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*Tourism Development and Promotion Project*

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# VIA DINARICA CORRIDOR

## Mega Trail

### - Overview -

#### **BACKGROUND:**

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Adventure tourism has been growing exponentially over the past years with tourist visiting destinations previously undiscovered. This has led to new sites and destinations being opened to the market, but it also highlighted the need for a coordinated and responsible development of this new segment. There are numerous initiatives throughout the Western Balkan region that look at and support adventure tourism development.

Via Dinarica has been recognised as a regional initiative that has already achieved some recognition in the adventure market. It is also recognised that on the ground there are still considerable differences as to the offer and services available to the visitors. Additionally, the identity of Via Dinarica is still not adequately developed and communicated.

For the Via Dinarica – and translated to Western Balkans adventure travel offer - it is necessary to develop and communicate both of the above aspects in order to reach its full potential.

Via Dinarica, as a regional effort, can:

- Attract a high level of visitors and media, as engines to create economic benefit to local communities;
- Lower barriers and develop mutually beneficial tourism flows between and among neighbouring economies;
- Enable remote and rural areas to create attractions and products that would positively affect quality of living for local population; and
- Encourage the development of new skills among tourism operators, including at the grassroots level.

#### **About adventure trails:**

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##### ***Via Dinarica Mega Trail***

The Via Dinarica Mega Trail is a long distance hiking trail that stretches nearly 2,000 kilometers and extends the entire length of the Dinaric Alps, connecting the Western Balkans' economies: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo<sup>1</sup> and Albania, with an initiative to also include the Sharr Mountain at the border between Kosovo\* and Republic of North Macedonia.

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

The Via Dinarica corridor has three trails: the White, the Green and the Blue, each offering hikes of varying difficulty for nature lovers and adventurous minds. In the last two years a sister trail has emerged exploring the Dinaric Alps by bike – the Trans Dinarica.

The genesis of the Via Dinarica dates to 2009-2010 with the pilot portion of the trail connecting Sutjeska National Park in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Durmitor National Park in Montenegro.

In 2013, the route was charted from Slovenia to the border of Kosovo\*, Albania, and Montenegro. One wing of trail goes beyond the Dinaric Alps and on to the Sharr Mountain at the border between Albania and Republic of North Macedonia. During the period from 2014 to 2018 a major investment was made with the support of USAID and UNDP during which the Via Dinarica White Trail was fully developed through Bosnia and Herzegovina, while during the same time a cross-border initiatives supported by EU developed sections of the trail connecting Montenegro and Kosovo\* and Kosovo\* and Albania. Further trail development support is projected for the upcoming period, again focusing on specific segments of the trail.

Currently, Via Dinarica regional coordination platform is under development, bringing together lead organisations from each Via Dinarica economy. The platform already includes national members from Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo\* and Serbia. The platform will continue to expand to include lead organisations from Montenegro and Republic of North Macedonia.

From the market perspective Via Dinarica has already gained recognition as well.

In 2014, American adventure magazine [Outside](#) named the Via Dinarica the world's best new hiking trail. In 2015, [Paste](#) magazine did the same. [Wanderlust](#) travel magazine and [The Guardian](#) shortlisted the trail as a must-do adventure stop for 2016. [National Geographic Traveler](#) magazine named the trekking route one of its "Best of the World" destinations for 2017. The Via Dinarica has also been covered by Vogue magazine, [Wizz](#) Airlines in-flight magazine, and [Lonely Planet](#) and more than 100 articles have been published in the travel media.

The current status of Via Dinarica development indicates high levels of organisation and development in Slovenia and Croatia – at the northern end of the trail. Following the above mentioned USAID and UNDP funded project, the core organisational structure has been established in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

Since early 2014 there has been strong private sector recognition for close regional coordination of the Via Dinarica product that led to establishment of the Via Dinarica Alliance – the business partnership that jointly presented Via Dinarica in the international market and closely coordinated delivery of the Via Dinarica products on the ground.

From the development perspective it is important to highlight that Via Dinarica Mega Trail is a flagship programme of the Via Dinarica adventure travel and cultural corridor.

### ***Trans Dinarica***

The first mountain bike trail to connect the Western Balkans, the Trans Dinarica is a

continuation of the Via Dinarica concept and aims to expand the area's tourism product base.

Trans Dinarica is created to address mountain bikers as a market segment tailored to their specific needs. The biking route also traverses the eight economies of the region—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, Kosovo\*, and North Macedonia—and will bring more small business-engine opportunities and capacity building to communities on the trail and in the vicinity.

#### ***Other initiatives and thematic trails***

In addition to the above described, there are cross border initiatives on grassroots level where individuals (guides) and small businesses are connecting, sharing information and coordinating themselves.

They are trying to meet the demand that shows that adventure travellers want to visit more than one or two economies in the region and coming back again.

They are exchanging information about the guests, developing products together and working on joint promotion for bigger recognition.

These grassroots initiatives are mainly focused on activities that the region has endless opportunities for such as ski touring, cat and freeride skiing, mountain biking (MTB), sport and rock climbing, rafting, etc.

The connection or integration of these fragmented initiatives within the regional offer under Via Dinarica corridor requires harmonisation and diversification of the itineraries and offers with other thematic trails (full adventure meaning including nature and cultural assets in the areas) existent at grassroots level.

#### **On-line marketing and visibility of adventure trails**

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Via Dinarica and other regional adventure routes in Western Balkan economies already have a certain online presence.

The website [www.viadinarica.com](http://www.viadinarica.com) has been established, currently offering information on the trail and development activities in those economies where there is an active Via Dinarica development effort. A partnership has been established with the Outdoor Active [www.outdooractive.com](http://www.outdooractive.com) through which an App is also made available. The information is updated targeting the itineraries and tourist services located along Dinaric Alps in WB6 economies. In this App you will find products of Via Dinarica and other thematic trails connected with it.

Other important links featuring regional adventures trails are:

[www.accursedcultour.com](http://www.accursedcultour.com)

<http://www.mokragora.org/>

[www.balkanridingroutes.eu](http://www.balkanridingroutes.eu)

<https://vipdinarica.com/en/bike-trail/>

<http://trails.vipdinarica.com/en/home/>

[https://www.rcc.int › download › pubs](https://www.rcc.int/download/pubs)

<https://www.rcc.int/news/577/via-dinarica-just-keeps-getting-better>

<https://www.rcc.int/news/579/via-dinarica-expands-its-regional-coordination-structure-throughout-western-balkans>

#### **Public infrastructure and services along adventure trails**

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Tourism infrastructure on adventure sites is still very weak, often non-existent.

There are both public and privately-owned sites along Via Dinarica and other routes that currently cannot be located by independent travellers – the signage to these sights has either never been placed or needs to be replaced.

Similarly, any new products and trail segments that are prepared and opened for visitors need to be adequately signed.

It is necessary altogether to take into consideration the initial signing of the trail or location/site, and the maintenance and management of the signage posted.

In order to communicate the common vision and standards of services, the signage needs to be standardised – both in visual and in meaning of each sign established. This refers to both directional and interpretative signage.

In addition to the signage itself, and particularly in remote areas, there is often

lack of adequate infrastructure along the trail that would provide adequate and needed services – i.e. accommodation, bicycle servicing centres or spare part services, dry toilets, and similar.

Close cooperation is needed with national parks and public authorities along the routes to find solutions and resources to address specific needs. In addition a common approach to address those solutions through practices of responsible tourism that causes minimum intervention into local environment, with full respect to existing traditional architecture and natural settings need to be agreed and pursued as a regional approach.