

OBSTACLES TO CROSS-BORDER TOURISM COOPERATION ACROSS THE BALTIC SEA AS SEEN BY INTERREG STAKEHOLDERS

Denis Cerić*

* Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation, Polish Academy of Sciences, Twarda 51/55,
00-818 Warsaw, Poland, d.ceric@twarda.pan.pl

Obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea as seen by Interreg stakeholders

Cross-border tourism cooperation offers significant benefits, yet it faces numerous barriers and obstacles. Unfortunately, studies on cross-border cooperation across sea borders remain limited, with a lack of scientific discourse on key topics such as obstacles to cooperation. To address this gap, this paper aims to identify and discuss the main obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across sea borders in the Baltic Sea region. Through qualitative analysis involving 35 in-depth interviews with stakeholders representing various aspects of tourism cooperation within the EU Interreg programme and different parts of the region, 43 distinct obstacles were identified. Among these, five obstacles were consistently mentioned by a significant portion of respondents: language barriers, poor human resources, reimbursement principles of financing projects, bureaucracy, and cultural differences. The identified obstacles were categorized and discussed in relation to the existing literature on cross-border cooperation barriers. Surprisingly, the Baltic Sea itself, often perceived as a hindrance due to vast distances and limited accessibility, was not highly ranked as an obstacle by stakeholders. Instead, it was seen as both a reason and an opportunity for cooperation. The research confirmed that the most significant obstacles to tourism cross-border cooperation in the Baltic Sea region align with those found in the literature on land borders, albeit with different importance.

Key words: cross-border cooperation, obstacles, tourism, sea borders, maritime borders, stakeholders, in-depth interviews, Interreg, Baltic Sea

INTRODUCTION

Cross-border cooperation refers to the collaboration between neighboring countries sharing land or sea borders. Sousa (2012, p. 673) defines it as *any type of concerted action between public and/ or private institutions of the border regions of two (or more) states*. There are significant benefits from cross-border tourism cooperation. These include: 1) reducing costs by combining resources, marketing, personnel and infrastructure (Timothy 1999, Ioannides et al. 2006 and Carson et al. 2014), 2) facilitating a balanced approach to the development of regional tourism, especially where two neighbouring countries share a common resource (Timothy 1999), 3) promoting a shared vision whereby the cross-border region is treated as one coherent whole for planning and management purposes (Pinheiro 2009 and Jakubowski and Miszczuk 2021) and 4) reducing unfavourable regional rivalry, nationalism and stereotypes (Greer 2002, Ilbery and Saxena 2011 and Carson et al. 2014). One of the basic goals of cross-border cooperation is the removal of different barriers that cause existing borders (Cuper et al. 2014). Despite various efforts and funding, cross-border cooperation still faces many barriers and obstacles. Political borders present barriers that may obstruct cross-border mobility (Studzieniecki et al. 2021), leading to the obstruction of cross-border cooperation. This

barrier – the border – can be *lifted*, the literature on cross-border cooperation supports the claim that the major obstacles to cross-border cooperation are connected with legal-administrative issues, language-related barriers, difficult physical access, economic disparities, public authorities' interests, sociocultural differences, and lack of trust (Laissy 2018, Medeiros 2018 and Svensson and Balogh 2018).

While much attention has been devoted to cross-border cooperation across national land borders, including river borders, studies on cross-border cooperation across sea borders are very limited. This lack of research attention is interesting, bearing in mind that there are several sea basins in the world dividing the shores of well-populated countries where the physical distance between countries across the sea is not large enough to hamper cross-border cooperation (i.e. parts of the North Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Caribbean Sea, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Java Sea, Arafura Sea, China Sea and Sea of Japan).

In the case of cross-border cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region, where in many cases cross-border cooperation runs across sea borders, of great importance are the works of Palmowski (2000, 2002 and 2017), Prokkola (2007), Nilsson et al. (2010), Kizielewicz (2012), Lyck (2012), Escach and Vaudor (2014), Prokkola and Lois (2016), Studzieniecki (2009 and 2016), Więckowski and Cerić (2016), Pacuk et al. (2018), Zaucha (2018), Cerić (2019), Fedorov et al. (2020), Studzieniecki et al. (2020), Cerić and Więckowski (2020), Zaucha et al. (2020), Kropinova (2021), Moodie et al. (2021) and Cerić (2023). Despite these attempts, Timothy and Saarienen's (2013) argument that the literature on land-based cross-border cooperation is rich compared to the literature on maritime cross-border cooperation, still seems to be accurate. The scientific community has not yet discussed a number of topics related to cooperation across maritime borders, including obstacles to cross-border cooperation across sea borders, particularly in the field of tourism.

Therefore, this paper aims to identify and discuss the key obstacles encountered by stakeholders involved in cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea. To answer the research question – *What are the major obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea from the perspective of stakeholders?* – a qualitative approach is employed with 35 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) conducted with representatives of the administration and beneficiaries of the Interreg-IV programmes in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The Baltic Sea Region has been selected as a representative area that has experienced growing cross-border movement and collaboration (Timothy and Saarienen 2013, Kolosov and Więckowski 2018 and Studzieniecki et al. 2020).

The region's significance has particularly increased since the political changes in Europe during the 1990s, which led to the opening of borders through the Schengen Treaty and the integration of the European Union (EU) across most of the area. The topic of tourism is chosen as tourism plays an important and pivotal role in cross-border cooperation (EC 2007, Timothy et al. 2016 and Dołzbłasz and Raczyk 2022). In the Baltic Sea Region, a number of initiatives supporting tourism cooperation have been established since 1990s (i.e. Baltic Sea Tourism Commission and Policy Area Tourism within the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region – EUSBSR). Since tourism cooperation in cross-border areas is not easy and is rarely spontaneous (Faby 2016), and the EU financial support is a significant factor in stimulating its development (Jeřábek 2015, Stoffelen and Vanneste 2017 and Shepherd and Ioannides 2020), stakeholders have been chosen among the beneficiaries and authorities of the Interreg programme – the EU project funding programme

which was initiated in 1989 as a response to the challenges of regional disparities and the need for cooperation across borders within the European Union. The main aim of the Interreg programme is to reduce the negative effects of borders such as administrative, legal and physical barriers, and to tackle common problems and exploit untapped potential (EC 2017a). Interreg is made up of three strands: Interreg A – cross-border cooperation, Interreg B – transnational cooperation, and Interreg C – interregional cooperation. To obtain the best possible results, all three strands were researched. After more than three decades of experience with Interreg co-financing programmes, the number of published reports, program evaluations and academic reflections is considerable (cf. Reitel et al. 2018). However, the topic of obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across sea borders has not been addressed and elaborated on in the literature yet.

OBSTACLES TO CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

It is important to highlight that the investigation of obstacles to cross-border cooperation in this research took place during a period when the majority of political borders in the Baltic Sea Region (excluding those with Russia and Belarus) were open, and there were no ongoing wars, migrant crises, or pandemics that could have had a negative impact on cross-border cooperation and yielded different results. Within the framework of the conceptual model of *bordering-debordering-rebordering*, which suggests a complex and dynamic process in which international borders are constantly unsettled and evolving (cf. Więckowski and Timothy 2021), this study focused on the debordering phase in the region. The debordering phase is characterized by the opening of borders and increased cross-border cooperation, which start happening in the BSR in the 1990s, when sovereign states reduced their isolation through greater cooperation with other states and opened up to processes of integration and globalization. The debordering process in the context of opening the borders between the BSR countries ended in 2007, when only Belarus and Russia remained behind the closed borders in the region. Other debordering processes are still ongoing, e.g. those as part of strengthening cooperation between EU countries and Norway, and at the same time the EU's external borders have been strengthened, i.e. the rebordering process has started (cf. Cerić 2023). It should be noted that in other phases, such as bordering and rebordering, the most significant obstacles to cross-border cooperation would likely be different, with political obstacles taking precedence.

Although numerous studies have examined the obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the context of open EU borders, there is no universally accepted classification. Different authors have proposed various divisions of identified obstacles, or they have focused on specific obstacles. For instance, recent literature has highlighted obstacles such as bureaucracy and language barriers (Poledníková and Urmínský 2021 and Šindelář 2023), differences in national, institutional, and legal systems (Broek and Smulders 2015, Pérez-Nieto 2016 and Polgár 2022), disparities in political, economic, cultural, and social characteristics of the actors involved (Bufon et al. 2014, Meyer and Gardzińska 2017 and Lačný et al. 2022), and the lack of institutionalization and coordination (Wawrzusiszyn 2018).

Several attempts have been made to categorize the overall obstacles to cross-border cooperation in the EU (Medeiros 2018 and Svensson and Balogh 2018), often based on the results of the DG REGIO Public Consultation on overcoming

obstacles in border regions (EC 2016). This EU survey, conducted in 2015 with 623 respondents, revealed a wide range of persistent border obstacles affecting both businesses and individuals. These obstacles were grouped into categories such as 1) legal-administrative barriers, 2) language barriers, 3) difficult physical access, 4) economic disparities, 5) public authorities' interests in working together, 6) socio-cultural differences, 7) lack of trust, and 8) other. In this research, an attempt was made to group the identified obstacles in a manner similar to the classification used in the aforementioned EU report. However, it was found that the highest number of obstacles identified by respondents fell into the category of "other obstacles". This finding underscores the unique nature of obstacles in the specific topic, group, and geographic area under investigation. Consequently, this paper proposes a new categorization of obstacles specific to cross-border tourism cooperation across sea borders in the Baltic Sea Region.

DATA AND METHODS

The study employed qualitative research with a phenomenological design utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary research technique and data collection method. This approach and design enabled the researchers to explore the obstacles to cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea from the subjective viewpoints of the stakeholders, focusing on their insights, perspectives, perceptions, and context in which these experiences occur.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the in-depth interview respondents. The respondents were sought within the representatives of the BSR Interreg IV programme beneficiaries of tourism-related projects and the regional Interreg headquarters¹. This particular cooperation period has been chosen for research as it was the first period after political changes in the BSR when the Baltic republics and Poland became members of the EU and the Schengen zone, and was the first Interreg programming period with the formal possibility of implementing cross-border cooperation programmes along sea borders. The Baltic Sea Region is here defined as the territory of support of the EU program Interreg IV B of the Baltic Sea Region in 2007-2013 which consists of the entire territory of 9 countries: Belarus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, Poland and Sweden, and parts of two other countries located by the Baltic Sea: Germany and Russia. The choice of beneficiaries to be interviewed was based on previous research findings on spatial features of cross-border tourist cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region within the all Interreg IV programmes of strands A, B and C (Cerić 2023). That research identified 89 projects directly related to cross-border tourism cooperation across sea borders in all Interreg IV programmes around the Baltic Sea. Within mentioned projects, 834 beneficiaries cooperated on 19 tourism-related topics which were grouped into 6 thematic groups. This research aimed to reach respondents from each thematic group, and from different parts of the BSR. The number of respondents representing different thematic groups corresponded to the share of projects identified to belong to the particular thematic group, while the choice of respondents' location corresponded to the identified spatial distribution of tourism-

¹ Representatives of the following eight Interreg regional headquarters were interviewed: Interreg Baltic Sea Region, Interreg Botnia-Atlantica, Interreg Central Baltic, Interreg Deutschland-Danmark (Fehmarnbeltregion), Interreg Nord, Interreg Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak, Interreg South Baltic, and Interreg Syddanmark-Schleswig-K.E.R.N.

related projects' beneficiaries within the Interreg-IV programmes around the Baltic Sea. Besides the beneficiaries, the question on obstacles has been asked to representatives of the Interreg programme headquarters, and representatives of tourism-related companies which operate across the Baltic Sea on a daily basis. The group of respondents participating in the research is not homogeneous. However, it covers the points of view of different tourism stakeholders cooperating across sea borders in the BSR.

The invitation for the interview was sent to 72 beneficiaries, 11 Interreg IV program headquarters, and 3 pan-Baltic companies. The positive response rate was 33.3% for the Interreg IV beneficiaries (24 interviews were conducted out of 72 invitations), 72.2% for the Interreg headquarters (8 out of 11 invitations), and 100% for the selected pan-Baltic companies (3 out of 3). A total of 35 in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data for the study (Fig. 1).

Interviewed representatives belonged to 7 different Interreg-IV programmes² implemented in the Baltic Sea Region with locations in 29 different cities of 7 BSR countries. Most interviews were conducted in Sweden (16), followed by Germany (7), Denmark (5), Finland (3) Estonia (2), Latvia (1), and Poland (1). All thematic groups are covered. The interviews were conducted with key informants with relevant knowledge and experience in tourism and cross-border cooperation. Interviewed representatives ranged from local NGOs and different association leaders, through private company managers and local and regional authorities to directors of Interreg headquarters. Due to ethical considerations, to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, generic terms are used in this paper while referring to the interviewed stakeholders.

Following the opinion that “individuals have unique and important knowledge about the social world that can be shared through verbal communication” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, p. 94), answers to the research question have been sought in the use of one of the basic and most popular techniques of qualitative research – individual in-depth interviews (IDI) with open-ended questions (Heron 1981, Nicińska 2000 and Berg 2007). This technique was used as McGehhe (2012, p. 365) describes it in the chapter on interview methods and techniques: “With this approach, the researcher typically loosely follows an interview schedule of open-ended, broad-based questions designed to guide the informant toward his/ her reconstruction and interpretation of the research topic”. Therefore, the starting point was a question: *What are the main obstacles, barriers or challenges to cross-border cooperation across sea borders?* The goal was to understand the obstacles, understood as any factors or conditions that impede progress or hinder cross-border cooperation. However, the asked question also includes barriers and challenges, since these terms are often used interchangeably with obstacles, no matter their distinct meanings in the context of overcoming difficulties or achieving goals.

Additional questions that were asked to the stakeholders did not suggest additional obstacles not previously mentioned by the interviewed person but were asked only to get a wider response on given ones. Interviews were conducted between April and October 2019 and the average duration of an interview was one hour. It is worth noticing that the question of cooperation obstacles was not the on-

² Six Interreg IV-A programmes: Botnia – Atlantica, Central Baltic, North Baltic, Oresund – Kattegat – Skagerrak, South Baltic, Syddanmark – Schleswig – K.E.R.N., and one Interreg IV-B programme: Baltic Sea Region.

ly topic in conducted interviews, since the method was used also to understand also other aspects of cross-border cooperation as seen by stakeholders. The actively listening researcher made notes, from which data were analyzed using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. In the first phase, the interviews were transcribed and observations about the data were noted. The responses provided by the stakeholders were grouped and coded to identify common themes and patterns. Through an iterative process, the obstacles were refined and categorized, capturing the diverse perspectives on obstacles to cross-border cooperation. The final step of the analysis was to select quotes that best capture the obstacles identified, the proposed research question and the overarching literature.



Fig. 1. Respondents to the in-depth interviews on obstacles to cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea

Source: own elaboration.

RESULTS

Conducted interviews provided valuable insights into the obstacles faced in fostering cooperation across sea borders in the Baltic Sea Region. Thematic analysis of the 35 individual in-depth interviews (IDI) with open-ended questions grouped a total of 181 obstacles mentioned by the stakeholders in 43 themes. Respondents mentioned 13 of these at least four times during the interviews, suggesting their importance. If the leading obstacles can be defined as the ones mentioned statistically by at least every third stakeholder – 33,3% of interviewed stakeholders, 5 obstacles were identified as the leading ones. They are connected with language barriers, human resources, reimbursement principle of financing projects, bureaucracy,

and cultural differences. These and other important obstacles mentioned by at least 10% of respondents – complementary obstacles, are listed in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1. Leading and complementary obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea as seen by stakeholders

Obstacles	Respondents who pinpointed the obstacle		Type of obstacle	Group of obstacles
	N	%		
Language barriers	23	65.7	Leading	Socio-cultural
Human resources	22	62.9		Organizational
Reimbursement principle of financing projects	16	45.7		Administrative (Interreg)
Bureaucracy	14	40.0		Administrative (Interreg)
Cultural differences	12	34.3		Socio-cultural
Economic disparities	9	25.7		Economic
Baltic Sea	8	22.9	Complementary	Spatial
Transport costs	6	17.1		Spatial
Insufficient financial support	5	14.3		Economic
Large distance	4	11.4		Spatial
Different legal frameworks	4	11.4		Political, governance and legal
Poor accessibility	4	11.4		Spatial
Different economic benefits	4	11.4		Economic

Source: own elaboration based on 35 in-depth interviews

All 43 themes of identified obstacles were further divided into 6 proposed major groups of obstacles to cross-border cooperation across the sea border: 1) spatial, 2) socio-cultural, 3) political, governance and legal, 4) economic, 5) organizational, and 6) administrative obstacles (Tab. 2).

The obstacles belonging to socio-cultural, administrative and organizational groups of obstacles were the most frequently mentioned by stakeholders – 40, 38 and 38 times, respectively. Economic, spatial and political, governance and legal obstacles were less frequently mentioned, suggesting their less importance (Fig. 2). However, when it comes to themes of obstacles it should be pinpointed that 8 of 13 obstacles repeated at least four times during the interviews actually belonged to the latter three groups (cf. Tab. 1).

The in-depth interviews revealed numerous, very interesting and diverse views of the obstacles to cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea. Due to the limitation of the length of the article, the following two subsections leading and complementary obstacles are described and accompanied by relevant quotes from the stakeholders, to illustrate their respective perspectives and experiences.

Tab. 2. Obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea as seen by stakeholders

Obstacles	
Spatial	Socio-cultural
Baltic Sea as a natural barrier	Language barriers and communication gaps
The specificity of the sea border	Differences in work styles, social norms, values, customs and practices
Large physical distance between cooperating partners	Lack of mutual trust
Poor connectivity and accessibility	Existing stereotypes, prejudices and xenophobia
Special rules, regulations and high costs of transport	Deep-rooted animosities
Challenges in coordinating transportation networks and logistics	“Historical baggage”
	Fear of change and uncertainty
Political, governance and legal	Economic
Divergent political systems, ideologies, and priorities	Economic disparities and inequalities
Issues related to national sovereignty and protection of interests	Weak economy
Political tensions, conflicts, and historical disputes	Unequal distribution of economic benefits
Unstable political climate	Insufficient financial support for cross-border cooperation
Security threats	Lack of loans
Differences in governance structures and decision-making processes	Domination of cooperation structures by 'richer' regions
Differences in legal frameworks, regulations, and policies	Differences in currency, taxation, trade policies, etc.
Varying standards and procedures for trade, investment, and intellectual property	
Organizational	Administrative
Capacity gaps in human resources, skills, and expertise	Strict administrative borders of cooperation programmes
Dependence on a few people	The obligation to finance part of the project costs
Involvement in too many projects simultaneously	The reimbursement principle of financing projects
Desired cooperation partners are not always available	The difficult process of crafting the project application
Challenges in coordination and cooperation among institutions	Bureaucratic red tape - complex administrative procedures
Challenges in sharing data, intelligence, and knowledge	Various deadlines pressure causing burnout of committed project participants
Differences in individual partners' interests	
Unclear roles and functioning of some institutions	
Not good personal relationships between representatives of cooperation partners	

Source: own elaboration based on 35 in-depth interviews.

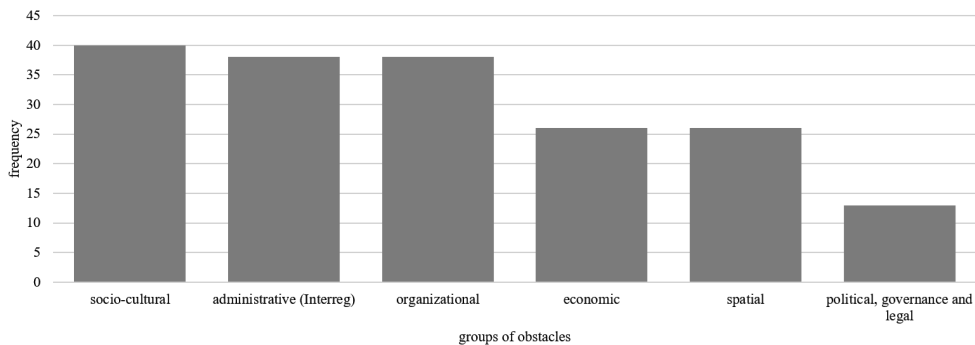


Fig. 2. Groups of obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea by the number of obstacles affiliated to groups

Source: own elaboration based on 35 in-depth interviews.

LEADING OBSTACLES

Language barriers and communication gaps. Among all the obstacles to cross-border cooperation mentioned by stakeholders, obstacles belonging to language barriers and communication gaps group are highlighted most frequently. Often is elaborated that language differences and the impossibility of direct communication can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and difficulties in conveying ideas, which can impede cross-border cooperation. Respondents believe that effective communication is crucial for cross-border cooperation, and see the language differences and communication challenges as the barriers which can hinder information sharing, understanding, and efficient decision-making among countries with different linguistic backgrounds. The language barrier as an obstacle was summed up in the best way by one project leader from Sweden: *What I don't like about international projects is when the partners don't speak English well. I see that they have the necessary knowledge and a great will, but the language blocks them: they cannot express themselves properly, they speak incorrectly, slowly, they stutter; they often do not understand even their tasks and in the end, the project suffers* (PR06, Sweden).

Human resources. After language barriers and communication gaps, respondents found capacity gaps in human resources, skills, and expertise of people engaged in cross-border cooperation as the largest overall obstacle to cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea. This was identified by 62.9% of the respondents. Stakeholders recognized human resources as crucial in cross-border cooperation and therefore pinpointed that obstacles to this cooperation can be found in unqualified employees without the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate cultural differences, language barriers, and diverse work environments. Moreover, some respondents experienced working with partners without enthusiasm for international cooperation, without professional expertise with respect to the project topic and partners who were afraid to take responsibility in the project – all depicted as an important human resources obstacle. Five stakeholders mentioned frequently changing staff as an obstacle, since more experienced employees might provide better overall results. This is pinpointed both by some beneficiaries of the projects and some Interreg headquarters. As Director of one Interreg A secretariat stated:

Almost nobody stays – staff is just in transit, for one edition. They gain experience in project management and find better business opportunities (IR02, Finland).

The reimbursement principle of financing Interreg projects. Each project partner needs to pre-finance its activities and this is reported as a huge obstacle by almost every second respondent. In the opinion of some stakeholders, this principle significantly limited the participation in the program of institutions and companies which, for financial reasons, would not be able to cover the costs of project implementation. Moreover, it is reported that this principle presents a much greater challenge to project partners coming from less developed countries, since they face more difficulties as they might have a higher scarcity of financial resources and are therefore less able to raise capital for the co-payments and the pre-financing. With expressions of dissatisfaction and anger, one NGO representative from Estonia stated: *Not only you have to add money, but you also have to wait for funds, wait for a long time ... This caused me numerous worries about running the organization, possible blocked accounts ... Because of this, I will never ever apply for a project within the Interreg programme again (PR08, Estonia).* For partners from more developed countries, the reimbursement principle of financing was also an issue: *Also because of self-financing issues and the fact that the EU covers not entire project budget, we decided to involve a large number of partners but with smaller individual budgets, in order not to make their financial contribution such large to cause problems in their ordinary business (PR13, Sweden).* The Interreg representatives also see this as an important obstacle to cross-border cooperation: *Some lead partners with very interesting projects resign from applications after consultation in our office, when we explain to them in detail the financing schemes of the Interreg programme (IR05, Germany).*

Bureaucratic red tape. This is the common name for another leading administrative obstacle mentioned by 40% of respondents. Complex administrative procedures, lengthy approval processes, excessive paperwork, inconsistent regulations, cumbersome Interreg structures, and delays in decision-making – just to name a few obstacles which were pinpointed by respondents as the ones that diminish the interest in cross-border cooperation projects. The following quotes confirm these claims: *That was our first international project – it had a very difficult administration (PR19, Sweden); When it comes to a realization of some parts of the project, the procedure is highly bureaucratic (PR04, Germany); It is not the cross-border cooperation that is challenging – it is the administration issues connected with the project implementation (PR21, Denmark).*

Cultural differences. Another important group of socio-cultural obstacles, identified by roughly every third respondent, is connected with differences in work styles, social norms, values, customs and practices. According to stakeholders, they vary significantly between countries in the Baltic Sea Region, and these differences can create misunderstandings and hinder cooperation efforts. Six stakeholders emphasized different social backgrounds as an obstacle which influences the work ethic and the overall success of the project. One concluded: *Partners have different needs, points of departure, and levels of task-solving. Sometimes in the project, you just do the job for them (PR21, Denmark).* Another added: *It may be that sometimes expectations to some partners are too high, comparing not to their expertise, as to their social capability (PR11, Germany).*

COMPLEMENTARY OBSTACLES

Economic disparities between countries, such as differences in wealth, development levels, and resource availability are identified as the main economic obstacles to cross-border cooperation. Some stakeholders, mainly from the countries that joined the European Union in the 2000s, recognize institutional cross-border cooperation partly financed by the EU as the only possibility for the development of cross-border activities in the field of tourism. It is well described by one Latvian stakeholder: *We couldn't find a possibility to gain some financial support from local or regional governments, so the Interreg was a good solution* (PR18, Latvia). For stakeholders from the "old" EU countries, the availability of funds was also mentioned as a determining factor, although not the only one: *We need that support; when activities around one project finish, we go to another one* (PR22, Sweden).

The Baltic Sea. Respondents naturally identified the Baltic Sea as the most important spatial obstacle to cross-border cooperation across the sea borders. The vast distance between cooperating partners separated by the sea is described as challenging both to establish and maintain relationships, and to coordinate activities and communication – due to longer travel times, higher transportation costs, and difficulties in establishing regular face-to-face communication and coordination. Some stakeholders emphasized numerous connections across the sea, while others the lack of ferry services and limited bridge infrastructure. However, both find existing transport solutions which can overcome the Baltic Sea as an obstacle to cross-border cooperation across the sea as not sufficient. On the other side, the Baltic Sea is often recognized as an opportunity for cooperation. The following two quotes highlight these findings: *However, I don't find the Baltic Sea as a big obstacle, mainly thanks to new technologies of communication and regular meetings taking place within the project. In the end, I found the Baltic Sea as a common element, something which gathers us and gives us an opportunity for cooperation* (PR02, Germany), and: *Thanks to the Baltic Sea we can create together interesting things – while separating us, it also serves as an enormous opportunity* (PR07, Sweden). Altogether, 22.9% of respondents found the Baltic Sea as an obstacle to cross-border cooperation across the sea borders.

Transport costs were discussed as a very important obstacle among four interviewees. While they understand the reason for the high costs of the ferry tickets explained also by a transport company representative: *The fleet is younger, it follows the highest cutting the edge World standards concerning energy efficiency, pollution of every kind, and ferry speed* (CR03, Sweden). Stakeholders still found tickets too expensive, which impedes cross-border cooperation across the sea in their opinion: *High ferry ticket prices are limiting the movement of the people, including tourists who might be more the "cross-border" ones, if these prices are not so expensive* (PR15, Finland).

Insufficient financial support. While discussing the economic obstacles, five respondents found the financial support for cross-border cooperation in tourism insufficient. In their opinion, Interreg projects should not be the only source for financing this cooperation.

Large distance. As partly explained above, while presenting the Baltic Sea as an obstacle, respondents found the large distance between cooperating partners as an obstacle, but not a huge one. However, it was mentioned by four interviewees.

Different legal frameworks. According to respondents, differences in legal frameworks, regulations, and policies are the most important obstacles connected with political, governance and legal obstacles to cross-border tourism cooperation across the Baltic Sea. One respondent discussed how legal regulations delayed much important project tasks, and emphasized: *I couldn't believe that there are so many differences in the regulations among the member countries of the European Union* (PR17, Sweden). Other respondent pinpointed: *Less is talked about legal differences as obstacles for cross-border cooperation, but they really make cross-border cooperation difficult. Differences in laws and regulations can create confusion and uncertainty about legal responsibilities and liability* (PR20, Germany).

Poor accessibility. Respondents discussed physical accessibility in the context of transport possibilities to reach places on the other side of the sea border. This obstacle is related to insufficient transport solutions and high transport costs across the Baltic Sea as explained before, but also to overall accessibility in the Baltic Sea Region, especially its northern and inland periphery areas.

Different economic benefits. The last obstacle identified as an important one refers to the unequal distribution of economic benefits. Stakeholders mentioned that different levels of earnings can even create tensions and therefore hinder collaboration efforts. The project leader from Estonia stated: *It was very hard to find good partners from Finland. They are taking a huge part of the budget, but bringing a small additional effect* (PR08, Estonia).

DISCUSSION

The Baltic Sea region, encompassing multiple countries with open borders and diverse natural and cultural landscapes, holds immense potential for cross-border tourism cooperation. However, despite this potential, many obstacles impede the realization of seamless collaboration among tourism stakeholders across the Baltic Sea borders. It is not a surprise that the stakeholders identified language barriers, human resources, reimbursement principles of financing projects, bureaucracy, and cultural differences as the prominent obstacles hindering effective cooperation since these results are mainly in line with the results found in the large EU survey on overcoming obstacles in border regions (EC 2016b), although the importance of the obstacles found in that survey and this research differs. Different levels of importance is also not a surprise, because the EU survey synthesizes obstacles of different borderlands and, as Leibenath and Knippschild (2005) argued: collaboration on different borderlands is shaped in a different way because the individuals involved in it are embedded in different conditions and therefore that cooperation is difficult to compare. We can agree that different types of borders, borderlands and countries possess different obstacles, and the relevance of each obstacle changes with them. For example, Medeiros (2018) explains that the language barrier can be strong in some border regions and relatively weak in others or that the legal and administrative obstacles are more relevant in the border areas where cross-border commuting intensity levels are much higher. In addition, the importance of individual obstacles depends on the perspective – to whom they present obstacles (Svensson and Balogh 2018). For example, different obstacles to cross-border cooperation can be identified by cross-border workers, and different by tourism managers. Therefore, while revealing the specific obstacles to cross-border cooperation seen by a specific group of stakeholders – Interreg beneficiaries, working on a spe-

cific topic – tourism, in a specific geographical area – Baltic Sea Region, cooperating across the specific border – sea border, it was necessary to divide identified obstacles and their importance into seamless relevant groups (cf. Tab. 1), and not try to fit them in the existing ones.

Bearing in mind that there is no existing literature on obstacles to cross-border cooperation across sea borders, the results are discussed with the literature on obstacles across land borders, which include borders across rivers, sometimes lakes and even the seas, while not specifying it. Sea borders involve vast bodies of water, which can pose logistical challenges in terms of transportation, communication, and infrastructure development. Remote or isolated locations, rough sea conditions, and long distances can make coordination and resource sharing more difficult. The OECD paper on governing cross-border challenges (2021) argues that the close geographic proximity of borders facilitates cross-border cooperation. Since cooperation across the Baltic Sea borders implies cooperation across large distances, it was surprising to find how the low importance of the Baltic Sea itself, the large distances between the cooperating partners and the poor accessibility in this specific area have been reported by the stakeholders as the obstacles to cross-border cooperation. Though these obstacles are identified by at least 10% of respondents, they rank 7th, 10th and 12th as the most frequently identified obstacle, respectively. While comparing cooperation across open borders of mountain and river character, Dołzbłasz (2017) argued that natural conditions of borderlands impact cross-border cooperation. More active cooperation is observed between institutions where the open borders have a river character – first of all in twin cities where they were located in a short distance from the border and connected by a road through a nearby bridge; in the case of cooperation across the mountain borders, cooperation was less active due to poor transport accessibility, the presence of protected areas, or generally a very low level of development of a given mountain area (Dołzbłasz 2017). This indicates the higher importance of transport accessibility than the natural conditions of borders, and the overall importance of proximity in cross-border cooperation. Despite that the European Commission argues that the Interreg programme “helped to reduce the distances between territorial stakeholders located in different foreign countries” (Wassenberg et al. 2015, p. 38), the creation of close networks and personal relationships is difficult in the case of large distances (Shepherd and Ioanides 2020). Therefore, often highlighted in border studies is insufficient transport accessibility which represents an important factor for cross-border cooperation. Poor accessibility together with closely connected transport costs are the obstacles reported together by 28.5% of respondents in this research. In border regions where the problem of transport accessibility is not so pronounced, cross-border cooperation is more facilitated (Sousa 2012). Cross-border cooperation across land borders may benefit from easier physical connectivity and communication infrastructure, such as roads, railways, and shared land borders. In contrast, cross-border cooperation across sea borders may require the development of maritime transportation infrastructure, networks and communication systems (Cerić 2019 and Medhekar and Haq 2022). The question is why the border character, the distance between stakeholders and overall accessibility, which are defined in the literature as important factors for cross-border cooperation, are not highly ranked by the stakeholders when it comes to cross-border cooperation across sea borders? The answer might be found in relativism: there were more important obstacles to point out from the stakeholders’ view, than the Baltic Sea, distance and accessibility. Moreover, stakeholders found the Baltic Sea as an opportunity, often

indicated as a link between countries and cities in its vicinity, as well as an element of identity and an opportunity for tighter cooperation. This is in line with Sousa's (2012) claims that geographical situation is often the most important driver to functional cooperation as it forces neighbouring authorities to negotiate, implement and administer joint infrastructure projects, such as the construction of a bridge, road, etc. or deal with the environmental policy issues and judicial cooperation. Natural barriers can actually shape cross-border cooperation in the field of tourism and environmental protection as well as culture (Dołzbłasz 2017) because different borderlands with certain natural, socio-cultural and even economic differences act as tourist attractions (cf. Więckowski 2023). When the sea is between, which represents a common history, but also common everyday challenges as seen in environmental protection, traffic regulations etc., the stakeholders' views on the Baltic Sea more as a cooperation opportunity than an obstacle, is not surprising – especially in times of rapid technological innovations which might shrink distances for functional cooperation.

Though some languages spoken in the Baltic Sea region are considered closely related, i.e. Danish and Swedish, German and Danish, Estonian and Finnish, or Latvian and Lithuanian, which belong to the same language families and branches, they have only a certain level of mutual intelligibility, meaning that speakers of one language typically cannot understand the other without prior exposure or learning. A better situation is between Norwegian and Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, and Polish and Belarusian, since these language pairs have a high degree of mutual intelligibility, enabling effective communication between speakers of the two languages. Despite this, language barriers and communication gaps are identified as the most important obstacle to tourism cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea borders, reported by 65.7% of stakeholders. The language barriers are also reported in the mentioned EU survey (EC 2016) and the literature as one of the most important obstacles to cross-border cooperation (cf. Lundén 2004, Cankar et al. 2014, Kurowska-Pysz and Szczepańska-Woszczyna 2017, Medeiros 2018 and Šindelář 2023). Lundén (2004) found as many as six different language situations in European borderlands: from the situation in which the spoken languages are the same, to the one in which the spoken language in the borderlands differs even from the official languages of the respective bordering countries. Therefore, the importance of the language barrier to cooperation should not be the same across the all Baltic Sea region borderlands. But when it comes to cross-border cooperation across the sea, this natural barrier divided also some language groups making the language barrier stronger, and therefore more important in this particular cooperation.

Around two-thirds of stakeholders recognized capacity gaps in human resources, skills, and expertise as an obstacle to cross-border cooperation across the sea borders. The universality of this obstacle and its importance to cross-border cooperation is clear. The opinion of respondents matches the arguments from the literature that actual cooperation in the practical dimension depends to a large extent on local and regional actors (Scott 1999), their formal competencies (Medeiros 2019) and intercultural skills (Cankar et al. 2014). Without people, energy, and desire for cooperation it wouldn't happen or it will be unsuccessful (Racyzk and Dołzbłasz 2022). An argument of Stoffelen et al. (2017) that most of the cross-border tourism cooperation is performed by a limited number of public sector professionals, while the private sector is practically absent due to high inter-firm com-

petition, opens a new dimension of human resources obstacles to cross-border cooperation. Some respondents also mentioned this in the interviews, claiming that desired partners were not available for cooperation in the tourism-related Interreg project.

The Interreg programmes' reimbursement principles of financing projects and its complex administrative procedures followed the two most frequent obstacles found. Financing cross-border cooperation is very important – this has been confirmed both in the literature and in this research. Many argue that the major reason to apply for an Interreg project is an acute need for funding (cf. Scott 2000, Blasco et al. 2014 and Stoffelen et al 2017), rather than a belief that the framework represents the most effective tool for facilitating cross-border tourism cooperation (cf. Shepherd and Ioanides 2020). But when it comes to obstacles related to financing cross-border cooperation, the biggest problem for stakeholders is the financing model of Interreg projects. This model of reimbursement of eligible expenditures for the implementation of projects is complicated and lengthy (Filip et al. 2020). The requirement of own contribution on the part of the beneficiary, as well as the lack of advance payments, significantly limit the participation in the program of institutions which, for financial reasons, would not be able to cover the costs of project implementation (Dołzbłasz 2017). There is no difference in cross-border tourism cooperation within the Interreg projects across the Baltic Sea borders: this was a relevant obstacle to mention by almost half of the stakeholders interviewed. Both results and the literature (cf. Raczyk et al. 2012 and Dołzbłasz 2017) and the Baltic Sea stakeholders share the opinion that this obstacle is even more relevant for less developed regions and countries, which threatens with the domination of co-operation structures by more developed regions, empirically proved by Cerić (2023). When it comes to Interreg bureaucratic red tape, beneficiaries struggled with the stipulations of the project application itself (Shepherd and Ioanides 2020), the administration connected with the implementation (Cankar et al. 2014), and different regulations (Menzel 2022). Filip et al. (2020) found that 80% of experts found the administrative burden of project preparation and implementation as an obstacle that diminishes the interest in tourism cross-border cooperation projects. The EU survey on overcoming obstacles in border regions (EC 2016) also exposed the legal-administrative obstacles as the ones on the top of EU citizens' concerns when crossing EU borders. For the cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea borders, the bureaucracy was an obstacle for 40% of stakeholders. The expressions of displeasure among the Baltic Sea stakeholders while discussing the administrative obstacles only can support Shepherd and Ioanides's (2020) claim that the Interreg bureaucracy, pressures and timelines result in the burnout of committed project participants and, in the end, the loss of established cross-border connections.

Despite prevailing opinions on the common history and identity of the people surrounding the Baltic Sea expressed by the stakeholders, various socio-cultural differences appeared to be one of the leading obstacles to cross-border cooperation across that sea. Doubts on common Baltic identity are raised by many (Hess 2011), while historical experiences vary in the Baltic Sea region, especially during the period 1945 – 1989 when a group of countries in the region were dependent on the USSR, behind the Iron Curtain, obviously has repercussions in socio-cultural attitudes. Therefore, differences in work styles, social norms, values, customs and practices are found to be important obstacles in cross-border cooperation across the sea in the Baltic Sea region. Different political and historical conditions (van Hou-

tum 1999 and Leibenath and Knippschild 2005) definitely create socio-cultural differences in the borderlands where the political borders were closed for decades. However, with the example of the Interreg cross-border cooperation between Norway and Sweden, where the borderlands are characterized as politically calm with a long common history, similar languages used, and similar cultures and working practices, Shepherd and Ioanides (2020) still found socio-cultural differences serious enough to deeply affect the success of the cross-border cooperation. Miszczuk (2013) argues that the similarity of the neighbouring regions is of great importance for cross-border cooperation, while Scott et al. (2019) claim that actually active economic and social cooperation between border regions can reveal the similarities. Many authors emphasize that socio-cultural conditions play an important role in the development of cross-border cooperation, and this is confirmed for cooperation across sea borders. The Baltic Sea itself in this context might be an even more important obstacle than it resulted from the interviews.

CONCLUSION

The aims of this paper were to identify and discuss the key obstacles to tourism cross-border cooperation across sea borders in the Baltic Sea region. The qualitative analysis utilizing 35 in-depth interviews with cross-border cooperation stakeholders representing different topics of cooperation related to tourism and different parts of the region revealed 43 different obstacles which can be categorized into six main groups of obstacles (Tab. 2). Altogether 5 obstacles – language barriers, human resources, reimbursement principles of financing projects, bureaucracy, and cultural differences are defined as the leading obstacles since they are mentioned by at least every third respondent. Another 8 obstacles are mentioned by also more than 10% of respondents are defined as complementary obstacles (cf. Tab. 1).

From the analysis of stakeholders' viewpoints, insights, perspectives, perceptions, and the context in which these experiences occur, the idea was to find the differences between obstacles to cross-border cooperation in areas where stakeholders share sea borders, from those where they share land ones, found in the literature of the subject. The border character, the distance between stakeholders and overall accessibility, which are defined in the literature as important factors for cross-border cooperation, are not highly ranked by the stakeholders when it comes to cross-border cooperation across sea borders, no matter that the Baltic Sea represents a vast natural border from which large distance and poor accessibility derive. Although the Baltic Sea region is characterized by a region with mostly open political borders, involvement of countries in the same international associations, and a certain level of historical, cultural, and even economic similarities, the obstacles to cross-border cooperation across the Baltic Sea are mainly in line with previous studies and the EU reports on cross-border cooperation obstacles across land borders. The respondents generally found the Baltic Sea more as an opportunity for cooperation, than an obstacle. However, this is not the case with the countries out of the EU and Eurozone – Russia and Belarus, where political factors still play a very important role.

The difference between important obstacles to cross-border cooperation between sea and land borders lies in the importance of identified obstacles. For example, an important EU survey on overcoming obstacles in border regions (EC 2016), as well as several literature findings place the legal and administrative obstacles as the most important obstacles, while this research suggests the socio-cultural ones.

This research confirmed that the most important obstacles to cross-border cooperation are similar, but different types of borders, borderlands and countries possess different obstacles, while the importance of individual obstacles depends on the perspective – to whom they present obstacles. Regarding cooperation itself, the findings suggest that the physical natural barriers such as the sea, the distance between cooperating partners and poor transport accessibility are important, but not crucial obstacles.

Obviously, this research has limitations. They can be found in specific focus on tourism, investigating only Interreg projects of one particular programming period, as well as researching the geographical region with almost all open borders. Therefore, the transferability of the results to other sea basins is questionable. Another limitation concerns given answers that have a cognitive value only at a given moment. Respondents, under the influence of new experiences (or other factors), may change their opinions, which significantly weakens the cognitive value of this method. A limitation, but also a great challenge of this research is the lack of scientific literature on cross-border cooperation across sea borders. This is probably the most important contribution of this research to the literature. The findings shed light on cross-border cooperation across sea borders, identify obstacles to this specific cooperation and contribute to the existing knowledge on overall obstacles to cross-border cooperation. It is hard not to agree with Sousa (2012) that cross-border cooperation is still relatively a new process in which no rapid results should be expected. Obstacles should be defined and afterwards removed where possible. Medeiros (2018, p. 480) pinpointed: “Each EU cross-border cooperation programme should identify the most persistent and important border obstacles in a concrete border area in order to define precise policy goals to mitigate them”. Defining these goals may be a potential future research avenue which can enhance cross-border cooperation and overcome challenges.

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Denis Cerić

PREKÁŽKY CEZHRAŇIČNEJ SPOLUPRÁČE V OBLASTI CESTOVNÉHO RUCHU V POBALTÍ Z POHEADU ZAJINTERESOVANÝCH STRÁN PROGRAMU INTERREG

Cezhraničná spolupráca zahŕňa spoluprácu medzi susednými krajinami, ktoré majú spoločné pozemné alebo námorné hranice. Takáto spolupráca prináša významné výhody, ale taktiež mnohé prekážky, ktoré bránia rozvoju. Zatiaľ čo v oblasti cezhraničnej spolupráce

na pevnine boli realizované mnohé výskumy, štúdie o spolupráci na morských hraniciach, najmä v oblasti cestovného ruchu, sú zriedkavé. Preto sa tento článok zameriava na identifikáciu a diskusiu o kľúčových prekážkach cezhraničnej spolupráce cez morské hranice na príklade spolupráce v regióne Baltského mora v oblasti cestovného ruchu. Získané výsledky boli porovnané s existujúcou literatúrou o bariérach cezhraničnej spolupráce na pevnine.

Vo výskume bol aplikovaný kvalitatívny prístup a ako primárna metóda zberu údajov boli využité hĺbkové rozhovory. Celkovo bolo realizovaných 35 rozhovorov s kľúčovými osobami, ktoré zastupovali zainteresované strany v oblasti cestovného ruchu z rôznych programov Interreg-IV a lokalít v regióne Baltského mora. Na analýzu údajov bola použitá tematická analýza, zainteresované strany uviedli 181 prekážok, ktoré boli zoskupené do 43 tém. Päť hlavných prekážok, ktoré uviedlo najmenej 33,3 % zainteresovaných strán, súviselo s jazykovými bariérami, ľudskými zdrojmi, podmienkami čerpania a preukazovania finančných výdavkov projektov v rámci programu Interreg, byrokraciou a kultúrnymi rozdielmi. Okrem toho sa vyskytli aj ďalšie dôležité prekážky, ktoré uviedlo najmenej 10 % respondentov (tab. 1), pričom všetky identifikované bariéry boli rozdelené do šiestich hlavných kategórií (tab. 2).

Samotné Baltské more spolu s veľkými vzdialenosťami medzi spolupracujúcimi partnermi a nepriaznivou dostupnosťou boli ako prekážky z hľadiska dôležitosti hodnotené nižšie než sme očakávali. Zainteresované strany vnímali Baltské more skôr ako príležitosť, pričom zdôrazňovali jeho úlohu spojnice medzi krajinami a vnímali ho ako prvok identity, ktorý podporuje užšiu spoluprácu. Jazykové bariéry sa ukázali ako najkritickejšie, brániace účinnej komunikácii v rámci Baltského mora. Je zaujímavé, že v literatúre sa uvádza, že jazyková bariéra je tiež dôležitou bariérou v cezhraničnej spolupráci v prípade pozemných hraníc, ale zvyčajne sa neuvádza ako najdôležitejšia. Druhou najdôležitejšou skupinou prekážok pre zainteresované strany v regióne Baltského mora boli nedostatky v kapacitách ľudských zdrojov, zručnostiach a odborných znalostiach. V literatúre o bariérach cezhraničnej spolupráce na vnútrozemských hraniciach sa prekážky týkajúce sa ľudských zdrojov síce spomínajú, ale nikdy nie sú definované ako veľmi kritické pre tento druh spolupráce. Ďalšie významné bariéry boli zistené medzi spôsobmi čerpania a dokladovania výdavkov na financovanie projektov a byrokratickými postupmi, ktoré sa často vyskytujú ako hlavné bariéry cezhraničnej spolupráce. Posledná významná skupina prekážok vyplýva z rozdielov v štýloch práce, spoločenských normách, hodnotách, zvykoch a postupoch, ktoré sú značne ovplyvnené odlišnými historickými, hospodárskymi a politickými podmienkami spolupracujúcich regiónov a krajín.

Článok zdôrazňuje jedinečnosť každého skúmaného pohraničia a krajiny. Rôzne typy hraníc, prihraničných oblastí a krajín má rôzne bariéry spolupráce, pričom význam jednotlivých prekážok závisí od perspektívy – z pohľadu koho bariéry vnímame. Sme si vedomí obmedzení, ktoré vyplývajú zo špecifického zamerania článku na cestovný ruch, obmedzeného rozsahu a transferu výsledkov. Napriek tomu poskytuje cenný pohľad na cezhraničnú spoluprácu na morských hraniciach a prispieva k existujúcim poznatkom o prekážkach cezhraničnej spolupráce.



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