



Iron Curtain Trail: Sustainable mobility along the newest EuroVelo route

South East Europe Programme

Half Time Conference Minutes

On Thursday, October 3rd 2013, the Half Time Conference of “Iron Curtain Trail” project took place in the New Municipality Hall of Thessaloniki, Greece. The Conference was organised by the greek project partner “ANTIGONE-Information and Documentation Center on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non-Violence”.

Project partners, non governmental organisations and local development organisations, representatives of regional and local authorities and other stakeholders (representatives of cycling associations, tourism, travel, transport services etc.) participated in the Conference that aimed to raise awareness on the project and its objectives towards a wide European collaboration for the development of EuroVelo 13 cycling route.

Mr Giorgos Dimarelos, town councilor, welcomed the participants of the Conference speaking about the use of bicycle in Thessaloniki, also pointing out that during the last years there has been a raise in the sales of bicycles in the city. However, he noted that although weather conditions allow cycling in the city, mainly due to the economic crisis, not much have yet taken place as far as it concerns cycling infrastructures. Last, he stressed the need of collaboration between national and local authorities with all relevant stakeholders so as to achieve the implementation of policies friendly to cycling and cyclists.

Following, mr. Tibor Polgar, representative of West Pannon Region and Development Nonprofit Ltd., made his introduction with a short presentation of the history of Iron Curtain Trail route linking cycling routes with the different cultures that exist in South East Europe regions. Showing the Iron Curtain Trail map, he referred to European Parliamentary Member Michel Cramer who took on the initiative for the development of EuroVelo 13 cycling route in 2011. Furthermore, he referred to the monetary profit of cycling tourism and its connection to transport services and infrastructures. He also pointed out that the aim of the project is to boost South East Europe regions keep pace with the northern parts of the European region that is more developed than the south one as far as it concerns cycling infrastructures.

He also presented the activities of “Iron Curtain Trail” project that combine cycling with sustainable public transportation and sustainable tourism which actually consist the main objectives of the project. About the results of the project, mr Tibor briefly mentioned the development of best practices in terms of cycling as well as the creation of methodologies on how to evaluate and how to compare cycling offers connected with transport and tourism so as to develop concrete sections of the route giving emphasis on the criterion that the cycling routes need to be located close to border areas. For the indication of the routes, feasibility studies are going to be developed under the framework of “Iron Curtain Trail” project so as to define the most



suitable options and target groups to safeguard the sustainability of “Iron Curtain Trail” and potential projects.

Following, mr Adam Bodor, representative of European Cyclists Federation (ECF), referred to the function of EuroVelo network and the development of EuroVelo routes. About “Iron Curtain Trail” project, he indicated the indispensable tools and evaluation criteria for the development of action plans that lead to the production of efficient methodologies. Mr Bodor set the objectives of “Iron Curtain Trail” project such as the sustainability of the mobility offers concerning the cycling routes that need to be created and emphasised the dimension of cycling that is linked with economic benefit which in some cases can reach even the 1/5 of the whole economic benefit of a region.

Presenting the share of cycling in South East Europe region, he referred to Austria as a good example comparing to other European countries while he stressed that in Greece much more needs to be done as far as it concerns cycling and cycling infrastructures. He added that cycling can be perfectly linked to tourism and leisure in a country pointing out once more the example of Austria that goes relatively well.

Setting the selection criteria of a EuroVelo cycling route, Mr Bodor primarily mentioned safety, in which northern European countries also proceed. He added that one cannot raise to a conclusion about the safety of cycling routes comparing the number of population of a country with the number of deaths caused by bicycle accidents, since in some countries like in Cyprus and in Malta, the percentages of cycling are relatively low. In South East Europe countries where there is still place for improvement, state policies should handle cycling as a whole system taking into account the level of safety, the attractiveness as well as other minimum criteria. Also, cycling routes should not be exclusively bicycle routes but also low traffic car routes. In every case, routes can be accredited as EuroVelo only under the condition that all EuroVelo signing rules are followed and cycling routes are connected with public transportation. Cycling routes should not compulsorily be very wide while they can also be next to high traffic routes. In case a cycling route is difficult to be created, cycle lanes can consist as a cheap and effective solution, or even, bus lanes can also be used by bicycles. Mr Bodor went on presenting cycling friendly services of countries that hold a cycling friendly service brand such as Slovakia, Austria, Croatia and others.

According to mr Bodor, before the completion of activities concerning the routes, cycling transport, services and promotion under “Iron Curtain Trail” project, partners should take into consideration all relevant criteria. Partners should complete and present a transnational action plan taking into consideration project’s objectives and goals by defining the target groups for the development of the project in each country. Activities that can be included in transport and tourism offers in combination to cycling could be sightseeing by bicycle, weekends of cycling tours, cycling as sports, cycling with pedelec (pedal electric cycle), cycling during holidays, using bicycles in everyday life by elderly people etc. To fulfill the needs of all target groups, partners



should also take include in their plannings tourists of lower incomes who could be interested in “Iron Curtain Trail” project development actions.

As far as it concerns the transnational action plans, Mr Bodor stated that partners should first estimate the cost of all activities which can be a simple process due to the cost evaluation and the existence of unique prices. The information about the cost is of significant importance in partners’ negotiations with decision makers so as for concrete and effective plans to be set including cycling in sustainable offers for mobility and tourism. Outcomes of “Iron Curtain Trail” project should be commercial products attractive both to customers and to implementation bodies and services. This is why project partners should estimate the value of their proposals and promote investment on their planned activities.

Mr Bodor encouraged the creation of cycling infrastructures in Thessaloniki proposing that the “shared space” one could be an effective solution for the city besides the high density of the routes. He referred to the example of the Netherlands and the UK supporting that a similar idea could work in Greek cities and specifically in Thessaloniki. Anyhow, he concluded that every partner should choose the solutions for standardised actions according to their countries contexts. In a next phase all collected results could be compared.

Following, mr Andreas Kourakis, Thessaloniki’s Vice Mayor of Urban Planning, City Planning and Development who participated in the Conference, saluted “Iron Curtain Trail” and its objectives stating to the partners his pleasure to host the event. He presented the “Strategy of everyday life” that runs in Thessaloniki with the aim to promote walking, cycling and public transport in the city as an alternative to car use. What he stressed the most was the need of changing culture towards a healthier and more ecological life style under which cycling in the city should be taken for granted. In parallel, from their part, the municipality authorities should promote cycling through policies for the creation of more streets for pedestrians and for bicycles implementing all safety measures. A safe network that gives precedence to the pedestrians and the cyclists is possible to be created in Thessaloniki according to the Vice Mayor, only under the condition that efforts of local authorities take place in collaboration with cyclist associations, cyclists and pedestrians. He also pointed out that a green city with citizens who walk and cycle in their everyday lives is a priority for the Municipality of Thessaloniki. He added that despite the problems pedestrians and cyclists face due to the construction of metro that is to be completed in 2016-2020, his wish for Thessaloniki is the city to reach to a point that, as it happens in Copenhagen, there is a redundancy of bicycles in cycling routes.

Roman Michael, representative of the Regional Government of Burgenland, came after with a presentation on the implementation of sustainable mobility transportation offers that can be created in the framework of “Iron Curtain Trail” project by giving examples experienced by the Regional Government of Burgenland funded by the European Union. He referred to projects developed into the running past involving stakeholders such as hotels in the region of Burgenland as well as touristic bungalows focused on the german market linked to region and public transportations



to ecotouristic destinations as the National Park of the area. Due to the lack of full connection to some particular regions, for example in Vienna, access could be possible only by bicycle. This has been an idea inserted through a relevant project by the Regional Government of Burgenland. Efforts were focused on inserting all close villages in a system of transport with the aim to reach a touristic destination combining public transportation and cycling.

Mr Roman also referred to the barriers similar projects can face. These could be their implementation cost, the low use of the infrastructures by the locals, the lack of full connections in regular times, the difficulties faced when using sustainable mobility means in covering big distances etc. One of the concrete examples he mentioned was that of the buses companies in the region that would not accept to buy electric buses for the purposes of the project unless they were guaranteed a 7 year implementation of the project. Since the duration of the project was not in accordance to the expectations of the bus business, the Regional Government of Burgenland finally used 1 mini bus that could not fully correspond to the project perspectives.

Mr Roman also presented Prenopania project and gave information on the funding, the partners, the regions where it has been implemented as well as the difficulties faced during its implementation. He pointed out that the most significant points project partners should focus on, is raising awareness on sustainable transportation and promoting project's deliverables to the local customers, for example by distributing maps, providing free tickets etc. as well as ensuring that the different transportation options (train, buses etc.) are coherently connected with regular timetables. Speaking about project Burgenland 2007 that promoted the use of electric bicycles, mr Roman noted that both everyday cyclists and tourists welcomed the project with great enthusiasm. Other successful projects have been those that involved free or low prices entrance in touristic areas and museums, free public transportation or offers in public transportation to specific areas, infrastructures for bicycles transportation by buses so as to combine cycling and public transportation etc. As a conclusion, Mr Roman noted that a concrete marketing strategy for the wide communication of a project to its audience through internet and press can lead to the sustainability of a project on local or national level for more than its planned duration. Furthermore, he added that it is of significant importance to clarify the authorities to be held responsible of every activity so as to ensure the sustainability of a project.

A rotation of questions and answers followed between mr Roman, Jan Rohac from Ekopolis Foundation headquartered in Slovakia and Mr Bodor, regarding project fundings that involve public transportation services. Mr Bodor noted that in Slovakia some negotiations have taken place with the Minister of Transportations concerning state funding of projects. However, it is more than important to take further steps to integrate bus services in the network of transportations and in transport public services.

In the Press Conference that followed, Mr Bodor presented the creation of the first EuroVelo route in Greece and its importance for sustainable tourism. Mr Polgar introduced "Iron Curtain Trail" and Mr Giorgos Farfaras, representative of ANTIGONE

as well as the National EuroVelo Coordination Center for Greece, presented the creation of “Cyclists Welcome Hellas” European cycle friendly service network.

Evgeny Apostolov from Bulgarian Cycling Association came after to present best practices from Bulgaria that could be also linked to “Iron Curtain Trail” and its objectives. After a small introduction concerning the lack of safety in Bulgarian cycling routes and cycling demonstrations that are organised in Bulgaria to claim better conditions of cycling infrastructures, Mr Apostolov noted that the first best practice should be on ensuring safety in all cycling routes in Bulgaria, northern areas and the Black Sea.

Speaking about sustainable offers, Mr Apostolov referred to projects implemented in the areas of Rhodopes connected to Greece that could be integrated in “Iron Curtain Trail” project. He also set the example of a successful project in southeast Bulgaria, in an area close to Burgas and Turkey, stating his wish for “Iron Curtain Trail” project to note such a success. Project under the title “Power of the Bike” was noted by Mr Apostolov as another best practice in the area of the Black Sea since many areas have been connected there through a plan similar to this of “Iron Curtain Trail” project. Another best practice had its origin in the border area of Bulgaria and Serbia while he also referred to “Velo Evolucia” events that promoted activities similar to “Iron Curtain Trail” in the cyclists communities in Sofia.

About the implementation of “Iron Curtain Trail”, Mr Apostolov referred to Aegean Sea and Black Sea as an area that could also be included in future route planning. Also, in order to insert “Iron Curtain Trail” in Bulgaria and Turkey border area, he mentioned the idea of constructing a bridge or maybe linking the areas in the two countries by a boat that can carry bicycles. He also referred to the catalogue of best practices his association has published inviting all partners to enrich it with their own best practices with origin in the different South East Europe countries. Speaking about the idea of “Iron Curtain Trail” route and Michael Cramer, Mr Apostolov proposed to broaden EuroVelo perspectives as far as it concerns funding for the extension of EuroVelo network.

Following, Mr Farfaras posed a number of questions and a short discussion followed concerning the extension of EuroVelo 8 and EuroVelo 5. Mr Apostolov brought into focus the area of the Black Sea where the implementation of projects is triggering despite the existence of experts who work in the area. As he supported, this is mainly due to the absence of key actors who could hold the responsibility concerning policies and activities.

Mr Bella Nemeth, project manager of the Hungarian train company GYSEV Cargo Zrt, after presenting the history of the company that has been operating 115 years now from the end of 1st World War, he referred to the region of Iron Curtain Trail where GYSEV Cargo Zrt runs a transportation network. Mr Nemeth mentioned that the area is profitable mostly due to the circulation of products in the European Union also pointing out that it could also be profitable to focus on the transportation of persons.

Mr Nemeth went on to number the most significant criteria as far as it concerns train transportation of persons in the area as the infrastructure, the punctuality in train arrivals, the realisation of all itineraries and above all the safety of the transportation. He added there is still quite a progress that needs to be done concerning the transportation of bicycles by trains in the area. However, he added that there are best practices that include plans aiming to cyclists friendly services. First one was about the convey of surveys on potential plannings on investments and infrastructures of the Information System and Mobility Center in Austria and Hungary. As far as it concerns investments in cycling, surveys involve cross-border cooperation in promoting cycling, surveys of business cases in cycling as well as surveys on quality controls on cycling so as to compare the criteria and the quality of infrastructures in the different areas.

Mr Nemeth went on to present good and bad experiences collected through their experience in conducting surveys. He mentioned that since the regulations are different in every country, other authorities and institutions are to be held responsible for the different policies according to the policy frameworks that vary according to the country. GYSEV Cargo has made steps to integrate the new cycling system in their business providing free place for the installation of bicycle garages or food services in 8 train stations. For the implementation of relevant measures, Mr Nemeth added that GYSEV Cargo is under negotiations with local authorities and stakeholders in the area of Burgenland mentioning a number of projects under the framework of which regions in Hungary could be connected with bridges for pedestrians and cyclists. He mentioned that this year such a bridge has been reconstructed and is now open for the audience. Furthermore, other infrastructures have been renovated mainly in Austria so as to be used by cyclists concerning for example refreshment places for cyclists etc.

Following the presentation of train lines for bicycle transportation, mr Nemeth referred to the importance of the existence of a plan on the safety of the cycling infrastructures. To achieve the development of such a plan, mr Nemeth mentioned GYSEV Cargo's initiative to distribute a questionnaire regarding assurance of safety in the train lines of Hungary targeted to pedestrians, cyclists and cyclist associations. Taking into consideration this feedback, the company went on to ameliorate its services so as to be able to safeguard the transportation of cyclists by train. Concerning the transportation of bicycles by train, according to mr Nemeth, feedback of cyclist associations and cyclists has been positive and so the company doubled their relevant infrastructures and inserted offers for cyclists in the market. In Szombathely, this year, the first places of storage for bicycles started to function and infrastructure for the transportation of bicycles started being installed in trains.

Closing his presentation, mr Nemeth encouraged transportation and tourism service providers and stakeholders to address the target group of cyclists through their projects as a way of obtaining funding. Through investments in cycling, "green" services can also obtain economic interest. Regions in the borders of Slovakia, Austria and Slovenia can benefit of 300-400 millions of dollars, according to mr

Nemeth, for investments on train connections and infrastructures. Efforts are focused so as for every train station to provide also touristic products and services for cyclist customers while cyclists' innovative ideas in the region are being taken into consideration by train services.

Following, as a small intervention in the row of presentations, Mr Farfaras showed to the participants a short video of "Move against cancer" flash mob that was going to be organised with the participation of cyclists the following days under the framework of European Week Against Cancer 2013.

Mrs Maria Csikai from Hungarian Cycling Alliance presented three best practices stating that she would speak about a new dimension concerning "Iron Curtain Trail" project. Starting her presentation, Mrs Csikai referred to the collection of friendly to cyclists best practices in cities and towns in Hungary. Towards this aim, Hungarian Cycling Alliance developed a questionnaire that should be completed and delivered by municipalities and other stakeholders. The questionnaire was of three types, one for cities, one for smaller towns and one for villages. The questions were about the length of the cycling routes in kilometers, the capability of bicycle storage, the ways of promoting cycling, the existence of areas that are in particular for bicycles, the specific relevant strategies in every area, the ways in which local authorities collaborate with police and other authorities etc., the ways in which cycling is being promoted by the media, the educational programs that may have been implemented in the city/town/village for the promotion of cycling and so on. Every city, town or village interested, could apply to participate in an informal competition so as to be certified as a "cycling friendly city". Mrs Csikai mentioned that during the last year, the number of candidatures of cities, towns and villages has been raised, adding that from the 40 cities that applied, the 26 have been awarded.

Apart from the municipalities, small or bigger business companies can participate in this competition by completing a questionnaire on the ways they try to promote cycling both among their employees as well as among their groups of customers. Showing the percentages, she pointed out that for now, 38% of the candidatures involved small enterprises while 12% bigger ones.

Towards the promotion of cycling, Mrs Csikai mentioned Hungarian Cycling Alliance efforts to set fixed criteria for the development of a cycling friendly services network in Hungary in correspondence with European standards. This network can include hotels, bars, restaurants and other food services, cultural events and other services that can be linked to cycling. She also referred to the organisation's idea to set and run a campaign for the promotion of cycling in the regions.

In the row of questions and answers that followed, Mr Farfaras asked about the specific regions of Hungary where the questionnaire is being distributed. Adam Bodor discussed the criteria of cycling friendly services that in Hungary started to exist in 2010. That year, Hungary also inserted a system in accordance to European criteria. Mr Polgar clarified that the criteria for the accreditation of quality of services linked to cycling may differ from those for the accreditation of "Iron Curtain Trail" project. Mrs



Csikai linked the statement of mr Polgar to the connection of the campaign with “Iron Curtain Trail” project. Mr Rohac from Ekopolis Foundation added that in Hungary, as well as in Slovakia, the accreditation of services according to the criteria will not be that a simple process.

Following the questions and answers row about the criteria, mr Farfaras, representative of “ANTIGONE”, started his presentation referring to the “Cyclists Welcome Hellas” system stating his wish of a common existence of criteria in all the countries of South East Europe countries in the future. As his presentation was on programs on transportation and tourism in South East Europe region, mr Farfaras pointed out that various programs may concern the different countries also due to the diverse percentages of cycling in every country.

Programs presented concerned different regions as well as aspects of cycling. Mr Farfaras presented programs on green areas and mountain cycling as well as cycling in areas where there is no asphalt like in some areas in Bulgaria. About programs on urban cycling, he referred to the example of “ATTAC” program in the city of Thessaloniki pointing out that unfortunately a significant number of municipalities do not have yet developed plans for cycling projects that could be funded by the European Union.

The number of programs he presented concerned culture (food culture, language etc.) and cycling as well as the promotion of cycling to vulnerable social groups such as people with disability. To what concerns transportation and cycling, mr Farfaras named a number of projects on transportation of bicycles by trains, boats and carrier companies.

In the last presentation of the Conference, mr Polgar elaborated on the integration of “Iron Curtain Trail” project both on national and transnational level during the new programming period 2014-2020. Speaking about the following action plans, he pointed out the importance of those plans being in accordance with relevant European standards and regional strategies. For the collaboration under the framework of other programs, he mentioned that apart from European Union’s funding rules and thematic objectives, what needs to be taken into serious consideration is the national, regional and local context in every country as far as it concerns the available potentials for investments and priorities.

Following, he presented the 11 thematic objectives of 2014-2020, 4 of which are relevant to the “Iron Curtain Trail” project. As far as it concerns tourism, mr Polgar mentioned that it could be integrated to priorities for investments and local cultural heritage as well as to priorities of sustainable mobility for the reduction of environmental pollution and the promotion of cycling.

Following participants took part in a round table discussion where mr Bodor introduced information on the flexibility of the activities that could be inserted in the operational programs. Mr Bodor pointed out the need for every partner to take into



consideration the specific context of every country and all responsible actors involved before proceeding to the planning of the programs.

Mr Polgar added that action plans for cross border cooperation are currently ongoing. However, there are no action plans that can involve “Iron Curtain Trail” in that phase and this is why there is a need for the creation of a lobby towards this issue. Mr Rohac proposed that instead of an action plan, partners could work on written requests addressing ministries, political key actors and authorities that could be held responsible for the promotion of cycling and sustainability in transports and tourism in every country. He added that a step like that could be more effective through synergies between the different stakeholders.

The assistant of mr Michael Cramer who is a Member of the European Parliament as well as the inspirer of “Iron Curtain Trail” cycling route, Philip Cerny, supported that it is of great importance that EuroVelo is considered of equal importance with other transportation networks. He also mentioned that despite such a decision has already been voted in the European Parliament on political level, not much has been done in order to set it into real practice. Adding to this, mr Bodor clarified that this decision should form a concrete European legislation and not a simple parliamentary manifestation. In a conversation that followed, mr Rohac and mr Bodor stressed the need for the European Commission to put pressure to the states so as for the governments to consider EuroVelo as a priority in their policies. Mr Farfaras emphasised on the environmental impact of policies that exclude cycling. Last, everyone agreed with mr Polgar who stressed the fact that environmental authorities, bodies and organisations should raise their voice and make recommendations, so as to stress state actions towards the promotion of cycling through concrete policies and measures on environmental sustainability.

With the completion of the Conference, mr Farfaras who coordinated the round table discussion, thanked all participants for their active presence and invited everyone to the Final Conference of “Iron Curtain Trail” project that is to take place in Hungary next autumn.