

Inclusive Border Cycling – a project placing Banat on the cycling tourism map

Over the course of two years, the ‘Inclusive Border Cycling’ project, run locally by the Timiș County Council, has mapped out a route of collective memory, to be explored on two wheels along the EuroVelo 13 route, which symbolically retraces the former Iron Curtain. The Timiș section of the route enters the country at Lunga, passes through Comlosu Mare, Comloșu Mic, Jimbolia, Checea, Cenei, Beregsău Mic, Beregsău Mare, Săcălaz, Timișoara, Uvin, Sânmihailu Român, Otelec, Iohanisfeld, Foeni, Cruceni, Grăniceri, Toager, Giera, Livezile, Banloc, Deta and exits the country at Moravița.

The project aimed to highlight the natural and cultural heritage found in the border areas, and to present local stories in an authentic, experience-based way that is accessible and meaningful to all social groups. Furthermore, the project’s activities sought to involve all sections of society (including young people and the elderly) from local communities in promoting and harnessing the area’s tourism potential, as well as to support local producers, who can become focal points of interest for cycle tourism enthusiasts, thereby contributing to the economic prosperity of the entire region.

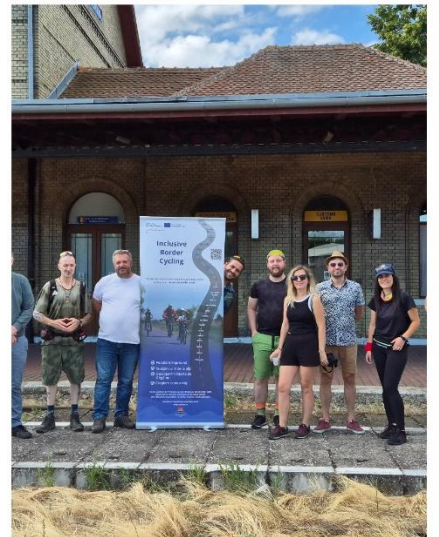
Relevant topics and locations that could help realise the area’s tourism potential were discussed during a workshop with representatives of the communities situated along the route, local authorities, cultural institutions and NGOs active in rural areas. The themes identified were documented and transformed into stories that recount the colourful, multicultural history of Banat. As a themed route dedicated to the Iron Curtain, the selected topics focused primarily on cultural and historical aspects linked to the political, military and ideological barriers erected during the Cold War, the way of life of people then and now, and how communities functioned and resisted under an oppressive regime. Topics such as deportation to Bărăgan or the USSR, escaping across the border – with all the risks that entailed – small-scale smuggling, the intercultural context of the Banat region, and links with Serbian and Hungarian neighbours were considered relevant to give the route its distinctive character. The stories from behind the Iron Curtain are true history lessons for younger generations, but also for tourists discovering the unique atmosphere and character of our region.



The stories, developed on the basis of consultation and research, were tested during guided tours, organised in collaboration with local organisations. The aim of these guided tours was not merely to add cultural information along the EuroVelo 13 route, but to explore how a transit corridor can be transformed into a place where people want to stop, explore and reflect.

The Lunga–Jimbolia section was chosen for the pilot scheme, where, in collaboration with the Colț de Banat Association, four guided cycling tours were organised on themes such as: deportation to Soviet labour camps and to the Bărağan, illegal border crossings during the communist regime; friendship, shared history and multicultural coexistence in border regions; and the changes and challenges of recent history, following 1989. All were deeply moving experiences thanks to the personal approach, first-hand accounts and the involvement of local residents as storytellers, who brought with them the emotion of the events they had lived through and the history of their own families.

The guided tours had a significant impact both on the community and amongst the participants. The results were truly remarkable: local communities got involved, residents became storytellers, cyclists became ambassadors for the events, forgotten stories came to light, and the route acquired its own identity.



A tourism promotion leaflet has also been produced, highlighting places along the route with tourism potential, traditional culinary specialities, and cultural and natural heritage sites that can be turned into attractions for visitors. An artistic map has also been produced, depicting the EV13 route in Timiș and highlighting the main points of interest for tourists.



The Timiș County Council organised the fourth partnership meeting as part of the project. Partners from Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Austria and Romania attended the scheduled events. The programme was extremely packed: the Timiș County Council's Multifunctional Hall hosted discussions and presentations on the project's progress, as well as the methods, strategies and materials aimed at boosting the area's appeal to tourists, alongside interactive activities through which all participants were involved in identifying creative solutions to promote the EuroVelo 13 route. A series of study visits were also organised to showcase sites of interest relating to the theme of the Iron Curtain route: a guided cycle tour of Timișoara, following in the footsteps of the December 1989 Revolution, a visit to the Revolution Memorial and the Bastion Multifunctional Centre, a presentation of the cycle path linking Timiș to Serbia, and a visit to the railway station and the Press Museum in Jimbolia. All these places, rich in symbolic significance, highlighted the potential that a cycle tourism route can offer not only to local communities but also in terms of regional and cross-border development.



Also, as part of the project, two works of art were created to enhance the route's attractions. In Lunga, the gateway to the country on the EV 13 route, based on the artistic concept developed as part of the 'Inclusive Border Cycling' project, a rest area dedicated to cyclists has been created to honour the courage of those who placed freedom above all else – a public space intended to remain a landmark of collective memory.

Through the involvement and engagement of the local community, the artistic concept has become a place for reflection, highlighting the impact that the oppressive communist regime had on the people and places behind the Iron Curtain. It will also send a message to future generations, raising awareness of the importance of respecting fundamental human rights and democratic values. At the same time, local stories are celebrated and their potential in shaping a tourist destination is highlighted.



For the second artistic concept, the village of Otelec was selected, one of the key locations on the EuroVelo 13 route. The village is strategically situated at the junction of several cycle routes, but also offers the opportunity to reach it via the navigable Bega Canal. The village also has a rich cultural heritage, owing both to its harmonious inter-ethnic coexistence and to the way in which the community has weathered difficult periods in recent history, from the communist regime to the floods that severely affected the village in 2005.



Following a series of meetings with the local community, the idea took shape to bring to life an artistic expression in the form of a memorial site that would symbolically bring together the defining elements of the town's history and the locals' aspiration to build a better future together, whilst learning from the lessons of the past. The project was presented to the community at the local event "Picnic in the Field", which provided a comprehensive setting for showcasing the artistic concept, the EuroVelo 13 route, the promotion of sustainable tourism and green mobility, as well as local stories.



Also as part of the IBC project, a "Practical Guide to the Development of Inclusive Cycling Tourism" was drawn up, based on the results achieved by the entire project partnership. Building on pilot tests carried out in Hungary, Austria, Romania, Slovakia and Croatia, the handbook provides tried-and-tested methodologies and practical recommendations for integrating local products and stories into cycle tourism, whilst ensuring social inclusion. The guide synthesises experiences from several border regions within the Danube Region, offering insights into how different territorial, cultural and socio-economic contexts influence the development of cycle tourism.

The Inclusive Border Cycling project has been recognised as a 'Flagship Project' for the period 2025–2026. This designation is awarded by the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) within the priority area of culture and tourism. The IBC project was selected as one of the top three projects from among 14 candidates and has received the official certificate attesting to this recognition.



The project was presented as an example of good practice at the Velo-city 2026 Conference, during the session dedicated to the development of new destinations for cycle tourism.



Alongside Timiș County, institutions and organisations from Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia and Austria worked on the implementation of the project.



The project 'Inclusive Border Cycling – Social inclusion by promoting heritage along existing cycling routes in remote border areas, DRP0200775, "IBC"', is supported by the Danube Region Programme, co-funded by the European Union.