Natura 2000 Javorniki-Šniežnik, Notranjski trikotnik, Gorski Kotar and S. Lika regions. Around 2,000 lynx, 50 wolves, and 600 bears live in this unique landscape of dense Central European forests. Their long-term protection is crucial for preserving biodiversity and ecosystems in the SI-HR area. Therefore, the project focuses on three common CHALLENGES: i) concretizing strategies and fixing gaps in the management of CB LCs; ii) mitigating threats to LCs, significantly increasing human pressure (traffic mortality, agricultural damage, habitat fragmentation) and iii) (mis)understanding the role of LCs in ecosystems, [28]. For the first time compared to previous projects, Carnivora Dinarica will systematically address these issues, complementing national/EU policies and, most importantly, transferring knowledge from research to practice at the local level. Measures are in place to ensure transferability and sustainability after the end of the project. THE PROJECT WILL: - IMPROVE TRANSGRANCIAL LC MANAGEMENT by harmonizing measures for wolf and lynx, better understanding threats to habitat connectivity and ecosystem services, and strengthening cooperation between institutions

from both countries; - REDUCING THREATS TO LC through 10 demonstration activities such as a best practice farm, damage prevention fences, shepherd dogs, installation of active signaling, rehabilitation area for young lynx, bear-proof baskets, visitor management measures in NP Risnjak, Snežnik, and Kolpa and the establishment of visitor management and awareness-raising center for LC in Pivka; - ENHANCING COMPETENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND AWARENESS OF THE IMPORTANCE AND WAYS OF COOPERATING BETWEEN PEOPLE AND LC by training more than 280 national and local stakeholders and residents of conflict areas.

There are more than 50 historic towns along the SI-CRO border with a rich cultural heritage and represent the only untapped potential for the revitalization of neglected squares and streets in the city center. Among them are ČRNOMELJ and JASTREBARSKO. do you know her? Probably not, even though we pass through them on our way to the Adriatic coast, even though we're less than an hour's drive from both capitals. Our challenge will therefore be to capitalize on heritage and tourism trends to increase visitor numbers to border areas. The TRANSGRANIC dimension is considered an important opportunity for small towns as well as Zagreb, Ljubljana, Piran, and Rovinj to find their place in the market. The goal is to activate and renew destroyed cultural heritage to achieve a breakthrough in sustainable tourism in small border towns. To achieve this, we will first develop and test the new tourism product CB Kultura in Jaska and Črnomelj and promote its wider use. This culture will be simple, different, and slow. It will be a "cool" tour of hidden cultural heritage, supported by digital CB maps and designed according to the expectations and needs of visitors, especially those with limited functionality. Kultura will showcase the town's heritage; it offers local offers, walks, and tastings, and allows digital animations and live encounters with historical figures from its streets, squares, and parks. In Jaska, the visitor center and pavilion become the main cultural attraction. In Chernomyl, a cultural path will be "laid" along renovated historical streets. This is achieved through a holistic, sustainable, integrated, and smart approach. We can only overcome the status quo of small towns through innovation; therefore, a personalized approach is introduced in all product areas - from transforming details to recreating the great stories of random characters. Kultura is seen as a model for development and the CB map is seen as a tool

for further expansion and marketing of all the historic towns along the border, [29].

The project aims to develop a tourism product that allows people to experience nature and wildlife in the border areas of the Dinaric Karst region. The area is an undivided forest on both sides of the border and belongs to the Northern Dinarid people. It is the only region in Europe that retains all three major predator species (bears, lynxes, and wolves). This is a key environmental and marketing advantage that can be leveraged in this cross-border collaboration. Three protected areas are affected (Risnjak, Pivka Intermittent Lakes, Zeleni vir). They provide the unique natural heritage and typical karst phenomena of forest areas, as well as knowledge in the field of nature conservation, providing rich resources for designing attractive and sustainable tourism products. Through a broader but thematically focused range of niche products and joint marketing campaigns, it will be easier to guide foreign tourists from tourist destinations to the interior of the country in search of specific eco-products.

This project will thus help create better conditions for smart growth, which is one of the main common challenges faced by OPs. The main goal of the project is to actively protect the region's shared natural heritage. This will be achieved through sustainable tourism, including improving participating heritage areas, increasing the attractiveness of content, supporting the green economy, and increasing awareness and knowledge of local SMEs and regional residents. The main direct impacts of the project will be the development of new cross-border green products/projects, increasing the number of upskilled personnel, and encouraging visits to the project's heritage areas and sites. Organized advertising and marketing increased visitor numbers by 10%. We will use this partnership to integrate the skills of development organizations and park managers. When building visitor infrastructure, we will draw on the expertise of a variety of experts to better implement our proactive approach to nature conservation. We implement the ideas and skills of local actors and stimulate the interest of tourists in particular. The project will help increase the visibility of PP, improve green infrastructure inside and outside the park, help better position the two regions as green destinations, and thereby increase visitor numbers. There will be tangible benefits for participating groups: heritage interpretation (hunters, guides, caretakers), business integration for tour operators, and greater local economic benefits.

### 3.5 Health Care and Life in Cross-Border Regions

The cross-border area of Istria County and the coastal region poses a challenge for emergency medical services (EMS) providers to provide adequate emergency medical services to all residents and visitors of the border area. Cross-border cooperation among health care providers for emergency services is virtually non-existent. This results in unequal access to emergency medical services and results in suboptimal provision of emergency medical services. The potential for cross-border cooperation among emergency services has not yet been fully realized. Therefore, the common main goal of the project is to create a permanent network of vital medical facilities in the field of emergency care in border areas. The project also aims to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas in access to the best emergency medical services. The first immediate main result of the project is the network of emergency services in the cross-border region, which includes Izola General Hospital, Istria County Institute of Emergency Medicine, Pula General Hospital, and Slovenian Emergency Medical Service Istria Health Center Izola, supported by several relevant partners. The EMS network will facilitate the development and long-term implementation of innovative common models to provide optimal emergency medical assistance to high-risk patients in cross-border areas, including special medical cases and mass casualties. Therefore, a new common protocol for the cross-border transport of patients at risk of death will be developed. The project will fulfill the requirements for the implementation of SHOW activities related to the agreement (construction of helipad, purchase of ambulance). Finally, new common cross-border protocols will be introduced into the regular workflow of EMS networks.

A common challenge in this program area is the trend of aging populations. The need for formal organization of home care for older adults is increasing, partly due to an aging population and partly due to changes in sociocultural norms. The project aims to develop and establish a new structure for cross-border cooperation to provide an integrated approach to home care that includes medical and social care services. This cross-border structure and content follow the same methodology and are new in both countries. Although individual segments of home care services are implemented in both countries, the field is normatively and systemically unstructured. There is also no formalized concept of an integrated approach, in which the content is defined in detail from both the

social and medical sides. The project is highly innovative because its results will serve as a technical basis for this field, which is organized normatively. This is already planned for extended home care in Slovenia. Providing high-quality preventive and rehabilitative care is superior to current institutional treatment methods and improves the quality of life of homebound older adults. The project transfers the implementation of the comprehensive home care approach from the center of Ljubljana, the Podravska region, Zagreb, and Megimulje County. The project will be based on partnership and cooperation between institutions. It will be built on a foundation of continuous transfer of knowledge, practices, approaches, and working methods of all project partners. The newly established cross-border cooperation structure will include eight institutions where at least 153 employees will improve their competencies and skills. This will increase the quality and quantity of services, with particular emphasis on providing comprehensive services, including medical and social care.

### 3.6 Unemployment Problem

In the cross-border area, there is a great need to develop inclusive social activation programs, since the same problems exist on both sides of the border, namely the long-term social vulnerability of target groups facing unemployment, first of all due to health problems, lack of information and social integration, [30]. As an innovative model for public services in cross-border areas, 2SoKroG solves the problem of the lack of an efficient social transfer system on both sides of the border, a problem that is increasingly serious in terms of demographic indicators. Improve the institutional capacity of public institutions to deliver social and employment services through the application of innovative models, social activation, and strengthening of mutual partnerships. In the cross-border area, the project can be implemented as a first demonstrable social activation, essential for transforming the work of social work centers and employment centers into important public institutions to change existing conditions.

*Outputs: a) strengthen partnerships between public actors in social activities in cross-border areas; b) improve institutional capacity through the 2 Socrog model; c) put the 2 Socrog model into practice and improve the quality of socially activated public services; d) improve Knowledge and skills of staff in the field of social activities.*

*Target groups: (a) Social work centers; (b) Employment services; (c) Educational institutions;*

(d) Local and regional development organizations; (e) Social enterprises; (f) Non-governmental organizations; (g) Surrounding border areas residents; (h) line ministries.

Innovative approaches by public authorities using social activation models can improve functional competencies and skills, providing opportunities for disadvantaged groups to reintegrate into the labor market and integrate into various social systems. Thus, improvements in health status in cross-border peripheral areas reduce the use of social transfers and increase their effectiveness.

Project partners face a common challenge in this program area: safety challenges during natural and other disasters, [31]. A particular challenge for the Slovenian side of the partnership is its high vulnerability to earthquakes. The city of Chornobyl is located in an area where earthquakes can cause serious damage (Euromark earthquake scale EMS level VIII). On the Croatian side of the partnership, the Dougaresa town area is increasingly vulnerable to flooding. It is located in an area with a high potential for flooding. The core concept of the "HITRO - Joint Cross-Border Protection and Rescue Team" project is to create cross-border partnerships and establish, train, and equip a joint cross-border protection and rescue team that is ready to respond to emergencies. Catastrophic events and mitigating the consequences of natural and other disasters. Another important component of the project is to raise awareness, educate citizens on how to behave in this situation, and promote responsible environmental behavior, [32]. The main goal of the entire project is to establish new quality

standards for safety services and overall cooperation for participants in the field of cross-border disaster prevention and control in urban and rural areas in border areas. The main outcome of the project will be the development and adoption of normative strategic/operational documents for border areas, including the establishment of standard operating procedures for cross-border team intervention and well-trained and equipped cross-border protection and rescue teams to address security issues. An increasingly common challenge in the field is occurring. In addition to civil defense responses to catastrophic events, a focus of the project is to increase people's resilience to natural and other disasters by raising awareness and educating people on how to behave in such situations, [33]. This specific project goal will be achieved through direct and indirect advertising measures, namely advertising campaigns and lectures in schools, kindergartens, homes for the elderly, and homes for disabled people, as well as associations belonging to the category of disadvantaged groups (young people, elderly people), disabled people, etc.).

The program has a total budget of €55.7 million (ERDF contribution of €46.1 million). Priority axes 2 and 3 will be implemented through public tenders. Under the priority axis, strategic projects are awarded through direct approval of the Supervisory Board. The program provides co-financing of up to 85% of a project's eligible costs. Funding is allocated for each priority axis as follows:

Table 1. The allocation of budget per priority axes, [34]

Priority axis	Thematic objective	Union support (ERDF), EUR	Percent (%) of total Union support
<b>Integrated flood risk management in transboundary river basins</b>	Promote investments to address specific risks, ensure resilience, and develop disaster management systems	10,026,557	21,74 %
<b>Conservation and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources</b>	Preservation, protection, promotion, and development of natural and cultural heritage Protect and restore biodiversity and soils and promote ecosystem services, including through Natura 2000 and green infrastructure.	28,074,358	60,88 %
<b>Healthy, safe, and accessible border areas</b>	Improve the institutional capacity of authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration by promoting legal and administrative cooperation and cooperation between citizens and institutions.	5,013,278	10,87 %
<b>Technical Assistance</b>		3,000,000	6,51 %
<b>Total</b>		<b>46,114,193</b>	<b>100 %</b>

## 4 Conclusions

The INTERREG V-A Slovenia-Croatia Cooperation Program aims to promote the development of sustainable, safe, and vibrant border areas by supporting smart approaches to the protection, mobilization, and management of natural and cultural resources, for the benefit of people who live, work, or visit in the area, [35].

The vision highlights the overall direction of sustainable development. The main focus is to exploit the natural and cultural values of the area, providing innovative, smart, and practical solutions that contribute to the protection and improvement of the quality of the environment and its diverse characteristics on the one hand and the activation of its socio-economic potential on the other. Ensuring a safe and vibrant area is vital for residents and this is achieved by improving opportunities for agencies at all levels to work together. With the joint efforts of both parties, flood risk management has been developed, which not only brings a sense of security to the residents of the area, but also promotes an increase in the number of tourists to the area, an increase of 800,000 people per year, but first of all improves the residents of the affected areas. awareness and cultural responsibility. The results of this cooperation show that with the help of the European Union and the commitment of both sides of the border area, it is possible to achieve incredible results. The use of available resources is being facilitated and the area is being made more attractive to tourists. The authors of the text see great potential and hope that the Croatia-Slovenia border area will continue to develop in the coming years and achieve even greater results than before from this fruitful cooperation.

## 5 Study Limitations and Further Research

This study allows us to expand our knowledge of the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources that should be considered in cross-border cooperation projects to achieve territorial sustainability, [36]. The rapid development of EU projects creates challenges by leading to uncertainty about the model and its direction. Therefore, the process should be closely monitored. However, the selected case studies allow us to fully understand the reality of the EU. We might have gained a deeper understanding of this topic if case studies with a larger sample from other EU regions were selected. Furthermore, the study only focused on the cultural and natural resource use context of

the selected areas. However, other topics and perspectives need to be explored to understand the complex processes involved in using the above entities. In concluding remarks, further study and research and close attention to EU projects are crucial to enrich this topic and expand our knowledge.

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