

Amazing Amazon of Europe

Regional sustainability plan for
Međimurje County

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ABSTRACT

Amazing Amazon of Europe (AoE) aims to enhance sustainable economic growth and tourism development based on distinctive natural and cultural heritage, which will result in collaboration network of key actors and enabling environment for high-quality tourism, responding to limited resources of ecosystems. Amazing AoE allow for sustainable development opportunities for managing diversity of natural and cultural heritage and resources in AoE from local to transnational level, while enabling unique experiences for international visitors.

The „Sustainability Plan” document was elaborated in the framework of the Amazing AoE, WP T2 called Developing the AoE destination: OT2.4: Sustainability and transferability plan. The purpose of the document is to elaborate proposals (with action plan) on how to ensure, support and enhance sustainable development of AoE destination by assessing the area of Međimurje tourism offer and evaluating its products potential in line with the desired future growth.

The structure of the document is as following. As a first step, Chapter 1 presents the Amazing AoE destination and its flagship products, namely AoE Bike Trail, AoE River Journey (guided canoe tours) and AoE Amazing Moments.

Next, Chapter 2 presents the EU strategic priorities defined in Transitional Pathway for Tourism, which is a plan jointly created with actors of the tourism ecosystem detailing key actions, targets and conditions to achieve the green and digital transitions and long-term resilience of the sector. The special focus was put on the Green and digital transition and Resilience.

Chapter 3 presents the Međimurje County and focuses on the long-term priorities of regional development in the territory of the Međimurje at the joint macro-destination level in to review the current state of development of tourism in order to overcome the challenges the territory is facing. Thus, the vision of the territory can be followed in order to develop “a leading sustainable tourism destination based on valorisation of its nature and culture”.

In Chapter 4, methodology employed in the preparation of document is explained.

Chapter 5 assesses the tourism offer of Međimurje through inventarisation, SWOT analysis and competitive tourism product cluster analysis.

Chapter 6 presents relevant thematic fields of AoE and the selected thematic pillars related to sustainability of the AoE destination. They are presented striving to offer base ground for proposing the future activities towards sustainable tourism in the selected territory. Amongst the four priorities of the Interreg DTP, A smarter Danube region and A more social Danube Region are the most important pillars for the Amazing AoE.

Chapter 6 describes the thematic concept and presents the work and life of Rudolf Steiner. It then links its heritage with the products that Međimurje and whole AoE need to develop in their quest of green and digital transition with the goal of increasing its positioning on the EU tourism market.

Moreover, Chapter 7 of the document is focusing on the proposal of a project idea to further strengthen the impacts of AOF and address key priority areas need to upgrade and sustainably transition the tourism offer in Međimurje County.

Last but not least, Chapter 8 presents available key financial sources that can be used in future development of tourism products based on the heritage of Rudolf Steiner that can help to cocreate the appealing brand and quality standards of AoE Amazing Moments.

INDEX

1. PRESENTATION OF THE AMAZING AOE DESTINATION AND ITS FLAGSHIP PRODUCTS	6
1.1. Description of the Amazing AoE destination	6
1.2. Description of the project objectives and flagship products	9
2. THE EU STRATEGIC PRIORITIES DEFINED IN TRANSITION PATHWAY FOR TOURISM	19
2.1. Green and digital transition	19
2.2. Resilience	22
3. THE LONG-TERM PRIORITIES OF REGIONAL AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE TERRITORY OF THE TBR MDD AT THE JOINT MACRO-DESTINATION LEVEL	26
4. METHODOLOGY	28
5. PRESENTATION AND ASESMENT OF MEĐIMURJE COUNTY TOURISM OFFER WITHIN THE AOE DESTINATION	30
5.1. Overview of tourism products	31
5.2. Swot Analysis of Međimurje tourist offer	36
5.3. Competitive Clusters of Tourism Products	39
6. THEMATIC CONCEPT	43
6.1. AoE selected themes	43
6.2. Rudolf Steiner and his heritage	43
6.3. Contribution of Međimurje to AoE Amazing Moments	44
7. PROJECT IDEA & TRANSFERABILITY	45
7.1. Project idea	45
7.2. Project action plan	46
8. FINANCIAL SOURCES	47
8.1. Sources of financing at the level of the Republic of Croatia	47
8.2. Sources of funding at the level of the European Union (funds and programs)	48
9. CONCLUSION	50

1. PRESENTATION OF THE AMAZING AOE DESTINATION AND ITS FLAGSHIP PRODUCTS

1.1. Description of the Amazing AoE destination

The Amazon of Europe area represents the largest natural river system in Central Europe. Amazing river landscapes along Mura, Drava and Danube was protected as the world's first 5-country biosphere reserve. Under UNESCO protection within the Man and the Biosphere programme, biosphere reserves are model regions where nature conservation goes hand in hand with sustainable regional development. However, despite over 20 years of efforts in protecting the area, the 11 border regions of AT, SI, HR, HU and SR are underdeveloped, facing loss of jobs and emigration.

The Amazing AoE project connects project partners and associated partners in joining the efforts of 5 countries for sustainable economic development of the region based on valorisation of natural and cultural resources. The concept is based on a joint integrated solution for sustainable biking tourism in the AoE while preserving the environment. The 5-country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube located in the larger area of the AoE, is the world's first biosphere reserve established across five countries. The establishment of this biosphere reserve aims to improve human livelihoods across the area and to enable an equitable sharing of benefits, while safeguarding the area's natural and managed ecosystems.

The project enhances cooperation between regions and protected areas within the planned transboundary biosphere reserve, contributing to its overall success. The Amazing AoE project also serves as a platform for sustainable development of areas within the protected zones, establishing the Mura-Drava-Danube region as a five-country sustainable ecotourism macro-destination. Once established, it aims to generate new jobs and create new transboundary connections, establishing a way to support projects that deal with regional development and nature protection in the area.

Spanning across Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia, the lower courses of the Drava and Mura rivers and related sections of the Danube are among Europe's most ecologically important riverine areas: the so-called "Amazon of Europe".

The rivers form 700 kilometres long "green belt" connecting almost 8.499,28 km² of highly valuable natural and cultural landscapes from all five countries and shall therefore become a symbol of unity by becoming world's first five country Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve "Mura-Drava-Danube". The future Transboundary Biosphere Reserve "Mura-Drava-Danube" altogether covers 2,5% of the total surface of the respective five countries.

Figure 1: Trans-Boundary River System of the Mura, Drava and Danube



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Despite numerous man-made changes in the past, this stunning river landscape hosts an amazing biological diversity and is a hotspot of rare natural habitats such as large floodplain forests, river islands, gravel and sand banks, side branches and oxbows. These habitats are home to the highest density of breeding pairs of white-tailed eagles in Continental Europe and other endangered species such as the little tern, black stork, beaver, otter and the early Project co-funded by the European Union funds (ERDF, IPA) extinct ship sturgeon. Every year, more than 250.000 migratory waterfowls use the rivers to rest and to feed.

A coherent network of 12 protected areas along the rivers highlight their ecological values including the world famous “Kopački Rit” Nature Park at the Danube-Drava confluence, “Drava-Mura” Regional Park in Croatia, “Gornje Podunavlje” Special Nature Reserve in Serbia and the “Danube-Drava” National Park in Hungary as well as – Biosphere Reserve Mura in Slovenia and Natura 2000 Site and Protected Landscape, Mura in Austria (Amazon of Europe, 2019). Natura 2000 sites in the TBR MDD offer new possible financing opportunities for further development of the area through the LIFE programme - EU’s funding instrument for the environment and climate action. In total they represent 2,5% of the total Natura 2000 surface of the five countries in question.

Figure 2: Protected areas partially included in the Trans-Boundary River System of the Mura, Drava and Danube



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Protected areas that are partially included in the Transnational Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube and are also a part of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail project territory, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sizes of protected areas that are partially included in Transnational Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube and are also a part of the Amazing AoE

Name of the area	Country	Size (km ²)
Natura 2000 Site and Protected Landscape, Mura	Austria	21,59
Natura 2000 Site, Mura	Slovenia	127,67
Natura 2000 Site, Mura	Hungary	21,35
National Park Danube-Drava	Hungary	504,41
Regional Park Drava-Mura, Natura 2000	Croatia	876,81
Nature Park and Special Zoological Reserve Kopački Rit	Croatia	231,26
National Ecological Network, Danube	Croatia	133,49
Special Nature Reserve Gornje Podunavlje	Serbia	196,05
Special Nature Reserve Karadjordjevo	Serbia	41,84
Nature Park Tikvara	Serbia	5,53

Aside from natural beauty the Amazon of Europe is very rich in cultural heritage and local crafts that can be found as well in the cities, as in the rural areas. Ancient castles, picturesque churches, museums and traditional watermills are only a few examples of the most typical cultural attractions in the area. Moreover, many interesting festivals take place in the region including fairs, cultural, music, dance and cycling festivals that are very attractive for potential visitors. Rich natural and cultural heritage of the area therefore represent a great opportunity for further development and strengthening a tourism economy in the region.

The Amazon of Europe area stretches across five countries and 11 NUTS 3 regions:

- Austria: Eastern Styria,
- Slovenia: Pomurska region,
- Croatia: Međimurje County, Osijek-Baranja County, Koprivnica-Križevci County, Varaždinska županija, Virovitica-Podravina County,
- Hungary: Zala County, Somogy County, Baranya County,
- Serbia: West Bačka District.

The NUTS 3 regions in the Amazon of Europe area cover 8,5% of the total surface of the five countries in which they're located (Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia) and therefore, they represent a substantial part of national territories. In Figure 3 the whole surface of NUTS 3 regions partially included in the Amazon of Europe area is graphically presented.

Figure 3: NUTS 3 regions of the Amazon of Europe area



1.2. Description of the project objectives and flagship products

Project objectives are clearly addressing the main challenges of 12 border regions along Mura, Drava and Danube. To overcome the main obstacles for economic growth based on heritage, such as high unemployment rates, depopulation, and lack of skills, Amazing AoE will develop a model for sustainable tourism growth in protected areas. The model will impose measures on how to find the best balance between three pillars of sustainability. First set of needs focuses on recognising the protected areas as development opportunity, and overcoming the decision-making without sound evidence about the foreseen impact on the economy and the environment. Therefore, the first specific objective is to enhance environmentally friendly behaviour of locals and visitors, and minimise the impact on the environment, especially by avoiding mass tourism. This will be achieved by developing the Responsible Green Destination Tourism Impact Model, which will serve as a basis for proposing measures for regions' development based on carrying capacity of ecosystems. Secondly, the area is lacking a joint integrated approach for tourism development, there are no joint long-term plans or products. Therefore, the second specific objective focuses on developing a joint solution for sustainable tourism in protected areas, which will integrate the current valorisation efforts of the local and regional governments and tourism boards. The partnership will develop a joint strategy and innovative tourism products, responding to the needs of the locals and visitors. Thirdly, there is a significant need in enhancing the

knowledge and skills of the local public and private organisations working in tourism and related sectors (nature conservation, economy, mobility). Therefore, third objective focuses on improving capacities for responsible tourism by implementing a joint educational programme covering different topics, resulting in enhanced skills for community-led and owned tourism.

Sound and innovative methodology is established for achieving project objectives. **1st objective, stimulating environmentally friendly behaviour in tourism**, is ensured by developing Responsible Green Destination Tourism Impact Model (RGD TIM) in WP T1 (months 1-10) and testing it in WP T3. RGD TIM model will be first time applied in international environment, and shared with EUSDR PA3 to support Target 2 harmonised monitoring system for sust. tourism in Danube Regions. **2nd objective, developing joint and integrated solution for sustainable tourism**, will be primarily addressed in WP T2 (most intensively in months 6-22). Firstly, a first-ever 5-country destination management organisation will be formed. Afterwards, we will develop joint AoE destination development strategy based on carefully planned participatory process, assuring bottom up approach and integration with existing strategies, including EUSDR PA 3&6 targets. The strategy will be complemented with transboundary tourism products, and finalised after feedback loop of model and products' testing. Service providers will be addressed with the Destination Toolkit (internal guidebook). For wide promotion, we will develop a Strategic marketing plan and on-line platform. Long-term functioning and transferability to other sectors and areas will be detailed in the Sustainability and transferability plan. Finally, **to enhance skills and knowledge of public and private organisations (3rd objective)**, we will implement several trainings in WP T3 (months 13-30). Firstly, we will educate RGD TIM experts at regional level that will integrate TIM recommendations into regional policies. Tourism experts will be trained in hospitality skills, IT and digitalisation of heritage. Validation will cover tourism products, application of TIM and innovative digital interpretation of natural and cultural heritage, as well as feedback loop to the strategy and sustainability plan, resulting in enhanced tourism development in AoE.

To achieve above explained objectives Amazing AoE offers joint flagship tourism products for international markets that will strengthen already established brand AoE Bike Trail, communicate the AoE values, create the benefit for the destination and be ready for promotion in demanding international markets. The products will enable high-quality experience of the whole pentilateral area and will build on main natural and cultural attractions, local experiences and traditions, connected by sustainable mobility options (public transport, electric vehicles) and enhanced by modern digital technology. The tourism products will be developed in cooperation with tourism stakeholders (tourism boards, protected areas as key providers of nature experiences, key attractions etc.) with the goal to increase regional income.

The Amazing AoE flagship products are the following:

- AoE Bike Trail – long-distance cycling route along the rivers.
- AoE River Journey – guided canoe tours.
- AoE Amazing Moments – authentic experiences with the locals, e.g. cooking fish stew, truffle hunting, pottery class.

1.2.1. AoE Bike Trail

The AoE Bike Trail as a sustainable long-distance cycling tourism product was developed by connecting 15 project partners and 10 associated partners, as a model for sustainable mobility and unique tourism product along the future five-country UNESCO Biosphere Reserve “Mura-Drava-Danube”.

Aside from cyclists, the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail is open to all visitors and offers spectacular natural landscapes and possibilities for various leisure activities making it a great destination for all nature lovers.

The total length of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail – without detours – is 1260 km, it has been divided into northern and southern routes which follow the Mura, Drava and Danube rivers on both sides and affect 5 countries - Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia.

Table 2: Main figures of the route lengths

	Length of the main route	Length of the detours*
AoE BT Northern route	553 km	86 km
AoE BT Southern route	707 km	155 km
Total	1260 km	241 km

* This is the length of the detour end points (usually a „must see” attraction or river viewpoint). The tourists have to cycle this length twice (to go there and back)

The trail consists of several sections which can be passed and visited in one day by bicycle – called daily stages (the criteria of one single daily stage were defined in the common methodology). A total number of 27 daily stages are part of the trail: 11 of them belong to the northern part of the route while the southern part of the route contains 16 daily stages. Each of them has an identifier which is a combination of a letter and a number. Letters “N” or “S” referring to northern or southern, while the continuous numbering of the stages starting from west to east, begins in Mureck, Austria. Stage points are start/end points of a daily stage, altogether 27 stage points have been selected along the entire trail. Besides the two main entry points / end points of the trail (Mureck and Mohács) city of Osijek in Croatia is the only spot where the two routes intersect each other but there are numerous other options (bridges, ferries) to change between routes.

The main route of the trail by definition is a continuous connection between two stage points without any bifurcation and has been defined in line with the set of criteria in the route planning methodology. It generally runs parallel to the rivers, but it is not necessarily using the closest road to them. Detours are connected to the main route where it is justifiable, often run perpendicularly to the rivers. A detour has been considered as justified if it creates a connection with natural/cultural sites closely related to the values of the project, offering river views, river access, or leading to popular natural or cultural sites, called them “must see” points. The total length of the detours regarding the entire trail is 241 km.

Total 11 daily stages have been defined along the northern route of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail is 553 km. The average length of a daily stage on the northern route is 50,27 km, the shortest stage is N8 Szaporca-Villány with 37 km, while the longest one is just over 65 km (N7 Drávatamási-Szaporca). Daily stage N2 Murska Sobota-Lendava has extended detour sections (24 km) thus the combined length (main route + detours) is almost 65 km. The lengths of the stages on the northern route are more balanced compared to the southern.

Table 3: Daily stages of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail's northern route

Stage	Starting point	End point	Length of the main route (km)	Length of the detours (km)	Country
N1	Mureck (AT)	Murska Sobota (SLO)	47,32	6,45	Austria & Slovenia
N2	Murska Sobota (SLO)	Lendava (SLO)	40,22	23,91	Slovenia
N3	Lendava (SLO)	Letenye (HU)	64,41	2,51	Slovenia & Hungary
N4	Letenye (HU)	Gyékényes (HU)	45,03	4,89	Hungary
N5	Gyékényes (HU)	Nagyatád (HU)	46,75	-	Hungary
N6	Nagyatád (HU)	Drávatamási (HU)	48,54	12,92	Hungary
N7	Drávatamási (HU)	Szaporca (HU)	65,22	10,42	Hungary
N8	Szaporca (HU)	Villány (HU)	37	12,48	Hungary
N9	Villány (HU)	Osijek (CRO)	54	2,48	Hungary & Croatia
N10	Osijek (CRO)	Suza (CRO)	52,64	-	Croatia
N11	Suza (CRO)	Mohács (HUN)	51,63	9,76	Croatia & Hungary
Total length of the northern route			552,76	85,82	

As result of the implementation process, the route has been equipped with different type of elements serving the cyclists.

Total length of 16 daily stages have been defined along the southern route of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail is 707 km. The average length of a daily stage on the southern route is 44 km, the shortest stage is S5 Varaždin Prelog with 24,59 km, while the longest one is almost 74 km (S11 Noskovci- Belišće). Daily stage S7 Koprivnica Đurđevac has the longest combined length (main route + detours) due to the extended “network of detours” on the left riverside at Repaš.

Table 4: Daily stages of the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail's southern route

Stage	Starting point	End point	Length of the main route (km)	Length of the detours (km)	Country
S1	Mureck (AT)	Banovci (SLO)	44,57	4,22	Austria & Slovenia
S2	Banovci (SLO)	Mursko Središće (CRO)	28,93	5,18	Slovenia & Croatia
S3	Mursko Središće (CRO)	Donji Vidovec (CRO)	62,18	6,57	Croatia
S4	Donji Vidovec (CRO)	Varaždin (CRO)	43,14	5,88	Croatia
S5	Varaždin (CRO)	Prelog (CRO)	24,59	12,43	Croatia
S6	Prelog (CRO)	Koprivnica (CRO)	56,43	6,98	Croatia
S7	Koprivnica (CRO)	Đurđevac (CRO)	50,73	33,76	Croatia

S8	Durđevac (CRO)	Pitomača (CRO)	34,89	8,68	Croatia
S9	Pitomača (CRO)	Kapela Dvor (CRO)	25,4	9,22	Croatia
S10	Kapela Dvor (CRO)	Noskovci (CRO)	61,44	9,59	Croatia
S11	Noskovci (CRO)	Belišće (CRO)	73,9	3,98	Croatia
S12	Belišće (CRO)	Osijek (CRO)	32,5	-	Croatia
S13	Osijek (CRO)	Erdut (CRO)	34,15	-	Croatia
S14	Erdut (CRO)	Apatin (SRB)	35,51	3,14	Croatia & Serbia
S15	Apatin (SRB)	Sombor (SRB)	36,8	24,26	Serbia
S16	Sombor (SRB)	Mohács (HUN)	60,9	21,11	Serbia & Hungary
Total length of the southern route			706,6	155	

As result of the implementation process, the route has been equipped with different type of elements serving the cyclists.

The trail is similarly signposted everywhere in the affected regions, but in terms of the other elements, the territorial distribution is not equal among the stages. There are some areas where we can find many of them, while elsewhere need to cycle longer distances to encounter even one. Installing these elements was not obligatory for the partners, but regional coordinators commonly accepted that one large info board will be placed in every stage point. The southern route can be considered better equipped compared to the north one, since 15 out of the total 17 resting places, or 22 out of 23 small info boards can be found somewhere along the southern sections. The numbers of the various installed items regarding the whole trail are the following:

- 37 large info boards
- 23 small info boards
- 17 resting places
- 50 other types of elements (17 bicycle repair stands, 26 bicycle racks, 4 solar benches, 2 solar lamps and one e-charging pillar for e-bicycles)
- More than 1700 signposts/signs

1.2.2. AoE River Journey

River Journey will offer multi stage river experience on the Mura, Drava and Danube with specified means of transport (e.g. traditional boats, canoe, rafting, SUP etc.) and overnights in towns/villages situated at the shores of the rivers.

Amazon of Europe River Journey offers an experience on the confluence of 3 mighty rivers and 3 historic cultures that shaped the Amazon of Europe – Germanic, Slavic and Hunnic, which fashioned not only the area of the Amazon of Europe, the first UNESCO 5-Country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube, but also had a profound influence on Europe as we know it today.

The tailor-made river journey takes visitors through 4 out of 5 countries which form the UNESCO 5-Country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube. Starting at the confluence of Mura-Drava in Legrad, they are paddling on the borders between Croatia and Hungary, and

finishing at the mighty Drava-Danube confluence and world-famous Nature park Kopački Rit. Along the way, they meet the amazingly hospitable locals who share with them their cultural and natural uniqueness.

AoE River Journey also aims to preserve the largest untouched river wilderness in Central Europe along the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube (Amazon of Europe), by establishing a valorization Programme Give back to nature in cooperation with WWF striving to giving back to this beautiful region and preserving the extraordinary ecosystem of the UNESCO 5-country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube. Hence, when visitors book river journey they are directly giving something back to the nature of the Amazon of Europe.

An example of a general product package includes 8 days, 7 overnights and 6 paddling days, and comprises of:

- 7 stays in quality-tested partner facilities including local and accommodation tax
- Accommodation:
 - 7 nights in a double room (single room per surcharge)
 - Boarding: 7x Half Board, 1x Bed & Breakfast, 6x Lunch (picnic/lunch box)
 - Tasting local food and drinks: 2x Wine tasting, 1x Beer tasting,
- Guiding of the River Journey
- Paddling on 5 selected stages on Drava river
- Guided tour - City of Osijek
- Paddling and hiking with guide in Nature Park Kopački Rit
- Canoe rental for 6 days
- Entrance to selected Nature Parks and Visitor centers
- Transfers from river to partner accommodations
- Luggage transfer from accommodation to accommodation
- Shuttle from Suhopolje to Kopački Rit
- Transfer back to the start of the tour
- Kingfisher Service: Comprehensive travel information and trail hotline (7/12)

Day 1: Arrival to the Amazon of Europe Destination

After arrival to Hotel Golf, visitors first tease and pamper tastebuds with local delicacies at the dinner. After a short presentation of the Amazon of Europe destination, they are equipped with all the information regarding the river journey tour program. They continue their journey with the in-house brewery presentation and tasting local beer.

Day 2: The majestic confluence of Mura and Drava

After being picked up at hotel Golf in Donji Vidovec, visitors start journey on the majestic confluence of Mura and Drava in Legrad. Here, a local representative presents the background and natural hotspots of the UNESCO 5-Country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube. After receiving the first information regarding the area and notes for nature maintenance, the journey continues with workshop for safe paddling trip. Canoe guide that will guide visitors on the river tour explains the instructions how to correctly steer the canoe and how correctly paddle on our long voyage, taking into consideration the river specifics. After the start of paddling journey on the confluence of Mura and Drava visitors continue paddling on Drava river along the preserved floodplain forests. After paddling for 8km they arrive to Šoderica Lake where they take a short break for picnic and swimming in the lake. They continue to paddle to the bridge Molve being the last point of paddling for this day. After being collected

with a van the visitors are driven to Lovački dom Čambina. Time for dinner. During dinner they taste traditional wines from this area.

Day 3: Paddling to the river island of Križnica

The day starts with breakfast which includes all traditional delicacies known for this area. After the morning farewell from the hosts visitors take a short van ride to next starting point. They start paddling day at “Skela Novo Virje” and paddle along the silver river beauty with natural meanders, which represent beautiful part of Podravina and the area of Dravski peski. The area known as Croatian Sahara is a very important symbol of this mysterious and undiscovered area full of artists, magic of nature, old secret recipes and cultural heritage. After paddling for approximately 3 hours, visitors arrive to famous Etno houses of family Karlovčan. Etno estate is situated in small village named Brodić in the municipality of Ferdinandovac just a few hundred meters from the banks of Drava offering discovering the rich past and beauty of nature and also tasting traditional local food and wine between the paddling break. Afterwards, the paddle continues to Skela Križnica where visitors climb to a pedestrian bridge which is the perfect place for taking pictures of the mighty river Drava. The paddling day will end in Križnica at the restaurant Dravska Iža. After a short time for refreshment, visitors are invited for dinner where they taste famous well know Fish Soup and typical regional culinary river fish dishes.

Day 4: Paddling the Drava between two countries

After being picked up at the accommodation Dravska Iža in Križnica visitors take an hour drive with the van to the starting point in Novo Virje. They start paddling day in in the center of Mura–Drava Regional Park, which was recognized by UNESCO in 2012 because of its outstanding natural values. After half hour paddling, they make a short stop visiting the military tower which is located approx. 150 m from the banks of the river Drava. From the tower they observe many endangered bird species and preserved nature. This day will be more paddling oriented. On the half of daily paddling distance, the visitors enjoy a perfect place to set up a picnic setting up a camping fire and grill traditional sausages on open fire. After a long, adventurous day, visitors are taken to the informative and educational centre The Drava Story, where they can relax.

Day 5: Discover the rich flora and fauna along Drava

The day will start with discovering the informative and educational centre The Drava Story. After the start on the dock of the visitor center, the journey continues by paddling and discovering the majestic nature of Amazon of Europe. The wetlands of the free-flowing Drava River are home for numerous plant and animal species, resulting in an extremely rich flora and fauna. After two hours paddling, visitors will arrive in a typical village Podravska Moslivina where they will have a short meal break. Day end point is Donji Miholjac visitors arriving there in the afternoon. After being pick up with the van, they visit Podpanj Ornithological Reserve which is especially famous for numerous bird species, out of which 20 are European endangered species. of the afternoon will be spent in the town of Belišće, where the accommodation for the night is located – the renovated rooms Industrial.

Day 6: Premium day on Drava River around Osijek

After morning routine visitors depart with the van to our starting point on docks of Kašarica. and paddle to Osijek, the biggest vibrant city of the Amazon of Europe, with the great walls of »Tvrđava« military castle. Visitors have a guided tour through the city center full of history originated from ancient times of Romans, and finish with a lunch break in the city center.

Then the paddle continues to the majestic confluence of the two big rivers Drava and Danube. An incredible sight of the confluence of the Drava and the Danube and the merging of two mighty rivers will flow visitors to Ajlmaš. The area known as altitude creates flood waters and numerous backwaters, side channels, ponds and ravines that are home to a very rich flora and fauna and numerous protected species of the Special Nature Reserve "Gornje Podunavlje" that have been coexisting for centuries. This place of experiencing the rivers and nature is a natural rarity and an exceptional area for discovering the preservation of pristine nature in its original form. In Ajlmaš visitors will have traditional dinner served in the local restaurant.

Day 7: A day in Nature Park Kopački Rit

Visitors spend your last day before departure surrounded by nature in the breath-taking nature park Kopački Rit, which was shaped by the confluence of two mighty rivers – Drava and Danube. Kopački rit is a nature park, placed in the corner formed by the river Danube and its tributary Drava. Depending on the water level, the water of these two rivers constantly shapes and changes the look of Kopački Rit, creating a beautiful mosaic of lakes, canals, ponds, floodplain forests, reed beds and wet meadows. It is one of the best-preserved floodplains in Europe, characterized by exceptional landscape beauty and great biodiversity. The whole area is widely known as a habitat for numerous waterfowl birds, population of a common deer and the most significant inhabitant – white tailed eagle, which is also a symbol of the Park. After breakfast visitors depart with the van from Ajlmaš into the wilderness. Upon arrival in Zlatna Greda, they will first visit the Visitor center, where the story of Kopački Rit and its biodiversity is presented.

Table 5: Daily stages of the AoE River Journey – guided canoe tours

Day	Starting point	End point	Length of the river (km)	Length of the paddling (h)	Accommodation
1	Donji Vidovec	Donji Vidovec	0	0	Hotel Golf
2	Confluence of Mura and Drava in Legrad	Repaški most in Molve	27	5	Country House Ivančan
3	Skela Novo Virje	Dravska Iža – Križnica	31	6	Dravska Iža-Križnica
4	Novo Virje	The Drava Story Noskovci	33	6	The Drava Hostel
5	The Drava Story Noskovci	Dravska plaža Donji Miholjac	32	6	Rooms Industiral
6	Kašarica	Ajlmaš	31	6	Etno Kuća Stari Dud Erdut
7	Ajlmaš	Zlatna Greda	10	2	Zlatna Greda
Total length			164	31	

1.2.3. AoE Amazing Moments

AoE Amazing Moments will enable exploration of cultural pearls along the Bike Trail, such as historical towns (i.e. Osjek or Varaždin), magnificent castles (i.e. Siklos), and authentic experiences with local population (e.g. cooking experience, where people learn how to prepare traditional and local sweet desert from Prekmurje or manufacturing the traditional straw basket) or visits to local cultural events.

Five countries, five different cultures, a wide variety of national cuisines and a great diversity of flora and fauna. There is so much and even more to discover by bike in the UNESCO 5-country biosphere park Mura-Drava-Danube. With its promise of "Cycling for Nature", it

opens up to us the largest untouched river wilderness in Central Europe along the rivers Mura, Drava and Danube, the "Amazon of Europe". As part of tried and tested "Explorer Tour" package, visitors will be immersed in a magical yet little-known destination on the most spectacular sections, garnished with an attractive supporting program and accompanied by experienced guides and local experts. Since it is impossible to get to know all 27 daily stages in one week, the Explorer Tour focuses on explicitly selected stages and cultural programs to give visitors the best experience on the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail.

An example of a general product package includes 8 days, 7 overnights, and comprises of:

- 7 nights in quality-tested partner facilities in a double room (single room per surcharge), including local and accommodation tax
- Boarding: breakfast, light lunch and dinner
- Pioneer Amazing Moments:
 - Untouched by light Gornja Radgona
 - Kopački rit Nature Park Experience, canoe rental, birdwatching equipment
 - Osijek City Tour
 - Apatin Town Tour
 - Old town of Sombor Tour
 - Wine Experience Villany
 - Jungle Tour along the Drava River
- Guiding of the Amazing Moments Explorer Tour
- Guided bike tour (in English) on 4 selected stages along the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail
- Bike rental 4 days
- Small bus transfer for the whole itinerary
- Entrance to selected attractions, nature parks and visitor centers
- bottles of water a day
- Kingfisher Service: Comprehensive travel information and trail hotline (7/12)

Day 1: Austria – Slovenia – Croatia: Bad Radkersburg, Gornja Radgona, Legrad, Djurdevac
Meeting in Graz or Mureck (AUT). City tour of the romantic town of Bad Radkersburg and crossing the bridge to Slovenia; First Amazing Moment: Untouched by light - the tasting of special sparkling wine in complete darkness and local delicacies tasting (cheese, ham, local vegetables plate). Transfer to Legrad. Visit of the spectacular wild nature at the Mura-Drava confluence in Legrad. Wine tasting of special Sand wines in Djurdevac (Croatian Sahara); Overnight in Djurdevac.

Day 2: Croatia: Famous Kopački rit Nature Park

Nature Park Kopački rit is one of the most preserved wetlands in Europe having an extraordinary biodiversity. Special value of Kopački rit is the continuous change of the landscape, according to the season and the inflow or outflow of the water. The tour starts at the visitor center exhibition. After lunch in a local restaurant, Amazing Moment will follow, experiencing Kopački rit in various forms: by canoe, hiking, watching the birds. Local dinner and overnight in the vibrant city of Osijek, the biggest city in the Amazon of Europe, located directly on the banks of the Drava River.

Day 3: Croatia: Croatia, Serbia: Osijek, Apatin

Starting the day in Osijek with Amazing Moment 3: “Back in time” City tour, where visitors meet a nobleman that will guide them through the rich history of this picturesque city.

Transfer via the large bridge over the Danube River to Serbia. Time to check the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail! Cycling on stage S14. Arrival to Apatin, a town with marina on the Danube. Amazon of Europe is a place where many cultures meet, and visitors experience this by visiting the Orthodox Church The Council of the Holy Apostles. Dinner in a local restaurant on the Danube.

Day 4: Serbia: Apatin, Sombor

Cycling on the stage S15 (Apatin – Sombor, Serbia) on Amazon of Europe Bike Trail to Kupusina; Amazing Moment Apatin: “Tastes of the nature of the Upper Danube” at Čarda Smuđ in Kupusina; Cycling to Bački Monoštor and then to continuing the cycling to Sombor; Dinner in Sombor.

Day 5: Serbia, Hungary: Sombor, Mohacs

Old town tour “On the track of the Donau Schwaben” in Sombor; Transfer to Mohacs; Late lunch break in the historic town of Mohacs at the Buso Court; Visiting the Buso exhibition; Transfer to the spa and thermal bath of Harkany; relaxing in the spa and dinner in the hotel.

Day 6: Hungary: Harkany, Villany

Cycling on Amazon of Europe Bike Trail from Harkany to Villany; Visit the Mosque of Malkoc Bey and a castle in Siklós; After lunch, cycling to the Sculpture Park Nagyharsányi; Cycling to Villany; The Devil’s shaft tour - exploring the wine hills of Villany and wine tasting; dinner and overnight in Harkany.

Day 7: Hungary: Szaporca, Nagyatad

Transfer to Szaporca and a short hike with ranger along the Drava River (Jungle tour); Cycling on Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, stage N7; After the lunch, transfer to Nagyatad; Time to relax and a dinner at the hotel.

2. THE EU STRATEGIC PRIORITIES DEFINED IN TRANSITION PATHWAY FOR TOURISM

On 10 March 2020, the Commission adopted a new industrial strategy. The aim was to help EU industry lead the green and digital transformations and to boost the EU's global competitiveness and open strategic autonomy highlighting the need to further accelerate the green and digital transitions and increase the resilience of the EU industrial ecosystems. Within this agenda, Transition Pathway for Tourism describes the measures and outputs needed to accelerate the green and digital transitions and improve the resilience of the tourism ecosystem to encourage and invite all groups and stakeholders in the tourism ecosystem to engage and play their part in the initiative. This chapter presents two Transition Pathway for Tourism building blocks that are relevant for the project.

2.1. Green and digital transition

Links between other industrial ecosystems can both contribute to and hinder the twin transition and the resilience of the tourism ecosystem. The cross-cutting nature of tourism should be recognised by taking a 'whole-of-government' approach that requires coordination between the local, regional, national and EU levels. Stakeholders identified several areas for action under the twin transitions where there are links with the objectives and actions in related industrial ecosystems and that support the competitiveness of the EU's tourism ecosystem.

One of the ecosystems that have a direct impact on the tourism ecosystem capacity to get greener, more digital and more resilient, relates to digital industries for developing digitalised processes, use of AI and new technologies, empower consumers' sustainable choices and data-based innovative tourism services.

Digitalisation of tourism services an important role. Digitalisation of the economy and of society in a broader sense, and the increased scope for data generation, collection and services will provide opportunities to transform tourism services. They can shift their business to provide more sustainable and innovative services that provide long-lasting and technologically enriched personalized experiences. Data (including space data) sharing between the public and the private sector can help create innovative tourism services that support sustainability (e.g. tourism mobility and transport), manage tourism flows based on real-time data (e.g. crowd management at attractions), stimulate tourism demand and match supply more effectively (e.g. over-tourism) or services that generate data and statistics to feed into policy and decision making.

A key factor to boost competitiveness and innovation in tourism services is making better and innovative use of data. Currently, tourism bookings and search-related data are mostly controlled by multi-national platforms, giving no or limited access to the businesses that provide these tourism services (nor for public authorities). These businesses could use this data to anticipate demand for their services, analyse customer profiles and business trends, and ultimately provide a better customer experience.

Creating public-private partnerships could be important in facilitating new types of data sharing agreements and creating new platforms. Sharing data between private actors and

public authorities can support better decision making and stakeholders have proposed that better public-private data sharing could also considerably enhance the competitiveness and resilience of destinations and the tourism SMEs in the area. This requires creating data sharing practices and agreement models that comply with the necessary privacy rules and respect the legitimate commercial interests of each partner. These practices need to be aligned with the upcoming Data Act.

From technological point, it is also possible to create services and platforms in which ownership is shared and not in the hands of a few. Actions are necessary to develop and enhance tourism service initiatives in which the data is community owned, like in case of platform cooperatives.

Overall, the digital transition should also help make information on the sustainable tourism offer in the EU more visible and known online. Eurobarometer survey showed that digital information sources play an important role in helping people make travel and tourism decisions. However, over one third of Eurobarometer respondents stated that they find it difficult to find trustworthy information on the sustainability of the tourism offer. To support sustainable tourism and help meet rising demand effectively, it is important to improve the online availability of trustworthy information, also by agreeing validation mechanisms and elements of key information to be published.

Given the above, the main emphasis should be put on:

- Stakeholder cooperation to agree on common practices (Code of Conduct) and to actively share tourism-related data in a European data space for tourism.
- Increasing use of data sharing in developing personalised tourism services and destination management, monitoring and service provision, including the creation of new platforms among SMEs.
- Use of artificial intelligence and data-based innovation, such as local digital twins for predictive planning to accurately meet demand and increase resource efficiency of services.
- Ensuring information is available on consumer rights and dispute resolution mechanisms for tourists via the European Consumer Centre Network's digital channels
- Improving the online availability of validated information on sustainable, accessible, or specifically targeted tourism offers.
- Developing partnerships with on-line portals and booking platforms to provide more visibility to certified accommodation providers.

Tourism operators generate data continuously through payment transactions, transport ticket purchases, participation in events, visiting cultural attractions, and by using of location positioning in mobile devices. This creates a wealth of data that, in full compliance with privacy and data protection legislation and users' fundamental rights could be used to better match tourism supply and demand and creating new types of services. Interoperable technical specifications for tourism data sharing could also facilitate sharing data with mobility, agro-food, and cultural and creative industry ecosystems, for example. Tourism should learn from developments in other ecosystems. Research and innovation are needed to support the technical developments for data sharing, data governance agreements and technical interoperability issues.

Developing a common language and governance framework for using data is a priority area for the digital transition for tourism. The data space for tourism should provide interoperability for all operators and for users and providers in other data spaces (e.g. data on mobility, data on agriculture, data on health, and digital data on cultural heritage) to effectively be a part of the European data economy. The support centre for data sharing supports developing common frameworks for all sectoral data spaces. The Interoperable Europe initiative, the upcoming Interoperable Europe Act and the Minimal Interoperability Mechanisms developed by and for cities in the living-in.eu movement can provide important support for the data spaces. Like all data spaces, the tourism data space must also be fully consistent with the Data Act. The Digital Europe programme has launched a call for preparatory work to create a data space for tourism. The same call targets preparations of other data spaces, which are also of relevance to the tourism ecosystem.

To make effective use of the shared data, R&I is needed to develop and pilot data-driven destination management tools, practices and technologies to boost the sustainability of tourist destinations and reduce overcrowding of sites and services. This will lead to better experiences for tourists and residents. In addition, there should be a greater role for the cultural and creative industries (dominated by SMEs), as they can be involved in creating new markets and sustainability-oriented services.

Virtual and augmented reality services provide new ways to help preserve natural and cultural resources at risk, while enabling real-like visitor experiences. Hybrid and augmented reality can enhance visitor experiences by increasing interaction and extending participation to tourism services (e.g. people at home interacting with a museum visitor or an event participant through virtual environment), or by experiencing digital reconstructions of historical sites. The technology can even help to simulate future developments of natural and cultural sites. They can be used to engage the customer with the tourism experience before and after travel, extending the time during which they engage with the service. Linking with the objectives of European data space for cultural heritage to digitise cultural heritage assets, R&I in this area could provide new innovative, sustainable and accessible forms of tourism services. Tourism providers could develop innovative approaches to make use of local digital twins, which will enable the next phase of smart and sustainable cities and communities.

R&I and technologies in these areas can be developed by projects run under the Horizon Europe clusters “Digital, industry and space” and “Culture, creativity and inclusive society”, the EIT, DIGITAL Europe, the Creative Europe programme, national and regional support programmes. Moreover, sharing best practices among Member States can further leverage public funding and regional cooperation to stimulate R&I investment and the adoption of new technologies in the tourism industry.

Given the above, the main emphasis should be put on:

- Technical implementation for tourism data space.
- Stakeholders to implement a preparatory action for tourism data space.
- R&I for digital tools and services in tourism.
- Data-driven destination management models and mechanisms.
- Innovative tourism services using advanced technologies (virtual reality, augmented reality, AI) and digitized cultural heritage.
- Support for digitalisation of tourism SMEs and destinations.
- Raising awareness of tourism SMEs on the benefits of digitalisation and on existing European, national and regional digitalisation programmes for SMEs.

- Developing a searchable inventory on existing transferable digital tools and practices for SMEs and destinations.
- Establishing a community of practice and a shared toolbox for data-driven destination management.
-

The stakeholder consultations highlighted the lack of good digital connectivity as a key issue in making progress on the digital tourism transition, especially in rural areas. Current analysis by the Joint Research Centre carried out for the EU Tourism Dashboard shows that the average internet speed differs greatly in different NUTS3 regions. This has direct impacts on the capacity of these destinations to provide digitally enhanced tourism services or accommodate visitors who need reliable and fast internet connections (e.g. digital nomads working remotely). Meeting the Digital Compass objective to reach 5G coverage across the Europe by 2030 will be very important to achieve the digital transformation of the tourism ecosystem.

Tourism sector may also lack the basic digital infrastructure needed to implement more digital business processes, or consider developing digital tourism services. Although currently most companies have internet access, they do not necessarily use technology in their work processes or interactions with clients. They should receive support to invest in useful software for business management, marketing and customer interactions, to help them become part of the digital transformation.

2.2. Resilience

Travelling to the EU is facilitated by the common visa policy, which allows nationals from 102 non-EU countries to access the border-free Schengen area with a single visa or even visa-free for nationals of 60 countries. Key to boosting EU competitiveness is to remain at the forefront of the digital transition in facilitating travel for both EU and non-EU visitors. To this end, the Commission intends to present in 2023 a proposal for a regulation on the digitalization of travel documents and the facilitation of travel, which will accelerate border-crossing processes. Thus, there is a need for seamless cross-border travelling that could be made possible via:

- digitalising of Schengen visa procedures for non-EU nationals,
- digitalising travel documents for EU citizens for improved and faster border processes

Based on the results of Eurobarometer, 82% of EU citizens are ready to change their behaviour in favour of more sustainable practices. One in three is ready to pay more for such changes. However, there are differences between countries, age groups and education levels, so it would be beneficial to organise awareness campaigns on the benefits and opportunities of sustainable tourism. Action is needed at local and regional level to reach tourism microenterprises and SMEs to inform and guide them on the benefits of shifting towards more environmentally friendly and digitally facilitated services, in response to the changing needs of tourists and residents.

There is the need to shift mindsets on the role of the local tourism destination organisation – whether its key role should only be to market the services of the destination or to also support their development and transition. This is a key question to consider when clarifying approaches and resources for the destination. The national and regional tourism strategies

should give guidance on destination management models and on interactions between the destination marketing/management organisation, the local authorities and all operators in the tourism ecosystem, including residents. Since good examples are important to support change and innovation, it could be beneficial to forge links between quality destinations, which have been awarded on aspects relevant to the green and digital transition and resilience in tourism. For example, the winners of the yearly awards of European Capitals of Smart Tourism, European Capitals of Culture, European Green Capital, European Capital of Innovation, EU Access City and European Heritage Awards could have very productive exchanges, which could provide excellent examples and good practices for other cities to follow.

Awareness raising on changes in tourism demand and the opportunities of twin transition for tourism therefore emphasize:

- Dissemination campaign on the tourism transition pathway to destination authorities, tourism management organisations and SMEs as to promote the relevance of actions linked with the twin transitions and resilience.
- Awareness-raising activities to increase the uptake and visibility of sustainability tools, as well as consumers' demand of sustainable options.
- Supporting networking and best practice sharing by award-winning cities in Europe on smart tourism, culture, sustainability, innovation, accessibility and European heritage.

Currently, several tourism sectors, the hospitality industry in particular, lack skilled workers. New, effective and inclusive training approaches are needed to help integrate the new workforce in the job market swiftly, benefiting from training opportunities combined with actual work tasks. There is the potential to attract new workers from the workforce leaving carbon-intensive sectors. Reskilling these workers should be a priority to avoid overall job losses and to benefit the tourism sector. There also needs to be specific attention given to training specialised tourism experts and managers in middle and high positions. With this regard, skills in tourism could be boosted by:

- Establishing of national, regional and local skills partnerships in major EU tourism regions.
- Engaging tourism companies, education providers, trade unions and other organisations to commit to jointly agreed training targets for their workforce.
- Fast training courses, apprenticeship schemes and blended models for the unemployed and job seekers.
- Providing a user-friendly digital access point for tourism SMEs on payable/free self-learning resources and updated announcements of upcoming training events from different providers.
- Providing an online space where tourism SMEs can connect with each other to share learning from one another.

One of the key challenges for the recovery and resilience of tourism is the lack of workforce. Due to the lockdowns and reduced working opportunities, many workers from accommodation, food and beverage services, and travel agency activities moved to other sectors. Developing attractive career paths with stable and quality employment, and ensuring fair wages and good working conditions through collective bargaining, will be essential to attract and retain a skilled workforce, and to relaunch EU tourism with improved long-term resilience.

The social economy with collaborative digital platforms is playing an increasing role in the tourism ecosystem. Platforms can facilitate access to job opportunities with flexible

conditions, but at the same time they may lead to precarious working situations. A person may in practical terms work as a platform employee, but have no official employment status or social protection linked to the job. Such risks exist for example for workers under platform-based passenger transportation services, food delivery services and local experience services offered under platforms, such as guided visits, home-offered meal experiences, or cultural cooking or dancing classes. The measures published by the Commission to improve the working conditions in platform work, developing guidelines about collective agreements regarding the working conditions of solo self-employed people and the social economy action plan will address several issues important for persons working in tourism.

Access for all to tourism could be boosted by developing moderately priced off-season accommodation and travelling opportunities for unemployed, retired and people with low income. However, for example school holidays may restrict when families can travel. The destinations should ensure a variety of services for people with different economic facilities, to boost accessibility of travelling to all types of people and families should all-year-round. The service providers should also ensure price diversity in their environmentally friendly tourism offer so that everyone can also participate in contributing to the green transition of tourism.

Tourism can provide important economic support for urban and rural destinations and their SMEs. At the same time, it is important to ensure that tourism does not cause harm to the nature, local environment, social and cultural wellbeing of the local residents. Tourism services should not be steered and provided to visitors in ways that risk harming the local environment, culture or its people. This would reduce the attractiveness of the destination over the long term by reducing its environmental and cultural authenticity.

Key factors that may have harmful effects on the social sustainability of local destinations are the perceived negative direct impacts of visitors (crowding, nuisance, increased waste, harm to nature or buildings) and indirect impacts (higher prices for services, changed housing markets, gentrification and access to business premises in city centres). The stakeholder consultations highlighted that the well-being of residents is a key aspect to the long-term sustainability of tourism. For this reason, the destination level tourism management organization should include residents in the planning and follow-up of tourism activities and impacts.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that more resilient business models can be achieved by providing services that benefit both residents and visitors. In this way, sudden changes to visitor flows do not paralyse local economy. The Booking.com Sustainable Travel Report states that 73% of travellers want to have authentic experiences that are representative of the local culture. Developing services that are of interest to local residents provides natural meeting places between residents and visitors in authentic local cultural attractions and practices.

The above explained EU strategic priorities defined in Transitional Pathway for Tourism represent a plan jointly created with actors of the tourism ecosystem detailing key actions, targets and conditions to achieve the green and digital transitions and long-term resilience of the sector. When implementing these actions, also the long-term priorities of regional development in the territory of the TBR MDD at the joint macro-destination level should be considered. The later are presented in the following chapter.

3. THE LONG-TERM PRIORITIES OF REGIONAL AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE TERRITORY OF THE TBR MDD AT THE JOINT MACRO-DESTINATION LEVEL

A joint mindset about the current state, as well as the direction in which the tourism development activities should take place, should be identified to overcome the challenges the territory is facing. The first step in this complex process is the identification of a joint tourism development vision and mission statements of the destination Amazon of Europe. To this matter, the territory ought to become a leading sustainable cross-border tourism destination, preserving the natural and cultural heritage and inviting its explorers to slow down along the mighty rivers, reconnect with nature and recharge their batteries through amazing green local stories. This could be achieved through acting as one destination, which will enable it to implement green economic and socially sustainable projects, give back to nature (ensure nature conservation) and raise awareness internally and externally about the unique undiscovered riverine destination in the first UNESCO 5-country biosphere reserve in the world, where health and nature are always the priority.

The long-term priorities of regional development in the territory of the TBR MDD at the joint macro-destination level through which the vision of the territory can be followed in order to develop “a leading sustainable cross border tourism destination”, are as following:

- Fully established and functional amazon of Europe Destination Development Organisation (AoE DDO).
- 8 Joint AoE Flagship Products (FSPs) are fully operational and profitable.
- The infrastructure of all 8 FSPs is established and regularly monitored and improved.
- AoE Collective brand and quality system is operational.
- AoE Academy is functioning and is regularly improved.
- AoE Business Hub is functioning and is regularly improved.
- All stakeholders in the region know the Amazon of Europe story, identify themselves with it and are able to present it in a comprehensive way.
- The Amazon of Europe story and destination is a brand that is recognized across the globe.
- The public transportation networks enable the AoE visitors and residents to arrive and travel within the destination with ease.
- A reliable, green AoE mobility network is fully functional and regularly monitored and improved.
- A fixed compensation valorisation system – Give back to nature is operational.
- A green behaviour valorisation programme is operational.
- Climate neutrality of the AoE destination (all involved stakeholders) is achieved.

To achieve the set priorities, a strategic model, consisting of 5 main pillars should be implemented, highlighting the main areas of focus in the development of the Responsible Green Destination Amazon of Europe:

- Product & Quality Management
- Regional Uptake
- Marketing
- Infrastructure
- Ecological Sustainability

4. METHODOLOGY

The TZMT is a partner in the Amazing Amazon of Europe project co-financed through the Interreg Danube transnational program of the European Union. The goal and purpose of the project is the development of the "green destination" of the Amazon of Europe (AOE) area by establishing a network of key actors and establishing conditions for the development of high-quality tourism, based on ecosystem resources. The AoE destination will be the backbone for the development of sustainable tourism that combines social and technological innovations, a joint destination strategy, joint tourism products, and the establishment of a model in two pilot areas. The Amazing AoE will develop sustainable management of the diversity of natural and cultural heritage and resources in the AoE area, which will provide a unique experience for visitors.

TZMZ focuses on the promotion of Međimurje tourist destination at the county level independently and through joint advertising, management of the public tourist infrastructure, participation in defining objectives and tourism development, promotion of the tourist offer of the county, enrichment of the total tourist supply of the county and creation of new products of the tourist region, especially in selective forms of tourism (rural, cultural, health tourism etc.), providing expert and other assistance to the tourist communities on matters of importance for their operation and development, encouraging and assisting the development of tourism in non-tourism areas, preserving, improving and promoting all existing tourism resources and potentials, and tourist supply of the county, the unification of joint development projects of tourist communities of municipalities and cities and tourist communities of areas of importance for the county, and coordination of activities and monitoring of the realization of objectives and tasks of tourist communities of municipalities and towns in the county. TZMZ has great experiences in the tackled topic. It has implemented several EU cycling projects. It also has its own cycling standard of quality "CyclistWelcomeQuality", which was developed based on insights into good practice examples of developed European cyclotouristic destinations. It relates to four types of service providers: accommodation facilities, facilities offering catering services for food and beverages, tourist information centers and other facilities. PP will actively cooperate in all work packages, and most intensively in WP5 as regional coordinator for implementing the AoE Bike Trail. To achieve synergistic quantitative and qualitative promotional and ultimately economic effects, the TZMZ will integrate all stakeholders that accept CWQ standards into the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail brand.

TZMT expects to enrich their current cycling offer and attract more cyclists due to an international bike route Amazon of Europe. One of the TZMT aims is also to protect the untouched nature and the rivers in the region and encourage people to take care of the nature. With the implementation of the ambitious project TZMT will promote sustainable economic development in the region and in the whole Croatia in areas where nature is still intact so that the area is designated as Natura 2000. With sustainable development and sustainable tourism offer TZMT will strengthen the service sector, provide new sources of revenues for maintaining a favourable state of nature and contribute to raising the competitiveness of the area in the broader region. The project will create sustainable conditions for exploiting development opportunities in the field of sustainable tourism and will add a certain value to the current touristic offer since cycling as a tourism industry and creation of attractive tourist

destinations can become an important factor for regional development. TZMT expects that the project and the know-how of other participant will also develop common identity and increase capacities of local tourism services providers for sustainable development of tourism in the region.

The task of this document is to create a plan for the sustainable development of tourism the area of Međimurje County, as one of the activities of the Amazing Amazon of Europe project and in accordance with the Plan for the preparation of results O.T2.4: Sustainable project plan. For Međimurje County when deciding among the offered strategic areas for sustainable development the topic AoE Amzing Moments, with the development of experiential tourism products based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner that resonate extremely well with current trends of health-conscious and transformative travel, as well as represent an upgrade of classical sustainable tourism products and go well with the established concept of healthness that Terme Sveti Martin successfully developed a decade ago.

The goal of creating the Plan is to prepare the concept of the project idea for application to the upcoming call for project financing in the Slovenia-Croatia cross-border cooperation program for the period 2021-2027. The creation of the Plan relies on key strategic documents and legal regulations:

- EU Strategy for the Danube Region - Danube Strategy
- European Green Plan
- Transport development strategy of the Republic of Croatia for the period from 2017 to 2030
- Sustainable tourism development strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030
- Environmental Protection Act (OG 80/13, 153/13, 78/15, 12/18, 118/18)
- Nature Protection Act (OG 80/13, 15/18, 14/19, 127/19)
- Law on Climate Change and Protection of the Ozone Layer (Official Gazette 127/19)
- Construction Act (OG 153/13, 20/17, 39/19, 125/19)
- Spatial Planning Act (OG 153/13, 65/17, 114/18, 39/19, 98/19)
- Međimurje County Strategic Tourism Marketing Plan 2014-2020
- Master plan for Međimurje County until 2027

In addition to relying on the strategic determinants of development and the legal basis in the aforementioned documents, the Plan also relies on relevant research related to development of sustainable and contemporary tourism products along with current and future tourism trends.

Available data from spatial planning documentation, development and strategic plans of local and regional self-government units, as well as data on projects in progress and planned projects of the competent port authorities were used to create the Plan. The desk review was supplemented by individual interviews and questionnaires with locals, experts working in the area and members of TZMT.

Further the assessment is based on the initial listing of main tourism resources from official documents as well as from Tripadvisor based upon which the SWOT analysis of tourism in Međimurje County is presented. This is further upgraded with the logic of competitive clusters of tourism products based on their growth potential and income generation potential used by leading tourism consulting specialists such as Horwath and PKF and constantly applied in high-level tourism strategy and policy planning.

5. PRESENTATION AND ASSESSMENT OF MEĐIMURJE COUNTY TOURISM OFFER WITHIN THE AOE DESTINATION

Međimurje County is a triangle-shaped county in the northernmost part of Croatia, roughly corresponding to the historical and geographical region of Međimurje. Despite being the smallest Croatian county by size, it is the most densely populated one (not including the City of Zagreb). The county seat is Čakovec, which is also the largest city of the county.

The county borders Slovenia in the north-west and Hungary in the east, with about 30 kilometers of Slovenian territory separating it from Austria. The south-eastern corner of the county is near the town of Legrad and the confluence of the Mura into the Drava. The closest bigger cities include Varaždin, Koprivnica and Bjelovar in Croatia, Lendava, Murska Sobota and Maribor in Slovenia, as well as Nagykanizsa in Hungary and Graz in Austria. The Croatian capital of Zagreb is about 90 kilometres south-west of Čakovec.

There are slopes of the Alpine foothills in the north-western part of the county, the Upper Međimurje, making it suitable for vineyards. The south-eastern part of the county, the Lower Međimurje, touches the flat Pannonian Plain. The flat parts of the region are also largely used for agriculture, which mostly includes fields of cereals, maize and potato, as well as orchards, which are mostly planted with apple trees. There are two major hydroelectric power plants along the southern border of the county, on the Drava River.

Međimurje County covers the plains between two rivers – the Mura and the Drava. The Mura flows along the county's northern border with the Slovenian region of Prekmurje (Municipality of Lendava, Municipality of Ljutomer and Municipality of Ormož) and its eastern border with Hungary's Zala County, while the Drava flows along the county's southern border with two other Croatian counties – Varaždin County and Koprivnica-Križevci County. The Trnava River flows through the middle of the county. There are two reservoir lakes on the Drava – Lake Varaždin and Lake Dubrava – both built to serve the two hydroelectric power plants based in the county. Lake Dubrava, located near the city of Prelog, is the biggest artificial lake in Croatia and the second-largest lake overall in the country. The power plant using Lake Varaždin is named after the county seat, Čakovec, while the one using Lake Dubrava is named Dubrava, taking its name from the nearby village of Donja Dubrava.

The county's elevation ranges between 120 and 344 metres above sea level, the latter being the elevation of its highest hill, Mohokos. Čakovec has an elevation of between 160 and 165 metres above sea level. Throughout the past, there were occasional earthquakes in the region. One of significant strength hit the region in 1880, while another in 1738 devastated Čakovec and particularly the nearby Šenkovec.

Of the county's total area of 729.5 km², around 360 km² are used in agriculture. Due to the high population density, agricultural land is divided into 21,000 units averaging 17,500 m² (188,368.43 sq ft) each. 27.5 km² are covered with orchards. 11 km² is the hilly area, located in the north-western part of the county, with villages like Štrigova and numerous vineyards. Grasslands and forests cover an area of around 105 km². The biggest forest is Murščak, located between Domašinec and Donji Hrašćan.

5.1. Overview of tourism products

5.1.1. Additional tourism offers at cross-border and regional level

5.1.1.1. Outdoor activities:

- The Amazon of Europe Bike Trail- international long-distance cycling trail following the natural meanders of the river Mura and Drava
- Lendava grad – Dobrovnik Loop from Mursko Središće (top cycling route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42889/road-cycling-routes-in-meimurje>)
- Turnišće – Dobrovnik Loop from Toplice Sveti Martin (top road cycling route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42889/road-cycling-routes-in-meimurje>)
- Dam at lake Varazdinsko jezero – Varaždin Loop from Čakovec (top road cycling route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42889/road-cycling-routes-in-meimurje>)
- Dobrovnik – Ljutomer Loop from Mursko Središće (top road cycling route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42889/road-cycling-routes-in-meimurje>)
- Varaždin – Dam at lake Varazdinsko jezero Loop from Dunjkovec (top road cycling route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42889/road-cycling-routes-in-meimurje>)
- Ship mill and taxi ferry – Allee bei Melinci Loop from Sveti Martin na Muri (top bike touring route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42890/cycling-in-meimurje>)
- Murmündung – Mündung der Mur Loop from Čehovec (top bike touring route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42890/cycling-in-meimurje>)
- Varaždin – Varaždin Loop from Čakovec (top bike touring route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42890/cycling-in-meimurje>)
- Kleine Kirche – Mur Brücke Loop from Dunjkovec (top bike touring route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42890/cycling-in-meimurje>)
- Mur – Mur Brücke Loop from Križovec (top bike touring route in Međimurje according to Komoot.com <https://www.komoot.com/guide/42890/cycling-in-meimurje>)
- Numerous cycling routes in Međimurje presented on <https://www.medimurje-bike.com/popis-ruta> (each route is carefully explained and ranked according to its level of difficulty)
- Regional park between the rivers Mura and Drava and landscape of the river Mura represent an interesting destination for hiking, taking photos and bird watching due to their exceptional biodiversity
- Rafting on Mura

5.1.1.2. Wellbeing, wellness and health

- Terme Sveti Martin (Wellness Resort)

5.1.1.3. Culture, ethnology, crafts

- The old town of Zrinski; Center of dr. Rudolf Steiner; Feštetić Castle in Pribislavac; Eco-museum Međimurje Malo; Ethno collection Old Farof

Kotoriba; The Mill on Mura; a couple of different ethnographic collections on display at various locations; numerous religious buildings- churches...

- The Tradition Road connects a dozen workshops of traditional crafts (potter, weaver, weaver of traditional dishes, miller on the river mill, gold washers, wood carver, gardener in the traditional garden, weaver, carver of carnival masks...)
- All intangible elements: old traditions and expressions including tales, legends, myths (e.g. the old Croatian God Svanimir/ Svevid; The legend of the carp without a tail, the pose of the god Perun; The legend of Izabela and Nikola; The legend of the love of Marquise Anna and King Karl III...), and epic songs; performing arts including music (more than 20.000 recorded Međimurje songs part UNESCO treasures of intangible heritage), dance and theater; social practices, rituals, and festive events; traditional craftsmanship referring to the skills and knowledge involved in craftsmanship.
 - E.g. of a fable from Donji Vidovac (Međimurje): It is about a farmer who while digging a vineyard, cut off a snake's tail, whereupon the snake bit his child, who immediately died. After a year, he met the same snake again and wanted to make peace, to which the snake said to him: "While I look at the place where my tail was once, and you the grave of your son, we cannot reconcile."
- Crafted wine. More than 20 wineries crowned on the Međimurje Wine Road Decanted medals
- Traditional gastronomy: žličnjaci/trganci (type of pasta), dairy products mostly made of cow milk (fresh cheese with sour cream and turoš cheese), vegetable dishes (beans, potato and cabbage), porridge, refreshing creamy meat soup with a lot of vegetables (pretepena juha). The most famous meat-based dish is meso 'z tiblice (cooked cured pork with lard in a wooden barrel), but there are also numerous poultry and game specialty dishes as well as fish from the rivers Drava and Mura. Desserts such međimurska gibanica (layer cake), zlevanka (pie made of corn flower and cream), krapci (cheese and apple pie) and kelešica (sweet bread-like pastry).
- Events: Urbanovo; Sailing along the Mura in traditional boats (Round fifty traditional wooden boats set sail from Bad Radkersburg in Austria and, passing through Slovenia, sail to Sveti Martin); Wicker and Fish days; St. Vincent's walking tour; Summer in the Zrinski Town; May Music Memorial;
- Cycling events: MURA BIKE cycle-marathon and bicycle race; Prvomajska biciklijada; On the trails of the municipality of Nedelišće; Grand Prize of Čakovec; Biciklima međimurskim putevima – BIMEP

5.1.1.4. Thematic paths and flagship attractions

- The Amazon of Europe Bike Trail
- Numerous cycling trails all over Međimurje (some of them are mentioned above in 1.1.1.1)
- AoE Amazing Moments
- The Tradition Road

- The Wine Road is undoubtedly one of the most famous tourism products in Međimurje. It consists of a 30 km itinerary with around thirty wine tasting establishments
- Educational trail in Murščak nature – suitably marked with boards and a guide. The trail is 6300 meters long, contains 12 marked stops, and you can cross it on foot or by bicycle, identifying the marked phenomena along the way. Every stop on the trail will be an open-air classroom where a person will be able to acquire the highest quality knowledge in natural conditions about water, forest, meadow, arable bio-ecosystems, geography and the rich historical, economic and traditional values of this ecologically still preserved region.

5.1.2.SME/service providers quality of services and digitalization

- Hotel Terme Sveti Martin (8.8 on Booking 1.910 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Hotel Castellum (9.3 on Booking 681 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Hotel Cubis (9.1 on Booking 679 reviews)
- Hotel Turist (9.1 on Booking 182 reviews)
- Millennium apartments (9.6 on Booking 258 review sand promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Luria apartments (9.6 on Booking 133 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- PansionMamica (9.3 on Booking 150 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Apartment Carolija (9.9 on Booking 101 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Holiday Home Rojko (9.8 on Booking 82 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Apartment and room Hadelá (9.2 on Booking 181 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Apartments and rooms Rea (9.6 on Booking 212 review sand promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Smx Apartment (9.7 on Booking 182 review sand promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Apartment Rafi (9.9 on Booking 67 reviews and promoted on <http://www.visitmedimurje.com/smjestaj.asp?>)
- Restaurant Mala Hiza (top 5 on Tripadvisor with more than 40 reviews, recognised by international gastronomic guides)
- Restaurant Terbotz (top 5 on Tripadvisor with more than 40 reviews)
- PotriKotac (top 5 on Tripadvisor with more than 40 reviews)
- Restaurant Barok (top 5 on Tripadvisorwith more than 40 reviews)
- Trattoria Rustica (top 5 on Tripadvisorwith more than 40 reviews)

5.1.3. Education – cooperation with all levels of educational programmes, especially vocational and faculty level

- Međimurje University of applied Science in Cakovec – Undergraduate professional study programme: Management of Tourism and Sports + Specialist professional graduate study programme: Management of Tourism and Sports
- University of Rijeka – Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management

- University of Zagreb – Faculty of Economics & Business – Graduate university study "Business Economics" – field of study: Tourism (<https://www.efzg.unizg.hr/turizam-15531/15531>)
- Faculty of Economics and Tourism “Dr. Mijo Mirkovic” – Study program: Tourism
- International University Libertas – Study programme: Tourism and Hotel management
- University of Split – Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism – Graduate university study programme: Tourism and Hotel Management
- Aspira – study programmes: Hotel and Tourism management; Graduate Study in Hotel and Tourism management; Gastronomy
- Karlovac University of Applied Science – Study programme: Hospitality
- Ugostiteljsko-Turisticko Uciliste Zagreb
- School of Tourism, Hospitality and Commerce in Pula
- Agency for Vocational Education and Training – provide useful insights in various fields including tourism and hospitality

5.1.4. Social inclusion and social innovation

- Social inclusion happens through all forms of tourism. Development of tourism creates jobs, strengthens the local/ regional economy, contributes to infrastructure development, and reduces disparities, poverty and inequality which positively influence social inclusion and innovation. In other words, sustainable tourism development based on the creation and implementation of new solutions that imply conceptual, process, product, or organizational change creates favourable conditions for economic and social growth.

5.1.5. Water access and valorization of rivers for tourism

- Mura – rafting, kayaking, canoeing, fishing
- Drava – rafting, kayaking, canoeing, fishing
- Varazdin lake
- Dubrava lake

5.1.6. Mobility, multimodality, public transport

- By car: In case you arrive by car from Slovenia or Hungary, you will pass one of the following border crossings: Goričan – Letenye I; Goričan- Letenye II; Mursko Središće-Petišovci; Trnovec- Središće ob Dravi
The main roads are:
 - A4 motorway which connects: Zagreb - Čakovec - Goričan border crossing and continues near Letenye as Hungarian motorway M70 (E71, E 65) towards Budapest.
 - 209 state road which connects: Čakovec - Mursko Središće border crossing (CRO/SLO) and continues towards Lendava/Murska Sobota and Bad Radkersburg border crossing (Austria).
 - D20 state road which connects: Varaždin - Čakovec - Prelog - Donja Dubrava - and connects to D2 state road towards Koprivnica, i.e. Osijek.
 - 208 state road which connects: Čakovec- Trnovec border crossing (CRO/SLO) and continues towards Maribor and Šentilj border crossing (SLO/A) direction Graz or connects to A1 motorway (E57) towards Ljubljana.
- By bus: Local bus routes connect most of the villages. During weekends and public holidays the routes do not operate between smaller villages. The

website <http://www.buscroatia.com> provides useful information about bus arrival and departure from almost all bus stations in Croatia. It facilitates finding information about timetables of almost every bus route in the country. The website is available in 5 languages, so it is a useful source of information for tourists making their stay easier and more pleasant.

- By plane: The Franjo Tuđman airport in Zagreb is located on the outskirts, which mean that to reach Međimurje you will first need to take a shuttle bus or a taxi to reach the city centre. From there you can catch a direct train or bus to Čakovec. On average on a weekday there are three bus departures from Zagreb but the schedule is not very optimal since two departures are at 8 in the morning and one is at 13:00. Other airports in relatively close proximity are the airport in Maribor (70 km) and the airport in Budapest 275 km. Međimurje is connected to both of them by motorway.
- By train: The most significant railway junction in Međimurje is the Railway Station Čakovec (border crossing and customs), 1km from the town centre. The local railway stations include: Mursko Središće, Vratišinec, Krištanovec, Novo Selo Rok, Macinec, Dunjkovec, Buzovec, Mala Subotica, Čehovec, Donji Kraljevec, Donji Mihaljevec and Kotoriba.

Figure 4: Distance to key markets



5.1.7. Protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure

- The Mura Drava Regional Park was declared by the Government of the Republic of Croatia in 2011. The Mura Drava Regional Park covers 5 Croatian counties and covers an area of 87,680 ha (Međimurje, Varaždin, Koprivnica Križevci, Virovitica Podravina and Osijek Baranja County)
- Protected natural monument - wet meadow at the site of Bedekovićeve grabe (in the Sveti Juraj na Bregu municipality) is home to one of the most endangered European species, the admirable Scarce Large Blue butterfly.
- Protected individual trees include English oak (Donji Vidovec), plane trees (Nedelišće and Sv. Urban), Wisteria sinensis (Čakovec), tulip tree (Vučetinec), maidenhair (ginkgo) tree (Donja Dubrava) and Magnolia lilioflora (Pribislavec) whose longevity testify to the force of nature.

5.1.8. Climate change adaptation & 5.1.9. Energy and resource efficiency

- Croatia has developed a national climate change vulnerability, impact and adaptation assessment as part of the NAS development process in May 2017, using the climate projections until 2040 and 2070.
- The Protocol on Procedure and Recommendations for Protection from Heat was adopted in July 2017 with the goal to reduce risk to individuals and institutions during heat waves by implementing necessary preparedness and response procedures at the national and local levels.
- The European Green Deal as the EU's Response to Climate Change
- Following an unprecedented crisis due to the pandemic, Croatia's recovery and resilience plan responds to the urgent need of fostering a strong recovery and making Croatia future ready. The plan consists of 146 investments and 76 reforms. They will be supported by €6.3 billion in grants. 40.3% of the plan will support climate objectives and 20.4% of the plan will foster the digital transition. The plan supports the green transition through investments of €789 million in energy efficiency and post-earthquake reconstruction of buildings. Furthermore, €728 million will be invested in sustainable mobility, notably in upgrading railway lines, autonomous electric taxis with supporting infrastructure adapted for people with disabilities, installing charging stations for electric vehicles and introducing zero-emission vehicles and vessels. In addition, the plan allocates €658 million to low-carbon energy transition through modernizing energy infrastructure, supporting investments for the production of advanced bio-fuels and renewable hydrogen and financing innovative carbon capture and storage projects. €542 million will be invested in supporting businesses for green transition and energy efficiency, supporting their projects aimed at boosting the green economy, sustainable tourism and investing in green technologies. (https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/croatias-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en)

5.2. Swot Analysis of Međimurje tourist offer

Based on the reviewed documents, consultation with key stakeholders and interviews and surveys performed with informants we evaluate the Međimurje tourism offer as follows:

Table 6: Strengths & Weaknesses

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich variety of natural values and protected natural areas • The Regional park between the rivers Mura and Drava along with the landscape of the river Mura represent an interesting destination for hiking, taking photos and bird watching due to their exceptional biodiversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local population is resistant to change • Lack of interest of the population in the development of tourism • Insufficiently organized and arranged nautical centers (river docks for boats, rental of nautical equipment etc.) • Demolished architectural heritage that requires immediate repair

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich cultural heritage both tangible and intangible (rich diversity of traditional garments, display of folk customs and other ethnographic collections) • Međimurje is the perfect place for bicycle tourism because it offers multiple cycling routes. Since it is a relatively small region, cyclists can choose various thematic tours passing through different terrains. They pass through amazing landscape and connect various cultural-historical monuments, restaurants, wine houses, inns, rest stops, and viewpoints. • The Amazon of Europe Bike Trail-international long-distance cycling trail following the natural meanders of the river Mura and Drava • Delicious traditional food that is often interlinked with wine-enogastronomy • The Wine Road that consists of a 30 km itinerary with around thirty wine tasting establishments • Numerous locations and opportunities for sports and recreation (cycling, kayaking, rafting, canoeing...) • Cultural, entertaining, culinary and sporting events take place in major towns and villages in Međimurje all year round (Urbanovo is one of the most famous events- it is an international traditional event held since 2000. It promotes Međimurje's Wine Road as a tourism product and Međimurje as an attractive destination.) • Existence of resources for wellness and SPA - so far only st. Martin is a successfully developed product • Existence of the Tourist organization Međimurje county • Existence of Međimurje webportal http://www.visitmedimurje.com | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdated categorization system • Lack of adequate workforce (understanding various tourism concepts such as packaging, designing, selling and presenting tourist contents/products) • Insufficient capital investments • Tourism micro-providers are insufficiently supported by the local tourism boards • Sectoral disconnection • Insufficient cooperation between entrepreneurs • Education is not aligned with market needs • Services of lower added value • Local service providers have insufficient knowledge of foreign languages and marketing • Local service providers` digital literacy is at a fairly low point along with their e-marketing skills (need an improvement) • Lack of tourist identity • Lack of sustainable (eco-friendly) tourist infrastructure (electric vehicles and charging stations for establishment of sustainable intermodal transport system) • Lack of public transportation connecting multiple tourist sites • Administrative burden on SMEs • Ineffective legal and administrative system/structure • Current marketing approaches need further polishing and modernization in order to gain a competitive edge and outshine their competitors • Lack of digitalization of natural and cultural heritage • Insufficient recognition and visibility on the market |
|--|--|

Table 7: Opportunities & Threats

OPPORTINITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU funds and regulations supporting sustainable tourism development • Increase of the national GDP • Tourism development supported through funding by the Ministry of Tourism • Sustainable economic growth and tourism development based on distinctive natural and cultural heritage supported by the Amazing Amazon of Europe project • Foreign capital for infrastructure investments in Croatia • In 2021, Croatia had 12.775.794 tourist arrivals in commercial accommodation establishments out of which 64.051 were in Međimurje. This suggests that there is an opportunity for growth. At the same time, the region also had relatively low number of overnight stays (14th place out of 21 counties) which again gives an opportunity for further growth • Connection of tourism, agriculture, and renewable energy sources • Increased interest for domestic tourism • Increased interest for continental travel- traveling by car to destinations in close proximity to their residence • Increasing demand for family-friendly accommodation • Availability of different sources of financing for projects in the field of tourism • General increase in the demand for all-inclusive, quality culinary experiences that are often enriched by professional wine pairing • Geographical position (openness and connection with neighboring countries) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unstable economic situation at a global level leading to an economic crisis (unsatisfactory standard of living/livelihood crisis, current inflation rates that are only expected to get higher, global asset bubble burst, debt crisis) • The economic situation at a national level- lack of national or public funds dedicated to tourism or reallocation of the budgeted funds for “bigger” issues and priorities as a reaction to the current economic situation • Unstable political situation worldwide • Geo-economics confrontations • Population outflow, especially young people • Migration of well-educated people • Rapidly changing technologies that request constant following and new investments • Competition from similar destinations in Croatia especially the near ones that have better conditions for tourism • Political instability on a national level (change of governance or local bodies) • Infectious diseases (Another pandemic outbreak or another COVID wave) • Reduction of the percentage of co-financing from the Rural Development Program for tourism • Natural disasters and climate change

- According to a research published by the European Commission, conducted on a representative sample of citizens from 27 EU countries, 41% of the respondents indicated that they are inclined to travel to less visited destinations which gives Međimurje a chance for further tourism growth

5.3. Competitive Clusters of Tourism Products

Based on the above presented SWOT analysis and current megatrends in tourism that are expected to shape the post pandemic tourism recovery we extrapolated further thematic clusters of tourism offer in Međimurje and grouped them in three distinct categories based on their market growth and income growth potential and thus classified into three priority groups.

The priority groups visible on the Figure 5 below, are the following:

1. Most important tourism products from perspective of income generation potential and market growth potential
2. Tourism products with mid- high impact whether on market growth potential or revenue streams potential.
3. Tourism products with limited economic and market potential

The figure explains which products should be systematically developed in order to gain maximum growth and yield biggest income, meaning the higher and the more to the right the product cluster is positioned, the more significant its development priority. Thus in Međimurje the most important products that should be systematically stimulated in order to bring maximum positive impacts of tourism are the products in priority group 1:

- **Cultural themed route**

Is an integration of cycling, gastronomy, wine tasting, sightseeing, nature, wellness etc. Has the highest rank in both categories because of the diversification it offers and the available resources in Međimurje.

- **Cycling**

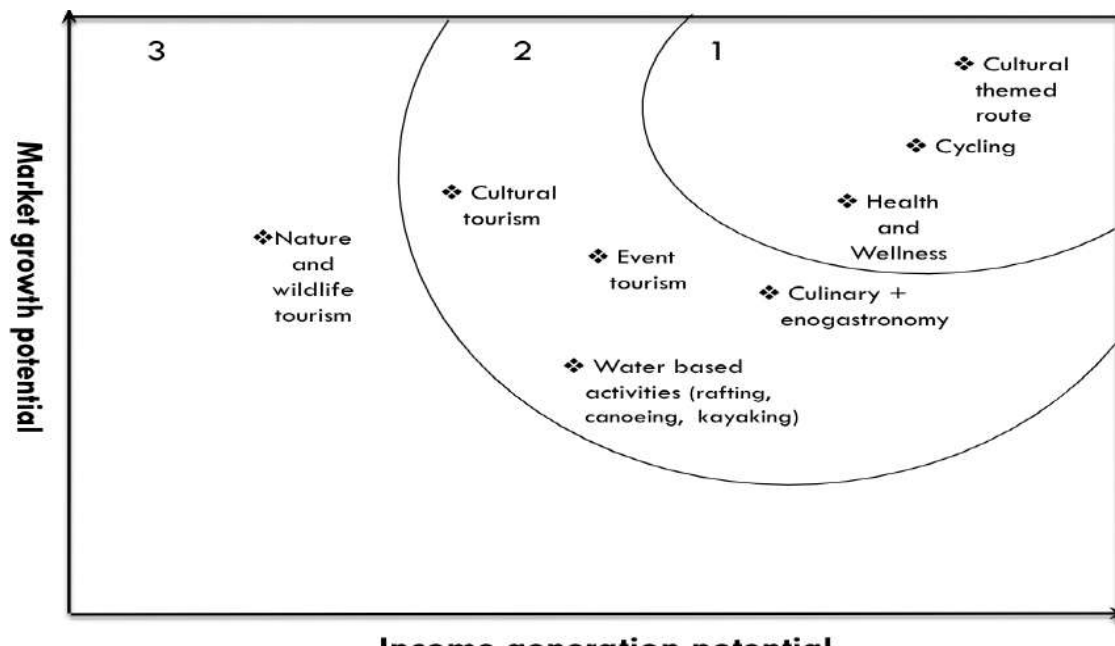
Cycling is the second product with the highest financial and market growth potential. That is due to the fact the cycling along the long trails is always connected to other tourism products (e.g. gastronomy, accommodation, nature, culture...)

- **Health and wellness**

While the renovation and expansion of Sveti Martin Healthness Resort is already planned, there is room for at least 2 to 3 similar health & wellness products in perhaps a smaller and even more exclusive boutique format. This would also positively impact the competition inside of the destination and bring the higher spending wellness guests into the Međimurje

County who will extend their stay in the region. Health and wellness is a product that can produce nice revenue streams but the market growth potential is a bit more limited in comparison to the previous two because it requires long-term investments and usually intense income of capital from private entities.

Figure 5: Product priority clusters



Priority group 2 is characterized by the following product clusters:

- Water based activities

Some water sports and board sports have become a lifestyle, synonymous with freedom and cool attitude among the young generation. Therefore there is potential for further market growth but that is limited because these kinds of sports are seasonal and weather sensitive. Plus in Međimurje these activities do not represent a starting point or in other words primary intention for visitation. However, during the summer these activities can be integrated into a bigger tourist package which will lead to enriched and more interesting tourist offers.

- Event tourism

Events come in all shapes and sizes, local events are primarily intended for local people and serve as mechanisms that create sense of community and belonging while major events aim to increase interest of tourists for a specific destination or region. These events bring the city significant financial benefits and promotion but in Međimurje there are not many events of such proportions. Mostly the events are local with exception of a few bigger events such as: “Urbanovo – Wine Days in the Zrinski County” – international event; Sailing along the Mura in traditional boats – international event; Summer in the Zrinski Town; St Vincent’s walking tour – most visited walking tour in Croatia etc. This means that there is an opportunity for some local events to further grow and become

valuable parts of the tourism offer. At the same time it is positive the events are organized throughout the entire year and there is something for everyone.

- **Culinary tourism + enogastronomy**

Food and wine can be efficiently to discover a place's culture and history which means it is an integral part of the tourist offer and thus has great potential but cannot be seen as a Star of the tourism offer since it is more of a complementary tourism product except when it comes to special food events. However, enogastronomic tourists are usually hedonists willing to spend money to fulfill their needs and have superb experiences which makes them great tourists. For example, Mala hiza is a successful story when it comes to enogastronomy. The famous restaurant offers a rich wine list and each wine is carefully combined with fresh traditional dishes prepared by simultaneously holding on to the original flavors and following contemporary trends and procedures in terms of presentation and pairing.

- **Cultural tourism**

It represents an integral part of the tourist offer for Međimurje. Visiting monuments and important architectural sites as well as getting familiar with the intangible cultural resources is the core reason to visit this county. No other type of tourism can happen without this one because the culture is omnipresent. However, it cannot be put at the same level as Cultural themed route because it has less income generation potential since it is a separate tourism product that is mainly connected to one-day domestic visits and gastronomy.

Marketing efforts should be emphasized for the product to emphasize:

- Group 1 products
- Group 2 products

Priority group 3 of thematic product clusters are the products that can appeal to niche audiences but their income generation potential and market growth potential in Međimurje are for different reasons limited, yet would need to be developed to the world class level in order for the destination to benefit from them, which we do not see it as realistic to happen until 2030. The products presenting this group are the following:

- **Nature-based tourism**

Represents a basic part of the tourist offer. By itself it cannot create major income or have great market growth rate but it is complementary to almost every other type of tourism which makes it irreplaceable. In addition, nature related activities are especially accessible for the local population and domestic tourists from nearby places

- **Wildlife tourism**

As a sub-branch of nature-based tourism it has limited potential because it is a relatively niche market.

- Sport fishing

Has the potential for further growth but it is limited as it is a niche market usually practiced by domestic tourists or local population.

- Hunting

It has limited potential because it is a niche market usually practiced by domestic tourists or local population.

- Bird watching

It has the most limited potential because it is a very niche market.

6. THEMATIC CONCEPT

6.1. AoE selected themes

Based on the Sustainability Plan – Plan for partners document (provided by Iskriva during summer 2022), 12 thematic topics were introduced to partners. Each partner was encouraged to choose at least one topic and try to further develop the Amazon of Europe destination focusing on the selected topic. The task of the partners is to prepare the sustainability plan document and especially develop kind of action plan & a project concept to the stage that can be suitable to be applied to one of the cross-border calls in the years 2023 and 2024.

The Lead Partner of the project listed several thematic topics, which are the basis for the sustainability plan. The listed topics are the follows:

- Additional tourism offers at cross-border and regional level (including outdoor activities, wellbeing, wellness and health, culture, ethnology, crafts, thematic paths, and flagship attractions)
- SME/service providers quality of services and digitalisation
- Education – cooperation with all levels of educational programmes, especially vocational and faculty level
- Social inclusion and social innovation
- Water access and valorisation of rivers for tourism
- Mobility, multimodality, public transport
- Protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity, and green infrastructure
- Ecosystem services, economic valuation of the area
- Climate change adaptation
- Energy and resource efficiency
- Further thematic areas may be proposed by project partners
- Results of TIM and implications for application to the whole AoE destination: evaluation of the usability of RGD TIM, proposal for applying the model to the whole AoE destination, benefits of the RGD TIM model, proposals for regional development, definition of roles and financial implications

Based on the nature of offer developed in Međimurje and its unique heritage and history, we propose to focus on:

- Additional tourism offers at cross-border and regional level (focusing on developing experiences that include wellbeing, wellness and health, culture, thematic paths, and spirituality – all included in the works of Rudolf Steiner)
- SME/service providers quality of services

6.2. Rudolf Steiner and his heritage

Rudolf Steiner was an Austrian scientist, philosopher and artist who lived from 1861-1925 and was born in Donji Kraljevac in Međimurje. His interests were not only in education, but also in a wide range of fields such as medicine, agriculture, nutrition, social renewal, the environment. One of his beliefs was that humanity needs to work organically in co-operation

with nature, not against it. He sounded warning bells about many issues, such as sustainability and depletion of human and natural resources, which are of wide concern today.

Steiner believed that humans once participated more fully in spiritual processes of the world through a dreamlike consciousness but had since become restricted by their attachment to material things. The renewed perception of spiritual things required training the human consciousness to rise above attention to matter. The ability to achieve this goal by an exercise of the intellect is theoretically innate in everyone.

Today there are over 1300 Steiner/Waldorf Schools and 2000 early childhood centres in over 60 countries. Steiner schools meet the policy requirements of diverse educational authorities of their respective countries. Steiner education is state funded in most European countries as well as in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and Holland. In the UK there are currently four state funded Academies as well. These are privately funded but aspire to make their education available to as wide a community as possible. Several public-funded ‘charter’ schools in the United States follow Steiner pedagogical principles which are generally recognized as excellent and advanced in terms of quality education they provide.

In each country, the curriculum is adapted to the particular culture and context, evolving in response to changing times within a methodology which reflects a consistent picture of child development. Steiner education is known for providing a sound and practical basis for working with children, enabling them to find their creativity and to become free individuals who can think for themselves, make their own judgements and find their own purpose and direction in life.

The approach to education is based on reflection and research into Steiner’s educational insights, specifically those that relate to child development. These form one aspect of what Steiner called ‘anthroposophy’, literally, ‘human wisdom’ or ‘knowledge of the human being’.

Apart from education, Steiner left a significant mark on the field of biodynamic farming. He is considered a founder of the biodynamic approach to agriculture, was a highly trained scientist and respected philosopher in his time, who later in his life came to prominence for his spiritual-scientific approach to knowledge called “anthroposophy.” Long before many of his contemporaries, Steiner came to the conclusion that western civilization would gradually bring destruction to itself and the earth if it did not begin to develop an objective understanding of the spiritual world and its interrelationship with the physical world.

Generally, Steiner's spiritual-scientific methods and insights have given birth to practical holistic innovations in many fields, including education, banking, medicine, psychology, the arts and, not least, agriculture and should thus be reflected in the creation of modern, high value-added tourism products in Međimurje & all along the AoE.

6.3. Contribution of Međimurje to AoE Amazing Moments

AoE Amazing Moments are a series of unique experiences that tourists can only experience in the AoE. They should become the flagship products with which the AoE should be branded

and recognised for. The unique story of Rudolf Steiner naturally represents big marketing potential and should therefore be used for all experiences that are integrating healthiness, spirituality, creativity and bioorganic approaches to farming and architecture, as they all can be found in his work.

Moreover, these are the topics that are also extremely trendy when targeting the population of generations X, Y, Y of travellers. Therefore we propose that our suggested project is used to develop the standards and guidelines for the development of such experiential products in Međimurje, which should then be transferred and developed in a similar manner in all other areas of AoE, as they truly have an outstanding appeal if developed and marketed properly.

7. PROJECT IDEA & TRANSFERABILITY

7.1. Project idea

The idea for the project is targeted towards the 2023 Slovenia-Croatia Interreg call. The idea for the project is based on the following parameters:

- Slovenia established itself as tourism sustainability leader EU-wide and has the methodology and standards of crafting sustainable tourism products.
- Međimurje has the potential to valorise the story Rudolf Steiner which will help it with tourism branding, recognition and positioning as an extraordinary destination for health and spiritual type of holidays.
- Terme Sveti Martin as the biggest accommodation and wellness provider in the area has successfully developed & marketed healthiness programmes and is in possession of necessary expertise.
- Healthiness & Spirituality tourism products yield high added value and are sold at price premiums
- AoE Amazing Moments require creativity, sustainability focus and unspoilt natural scenery – all this is reflected in Steiner's Waldorf education philosophy.
- NGOs dealing with creative learning methods and spiritual approaches from both Slovenia and Croatia should get involved in development of AoE Amazing Moments based on Steiner's principles.

Table 7: Proposed project intervention logic

Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rudolf Steiner story is not sufficiently valorised in Međimurje • Lack of availability of modern experiential tourism experiences with higher value added in Međimurje and along the AoE • Lack of healthiness-based products away from Terme Sveti Martin premises • Insufficient creative and digital marketing skills of major target groups • Lack of cross-sectoral cooperation to provide immersive destination experiences • Hospitality services lacking interest to participate in tourism experience development in the region
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To strengthen the recognition of Međimurje as a destination for healthy & spiritual living • To valorise the heritage of Rudolf Steiner • To boost the destination's appeal, recognition and market position • To create modern experiential tourism products based on work of Rudolf Steiner and make them instantly bookable • To support more sustainable tourism product development on all levels in Međimurje and selected parts of AoE destination
Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Defining sustainable framework for proposed experiential products based on life and work of Rudolf Steiner 9. Regional analysis of stakeholders' behaviours' and capacity for approach implementation at specific micro locations 10. Pilot testing of first 5 developed experiential products 11. Developed Guidebook for creation of Experiential Rudolf Steiner-based products 12. Trainings for the stakeholders on the methods to develop and market innovative tourism products with high value added 13. Raising awareness events 14. Preparing the joint strategy and Sustainability and transferability plan for the proposed approach to develop healthness products to be used in wider AoE destination
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tested and fine-tuned experiential tourism products developed in the area of Međimurje County based on the work of Rudolf Steiner that can further be extended along the AoE route as AOE Amazing Moments. • Raised awareness of relevant stakeholders on importance of common umbrella storytelling for the sustainable tourism promotion of the destination • Effective bookability of experiential tourism products • Improved image, positioning and recognition of Međimurje County as the place for 365 degrees immersion into healthness based on the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner
Target groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public and private organizations participating in tourism development in Međimurje County & beyond • Public and private organisations from Slovenia • NGOs from Cultural & Creative Industries as well as sustainability

7.2. Project action plan

Project implementation action plan is presented in the following table.

Table 8: Project implementation action plan

Activity	Time frame	Responsible
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1. Project concept finalization	Spring 2023	Motivated lead partner and project partners
2. Preparation of application to the selected call for proposals	Autumn / Winter 2023	Lead partner and project partners with potential collaboration with specialized external agency
3. Implementation of the project	2023 - 2026	Project consortium

8. FINANCIAL SOURCES

In order to fund the proposed project idea fitting into the above presented thematic concept, the financial sources can either be found at a national or at an EU level.

8.1. Sources of financing at the level of the Republic of Croatia

- Grants to the tourism sector are awarded every year by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports through publicly announced invitations and tenders aimed at businesses operating in tourism. Linked directly to AoE Bike Trail, grants are available for routing, arranging and marking cycle tourism routes, creating maps, renting a web domain or creating mobile applications. These funds are available through Cycling Tourism Development Program on the continent. Similarly, public sector grants can be obtained through the Public Tourist Infrastructure Development Program and the above mentioned Cycling Tourism Development Program on the continent. Funds aimed at tourism operators are available for investments contributing to increase the standards, quality and additional offer of hospitality facilities, sustainable development, diversification of offer and development of the tourism economy through the Program of Competitiveness of the Tourism Economy aimed at encouraging the attractiveness and competitiveness of tourism.
- Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development (HBOR) provides beneficial and development-oriented financial resources for the tourism sector. These support investments in the development of the tourist supply with the ultimate goal of extending the tourist season. Short-term loans are used for the preparation of the tourist season, i.e. financing the necessary working capital for the procurement of food, beverages, small inventory and current maintenance, while long-term loans are intended for investments in fixed assets - purchase, construction or reconstruction and furnishing of facilities. Beneficiaries of HBOR credit programs can be trading companies, craftsmen and family farms. The bank offers two programs for the development of tourism sector lending program whose goal is the realization of investment projects in the tourism industry, which create conditions for encouraging employment, extending the tourist season and increasing tourism income with the aim of increasing the competitiveness of tourist destinations. Loans are granted with an interest rate of 2% per year and a repayment term of up to 17 years. Credit funds can be used for: improving the accommodation offer, increasing accommodation capacity

and categorization, building or arranging energy-efficient accommodation facilities, raising the level and variety of services through additional facilities that expand the offer of accommodation facilities, as well as the renovation of facilities built in accordance with the original traditional and ambient architecture, the protection and preservation of cultural heritage in the function of tourism and the enrichment of the variety of new services and contents to increase the competitiveness of the destination.

8.2. Sources of funding at the level of the European Union (funds and programs)

European Union offers various financial instruments aim at achieving the goals and priorities previously set. The new program period started with 2021 and will last until 2027. The most relevant operational programs for tourism are:

- Operational program Competitiveness and Cohesion 2021.-2027 which covers investments from the European Fund for Regional Development and the Cohesion Fund. Main priorities for investing in tourism are:

- Strengthening the economy by applying research and innovation;
- use of information and communication technologies;
- business competitiveness;
- promotion of energy efficiency and renewable energy sources;
- climate change and risk management;
- environmental protection and sustainability of resources;
- connectivity and mobility;
- education, skills and lifelong learning.

- Operational program Effective human resources 2021.-2027 which is partly financed by the European Fund for Regional Development and the Fund for Just Transition. Main priorities for investing in tourism are:

- High employability and labor mobility;
- social inclusion;
- education and lifelong learning;
- good management.

Projects financed from these programs are mostly transnational and require several partners from several different countries and aim at solving problems specific to a particular sector in Europe. For projects in tourism, the following are available:

- INTERREG EUROPE interregional cooperation program covers all EU member states as well as Norway and Switzerland as part of the objective of European territorial cooperation, which is co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It provides co-financing to regional and local institutions, such as public administration, regional development agencies, educational institutions and others, in order to create networks and

exchange experiences on various topics, thereby generating good regional practice at the European level.

- INTERREG IVC program's aim is to capitalize on regional knowledge and good practices that have already been recognized at the European level.
- HORIZON 2020 - a research and innovation program that brings together the activities of the Seventh Framework Program (FP7), the innovation aspects of the Competitiveness and Innovation Program (CIP) and the EU contribution to the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). Priorities for tourism are: excellent science, industrial leadership, social challenges, instruments for SMEs. All civil and legal persons, regardless of residence and place of establishment, small and medium-sized enterprises from creative industries, ICT companies can apply.
- CREATIVE EUROPE – a program to help cultural and creative industries in transnational activities, circulation of works in the field of culture and mobility of employees and artists in the field of cultural and creative industries. Priorities for tourism are: sub-program for culture, sub-program for media and cross-sectoral sub-program for cooperation projects of cultural and creative industries and audio-visual industries.
- LIFE – a financial instrument to support projects for the protection of the environment and nature. Priorities for tourism are: environmental and energy efficiency, biodiversity and environmental and information management.
- ERASMUS + - a program with a goal to increase employability and skills, to modernize education and training of young people. The cultural heritage sector is mainly covered by key measure 2: cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practice which can have various forms such as: strategic partnerships; capacity building in the field of higher education & capacity building in the field of youth work.

9. CONCLUSION

In presented document we have elaborated proposals with action plan on how to ensure, support and enhance sustainable development of tourism linked to AoE in Međimurje County by upgrading the quality of its products and marketing.

By valorising the story of Rudolf Steiner, it is possible to unlock the innovation potential by enabling collaboration between all stakeholders for the development of sustainable tourism experiences with high added value by combining elements of creativity, intangible regional heritage, organically sourced local products, and activities based on principles of healthiness and spirituality.

We strongly recommend further collaboration which will ensure sustainable tourism in the AoE destination. To demonstrate the potential of developing innovative products of AoE Amazing Moments series based on heritage in selected areas in Slovenia – Croatia cross-border territory, we propose pilot project concept and pilot implementation action plan to be submitted to the next INTERREG Slovenia-Croatia call.

For further development nevertheless, other complementary financing sources at European, macro regional and national level should also be considered to simulate the tourism development of experiences that can popularise the quality standard and brand of AoE Amazing Moments by building up by the now more than ever before appealing heritage of Rudolf Steiner. .