

# Cross-border tourism Montenegro-Albania: Underutilised potentials and constraints

*Andreas Kagermeier & Natalie Stors (Trier)*

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## Summary

Following difficult phases at the end of the 20th century, the Western Balkan countries are endeavouring to (re-)position themselves on the international tourism market. Since these countries are small, they often have only limited potential for the self-contained development of many tourism products. Hence it stands to reason to engage in cross-border cooperation to enhance the spectrum of products available. This contribution focuses on the border region between Montenegro and Albania in the Montenegrin or Albanian Alps. The options for intensifying collaboration and the constraints involved will be discussed.

## Zusammenfassung

Nach schwierigen Zeiten zum Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts sind die Staaten des westlichen Balkan inzwischen dabei, sich (wieder) auf dem internationalen Tourismusmarkt zu positionieren. Da es sich um relative kleine Länder handelt, sind die Potentiale für nationale Tourismusentwicklungsstrategien teilweise limitiert. Daher liegt der Gedanke nahe, durch grenzüberschreitende Zusammenarbeit die Wahrnehmbarkeit auf dem Zielmarkt und die Produkttiefe zu steigern. Am Beispiel der Grenzregion zwischen Montenegro und Albanien, den sog. Montenegrinischen oder Albanischen Alpen werden Optionen für eine Intensivierung der Zusammenarbeit und sich dabei stellende Herausforderungen und Schwierigkeiten analysiert.

## 1 The role of borders in tourism

For a long time, the aim of national frontiers was to separate national territories from one another – which is sometimes still the case today – constituting not only a physical but often also a mental demarcation (cf. *Timothy* 2000, 2001, p. 6; *Sofield* 2006, p. 102). And yet frontier zones are often peripheral, marginalised regions (*Ilbery & Saxena* 2011, p. 1141) in which economic dynamism is feeble. Many of these rural European border-zone areas have developed nationally oriented tourism activities in recent decades to compensate for weaknesses in other economic sectors. Particularly due to the recent boom in hiking and cycling, other nature-oriented (sports) activities or sometimes regions' culinary arts (e.g. wine or other regional culinary specialties), a number of rural areas have be-

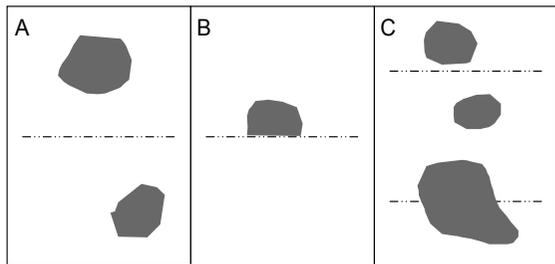
come attractive to tourists (cf. *Kagermeier* 2009, 2010, 2011a & 2011b). Thanks to the European Union's integrative approach, such nationally oriented tourism is shifting to an approach that attempts to link national destinations on both sides of their frontiers, enhancing their attractiveness (*Faby* 2006). Cross-border tourism between neighbouring states has yet to be explored in detail in the literature (cf. *Hampton* 2009, p. 3). At the same time, border regions are often of a rural and/or peripheral nature, meaning that tourism is often viewed as an important tool for economic development. As a consequence, *Wachowiak* stresses that "theories and concepts are necessary in order to understand the characteristics of tourism planning and development" in these regions (2011, p. 7). More intensive academic activity in this field could contribute to the positive economic and social development of peripheral border regions.

The spatial relationship between destinations on both sides of a political border was differentiated by *Timothy* (cf. fig. 1). In case A) two destinations are located a certain distance within the border; in case B) there is a tourism destination on only one side of the border (for example, a border city that attracts urban tourism). In these two cases, there are only very few options for cross-border tourism development.

The point of departure for cross-border tourism development is only favourable in case C), where there are either two destinations close to the border or where one destination is split by the border (e.g. a continuous natural setting such as a low mountain range).

Concerning the influence a border can have on the type of tourism activities on both sides, *Timothy* distinguishes three situations (cf. fig. 2). These depend largely on the degree of permeability of the border and on the intensity of cooperation between the stakeholders on both sides:

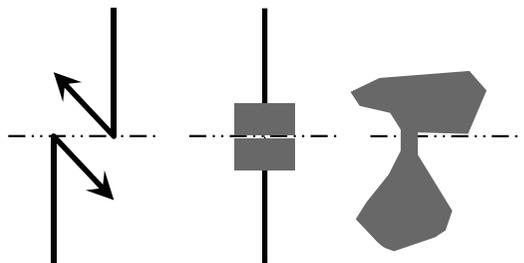
Fig. 1: Political boundaries and tourism



----- Political boundary    ■ Area of touristic interest

Source: Author's design with reference to *Timothy* 1995, p. 526

Fig. 2: Typology of borders



Borders as barriers

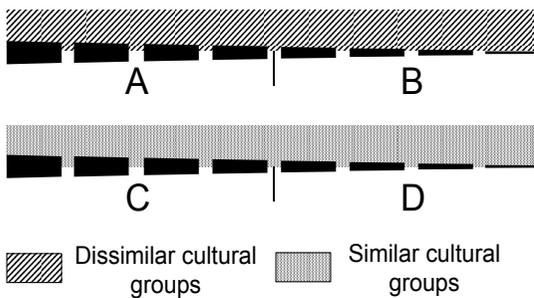
Borders as destinations

Borders as modifiers of the tourism landscape

Source: Author's design with reference to *Thimm* 2012, p. 107 & *Timothy* 2001, p. 11

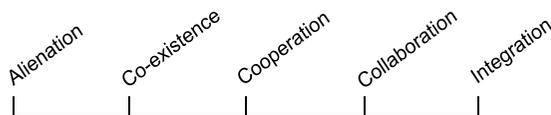
- 1) The border acts as a barrier or simple line of transit with no great influence on the tourism product (low degree of permeability and no cooperation)
  - 2) The border acts as a destination where visitors are interested in visiting both sides of the border (high degree of permeability, little or no cooperation)
  - 3) The border acts as a modifier of the tourism landscape (high degree of permeability and intensive cooperation; cf. *Timothy* 2001, p. 10, see also *Thimm* 2012).
- Synergetic effects may already arise in the second case, where two national destinations meet at a permeable border, even if there is no cooperation between the stakeholders on both sides. In this case, the added value is driven by demand, i.e. visitors opt to combine the supply offered on both sides, increasing the number of potential holiday activities available to them. In the third case, where stakeholders on both sides collaborate and present a joint cross-border destination, major synergetic effects are expected, creating an added value and a win-win situation for both sides. All of the natural and cultural attractions operate as one entity, raising the attractiveness of the destination and its visibility in target markets.

Fig. 3: Classification of border types for tourist crossings



Source: Author's design based on *Timothy* 1995, p. 527

Fig. 4: Levels of cross-border partnerships in tourism



Source: Author's design with reference to *Timothy* 1999, p. 185

no partnership exists between two neighbouring nations, and (full) integration, where all boundary-related barriers have been dismantled and the two regions have functionally merged, with each entity waiving some aspects of its sovereignty to a certain degree so as to achieve the common goal of mutual progress. The three intermediate steps are 1) co-existence (toleration with only minimal levels of partnership, but no active working together in order to solve common

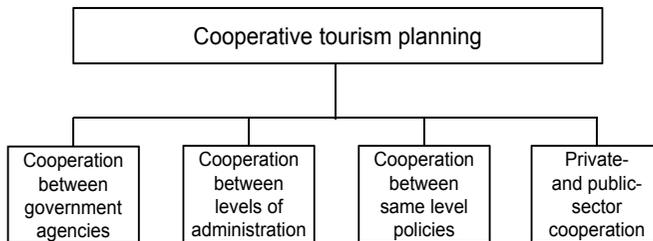
One of the aspects *Timothy* took into account when reflecting on cross-border cooperation was the stakeholders' cultural setting. Figure 3 shows his four classifications, displaying different grades of permeability (ranging from nearly impossible to cross on the left to easy to cross on the right) and similar (above) vs. dissimilar (below) cultural groups.

In order to describe the quality and intensity of cross-border interaction between stakeholders, *Timothy* (with reference to *Martinez* 1994) identified five levels (cf. fig. 4). The two poles are marked by alienation, where

problems), 2) cooperation, characterised by initial efforts to solve common problems and to share resources and 3) collaboration, where relatively stable binational relations are established, joint efforts are made to work together on development issues, and a degree of equity exists in their relationship (similar: *Więckowski 2011, p. 4*).

As in any destination management process, the different groups of stakeholders must be integrated into the cross-border management process. As *Timothy (1998, p. 54)* points out, the existence of stakeholder groups on both sides of the border necessitates not only interaction between the different groups of stakeholders, but also intra-stakeholder group interaction (cf. fig. 5; see also: *Ilbery & Saxena 2011, p. 1150*). All destination management processes are complex tasks, often involving the integration of divergent positions. In the cross-border context, however, this additional dimension makes the task even more challenging.

*Fig. 5: The four types of cooperation necessary for the development of successful integrative tourism*



*Source: Author's design following Timothy 1998, p. 54*

*Prokkola* describes the function and aim of cross-border tourism as follows:

*“Cross-border cooperation in tourism is understood as a means of increasing regional competitiveness and sustainability, of strengthening regional identity and promoting the emergence of functional and imaginary regions. A functional tourism region is created for it serves wider purposes in tourism development, for example, the clustering of tourist attractions, the creation of tourism routes and transportation and knowledge sharing ... The concept of the imaginary region refers to the social construction of a tourism region or destination, often ordered by politicians or a region’s developers ... Such new regional (cross-border) tourism spaces are not opposite to national, but nation-states often actively encourage the creation of new regional spaces because they support the national economy and assists sub-national entities in overtaking a larger share of EU resources” (2008, p. 31).*

This means that cross-border interaction is influenced by the stakeholders’ and visitors’ perceptions, as well as by the relevant legal situations and frame conditions. Some of the major challenges of future research on this topic that have so far been explored inadequately are dismantling stakeholders’ mental barriers and creating trans-border awareness.

## 2 Introduction to the Montenegrin-Albania cross-border region

The independent states of the former Yugoslavian republic are currently struggling – after having to come to terms with the aftermath of ethnic conflict in the 1990s – to reposition themselves on the tourist map. At the same time, Albania has undergone a process of gradually opening up to the Western world over the past two decades. All of these Western Balkan nations are struggling to cope with the negative images they conjure up in the western European target market. In order to overcome these image problems and to rebrand the region, the “Balkans Peace Park” project was initiated with substantial support by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

### 2.1 The border between Montenegro and Albania

The border between Montenegro and Albania has experienced different phases in the past, with quite different grades of permeability. The current border has not been drawn during the Ottoman era. The border between Montenegro (which gained independence following the signing of the Berlin Treaty in 1878) and Albania was delimited following the Balkan Wars (1912/13), when an independent Albania was created, and the Ottomans left the Balkans entirely. Connections remained between villages on both sides of the newly established border; cross-border marriages were still quite common, and peasants crossed the border frequently to visit markets or festivities on the other side. At the same time, it must be stressed that those living in the Montenegrin part of the study area speak Albanian, and many of them are Muslim (as in Kosovo). Following World War II and the isolation of Albania, the border was hermetically closed. The border between Montenegro and Albania only reopened with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the transformation process that occurred in Eastern Europe. Referring to *Timothy* (cf. fig. 2), the degree of permeability has changed several times over the past decades and, simultaneously, the traditional cultural basis remained the same whereas the political influences that marked society were very different between 1945 and 1990. Hence the study region is quite representative of a process described by *Prokkola*: “*In the process of nation-building border regions have been integrated with the national centres and cross-border connections have decreased, leaving these regions in a rather peripheral and marginal position*” (2008, p. 31).

### 2.2 Tourism in Montenegro and Albania

Montenegro was a tourism destination during the Yugoslavian era. The entry of international European visitors was assured following the construction of an international airport at Tivat at the turn of the 1970s. During the Yugoslavian era, tourism development focused mainly on the coastal regions of the former Yugoslavian republic. Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, the ensuing years saw a decline of the tourism afflux due to the Bosnian and Croatian Wars in the 1990s. Since the turn of the century,

however, the tourism industry has been recovering, especially since Montenegro left the federation with Serbia in 2006. In 2007, the number of tourists in the region had reached its 1989 level again, with some 7 million registered overnight stays (*Montenegro Ministry of Tourism and Environment 2008*, p. 16 et seqq.; *WTTC 2007*, p. 52).

In the vision of the “Montenegro Tourism Development Strategy to 2020”, the following claims are made:

*“Its brand name and statement “Montenegro – Wild Beauty” is not only justified by offering its visitors a look of the unmatched pristine nature. It equally offers diversity and high quality aimed to meet the demands of each individual visitor. ... Apart from remarkable beaches, Montenegro is known for its unique national parks and nature parks, and an extensive network of panoramic roads for visitors coming by cars and a network of wilderness hiking and biking trails. This network covers the whole country offering to visitors a unique experience and offers to the local population the opportunities for additional income generation. As for nature tourism, Montenegro will have managed to become the leader in the Mediterranean, with a positive impact on extending the season. The sophisticated nautical, health and wellness facilities, winter sports and golf entice high-yield guests and strengthen its international reputation. The diversified products, high standards, training and services quality, offered at still competitive prices will have greatly increased employment, personal income and living standards”* (*Montenegro Ministry of Tourism and Environment 2008*, p. 22)

The central aims of the current Master Plan – a refined version of the first plan of 2001 (*DEG 2001*) – are therefore not only to enhance the quality of the offer to meet tourists’ demands, but also to significantly reduce the seasonality of the current coast-oriented supply (cf. *WTTC 2007*). This shall be achieved to a certain extent by focusing on the potentials offered by the hinterland, especially nature in the “Black Mountains”.

Until the beginning of the 1990s, Albania was a country that received few tourists, due to its political orientation under the regime of Enver Hoxha. When Albania opened up to the West, tourism was soon seen as an option that gave the country an additional economic perspective. In addition to developments along the coast (particularly targeting customers from Kosovo), the cultural and natural potentials offered by the hinterland were also to be exploited (cf. *Republic of Albania. Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports 2007*, p. 7). Even if the complex settings of Albania are difficult to promote for the international market, the slogan “Albania: Europe’s last secret” aims to tackle the specific frame conditions.

Starting out from two different points, both Montenegro and Albania are currently seeking to develop nature-oriented tourism offers, combined with their specific cultural backgrounds, at the crossroads of different cultural influences. Both of the destinations, which are comparatively small, find it hard to position themselves on the international market and to raise awareness of their great potential. For this reason, it may be beneficial for the two countries to combine their products (which as yet largely have to be developed) in order to attract greater attention on the international market.

### 2.3. Presentation of the study region and cross-border initiatives

Besides a number of initiatives undertaken around Skadar Lake – situated in both countries – with the support of GIZ (formerly – until 2011 – GTZ; cf. *GTZ* 2007, 2009a & 2009b), in the hinterland the Montenegrin or Albanian Alps represent the heart of potential cross-border cooperation in tourism (cf. fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Border region between Montenegro and Albania with the ‘Balkans Peace Park’



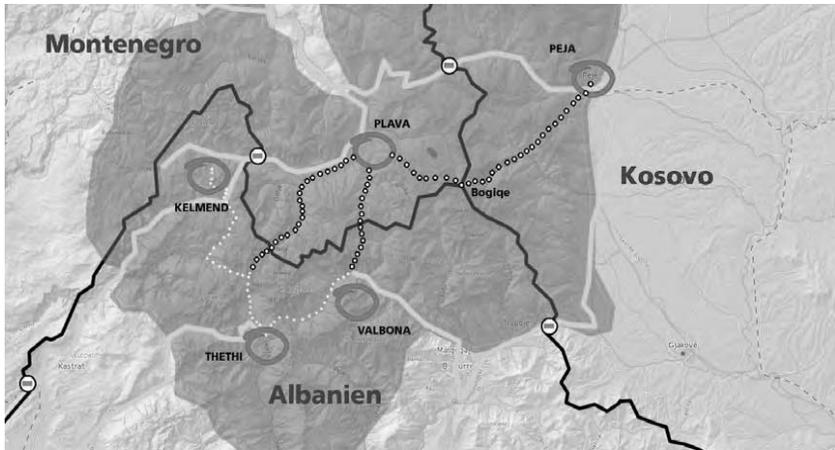
The mountainous border region between Montenegro and Albania – together with the neighbouring country of Kosovo – forms a triangle where a joint tourism product focusing mainly on nature-oriented hiking and climbing activities is to be established. The aim is to attract tourists in order to economically stabilise these marginalised peripheral regions on the edge of Europe. The initiative was proposed by European non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that coined the

meaningful term ‘Balkans Peace Park’. The name of the cross-border region refers to the wish to achieve reconciliation between the countries following the isolation of Albania and the past conflicts between the former Yugoslavian republics.

*“At the heart of our vision is a transnational park, a rugged mountainous region spanning Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo/a, a symbol of peace and cooperation where communities from all three countries work together to protect their fragile environment, stimulate local employment and promote sustainable visitor activities in the region”* (Balkans Peace Park 2013). The initiative, established in 2001, has led to an increase in activities being carried out in the region since 2007 to foster the tourism infrastructure and for capacity building purposes (cf. *Walters Todd* 2012, p. 3 et seq.).

In other words, the initiative for cross-border activities was borne outside the region, making the portfolio of stakeholders involved (cf. fig. 5) even more complex than that envisaged by *Timothy* (1998). At the same time, the peace park claim refers to a global initiative for creating cross-border national parks (cf. *Saalem* 2007, *UNEP & WCMC* 2013). With the exception of initiatives in North America and Europe, most of these parks are located in post-apartheid South Africa (cf. *Peace Park Foundation* 2013). Making this reference achieves two goals at the same time: the internal marketing and awareness creation function of the connotation appeals to the region’s joint future and the external market communication refers to a brand with positive connotations.

Fig. 7: Proposed hiking trails in the Balkans Peace Park



Source: Beka 2010

The approach of establishing a Balkans Peace Park was taken and supported by the GIZ representative in Tirana (cf. Beka 2010). First of all, potential cross-border routes were identified (cf. fig. 7). The subsequent steps taken focused on the Montenegrin-Albanian cross-border region around Plav and Thethi, which we therefore adopted as the area of investigation for this study. For a comprehensive evaluation of the Balkans Peace Park perspective, see the article by Bernthäusl & Gronau (2013) in this volume.

Based on the preliminary work of the Balkans Peace Park NGO, GTZ set out to improve signposting on hiking trails in Albania and Montenegro together with volunteers from various Central European hiking initiatives (cf. fig. 8).

The second major step taken to ensure the usability of the hiking trails, topographic maps (GTZ 2008 & n.d.) and a guide book (Zindel & Hausmann 2008) were financed by GTZ (cf. fig. 9).

Although the project was conceived of as a cross-border undertak-

Fig. 8: Signposting on hiking trails in the Albanian Alps, initiated by GTZ



Source: Beka 2010

Fig. 9: Hiking maps for the Montenegrin and the Albanian parts of the Balkans Peace Park



Source: GTZ 2008 und GTZ n.d.

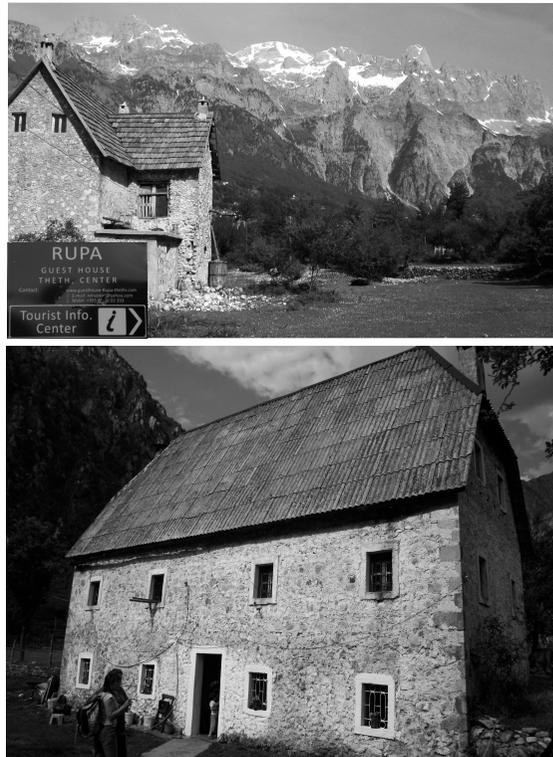
“Albanian Alps”. Furthermore, the section showing Kosovo (which has for several years not been officially recognised by Montenegro) is covered in capital letters with the word “SRBIJA”. What is more, the Albanian map was printed in Germany, and the Montenegrin map was printed by the Serbian branch of the same publishing house in Belgrade. It also goes without saying that the neighbouring country’s map is only available from tourist information centres on the respective side of the border. Hikers can only obtain a cross-border hiking map of the region by cutting up two maps (with the same scale and projection) and gluing them together!

In addition to focusing on hiking infrastructure, emphasis was also placed on providing suitable accommodation. Around 350 beds are available on the Montenegrin side in the municipality of Plav (which more or less covers the Montenegrin part of the Balkans Peace Park) (cf. *Nedica* 2010, p. 33). Some of these rooms already existed during the Yugoslavian era; others were built in recent years. Around Plav, for instance, there is a good range of types of accommodation for hikers and other visitors to the region. On the Albanian side, accommodation capacities had to be built up, due to the political situation up to 1990 and the absence of tourism orientation in this country. In 2006, only 10 beds were available in the region of Thethi and Valbona. With a small amount of funding from GTZ, this figure rose to 130 in 2010. About 20 traditional houses have been restored and refurbished by the local population and transformed into guest houses. Some of these receive up to 1,000 overnight guests per year – about 90 per cent of whom are international tourists (*Beka* 2011).

ing – the technical layout of the maps is identical and they overlap each other – they make no reference to one another. On both national maps, the hiking trails end at the border. What is more, the names used in each map for the neighbouring parts are only given in the respective language. In the Montenegrin map, for example, the section showing Albanian territory is described in large bold letters as “Prokletije” (the Montenegrin/Serbian name) instead of using the Albanian names “Bjeshkët e Namuna” and “Alpet Shqiptare”, or even the English name

A subsidy of around € 2,000 on average was given to each family. Instead of providing cash, however, GTZ mainly provided construction material and furniture to local stakeholders (*Beka 2011*). As a result of these activities, the number of visitors rose from 300 in 2006 to 8,500 in 2010 (*Beka 2010*), and may hit the 10,000 mark in 2011 (*Beka 2011*). On the Montenegrin side, GTZ's activities were integrated into the broader approach of the project "Support to Tourist Destinations in the Hinterland of Montenegro" (GTZ 2009c). With the overall aim to "create income-generating possibilities in structurally weak regions, the project's activities are focused on three components

*Fig. 10: Traditional farm houses have been transformed into guest-houses in Thethi*



Source: Photo Kagermeier May 2011

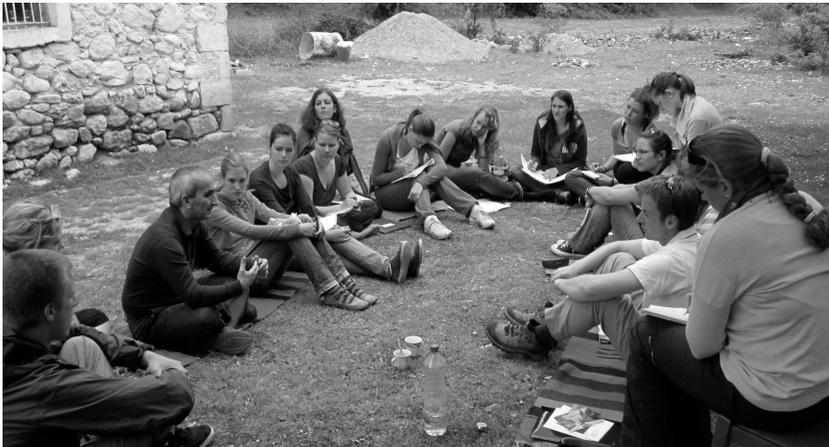
1. Integrated destination tourism development at selected local and regional destinations in Cetinje, Plav and Lake Skadar
  - Advice to local tourist organizations and National Parks in destination management
  - Advice in marketing
  - Support to the development of local tourist offers
2. At a national level the project advises the Ministry of Tourism on the development of hiking and biking tourism and agrotourism which are relevant for the central and mountainous regions of Montenegro
3. Promotion of the tourist private sector in central and mountainous areas as a crosscutting issue" (GTZ 2009c, p.1).

Hence, although one of the ideas was to promote cross-border tourism activities in two adjacent destinations, the organisational and funding structures on the part of the German donors were divided. This was due to a certain extent to the wishes of the stakeholders, who tended to favour national projects.

### 3 Evaluation of Montenegrin-Albanian cross-border tourism activities

In view of the attempt by external initiatives to foster a cross-border hiking and cycling product in the mountainous border region between Montenegro and Albania, a preliminary evaluation is presented below. The evaluation focuses on four aspects: commercialisation by tour operators, visitors' perception of the product, the quality of the product and interaction between local stakeholders. The findings are mainly based on empirical results of a fact-finding mission carried out by University of Trier students on the Master's programme in "Tourism Development and Destination Management" as part of a student research project in 2011. The field work was conducted in cooperation with two university colleagues from the regions under investigation, namely Assistant Professor Dr. Andriela Vitic-Cetkovic from the Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management (Kotor) of the University of Montenegro and Professor Dr. Arjeta Troshani from the Tourism Department of the University of Shkodër "Luigj Gurakuqi". Even if the findings do not constitute a comprehensive, representative analysis of the situation, they draw quite a clear picture of the current situation.

*Fig. 11: Stakeholder interview in Thethi*



*Source: Photo Kagermeier May 2011*

#### 3.1 The response by (German) tour operators

Since GTZ was the central promoter of the cross-border tourism offer in the mountainous Montenegrin-Albanian region, the project had a major advantage in that it received attention from German tour operators. In the meantime, a number of special interest tour operators (Albanien Reisen, culterramar, DAV Summit Club, Ilyria Agentur, Lupe Reisen, Schulz Aktiv Reisen, Via Verde, Wikinger Reisen) now offer hiking tours in the Albanian Alps. It must be stressed, however, that only one of them (Schulz Aktiv Reisen) offers a true cross-border

tour – albeit including Kosovo rather than the Montenegrin region of Plav! Although most of the other tour operators include hiking tours in Montenegro in their portfolio, the tours do not involve crossing the border. One of the reasons is that there is no official border-crossing point between the two regions. Officially, crossing the border involves a procedure of contacting the police station next to the border and applying for permission to cross it. In our experience, however, the police station south of Plav was never manned when we crossed it, meaning that cross-border tourists would be unable to obtain official permission without a wait. Although some individual tourists cross the border at their own risk, this constraint continues to act as a barrier to the acceptance of cross-border tours for organised groups.

Due to the traditional role it played in tourism, an established national marketing agency promotes the Montenegrin hiking product. Even if it may appear easy for the region of Plav to gain access to the market, Plav is only commercialised as a sideshow to the Bjelasica region (some 60 km away). Even in the latest Master Plan 2020, the region around Plav continues to be viewed as a sideshow to the (touristically more important) region around Bjelasica (*Montenegro Ministry of Tourism and Environment 2008*, p. 72).

Both regions therefore find it rather difficult to gain access to the market, which is typical of marginalised border regions. In the case of the Albanian part of the study region, access is difficult because national tourism promotion remains weak. On the Montenegrin side, the border region of Plav is marginalised and dwarfed by the neighbouring destination. Only the German market reflects an interest in the Albanian Alps, due to GTZ's indirect promotional activities (involving volunteers from European hiking associations who act as multipliers using word-of-mouth marketing).

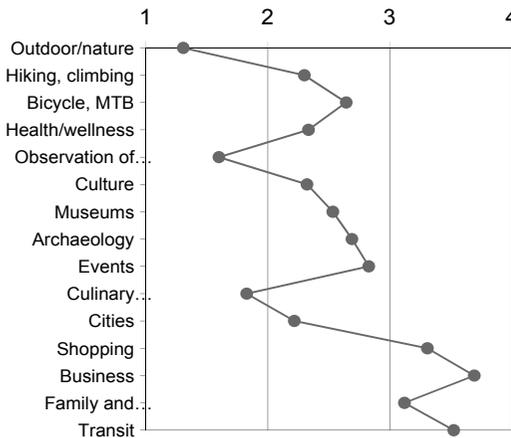
Intensification of the cross-border hiking product could attract greater attention to both regions. However, even if cross-border cooperation were officially “preached” in the region, the circumstances remain unfavourable. The impression given in the region is that its 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage acts as a barrier to more intense cooperation in the region.

### 3.2 Evaluation of visitors' views

The second part of the evaluation involved interviewing the (few) international tourists we met during our stay in the region. Although a total of only 32 interviews were conducted, they enable characteristics of the international target group to be highlighted. Over 80 per cent of the tourists interviewed were first-time visitors to Montenegro or Albania. They came from various Eastern and Western European countries or the United States. Quite a few of them had visited more than one Western Balkan country during their stay: *“In more than 85 % of the cases, the location where the questionnaire has been answered wasn't the only destination on the journey. The tourists mainly went for tours around the Balkan Peninsula and therefore visiting countries being part of former Yugoslavia, especially Croatia and second Bosnia-Herzegovina. Countries like Serbia, Kosovo or Macedonia were stated less. Concerning the relation between Albania and Montenegro following observation could be made. 16 % of*

those people questioned in Montenegro went to or are willing to visit Albania. On the other hand, 43 % of tourists questioned in Albania went to or are willing to visit Montenegro. Relative to the tourists being interviewed there is some kind of cross-border tourism between Montenegro and Albania. To generalize this point of view, it can be summarized, that tourists who are travelling to Montenegro and/or Albania, combine it for the most part with a stay in other countries of the Balkan Peninsula. The average time of the journey is about 19 days (Montenegro: 21 days; Albania: 13 days)" (Bulgakova, Stors & Vollmer 2012, p. 16/17).

Fig. 12: Reasons for visiting the study region  
(1 = very strong to 4 = weak)



Source: Bulgakova, Stors & Vollmer 2012, p. 18

The reasons why tourists come to the Western Balkans are mainly their desire to experience nature and to enjoy the specific cultural setting – including the culinary offer (cf. fig. 12). At the same time, both countries are seen in a very positive light as far as safety, hospitality and authenticity are concerned. In fact, with one exception (because “it’s a little bit isolated”), all of the tourists interviewed would recommend a journey to Montenegro and/or Albania.

The survey of the target groups was complemented by participant observation. With semi-structured notes, tourists’ impressions were confirmed by students “simulating” through the eyes of a tourist:

*“In total, the main reason to visit Thethi is its beautiful landscape, which attracts most tourists“ (Fischer, Humpert & Staudt 2012, p. 34)*

*“Finally, Plav and Gusinje are small villages where there is not a lot to see, but they are surrounded by a beautiful landscape, untouched nature and it is very quiet up there. At first glance, both villages do not impress the foreign visitor, but the nature is definitely worth the trip“ (Fischer, Humpert & Staudt 2012, p. 37).*

In short, from the perspective of tourists and the students’ impressions, the region has potential (cf. as well Bojkovska-Langer 2010, p. 68 et seqq.):

*“To put it in a nutshell, the position of the two countries Albania and Montenegro on the Balkan Peninsula make them attractive for private or organized round tours, which have destinations in several countries of former Yugoslavia. On the other hand, although Albania and Montenegro share the mountain chain of the Albanian Alps in common, which has a great potential for hiking or mountain biking, as well as the situation at the lake Skodra, there is just little cross border tourism in these parts of the country“ (Bulgakova, Stors & Vollmer 2012, p. 17)*

### 3.3 Product quality

Another part of the evaluation involved analysing the quality of the existing offer. Since hiking is one of the core products, the group performed “mystery shopping” by hiking in both parts of the study region (cf. fig. 13). It soon became clear that signposting fails to meet Central European standards in both Montenegro and Albania. It is easy to get lost on the rough trails. Nevertheless, evidence of efforts to provide advice and signs for hikers was visible. Once established (whether by official bodies in Montenegro or volunteers in Albania), however, there is no regular maintenance, representing a great obstacle. In other words, if a sign is destroyed, it is not automatically replaced. This is partly due to the fact that no local authority has been tasked with ensuring signs are inspected regularly. We felt that the locals are unaware of international hikers’ need for signposting. Hence weak local/regional organisational structures and a lack of awareness are the two key reasons for this weakness.

During their stay, each group of students checked their respective accommodation (each member of the group completed a service quality questionnaire). The results of the survey on accommodation in the Plav region (Plav and Gusinje) and the two guest houses in the Thethi region are shown in table 1.

Tab. 1: Evaluation of different quality aspects of accommodation

Category	Hotel Rosi (Gusinje)	Kula Damjanova (Plav)	Roze Rupa (Thethi)	Pavlin's Guesthouse (Thethi)
Arrival	2.53	2.32	4.32	4.02
Outside appearance	2.31	1.67	2.51	2.68
Entrance / reception	2.51	2.33	1.64	2.13
Hotel rooms	2.56	1.74	2.68	2.51
Sanitary facilities	2.75	1.89	2.61	3,00
Overall impression	2.68	1.59	2.29	2.19
Breakfast	3.13	2.00	1.95	1.62
Overall average	2.52	1.95	2.58	2.50

Fig 13: “Mystery hikers” in the Albanian Alps



Source: Photo Kagermeier May 2011

The evaluation (with ratings from 1 = very good to 5 = very poor) showed that, on average, a satisfactory level of quality is provided, although access to the Thethi region and the facilities offered there were perceived as being rather basic. However, this was partially compensated by the friendliness and hospitality of the staff or owners – and in some cases also by the food provided.

The students concluded: *“In most of the places, especially in the accommodations and restaurants, the expectations of the participants towards the quality were fulfilled. A big plus was often the hospitality and the friendliness of the employees and owners of accommodations and gastronomy. Small accommodations usually had better critiques than bigger hotels due to a personal character and the authenticity. In general the standard of hotels, gastronomy and other touristic offers cannot be compared with the German standard, which is likely to be the standard the participants of the excursion compared everything with. In Albania and Montenegro the tourism sector is still at its very beginning and there is still a lot to do”* (Kutter et al. 2012, p. 178).

### **3.4 The role played by various stakeholders**

Another group of students focused on the stakeholders who represent the relevant groups we met during the field work. To a certain extent, these findings complement other results (cf. tab. 2): a generally positive attitude to tourism and a certain amount of dedication were detected, with a slightly more positive impression in Albania. On the other hand, the qualitative impressions concerning some aspects that impact on the level of quality (language skills, knowledge) mirror the findings of the quality check. The role played by international donors was generally considered in a positive light.

One clear finding is that Montenegrin stakeholders are not very receptive to the idea of cross-border activities. One reason for this could, of course, be the legacy of the closed border in the second half of the 20th century. As *Lagiewski & Revelas* (2004, p. 5) pointed out concerning Montenegrin cross-border relations with Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the psychological consequences of the past remain a constraint for common activities. Nevertheless, Albania is often seen as a newly emerging competitor by Montenegrin stakeholders. There is a feeling that the “good old days” of tourism may have disappeared from Montenegro, creating new challenges, but this is not yet taken very seriously. Hence the slightly defensive attitude in Montenegro may reflect a kind of “Yugoslavian nostalgia”.

Tab. 2: Qualitative evaluation of stakeholders

	Language skills	Attitude to tourism	Will to encourage tourism	Touristic knowledge	Openness to tourists	Commitment (dedication)	Will to cooperate with other local stakeholders	Utilization of International aid	Proactiveness	Attitude to cross-border projects
<b>MONTENEGRO</b>										
Government & regional decision makers	↘	↗	↗	↘	↗	→	↑	↗	↘	↘
Academic Experts	↑	↑	↑	↗	↑	↗	↑	↗	↗	→
Providers of touristic product	↘	→	↗	↘	→	↗	→	↗	→	↘
Service providers	↘	→	↗	↘	→	→	→	↗	↘	↘
<b>ALBANIA</b>										
Government & regional decision makers	↘	↑	↑	↘	↑	↗	↑	↑	↗	↗
Academic Experts	↑	↑	↑	↗	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↗
Providers of touristic product	→	↗	→	↘	↗	↗	→	↑	→	↗
Service providers	↗	→	→	↘	↗	→	→	↗	→	↗

Source: Ibel & Lippe 2012, p. 2 & 6

## 4 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to take a closer look at cross-border activities between Montenegro and Albania. Both countries are attempting to present themselves with emerging nature-oriented products on the European market. Hence it stands to reason to cooperate in order to enhance the attractiveness of the product and to attract greater attention on the international market.

Although the results of the evaluation are anything but comprehensive and representative, a number of clear conclusions can be drawn. There is indeed

potential for establishing an attractive niche-market segment, but the poor quality of the offer – due to the local and regional stakeholders' poor or non-existent competencies and skills – prevents the destination from performing better. An even greater obstacle is the feeble cross-border cooperation in the region.

*“However, comparing the objectives and aims of the GIZ with the observations made on-site, it can be noted that there exists a certain discrepancy between the action plan, the efforts that are being made and the recent achievements. A fundamental requirement for any cross-border approach is the willingness of both partner-countries and their belief in the benefits of such an undertaking” (Müller, Meier & Klein 2012, p.11).*

Hence the idea of a “Balkans Peace Park” as an imaginary region and branded destination is a long way from being realised. The situation of two adjacent destinations with similar product options to facilitate cross-border activities, an official permeability of the border and similar cultural groups on both sides means, that all of the facilitating preconditions, as described by Timothy are met. However, it seems that it is not only organisational and professional barriers that hinder intensification of the collaboration, but mental barriers from the past. So far, international stakeholders' initiatives have not yet been able to overcome these invisible “barriers in the mind”.

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## Tourismus und Grenzen

Die Rolle von Grenzen im Tourismus steht im Mittelpunkt dieses Bandes. Grenzen werden ja oftmals als trennend und einschränkend verstanden. Gleichzeitig bieten sie Chancen für Kooperationen und Synergien, wenn sie überwunden oder positiv gewendet werden. Das Spektrum der Beiträge in diesem Band thematisiert damit zunächst die Rolle von politischen Grenzen für den Tourismus und behandelt folgende Themenfelder:

- Politische Grenzen und deren trennende Wirkung für Destinationen
- Grenzüberschreitende Kooperationen im Destinationsmanagement
- Grenzüberschreitender Tourismus
- Tourismus als Teil der grenzüberschreitenden Verständigung.

Gleichzeitig deckt der aufgespannte Rahmen auch Themen ab, die sich mit der Begrifflichkeit von "Grenzen" in einem weiteren Sinn und mit der übertragenen Bedeutung von Grenzen auseinandersetzen:

- Grenzen der Wahrnehmung und von Handlungsmotiven zwischen Akteuren mit unterschiedlichen Rationalitäten
- Institutionelle und organisationalen Grenzen und Constraints im Destinationsmanagement und der Umgang mit diesen
- Grenzen der touristischen Tragfähigkeit
- Tourismus jenseits der Grenze der „Tourist Bubble“
- Grenzerfahrungen und Grenzüberschreitungen im Tourismus.