

Digital Storytelling on Euro Velo 13 Cycling Route to Boost Sustainable Tourism

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There are several transnational cycle trails in the Danube Region, developed as part of the sustainable mobility and tourism objective of the Danube Strategy. Sections of the trails, crossing border peripheral areas face several socio-economic challenges, such as: migration of the young work force, ageing society, and existence of vulnerable groups, pockets of poverty, deficiencies in infrastructure and services.

Promotion of natural and cultural existing asset along the cycling trail through digital storytelling is regarded as a catalyst for the development of tourism and inclusion at regional level. Local cultural stories, grouped around a theme and the development of new flagship cultural tourism products boost the inclusion of local vulnerable groups. This paper looks at the important role of promoting cross-border cultural heritage through digital storytelling and cycling along the Euro Velo 13 -Iron Curtain trail.

This article makes a qualitative analysis of the documents regarding cultural cross-border cooperation within the Danube Strategy, a literature review of the relevant academic research in the field and an onsite research.

Our study area is at the intersection of the lines of action of several strategies, starting from European macro level, moving towards a micro, local level. The digital transmission of the local stories about the lives of people in the border area during communism, the atmosphere and the unique character of the region add a cultural value to the future cycling infrastructure, crossing several European countries and give a sense to the shared cultural heritage.

Keywords: digital storytelling, sustainable tourism, regional development, cross-border cooperation, Danube region

1. Introduction

The Danube region (Padło et al. 2021), historically shaped by political divisions and territorial fragmentation, according to Lagendijk (2015), currently encounters a complex set of socio-economic challenges, particularly in its border areas (Popescu et al. 2021). Challenges such as: migration of the young population, an ageing society, the presence of marginalized communities, vulnerable groups, and infrastructure deficits (Fassmann et al. 2018) complicate the pursuit for implementing a sustainable development in the Danube region (Gál et al. 2013), in order to become one of the symbols of Europe (Koller 2010).

Nonetheless, these challenges can be addressed through recent initiatives, such as the establishment of transnational cycle trails, aimed to promote both sustainable tourism and social inclusion (Petrović-Tzifakis 2021). This finding supports earlier research by Ágh (2016), suggesting that the European Union's strategy for the Danube region emphasizes these objectives, making cycling routes a key component of regional economic growth and cross-border cooperation (EU Strategy for the Danube Region 2022).

In this context, the activities undertaken within the Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) project, are implemented under the broader framework of the European Union's Danube Strategy. The IBC – Inclusive Border Cycling, project seeks to leverage the unique geographical and cultural assets of the Danube border areas, primarily through cycling tourism. A key objective is to integrate vulnerable local groups into the tourism economy, while promoting the region's cultural heritage through storytelling. The cycle routes, including the well-known Eurovelo 13 or Iron Curtain Trail, is a long-distance cycling route, crossing 20 European countries, from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea. The present cycle route follows the path of the former Iron Curtain, a symbolic and physical boundary, dividing Europe during the Cold War, separating the communist Eastern Bloc from the Western European countries. It supports and strengthens cross-border cooperation and regional development. It is certified as a Cultural Route by the European Institute of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. The trail is designed to honour Europe's political separation during the Cold War, while encouraging peace, unity, and eco-friendly tourism, through cycling and the celebration of cultural heritage (Interreg Danube Region, Inclusive Border Cycling – IBC project 2025).

Within this framework, digital storytelling has evolved significantly since its initial development by Lambert (2013), founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling. Later scholars, such as Gregori-Signes (2008) and Signes–Gregori-Signes (2014) and Alcantud-Díaz et al. (2014), expanded its application, and today has emerged as a tool for promoting natural and cultural assets along the cycling trail and acts as a catalyst for the development of tourism (Bassano et al. 2019). More recently, researchers including Yehia et al (2025), highlight its role of inclusion at regional and national level.

By using created and shared narratives (Reamy 2002), local voices, long-standing cultural histories (Sole–Wilson 2002, p. 73), hidden or unknown touristic objectives along the cycling trail, digital storytelling helps highlight the unique identity and assets of border regions. Furthermore, it generates new forms of interaction between people, places and memory (Lomas et al. 2024). Through these techniques, it opens the door for the economic and social participation of vulnerable groups and visitors. The purpose of this paper is to examine *how digital storytelling can promote existing natural and cultural assets along cycling trails*, and how it can function as a *catalyst for regional tourism development and social inclusion*. Specifically, it explores this dynamic within the *Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) project*, implemented under the European Union's Danube Strategy. The IBC project aims to harness cycling tourism as a mean of strengthening cross-border ties, foster sustainable regional development, and integrate disadvantaged communities into the tourism value chain.

This research investigates the intersections among *space, identity, and storytelling* along EuroVelo 13, with a focus on the *Danube border region*. The study is framed by two central research questions:

- how is the concept of space and territorial identity constructed and represented along the EuroVelo 13 cycling route, particularly in the Danube border regions?
- how can digital storytelling, when applied along transnational cycling trails, such as EuroVelo 13, contribute to regional tourism development and the inclusion of vulnerable groups?

The paper is structured as follows: Introduction – chapter 1 presents a theoretical overview within the Danube macro-regional context of digital storytelling, tourism. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used to examine case examples and data from the IBC project. Chapter 3, Borders as Cultural Corridors: Cycle Tourism and Storytelling Along the Iron Curtain explores how borders have evolved into spaces of cultural exchange through cyclo tourism. Chapter 4 Digital Storytelling as a Catalyst for Inclusive Regional Tourism Along EuroVelo 13 examines the role of digital narratives in fostering inclusion and promoting sustainable tourism across transnational cycling routes. The final chapter offers a summary of the main findings and suggestions for future research and practice.

2. Research Methodology

The research methodology involves a qualitative review and analysis of strategic documents regarding cultural cross-border cooperation within the Danube region. Reflecting a *multi-scalar approach*, the analysis is structured around three interconnected levels: regional, national, and European. At the regional level, the research examines the regional development strategies of Timiș County and publications from the West Regional Development Agency. Our case study focuses on the Romanian part of Euro Velo 13- the Iron Curtain trail. The route is designed to cross 24 settlements in Timiș County and offers a unique opportunity for cultural exploration. The case study is supported by *document analysis*, field observations along the Romanian section of EuroVelo 13 – spanning 24 settlements in Timiș County – providing grounded insights into the local implementation context, infrastructure conditions, and community engagement with the cultural route.

At the national scale, policies and strategies include relevant documents from the Minister in charge for regional development and policy instruments that support cross-border cooperation initiatives. At the European level, it also examines European initiatives and strategies on cultural cross-border cooperation (Rădoi 2020), INTERREG – SUERD, along with official documents from key institutions, such as: the European Parliament and European Council. Additionally, the reference documents for the IBC project, relevant academic literature and field observation provide further insights into the subject. A case study methodology is appropriate given the focus on a specific regional initiative (the IBC project) and its embeddedness within broader EU policy frameworks (such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region).

2.1. Data Collection

The study draws on multiple sources of qualitative data to ensure triangulation analysis.

Firstly, we have *document analysis*: policy documents, project reports, EU Danube Strategy publications and IBC implementation plans, previously mentioned in the paragraphs above.

Secondly, the digital storytelling materials cover: stories about deportations, small-scale border trade, connections with Serbian and Hungarian neighbours, and resistance through humour are meaningful elements that could give the trail a unique character. The stories from behind the Iron Curtain offer true history lessons for younger generations, as well as for cyclists discovering the atmosphere and distinctive spirit of our region through cycle tourism. These narratives will also help create development opportunities for the communities along the route.

Additionally, data were collected through reports from *workshops* organized to promote the inclusion of local products in cross-border cycle tourism. These sessions aimed to recognize the economic and cultural potential of cycle tourism and facilitated discussions around innovative strategies for incorporating local products into tourism offerings, while also defining concrete next steps.

Finally, we analyse on *field data*: where possible, in-person or virtual observation of specific cycling routes, storytelling events, and regional tourism activities.

This study explores the dynamics of space, identity, and storytelling along EuroVelo 13, emphasizing the cultural and territorial context of the Danube border region. Although, the research acknowledges the importance of infrastructure readiness, policy support, and community engagement for the practical implementation of the IBC project.

3. Borders as Cultural Corridors: Cycle Tourism and Storytelling Along the Iron Curtain

The border regions of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly those that were once behind the Iron Curtain, charged with historical significance after decades of communism, sought to reclaim their identities and transform their unwanted past (Light 2000). This occurred within a broader European framework, emphasizing economic and social integration of its member states (Rădoi 2017), particularly after joining or preparing to join the European Union (EU) (Kittel 2024). The European Union's expansion, takes into account different perspectives of the border, such as: cultural, social, political and mental dimensions (Newmann–Paasi 1998).

Academic research on border reveal a complex phenomena and different border models (Brunet-Jailly 2005). Haselsberger (2014) emphasizes the importance of decoding the multifaceted concept of border. It can be a simple line of demarcation between state, or, borders represent peripheral and marginal regions that face distinct development challenges, as described by Ratti (1995). Konrad research (2014) points that border can be a zone of interaction and relationships

between neighbouring communities, not just lines of separation, a perspective also reflected in the study of Varol, C. and Soylemez, E. (2018), which explores socio-spatial external EU border regions.

Today, more than 35 years after the fall of communist regimes, there are over 100 cross-border cooperation zones in Europe, according to the *Association of European Border Regions (AEBR)*. As a result, across these initiatives, communities located on both sides of the border have experienced greater solidarity, mutual support, enhanced cooperation, and growing trust, all of which strengthen regional cohesion (Popa 2006). The European Union has played a key role in this process, by eliminating internal borders within its single market, thereby facilitating the free movement of people, goods, services, and information. A single internal market without borders had been stated as one of the most important priorities and actions even from EU's establishment (Single market. *European Union*-2007).

Borders define a clear territorial space/place, yet the meaning of that space is far from being fixed. More importantly, according to Rațiu (2009), territorial space/place, carries an ideological substratum, shaped by the values and perspectives of the actors involved in its construction. Thus, borders are not just physical boundaries – they are socially and symbolically constructed, embedded with memory, meaning, and potential for transformation. Further, the concept of territory/space/place also incorporates meanings of cultural heritage (Smith 2006, pp. 75–76), which have a direct link with identity construction (Conti 2024).

3.1. EuroVelo13 – The Iron Curtain Trail

The Iron Curtain, once a powerful symbol of Europe's Cold War division, has been transformed into a cultural and historical corridor through the EuroVelo 13 – Iron Curtain Trail (see Fig. 1). Following this route for more than 10,600 km from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea, recognized as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe since 2019, the trail passes through 20 different countries, diverse landscapes and historical sites and also provides a welcome reminder of the peace and reconciliation (European cycle route network 2025), that have followed after the fall of the 'Curtain'.

In 2005, with the support of the Green MEP Michael Cramer, who had previously been involved in establishing the Berlin Wall Trail in Berlin, European Parliament officially recognized the 'Iron Curtain Trail' as a model for sustainable tourism and called on member states to offer their support. The Iron Curtain Trail serves as an example of the transformation of borders from barriers into bridges, connecting Eastern and Western Europe through shared historical memory.

Figure. 1. Map of EuroVelo 13 –Iron Curtain Trail across Europe

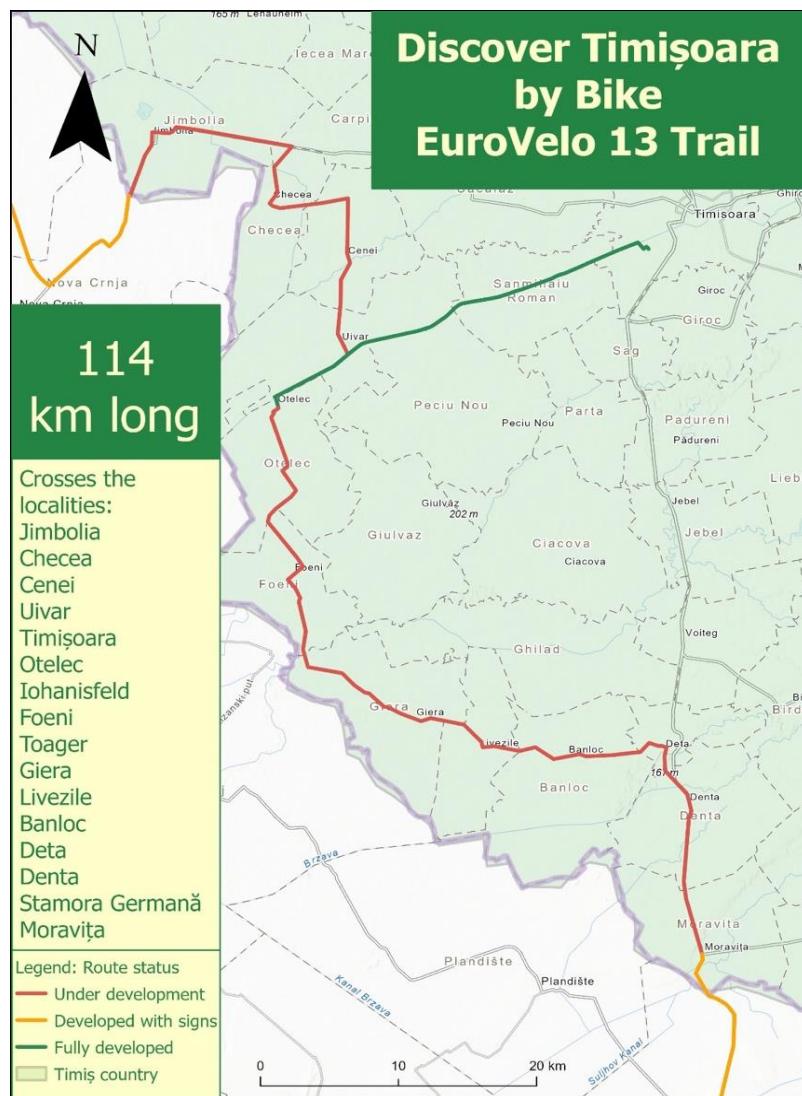


Source: IBC – project

3.2. Inclusive Border Cycling Project- The Iron Curtain Trail (Romania)

The primary goal of the project is to promote social inclusion by empowering vulnerable groups in border regions. This is made possible through sharing the local histories and cultural tourism. As shown in Fig. 2, the area near the Serbian–Romanian border remains a peripheric area (Papp–Rădoi 2020) with pockets of poverty and facing challenges such as poor infrastructure and limited employment options.

Figure 2. EuroVelo 13 Iron Trail in Romania – Timiș county



Source: IBC – project team member 2025

These regions, often referred to as "buffer zones," were characterized by restricted access, a lack of economic opportunities, and a general absence of modern infrastructure through initiative research by Turnock (2004). As a result, these areas became isolated from the economic growth that occurred in other parts of the continent, and even after the fall of the Iron Curtain, they continued to face difficulties in terms of development. These regions, still marked by a lack of investment in infrastructure, are often considered pockets of poverty. Many of these communities, share territorial disparities (Ancuța 2010), being once strategically important for military purposes and now struggling with socio-economic challenges, including high

levels of unemployment, migration of the younger workforce, and a lack of basic services (Crețan et al. 2021).

4. Digital Storytelling as a Catalyst for Inclusive Tourism Along EuroVelo 13

4.1. Stories behind the Iron Curtain in Romania

With the installation of the communist regime in Romania in the late 1940s, all forms of individual freedom were effectively abolished, and any expression of dissent was swiftly silenced, by an increasingly oppressive state apparatus. The regime imposed a climate of fear, with the *Securitate*, the secret police, playing a central role in monitoring, intimidating, and punishing perceived opponents of the state. At the same time, thousands of *Germans ethnic from Romania were deported to the Soviet Union*, primarily to labor camps in Siberia. This collective punishment was framed as a war reparations and represented both political repression and ethnic targeting.

In the context of escalating tensions between Romania and Yugoslavia – excluded from the Cominform in 1948 – the border between the two countries became a highly sensitive area for the communist government in Bucharest. For that reason, the regime undertook drastic measures in border areas. One of the most brutal actions was the *forced deportation to the Bărăgan Plain* in 1951. Nearly 44,000 people from the counties of Timiș, Caraș-Severin, and Mehedinți – residing within a 25-kilometer security zone from the Yugoslav border – were forcibly relocated. These individuals were labeled as "untrustworthy elements" and included wealthier peasants (so-called "class enemies"), ethnic minorities, and others, seen as politically unreliable. Deported in sealed cattle wagons on the night of *Pentecost (Rusalii)*, families were left to settle in the barren, undeveloped steppe of southeastern Romania, often forced to build homes from scratch, in hostile conditions, without infrastructure or basic resources.

Attempts to *illegally cross the border*, mainly towards Yugoslavia or Hungary, were met with extreme violence. Border guards were authorized to shoot on sight. Those captured alive faced harsh prison sentences, inhumane detention conditions, and frequent abuse or torture. The communist regime regarded such escape attempts as acts of treason, and even relatives of those attempting to flee were often persecuted or placed under surveillance. Resistance was rare and, when it occurred, was brutally suppressed.

The trauma of forced relocation, imprisonment, and constant surveillance left deep scars in the collective memory of local communities. Today, these historical episodes are being rediscovered and recontextualized through projects focused on *memory, education, and cultural tourism*. In regions like Banat and Mehedinți, these narratives are seen not only as *critical historical lessons*, but also as opportunities for *sustainable development and identity reconstruction*.

By integrating these stories into symbolic route, such as those used in *bicycle tourism and cultural heritage trails*, communities can connect past injustices with present resilience. These memory-based journeys allow both residents and visitors to reflect on the value of freedom, the cost of repression, and the enduring strength of human dignity.

4.2. Development of the Danube Region Cycling Storyportal -A Digital Platform for Inclusive Cultural Heritage Promotion

Within the framework of the IBC project, it will be develop a *Danube Region Cycling Storyportal*, an innovative and interactive digital platform, designed for the *creative presentation and valorisation of local cultural heritage*. This tool will serve as a central component for the promotion of inclusive cultural tourism and integrating cultural narratives into cycling tourism routes. Besides the digital platform, there will be promoted *flagship cultural tourism products*, embedded in the cycling tourism offer. These products aim to promote regional cultural assets through a combination of creative storytelling, digital tools, and inclusive tourism strategies. In parallel, IBC will also provide *support to project partners* in integrating local product brands into the *Inclusive Danube Region Cycling Storyportal*, ensuring their effective digital representation. To guide this process, a handbook will be prepared and distributed, in both *digital and printed formats*, to relevant stakeholders.

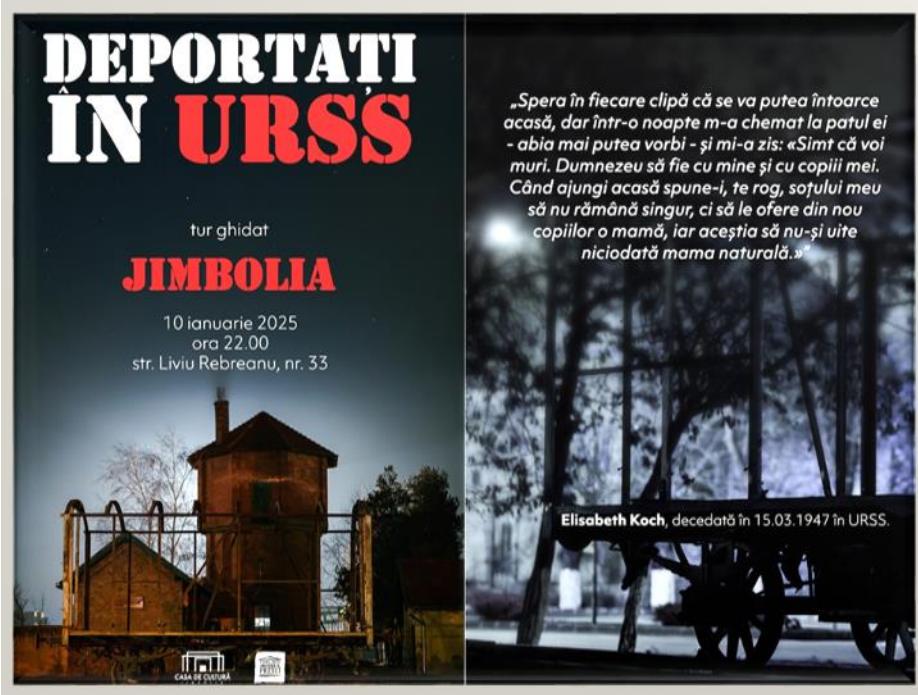
The project is aligned with the Fourth Industrial Revolution and one of its main achievement is the creation of digital solutions that delivers measurable benefits to all stakeholders. One direction is by engaging historians and local stakeholders. *Border(hi)stories* creates a comprehensive digital inventory of local stories and remembrance sites, whith public access to historical documents and literature, a curated archive of images and videos, and joint travelling exhibitions. Key cultural points of interest will be fully digitized to provide an engaging user experience, with special attention to accessibility for elderly users and individuals with disabilities. Complementing this, a targeted marketing strategy will be implemented to promote the border cycling trails and the digital storyportal, utilizing digital marketing tools, content guidelines, and tailored recommendations for promotional events and tourism fairs, to maximize outreach and stakeholder involvement. The project includes several events that have already taken place, as part of its implementation timeline, which it will be presented shortly in the next lines.

It was a night tour, lasting approximately 3–4 hours, conceived as a humble gesture of love and remembrance for those who suffered, so that we may learn to resist the temptation of hatred. Accompanied by the cold and darkness, participants walked and talked about the forced deportation, the imprisonment at the House of Culture, the loading into cattle wagons, the three-week journey, and the struggle for survival in the labor camps of Russia. Together, participants praied in Saint Wendelin Church and reflected on digital material presented in a thematic exhibition (interviews, lists of deported people, letters, photos). Digital art can immortalize a moment in time, according to organizers. This type of storytelling event can also be offered in digital format for tourists visiting the area. Through a dedicated online platform, visitors can access historical narratives, images, and audio guides that recreate the experience virtually. This approach allows for deeper engagement with the region's cultural memory and ensures broader accessibility, even for those who cannot attend in person.

The first thematic cycling tour organized as part of the Stories on Wheels project was an active journey through the past and present of a border region, rich in history, culture, and remarkable people. Along the way, we discovered what was

allowed and what was forbidden in the border communities, while listening to the stories of local residents. This event was orgaased by NGO Colț de Banat in Jimbolia.

Figure 3. Event: Deported to U.S.S.R.



Source: Night tour organized by Jimbolia Town House of Culture and the 'Sever Bocu' Press Museum 2025

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored how the *concept of space and territorial identity constructed and represented along the EuroVelo 13 cycling route, particularly in the Danube border regions, together with digital storytelling applied along transnational cycling trails, contribute to regional tourism development and the inclusion of vulnerable groups*. In the framework of European Union's Danube Strategy and examined through the Inclusive Border Cycling (IBC) project, the study demonstrates that cycling-based tourism can act as a catalyst for social inclusion and regional development, in formerly marginalized border areas.

The research show that border regions, often historically shaped by exclusion, surveillance, and trauma (deportations and the suppression of movement during the communist regime) now hold the potential to become *cultural corridors* of reconciliation and growth. Through the medium of *digital storytelling*, these communities are reclaiming their narratives, connecting past injustices with present identities, and shaping new paths for inclusive economic and cultural participation.

The IBC project's integration of *cycling infrastructure, digital heritage tools, and inclusive tourism practices* shows how vulnerable and underrepresented groups (elderly residents, ethnic minorities, and those from economically disadvantaged areas) can be actively engaged in creating and sharing cultural value.

Moreover, the development of the *Danube Region Cycling Storyportal* and initiatives like "Stories on Wheels" offer promising models for how technology and participatory storytelling can shape *accessible and immersive heritage experiences*. These approaches exemplify a shift from top-down tourism development, to *community-driven cultural regeneration*, empowering residents to become both storytellers and stakeholders in the regional tourism economy. In addressing the research questions, this paper concludes that: *territorial identity* in the Danube border regions is deeply shaped by historical memory and reinterpreted through cultural tourism and storytelling practices. *Digital storytelling* can serve as both a symbolic and practical tool for inclusion, contributing not only to regional tourism development but also to social cohesion and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Until 2026, the project's objective is to establish an inclusive cross-border cycling network in the Danube Region, that provides tourism opportunities for all age groups. This initiative is grounded in the values of local natural and cultural heritage and will be implemented through the development of cycling trails. While the IBC project is still ongoing, its preliminary findings underscore the importance of continued investment in inclusive and heritage-driven tourism strategies. Future research should evaluate the long-term impacts of such initiatives on regional development and identity formation, as well as examine how digital tools can further enhance participation and cross-border cooperation. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that *borders are not just lines of separation, but places of memory, connection, and opportunity*, especially when reimagined through the lenses of culture, cycling, and shared stories.

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