

## THE ROLE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURIST BRAND IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

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**Purpose:** This article addresses the problem of transnational destinations branding. An example of such a destination is the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), which is the first macro-region of the EU. The main objective of the article is to answer the question of how the cultural heritage of the BSR can be used in the branding development process of the Baltic Sea Region. A secondary objective is to identify the key cultural resources and stakeholders of the BSR.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The achievement of the research objectives called for conducting a literature study related to the branding process of tourism destinations. Based on secondary sources, including materials of international organisations, key cultural resources of the BSR were identified, key stakeholders involved in the branding process were identified. In addition, a participatory observation method over the last 30 years was used involving observation of the tourism and cultural cooperation process within the BSR.

**Findings:** Research has shown that the Baltic Sea Region has an attractive and diverse cultural potential, which could be used in the creation of a tourism brand. This brand could be based on common themes such as Hanseatic heritage, Viking heritage, amber heritage and maritime heritage. Attempts have been made to create a territorial and touristic brand. The most advanced activities were carried out by the Baltic Tourism Commission (BTC). An opportunity to continue territorial branding efforts is provided by the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

**Research limitations/implications:** The article only identifies key resources and key stakeholders in the culture and tourism system. The evolution of the branding process is presented very briefly.

**Practical implications:** A tourism brand can play an important role in promoting the Baltic Sea Region as a tourist destination. It can connect stakeholders, inspiring them to work together effectively. There is a consensus among BSR stakeholders that a brand can bring them a number of benefits. There is an emerging need to develop systemic solutions. This paper may help in their development.

**Social implications:** A territorial brand that takes into account cultural assets can contribute to social integration and the development of a transnational identity. This is particularly relevant in the context of the labile geopolitical situation in the BSR.

**Originality/value:** The article synthesises the cultural heritage of the BSR, identifies the main stakeholders and analyses activities to date. It may be of interest to authorities and organisations related to BSR culture and tourism.

**Keywords:** tourism, culture, branding, destination, the Baltic Sea.

**Category of the paper:** Case study, General Review.

## 1. Introduction

A tourist brand is a complex and multidimensional category (Kuźniar, 2018; Gartner, 2014; Ibáñez, George, 2017). It is one of territorial brand forms (Feijó de Almeida, Cardoso, 2022). Its recipients are domestic and international travellers visiting a selected area called a destination (Barkhordari et al., 2023). Panasiuk (2013) emphasises that a tourist brand is tied to a tourist product. It reveals its uniqueness, facilitating a competitive advantage in the global tourist market (Miličević et al., 2016). It can also contribute to the prosperity of the destination's inhabitants (Horodecka, 2011).

A brand is an element of communication (Zalech, 2011). It is a message (Perzyńska, 2013) addressed to diverse target groups (investors, tourists, residents and employees). It facilitates integration with the internal and external environment (Sycha et al., 2021). It represents a commitment from its creator to its recipients (Armstrong, Kotler, 2014). It attracts people and convinces them that a product has specific qualities that it may actually lack in reality (Anholt, 2006).

Territorial branding is the process of creating and implementing in the minds of the public a vision representing a specific idea. This is done through the use of visual (logo, sign, symbol), verbal-semantic (keyword, slogan, thought), audio (melody, anthem) messages in a context clearly associated with the territory (Studzieniecki, Kurjata, 2010). According to Anholt (2006), a brand reflects the spirit of a community, sets a common purpose that unites an organisation, a place, a reputation derived from the product itself or the experience of consumers.

A specific case of destinations are cross-border destinations, located on the territory of at least two countries. These can be divided into natural (e.g. mountains, lakes) and anthropogenic (e.g. Euroregions, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, EU macro-regions). Branding cross-border destinations is more difficult than branding destinations located in one country (Nowak, Kruczek, 2022). According to L. de Chernatony (2003), one of the biggest challenges in the branding process 'is the coordination of all value-adding activities to achieve an integrated brand'. A transnational brand requires effective stakeholder cooperation (Góral, 2014; Keller et al., 2008), and the construction of an efficient marketing management system (Zdon-Korzeniowska, 2012). The identification of common cultural motives plays an important role in the creation of a transnational brand (Studzieniecki et al., 2023). Cultural heritage is seen as an element that influences the sense of identity and belonging of individuals or social groups (Smith, 2006).

### **1.1. The Baltic Sea region as a tourist destination**

The Baltic Sea Region, also known as Baltic Europe (Zaleski, Wojewódka, 1977; Palmowski, 2021) is a combination of sea and hinterland. In this region, natural beauty meets rich history and cultural diversity (Ellefors, 2000). It is an area of unique geopolitical importance, where the interests and spheres of influence of different states and nations intersected. In other words, cooperation has always interchanged with rivalry in this region for centuries (Nocuń, Stępniewski, 2023).

Noteworthy is the conceptualisation of the Baltic Sea Region. The word ‘Baltic’ is probably derived from the Lithuanian word ‘Baltas’ meaning ‘white’ (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2024). The body of water that the Baltic peoples (Lithuanians and Latvians) and the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians) call the Baltic Sea for Germans and Scandinavians is the East Sea (German: Ostsee, Swedish: Östersjön), for Estonians it is the West Sea (est. Läänemeri).

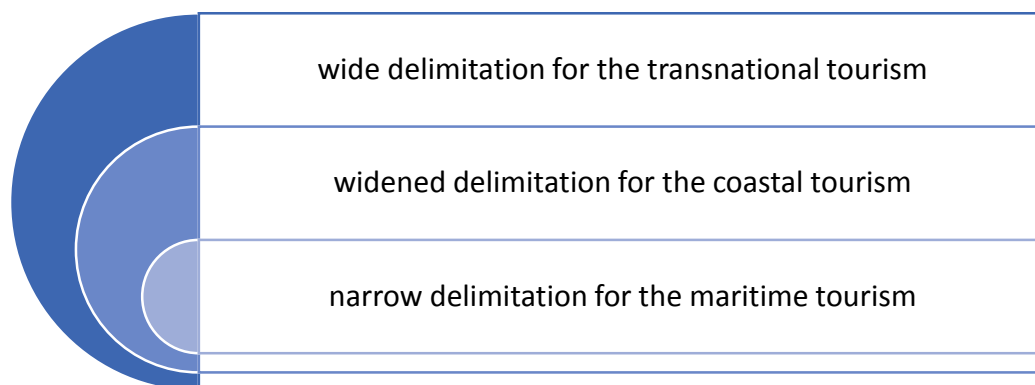
There is no consensus on what areas the Baltic Sea Region comprises. The issue of delimitation of this area is the subject of a lively scientific discourse. Klemeshev et al. (2017) analysing existing definitions and approaches suggests a threefold delimitation of this Region: narrow, extended and broad (Fig. 1). In the first version, the Region consists of 9 countries, including 6 countries in their entirety (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and 3 countries in part (Poland, Russia and Germany). The extended version adds Belarus and Norway, which are located within the Baltic Sea catchment area. The broader version adds countries such as Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Iceland, which are functionally linked to the Region. Given that the Baltic became an internal sea of the European Union in 2004 (omitting the 3 oblasts of the Russian Federation) and that the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR, 2024) was implemented in 2009, a new pragmatic conceptualisation of the CBSS emerged, encompassing 8 EU Member States plus Norway, which is a member of the European Economic Area. Russia and Belarus were invited to join. However, with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war (Sliwa, 2023), cooperation with these countries was put on hold.



**Figure 1.** Triple delimitation of the Baltic Sea Region.

Source: Klemeshev et al. 2017.

In the context of the tourism function, the concept of triple delimitation must be modified (Studzieniecki, Palmowski, 2019). The narrowest delimitation, limited to the boundaries of the water body, is made for the purposes of maritime tourism, including cruising, ferry and sailing. Another one, encompassing countries (or parts thereof) located by the sea, is used for coastal tourism (leisure, recreational, health). The widest and most open delimitation is used for transnational tourism, including cultural tourism (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Triple delimitation of the Baltic Sea Region for tourism purposes.

Source: own study.

In its promotional materials, the international organisation Cruise Baltic (2024) admits that the weather on the Baltic is not the best. Winters are long and the food can be strange. However, they mention assets such as historic architecture and contemporary design. It is demonstrated that the oldest monarchies in the world, the youngest democracies, art, crafts, festivals and fairy tales can be the attractions that draw tourists. The Baltic Sea Region is an area characterised by a multicultural identity. Multiculturalism defines a social space in which inhabitants adhere to different normative, religious or customary systems and are aware of these differences (Nikitorowicz, 2018; Śliz, Szczepański, 2020).

There are 122 UNESCO World Heritage sites in the BSR (in nine countries). The majority of these (111 sites) are cultural heritage sites (UNESCO, 2024). The highest number of sites are in Germany (55 sites), the fewest in Estonia (2 sites). The UNESCO-listed sites include urban, sacred, military and industrial heritage, among others.

The shared cultural heritage of the BSR is reflected in the European Cultural Routes. The BSR countries appear on 37 of the 48 European Cultural Routes. In most cases, this heritage is pan-European (e.g. Via Habsburg, Destination Napoleon) and therefore cannot be a distinctive feature of a destination. The region is also characterised by industrial heritage including shipyards, steel mills, mines and chemical plants (ERIH, 2024). Most of the Baltic States have sites included in the European Cemetery Route.

Looking for typically Baltic motifs, it can be seen that all the BSR states are associated with the Hanseatic and Viking cultures. Formally, 8 out of 9 BSR states belong to the two European routes, but in reality the Hanseatic and Viking heritage covers the entire analysed area. Some cultural routes reflect the heritage of only certain BSR countries. An example is the St. Olaf Route covering the Scandinavian countries. The fame of this route in the Middle Ages rivalled those of the pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostella. For nearly four centuries, thousands of pilgrims peregrinated to the tomb of St Olaf in Trondheim Cathedral (Duda, 2016).

An important transnational cultural theme of the BSR is the heritage associated with amber. This includes, among others, museums, galleries and manufacturies (Cudny et al., 2023). This primarily concerns the South Baltic countries, i.e. Poland, Russia (Königsberg Oblast), Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Work on the development and promotion of the international amber route has been going on for many years (Studzieniecki, 2022). Unfortunately, it has not yet been included in the list of European routes. When promoting the BSR as an attractive transnational tourist destination, it is worthwhile to make use of the prestigious awards and prizes given for achievements in the field of cultural preservation and development (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*European Culture Routes in the Baltic Sea Region states*

No.	Year	Route	PL	DE	DK	SE	NO	FI	EE	LV	LT	Σ
1.	1987	Santiago de Compostella Pilgrim Routes	+								+	2
2.	1991	Hansa	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	8
3.	1993	Viking Route	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		8
4.	2004	European Route of Jewish Heritage	+	+							+	3
5.	2004	European Mozart Ways		+								1
6.	2005	Saint Martin of Tours Route	+	+								2
7.	2005	Cluniac Sites in Europe	+	+								2
8.	2005	Via Regia	+	+								2
9.	2007	The Romanesque Routes of European Heritage		+								1
10.	2010	European Cemeteries Route	+	+	+	+	+		+			6
11.	2010	Prehistoric Rock Art Trails					+	+				2
12.	2010	European Route of Historic Thermal Towns	+	+					+			3
13.	2010	Route of Saint Olav Ways			+	+	+	+	+			5
14.	2012	European Route of Ceramics	+	+			+					3
15.	2013	European Route of Megalithic Culture		+	+	+						3
16.	2013	Huguenot and Waldensian Trail		+								1
17.	2014	Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century In Europe's Urban Memory	+									1
18.	2014	Réseau Art Nouveau Network		+			+			+		3
19.	2014	Via Habsburg		+								1
20.	2015	European Routes of Emperor Charles V		+								1
21.	2015	Destination Napoleon	+	+								2
22.	2015	In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson		+								1
23.	2016	Fortified Towns of the Grande Region		+								1
24.	2018	Impressionisms Routes	+	+	+			+			+	5
25.	2019	European Route of Industrial Heritage	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		7
26.	2019	Iron Curtain Trail – EuroVelo 13	+	+			+	+				4
27.	2019	Le Corbusier Destinations : Architectural Promenades		+								1
28.	2019	Liberation Route Europe	+	+				+				3
29.	2020	European Route of Historic Gardens	+	+								2
30.	2020	Via Romea Germanica		+								
31.	2021	Alvar Aalto Route – 20th Century Architecture and Design		+	+			+	+			4
32.	2021	European Route d'Artagnan		+								1
33.	2021	Iron Age Danube Route		+								1
34.	2022	Historic Cafés Route			+							2
35.	2022	European Fairy Tale Route		+							+	2
36.	2022	Women Writers Route	+									1
37.	2023	Transhumance trails				+						1
38.	2024	European Route of Historic Pharmacies									+	1
Total			18	30	8	7	9	9	6	4	6	97

Source: own study based on: COE, 2024.

The distinguished ones include cities from all the BSR countries. One of the more well-known awards is the title of European Capital of Culture. In practice, only larger cities have the chance to receive this title. Therefore, awards such as the BSR Pearl of Culture deserve attention. This is a new award that enables smaller cities to support the use of cultural resources and improve the quality of life of their residents. This award is a typically Baltic one.

**Table 2.**

*Prestigious awards and prizes for cultural preservation in the BSR*

No.	State	Category and city			
		<i>European Capital of Culture</i>	<i>European Heritage Token</i>	<i>EDEN award (culture)</i>	<i>Pearl of Culture RMB</i>
1.	Poland	Kraków, Wrocław	Gdansk, Lublin, Warszawa, Łużna, Łambinowice, Wrocław		
2.	Germany	Berlin, Weimar, Essen	Hambach, Muenster, Onabruck, Leipzig, Altranft, Stuttgart		Kiel
3.	Danemark	Copenhagen, Aarhus		Middelfart	Svendborg
4.	Sweden	Stockholm, Umeå			
5.	Norway	Bergen, Stavanger			
6.	Finland	Helsinki, Turku	Jyväskylä, Kalevala Helsinki	Fiskars	Jakobstad
7.	Estonia	Tallinn, Tartu	Tallin, Tartu	Viljandi	
8.	Latvia	Riga	Riga, Turaida	Cēsis, Rezekne	Rūjiena
9.	Lithuania	Vilnius, Kaunas	Kaunas	Pakruojis, Paliesius	

Source: own elaboration based on: COE, 2024.

## 2. Cultural heritage in the development of the BSR tourism brand

### 2.1. Origins of the Baltic Sea Region tourism brand development

The need for creating a common tourist brand for the BSR emerged at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the development of international tourism cooperation between the countries bordering the Baltic Sea. This cooperation was carried out by numerous organisations bringing together tourist sector entities, government and local administrations, universities and non-governmental organisations (Kizielewicz, 2012).

There was a growing awareness of a common identity among BSR stakeholders. The Baltic society has been united by a maritime tradition that had created common values over the centuries. The concept of ‘Homo Balticus’ emerged to identify the cultural attributes of a Baltic Sea resident (Gebhard, 2009). It was believed that ‘Homo Balticus’ was deeply rooted and integrated into the marine environment, fully aware of the common destiny, open to other languages, cultures and religions (Pacuk, Palmowski, 1999). Another idea that was supposed

to reflect a common identity was ‘Balticness’ (Chekov, 2023). Balticness functioned as an imagined community, rooted in the history of human interactions with a particular focus on trade links, independent of nationality (Nocuń, Stępniewski, 2023). Poznański (2020) rightly notes that the concept of ‘Baltic identity’ is highly ambiguous and should also take into account regional variation. *‘If we assume that we should all be the same (identical), we obviously fall into a blind trap. We are different in our Baltic Sea region. We have different histories, cultures, languages and, despite globalisation, we have different economies and even education systems. We often look at supposedly obvious facts from different perspectives, understanding their meaning in different ways.’*

## 2.2. National tourism brands

In the context of tourism, each of the BSR countries has its own promotional policy (Jordan, 2014), builds its own territorial brands (Andreja, 2018), including tourism brands (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Logos of national tourism brands of the BSR countries.

Source: own elaboration based on websites.

When analysing the logos of individual countries, one can notice their considerable diversity. A common feature of most logotypes is the exposure of the countries name and the colours of the flag. The reference to the colours of the flag can be subtle (e.g. the logo of Poland) or expressive, as in the case of the logos of Sweden and Norway.

The logos differ in concept and message. The Estonian logo is characterised by minimalism, while the Finnish logo is inspired by abstractionism. Poland emphasises nature (tree, mountain, water), while Lithuania emphasises beauty in its promotional slogan. Denmark, in turn, refers to love through the use of the heart. Noteworthy is Latvia's logotype, in which the idea of sustainable development can be seen.



### 2.3. Attempts at creating a transnational BSR brand

Independently of national branding, attempts have been made to create a common BSR brand. Noteworthy are the 4 organisations that have taken action in this regard (Fig. 4). Their logos refer to the sea, represented by waves.



**Figure 4.** Logos of selected international organisations of the Baltic Sea Region.

Source: own study.

The first international organisation to attempt to create a tourism brand was the Baltic Tourism Commission (BTC). It was established in the 1980s. It functioned successfully for 30 years. Its statutory objective was to promote the BSR as a cross-border tourist destination (Ellefors, 2000). Marketing activities also included the development of cross-border tourist products. These made use of the common cultural heritage (Studzieniecki, 2000) including themes such as:

1. Hanseatic heritage.
2. Viking heritage.
3. Amber heritage.
4. Maritime heritage.

Popular products at the time were themed coach tours and Baltic Sea cruises. Marketing activities used the slogan 'Fjords, forests, fauna - culture, history, sauna'. The BTC logo appeared in promotional materials, including brochures, maps and tourist catalogues.

Building the BSR brand is also on the spectrum of interests of the intergovernmental organisation established in 1992, the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS, 2024).

The organisation's activities have focused on 3 priorities:

1. Regional identity.
2. Safe and Secure Region.
3. Sustainable and Prosperous Region.

It was recognised that developing a Baltic Sea Region identity would increase people's sense of belonging to a common area. The development of a regional identity implied the activation of people-to-people contacts through dialogue, macro-regional networks and international institutions.

On the initiative of the CBSS, the Baltic Sea Heritage Committee was established in 1998. Its aim became the promotion of cultural heritage as a strategic factor in the development of the CBSS. The Committee was composed of experts nominated by the state authorities of the Baltic Sea States. The Committee addressed both heritage protection issues and the implementation of sustainable management principles. Within the Committee, 6 working groups were established (Table 4). The objectives of the working groups' activities determined the directions of the work on the protection and promotion of cultural heritage.

**Table 3.**

*Working groups and objectives of the Baltic Sea Heritage Committee.*

No.	Working group	Aims
1.	Cultural underwater heritage	Developing and coordinating a regional agreement on the protection of underwater cultural heritage in the Baltic Sea. The objects of interest are historic wrecks and underwater archaeological structures.
2.	Cultural coast and maritime heritage	Deepening cooperation between authorities in the field of coastal culture and its development and supporting strategies for the sustainable use of coastal areas. The subject of interest is the documentation and promotion of coastal culture in the field of research and exhibitions.
3.	20 <sup>th</sup> century building & design heritage	Deepening knowledge of post-war building heritage, with particular emphasis on architecture. Supporting urban planning that takes into account cultural heritage. Assisting in mediation and decision-making.
4.	Cultural heritage and climate change	Exchange of knowledge on the impact of climate change on cultural heritage in the BSR. Identification of key issues that heritage management organisations should prioritise (e.g. adaptation strategies for cultural heritage buildings, threats to archaeological sites).
5.	Illegal trading with cultural goods	Strengthening of the legal framework and enforcement mechanisms that prevent illicit trade in cultural artifacts. Regional cooperation to increase awareness, improve monitoring, prevent looting and unauthorized sale of historical objects.
6.	Culture routes	Promoting and more effectively using the Council of Europe Cultural Routes programme in the Baltic Sea Region. This programme supports cooperation between the cultural heritage and tourism sectors and serves as a tool for developing sustainable cultural tourism.

Source: own study based on CBSS, 2024.

Another organisation that attempted to create a brand was the Baltic Development Forum. The organisation was founded in 1998. Its founders were politicians associated with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The BDF's mission was to make the Baltic Sea Region one of the most dynamic, innovative and competitive growth centres in the world (BDF, 2024). The organisation initiated action by organising a workshop with BSR stakeholders. The workshop was coordinated by Simon Anholt - a territorial branding expert. The workshop resulted in the identification of 3 transnational themes and an accompanying 'story'.

**Table 4.***BSR branding themes by Simon Anholt*

L.p.	Motive	Story
1.	$E + W = B^2$	The Baltic Sea region is an optimal cultural mix, combining the vigour, appetite, talent, creativity and resources of the emerging Baltic States, Poland and Russia with the cultural, technical, economic, social, political maturity, stability, experience and confidence of Scandinavia and northern Germany. It is the perfect combination of the developing and the developed; the best of both worlds; a wise head in a young body.
2.	Born in the age of globalisation	The Baltic Sea Region is the only economically significant place on earth that was born for and in a global world. Unlike most other regions, it is not struggling to cope with a different world order to the one in which it grew up, but is itself a product of globalisation and therefore has global competitiveness within it.
3.	The world's smartest region	The Baltic Sea Region is a model of a talent economy; its main resource is brainpower. Therefore, one can be absolutely certain about the long-term sustainability of the region's economic growth, the qualifications of its workforce, the scope of its interests and the stability of its political framework: this region is smart enough.

Source: own study.

A new phase in the construction of a regional identity began with the birth of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR, 2004). This was the first macro-regional strategy of the EU. It covered the 8 European Union countries bordering the Baltic Sea. It had 3 main objectives (protection of the sea, integration of the region and increasing prosperity) and 9 specific objectives (Palmowski, 2021). The governance model of the Strategy has evolved. It is now based on 14 thematic areas linked to the main objectives. One such area is Culture. Poland and the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein became the coordinators of this area. The protection of the cultural heritage of the Baltic Sea region and the strengthening of regional identity were identified as one of the priorities. In 2024, a workshop organised by the OT Culture coordinators was held in Visby during the annual EU Strategy Forum, during which participants called for the continuation of efforts to develop the territorial brand of the BSR.

### 3. Conclusions

The creation of a BSR tourism brand based on cultural heritage is quite a challenge. There is no consensus on the delimitation and conceptualisation of the area. The BSR does not have as rich a cultural heritage as the southern European countries. The number of UNESCO-listed sites is moderate outside Germany. Countries located in the BSR have sites included in many European Cultural Routes. However, the number of routes covering the typically Baltic heritage is limited. As in other regions, the BSR states simultaneously cooperate and compete in a competitive tourism market. Studzieniecki and Kurjata (2010) emphasised that the branding of the Baltic Sea region is very complex. The region itself is shaped by a huge diversity of cultures, languages, traditions, histories and levels of pace and economic development. Its identity has only been partially identified. For many years there was no political need for

branding. Often differences arose, which were the cause of many conflicts and disputes between the countries of the region.

Numerous organisations have attempted to create a tourism brand. The closest to success was the Baltic Tourism Commission, which accurately identified transnational motifs and succeeded in marketing tourism products. Transnational cultural motifs are not viewed with the same enthusiasm by all countries. The Hanseatic motif has Germanic roots, the Viking motif may be associated with a bleak history. The amber motif is not attractive to Scandinavians, while the story of St. Olaf is of moderate interest to Slavs.

The territorial brand motif proposal suggested by S. Anholt is worth a closer look. Unfortunately, these were only proposals that were put to practice. According to Andersson (2007), the most significant barrier to brand development is the lack of a single decision-making body and the lack of unity of purpose among potential stakeholders. In the last few years, this problem has been recognised by the coordinators of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. A structure has emerged that is able to continue working towards the creation of a territorial brand and an associated tourism brand. The success of this work will depend on the determination of the coordinators of the Thematic Areas (such as OT Culture and OT Tourism) and on the commitment of the BSR shareholders.

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