

TRANSNATIONAL TOURIST DESTINATION MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION

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Received 17 July 2020

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-3-8

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Meyer, B., 2020

The issue of tourist destination management has been widely reflected in scientific literature. However, transnational destinations, i.e. those that are located on the territory of several countries, have not been given enough attention. The development of transnational destinations can occur provided there is close cooperation among key stakeholders. In the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) conditions for effective cooperation were created at the end of the 20th century when integration processes intensified. Currently, the BSR is the first macro-region of the European Union to implement a transnational strategy, in which tourism is recognised as a development priority. Creating an effective tourist destination management system has become a key challenge in this process. This article aims to identify and critically analyse the concept of transnational tourist destination management. Another goal is to identify the changing determinants of tourism management in the BSR and to explore relations between key stakeholders. To this end, we conducted a review of literature on destination management. We carried out a critical analysis of secondary sources (documents, information materials, the Internet resources) and supplemented the review with our insights from participatory observation. We also obtained additional information from interviews. Three models of destination management were identified: marketing-oriented, planning-oriented, and governance-oriented. Our research shows that the evolution of destination management is characterised by a gradual increase in the participation of public entities. This is related to the marginalisation of the tourism industry, which resulted in a systematic decrease in state funding for maintaining destination management structures. Acquiring the European Union funds from the European Territorial Cooperation Programs has become a partial but not entirely effective solution to this problem.

Keywords:

transnational tourist destination, tourist destination management, international cooperation, Baltic Sea Region, Baltic Region

To cite this article: Studzieniecki, T., Jakubowski, A., Meyer, B. 2020, Transnational tourist destination management: a case study of the Baltic Sea Region, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 12, no 3, p. 127–146. doi: 10.5922/2078-8555-2020-3-8.

1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, as a result of geopolitical changes in Europe, the Baltic Sea Region became an area of very dynamic social and economic cooperation. This cooperation intensified with the accession of Poland and the Baltic republics to the European Union in 2004. The next stage of Baltic integration was the development of an innovative European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region in 2009. One of its priorities was transnational tourism development. There were several steps undertaken to build and implement a model of multi-level tourism management. It should be emphasized that this was not the first attempt to manage a transnational tourist destination of the BSR.

The paper presents a comparative analysis of the current form and previous approaches to Baltic tourism destination management. This helps to gain an understanding of the determinants of tourism cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. It also provides useful insights for refining the concept of transnational destination management. Among all the EU macroregions, the BSR is the most advanced in terms of transnational tourism development. As a result, it is becoming a kind of testing ground whose experience can be applied in other EU macroregions.

2. Approaches to tourist destination management

There are many definitions of tourist destinations in the scientific literature. However, despite the different interpretations, the definition of a 'destination' can be reduced to four categories:

1. an area [1] (commune [2], space, territory, region, place) that constitute the destination of visitors' travels [3];
2. a set of entities (institutions [4], clusters [5]) that create conditions for tourism in the visited area;
3. a collection of products consumed by visitors during their stay in this area [6];
4. a collection of experiences (feelings) that visitors draw from visiting this area [7].

These different concepts can complement each other enabling a clearer understanding of the term [8].

According to UNWTO's definition¹, a tourism destination is a physical space in which a tourist spends at least one overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions and tourist resources that can be found within one day's return travel time. It has physical and administrative boundaries defining its management, and images and perceptions defining its market competitiveness.

In turn, in the European Commission's guide on the management of sustainable tourism areas², a 'destination' is described as:

1. a geographic area that is currently or potentially attractive to visitors/tourists;
2. a place or area which is recognized and can easily be defined as a visitor destination and has a range of facilities and products in place for tourism purposes;
3. a place or area which is promoted as a destination;
4. a place or area where the visitor management process usually includes a range of public and private-sector stakeholders together with the host community;
5. a place or area where it is possible to measure the supply of and demand for tourism services, i.e. the visitor economy.

Scientific research proves that destinations are crucial points for tourism development [9], and thus, for the study of tourism. However, they are difficult to manage due to their complex organizational systems [10]. This complexity results from the fact that destinations are driven by a wide range of forces in their internal and external environments [11]. Destination management is often entrusted to specialized professional institutions called 'destination management organizations' [12]. Another popular solution is shared management performed by public administration entities and organizations carrying out only some destination management tasks [13]. These tasks mainly concern marketing [14], therefore such organizations are called 'destination marketing organizations' [15].

¹ *A Practical Guide to Tourism Destination Management*. 2007, Madrid, World Tourism Organization.

² *The European Tourism Indicator System ETIS — toolkit for sustainable destination management*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/offer/sustainable/indicators_en (accessed 02.07.2020).

In the case of international destinations, management is much more difficult. Among other factors, this is due to different administrative structures, legal orders, and the incompatibility of tourism management systems. For this reason, scholars and practitioners seek a new organizational, legal, and economic solutions to support the development of transnational tourism [16]. The used and adapted solutions include those developed within the framework of multilevel governance [17]. They involve the participation of key stakeholders from the destination in the management process to share the costs of tourism development.

3. The Baltic Sea Region as a tourist destination

The definition of the Baltic Region, and thus, the delimitation of destinations, remains an unresolved problem. There are many definitions of the BSR [18]. Undisputedly, the region includes the countries located on the coast of the Baltic sea. However, sometimes, Belarus and Norway, which do not have access to it, are also seen as part of the Region, as these countries are located in the Baltic catchment area and are functionally connected with the rest of the Baltic States.

For the purposes of the study, it can be assumed that the Baltic Sea Region is spatially equivalent to the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme's area covering ten countries, eight EU member states and two partner countries. The EU member states are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany (the States (Länder) of Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schleswig-Holstein, and Niedersachsen (only NUTS II area the Lüneburg region)), Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. The partner countries include Norway and Russia (St. Petersburg, the regions of Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Murmansk, Novgorod, Pskov, Republic of Karelia, Komi Republic, Nenetsky Autonomous District)⁵.

⁵ *Interreg* Baltic Sea Region. Area. URL: <https://www.interreg-baltic.eu/about-the-programme/area.html> (accessed 06.07.2020)



Fig. 1. The area of INTERREG Baltic Sea Region
2014—2020 Program

Source: Own elaboration based on [21].

The establishment of the BSR as a transnational tourist destination began with the collapse of the USSR and the restoration of independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In Europe, cross-border cooperation started to develop dynamically [19], encompassing not only countries but also regions and cities. The basis for the sustainable development [20] of the destination was the idea of using the region's attractive historical and natural heritage, numerous ties connecting the states located on the Baltic sea coast, and the willingness to cooperate (expressed enthusiastically by the key stakeholders) for tourism purposes [21]. Since then, various destination management solutions have been implemented. They all fall into three categories: marketing, planning, and executive ones.

4. The Baltic Sea Tourism Commission: Marketing-oriented destination management

Registered in Sweden in the 1990s as an international non-governmental organization, the Baltic Sea Tourism Commission was an institution coordinating the marketing activities of the key entities in the Baltic Sea Region's tourism system. The idea of such an organization emerged during the Baltic Tourism Conference (BTC) in Lübeck (Germany) in 1988. Its name has been modified since its establishment; it was important to add the word 'Sea,' as the organization was previously associated only with the Baltic states. Despite the name change, the acronym BTC was used until the dissolution of this institution around 2010.

Its creation was encouraged by representatives of the tourism industry: tour operators, air carriers, sea carriers, and hoteliers, among others. Its members also included governments and self-governing administrative institutions, tourist organizations at the national, regional and local levels, as well as social sector entities (Fig. 2).

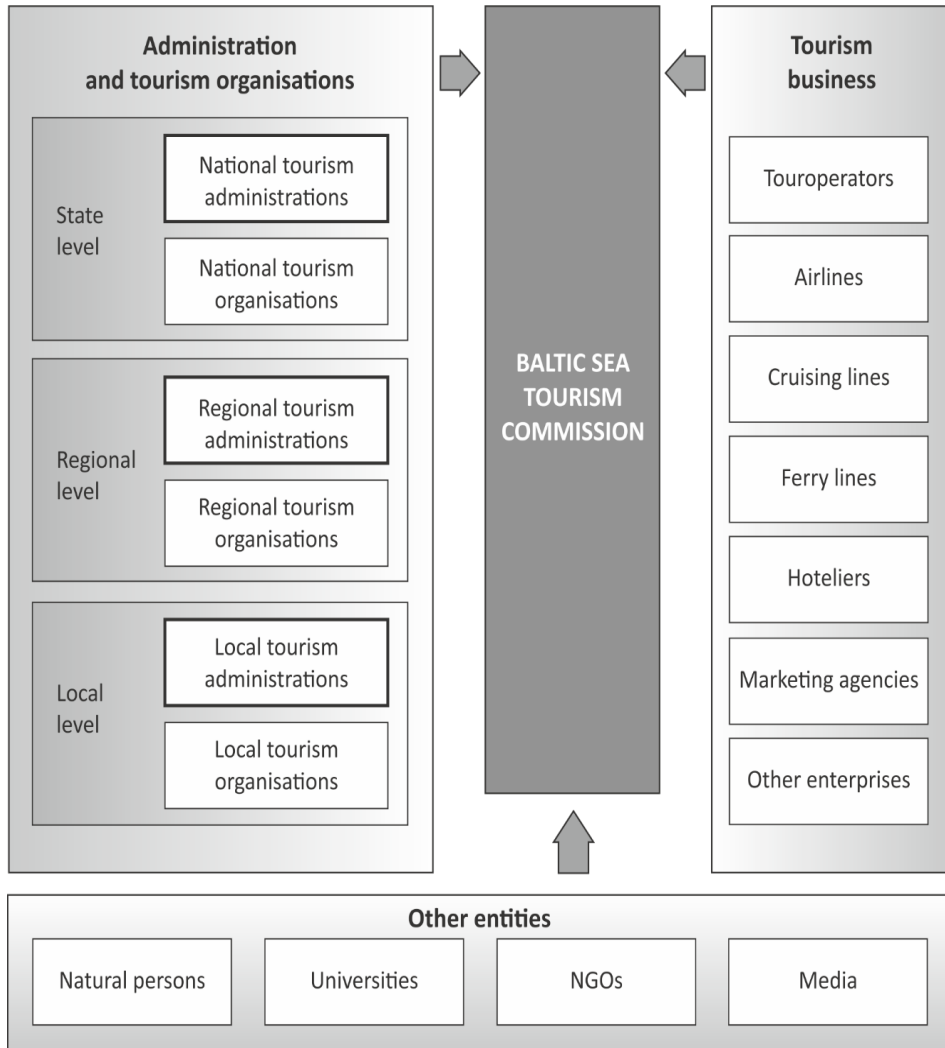


Fig. 2. Organizational model of Baltic Sea Tourism Commission

Source: Own elaboration based on *Baltic Sea Breezes*⁴.

It should be noted that the organization's membership was composed not only of representatives of the destinations in question but also of entities (mainly tour operators) from tourism-generating countries. This structure was highly instrumental in promoting tourist products in the target markets, including overseas ones (Australia, Canada, the United States).

⁴ *Baltic Sea Breezes*, No 5, 2004, p. 48.

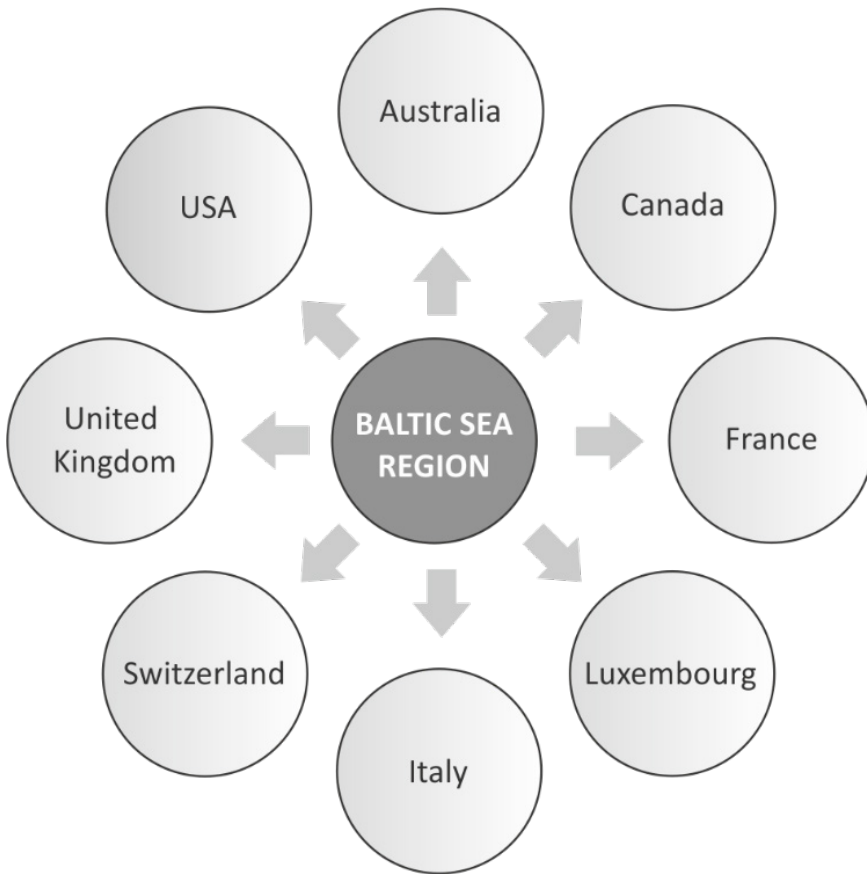


Fig. 3. Tourism generating countries represented by BTC members

Source: Own elaboration based on *Baltic Sea Breezes*.

At its apex, the BTC comprised over 100 members. Over time, this number began to decrease. By 2004, the organization had only 62 entities, including 44 entities from countries located on the Baltic sea coast. At that time, entities from Russia were no longer part of the BTC although Russian authorities and national tour operators continued cooperation within task groups (e.g., the Amber Heritage Group, the Hanseatic Heritage Group, the Viking Heritage Group). The largest share of BTC members came from Finland, while the smallest number came from tourist origin countries.

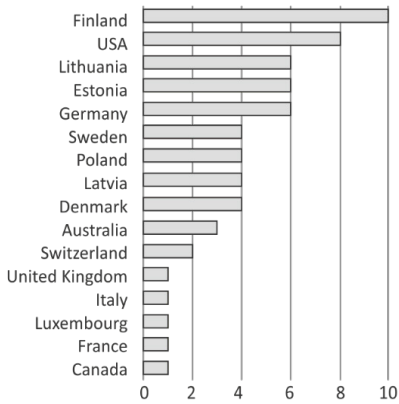


Fig. 4. Number of BTC members by country

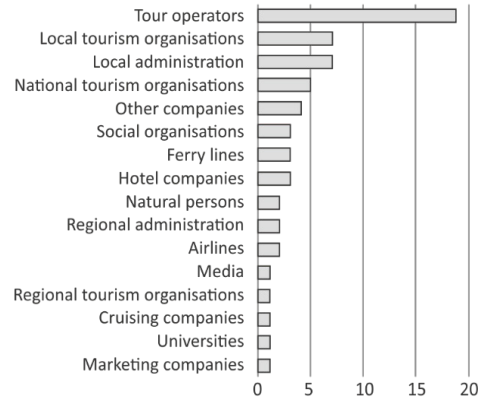


Fig. 5. Number of BTC members by category

The BTC functioned as a typical DMO (destination marketing organization). It undertook marketing activities, including joint preparation of trans-national tourist products, which were then offered in the target markets. The organization had its website, its magazine, published informational materials, and promoted the BSR as an attractive destination at numerous tourist fairs and exhibitions. It collaborated with international organizations (Council of Europe, European Economic Community, Council of the Baltic Sea States) on supporting key forms of tourism. The BTC was also the organizer of the Baltic Travel Mart serving as a platform for transactions between tourism entrepreneurs in the tourism reception and tourism-generating countries. As transport accessibility has always played an important role in the development of destinations, the BTC lobbied for the development of transnational routes, including the development of the Amber Road, which was to connect the Baltic and the Adriatic seas.

To better coordinate its activities, the Baltic Sea Tourism Commission established field offices in selected BSR countries. Its representation operated in Poland until 2002. Financed by the national budget, it coordinated cooperation among the Polish members: the Ministry of Tourism, the Polish Tourist Organization, the city of Gdańsk, the city of Gdynia, and Gdynia Maritime University. At the same time, BTC Poland was the coordinator of the Amber Heritage task group. The group's goal was to create international tourist products using the theme of amber (e.g. The World Championships in Amber Collecting, international amber trade fairs, international trips along the amber route).

5. Network Sustainable Tourism Development in the Baltic Sea Region (NSTDBSR): Planning-oriented destination management

The NSTDBSR platform was created as a bottom-up initiative by academic institutions and the BSR's environmental organizations aiming to ensure that tourism development took place in a sustainable way in accordance with the guidelines of Agenda 21 developed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Managing such an initiative required considerable funds, which were obtained from the INTERREG program. The budget of the "AGORA — Network Sustainable Tourism Development in the Baltic Sea Region" project was 2.9 million euro. The project was carried out in 2005—2007 and was coordinated by the University of Greifswald in Germany.

The partners included international, national, regional, and local institutions from the Baltic Sea States and Belarus. Stakeholders from the Network (Fig. 6) evaluated and improved tools used in spatial planning and tourism management to strengthen the effectiveness of sustainable tourism. These tools were tested in several pilot projects followed by feedback on the "Toolbox". There was also a new check tool aimed at ensuring the sustainability of tourism projects developed, discussed by an Advisory Board, and tested in the pilot initiatives (Sustainability Check). All of the experience, information, and expertise that the partners contributed was integrated into the Strategy Factory, which included policy recommendations for sustainable tourism development in the BSR.

At the end of the project, funding for further network management ran out; however, its participants continued some of the project's activities.

⁵ AGORA – Network Sustainable Tourism Development in the Baltic Sea Region, Keep.eu Database. URL: <https://keep.eu/projects/648/> (accessed 03.07.2020).

Level Category	EU Meber State								non-EU Member States	
	DE	DK	SE	FI	EE	LV	LT	PL	RU	BY
International	Baltic Sea Tourism Commission (BTC)									
	Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB)									
	Baltic Sea Chambers of Commerce Association (BCCA) Naboer AB									
National	Federal Environmental Agency				State Nature Conservation Centre		Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia			
			Swedish Tourist Authority		Estonian Tourism Board					
	German Society for Nature Conservation, Friends of the Earth Germany		The Swedish Ecotourism Society		Finnish Forest and Park Service		Estonian Heritage Society		Latvian Ecotourism Society	
Regional	Ministry of Environment of the Federal State Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania		Region Zealand				North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve			
	Tourist Board Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania						Kurzeme Tourism association Vidzeme Tourism Association			
	National Park Visitor Centre				Matsalu National Park		The Union of Towns and Communes of the Parseta River Basin		Polish Ecological Club City of Gliwice Chapter	
Local	Environmental Council of the Island of Fehmarn		Storstrom County		Isokyrö City		Neringa Ciyu			
	Support Society for the Archaeological-Ecological Centre Albersdorf, Viabono supporter association SOCIAL-HANSA		CEUS School of Business		Mid Sweden University University of Kalmar		University of Helsinki		Thomas-Mann-Culture Centre	
							University of Gdańsk		Kaliningrad State University St. Petersburg Naturalists Society	
	Tourist Co. Ltd. Darss									

Fig. 6. Organizational model of NSTDBSR⁵

6. The Baltic Sea Tourism Center: Governance-oriented destination management

The Baltic Sea Tourism Center is an innovative instrument of multilevel tourist destination management. Its creation was the result of many years of synergy and tourist cooperation in the BSR as well as the creation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

The BSR was chosen as a pilot area in the EU since the region is “an icon of macro-regional co-operation” [22]. The EUSBSR was adopted by the European Commission in June 2009. It brought together intergovernmental cooperation organizations (e.g., VASAB or HELCOM) as well as transnational (bottom-up) cooperation initiatives, and tried to match them with the framework of EU cohesion policy. Thus, it does not substitute the existing networks and relations [23] but rather tries to capitalize on them using a more far-sighted approach [24]. The strategy has 4 horizontal actions, 3 objectives, and 13 priority areas. The Tourism policy area is one of the 13 current policy areas representing the fields of action within the integrative framework tackling the current and future challenges of the BSR. Figure 7 provides an overview of the Strategy’s Action Plan, which defines its overall objectives, policy areas, and horizontal actions. Tourism was assigned to the “Increase prosperity” objective, mainly because of its assumed economic potential for the region⁶.

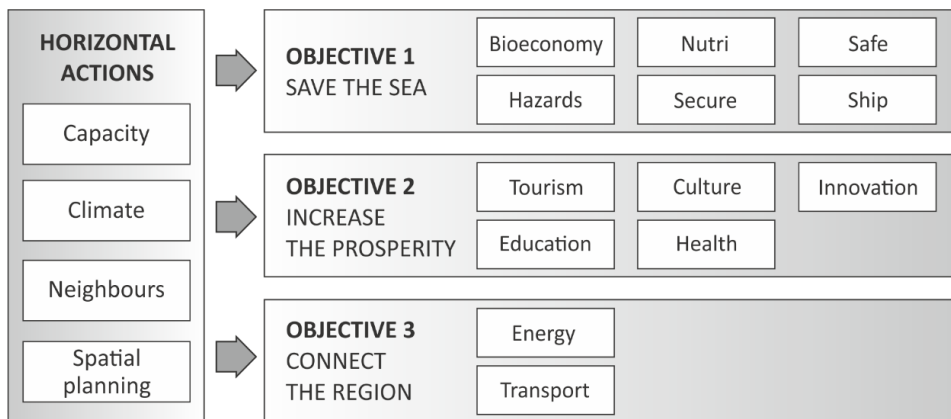


Fig. 7. Governance model of EUSBSR

⁶ EUSBSR EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Policy Area Tourism. URL: <http://www.baltic-sea-strategy-tourism.eu/pa-tourism/> (accessed 06.07.2020).

The management structure of PA Tourism includes only national authorities of 8 EU countries with the sole exception of the Ministry of Economic, Employment and Health of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern which is formally organized at the regional level (Fig. 8).

Level	Category	State							
		DE	DK	SE	FI	EE	LV	LT	PL
National	Public administration			Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation	Ministry of Employment and the Economy Regional Development	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	Ministry of Economics, Entrepreneurship, Competitiveness Dep.	Ministry of the Economy and Innovation	Ministry of Sport and Tourism
	DMO	German National Tourist Board	Visit Denmark						
Regional	Public administration	Ministry of Economics, Employment and Health, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern							

Fig. 8. Governance of EUSBSR PA Tourism

The Baltic Sea Tourism Center is associated with the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum (Fig. 9) whose structure is much more complex and representative. It includes 4 levels: international, national, regional, and local. The BSTF meetings are attended not only by entities from EU countries but also from Norway, Russia, and Belarus. The forum is rotational, taking place in a different country every year. National, regional, and local tourist organizations play an important role in the Forum’s work.

Establishing an institution responsible for managing tourist destinations took many years. This topic was discussed during the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum (Table 1). The Baltic Sea Tourism Center could finally begin functioning only thanks to the funding received under the INTERREG 2014–2020 V-A Poland — Denmark — Germany — Lithuania — Sweden (South Baltic) program.

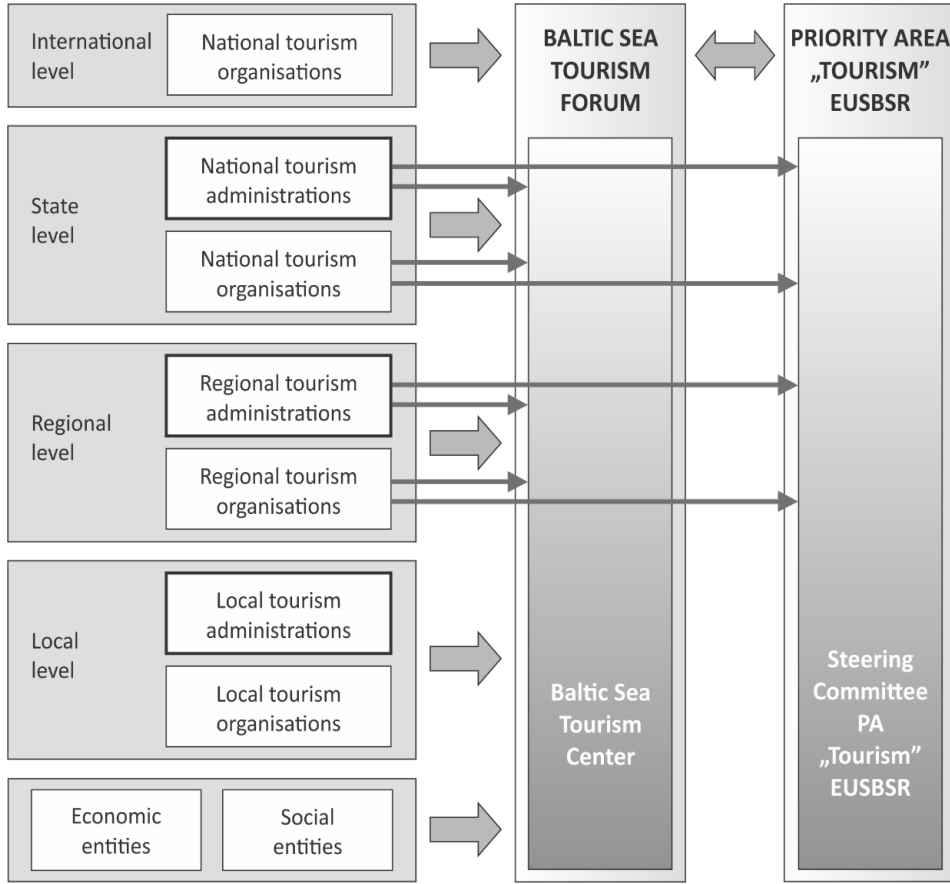


Fig. 9. The organisational model of BSR transnational destination

Table 1

Key provisions on tourist cooperation and coordination expressed in the Declarations adopted by the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum

Year	Place	Declaration
2012	Rostock, Germany,	To further develop the creation of a permanent co-operation platform at transnational level with the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum at its core for continuous collaboration on the basis of a multilevel process;
2013	Ringsted, Denmark	Develop current seed money projects and new initiatives into relevant transnational networks and clusters as a contribution to shape the profile of the region as a sustainable tourist destination
2014	Karlskrona, Sweden	To facilitate a cooperation structure to manage joint marketing and project initiatives at transnational level, as envisaged in the “Baltic Sea Tourism Center” approach

Year	Place	Declaration
2015	Gdańsk, Poland	To fully support the establishment of the flagship Baltic Sea Tourism Center in order to strengthen transnational communication and cooperation in tourism matters, to further professionalise the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum process as well as the development of the whole Baltic Sea Region as one tourism destination,
2016	Pärnu, Estonia	To build up a more continuous, up-to-date communication platform which complements the annual Forum and thus raises the potential for improved networking and coordination, also with the help of the flagship Baltic Sea Tourism Center To consider that a more content-based and thematically focused Forum, e.g. in the fields of cultural tourism, active tourism, culinary, market research, science-business collaborations, might be especially beneficial for a stronger involvement of the private sector to further align the BSTF and Policy Area Tourism in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region to increase potential synergies.
2017	Turku, Finland	To encourage the activities of the Baltic Sea Tourism Center To further develop the transnational cooperation in projects and processes in sustainable tourism to establish the Baltic Sea Region as an attractive destination, to promote the participation of stakeholders from non-EU countries to ensure integration of all countries from the Baltic Sea Region,
2018	Riga Latvia	To actively support the activities of the Baltic Sea Tourism Center and its newly established Expert Groups on Sustainable Tourism, Market Research, Training Offerings and Tourism Policies. To develop and establish the BSTC Tourism Market Report (TMM) and Tourism Trend Radar (TTR) to share and support the Position paper on “Sustainable tourism development in the Baltic Sea Region post 2020”,
2019	Brussels Belgium	<i>The 2019 Declaration has not been posted on the official website yet.</i>

The Baltic Sea Tourism Center is coordinated by the Ministry of Economics, Employment and Health of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Organizations from only 6 Baltic countries were involved in the process of developing the BSTC (Fig. 10). This stemmed from a limited geographical area of support of the INTERREG program financing the BSTC⁷.

⁷ *Baltic Sea Tourism Center – Sustainable development structures for ACTIVE TOURISM*, Keep.eu Database. URL: <https://keep.eu/projects/17777/> (accessed 06.07.2020).

Level	Category	State							
		DE	DK	SE	FI	EE	LV	LT	PL
National	Public administration							Ministry of the Economy and Innovation	
	DMO	German National Tourist Board	Visit Denmark		Visit Finland				Polish Tourist Organisation
Regional	Public administration	Ministry of Economics, Employment and Health Mecklenburg Vorpommern		Region Blekingen					Self-Government of the Pomorskie Voivodeship
	DMO	Mecklenburg Vorpommern Tourist Board	Visit East Denmark						Pomorskie Tourist Board
	Self-government organisations							Association "Klaipeda Region"	Association of Polish Communes Euroregion Baltic
Other	Universities	Stralsund University of Applied Sciences							

Fig. 10. Stakeholders of BSTC

The Baltic Sea Tourism Center was established to jointly improve competitiveness for sustainable tourism in the BSR. One of its chief undertakings was to begin the implementation and dissemination of the important concept of CSR (corporate social responsibility) [25]. According to its coordinators, the institution aims to be “the leading centre of expertise speaking for tourism development in the Baltic Sea region — providing partnerships, insights and skills.”⁸ Stakeholders identified the following tasks as the most important:

- bundling resources, communicating fresh knowledge to prepare for relevant trends;
- sharing experiences to deal with common challenges;
- providing data and benchmarking possibilities;
- gaining an overview of players, projects, and initiatives by coordinating and making strategic use of project results;
- supporting training and product development in sector-specific areas;
- increasing the visibility of regions, countries, and the entire BSR as a tourism destination.

⁸ Sustainable tourism cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. URL: <https://bstc.eu/partnerships/about-the-bstc> (accessed 03.07.2020).

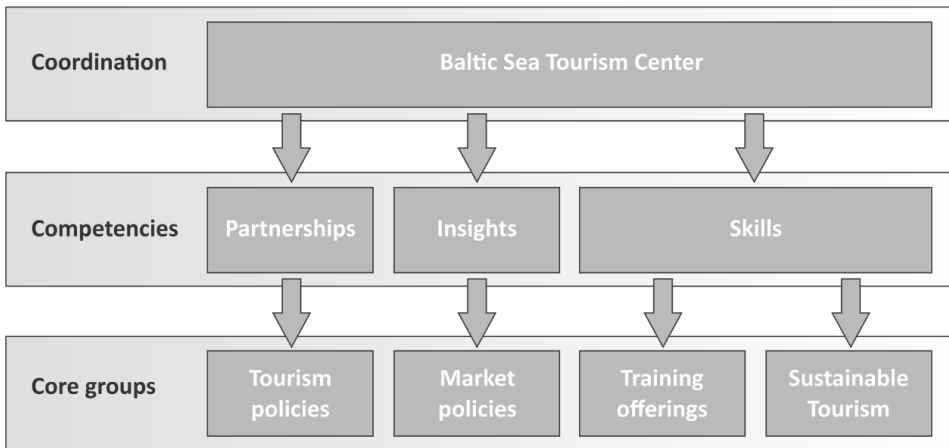


Fig. 11. The model of the BTSC Coordination

This structure, based on the concept of multilevel governance [26; 27], was developed during the BSTF in Riga in 2018 (Fig. 11). It should be emphasized that the initiators of this governance structure took into account the participation of not only EU entities but also Russian partners [28, 29] interested in the development of transnational destinations in the BSR. However, the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 froze the BSTC's work and thus delayed the formation of 4 core groups. This situation is becoming a serious threat to the development of tourist destinations. Numerous studies have shown the importance of European Territorial Cooperation funds in the development of tourism in cross-border areas [30]. Meanwhile, the EU project financing the BSTC has just ended, and alternative funds to ensure the continued existence of the governance structure have not been found yet.

Conclusions

The Baltic Sea Region meets the prerequisites for being considered a transnational destination. It is distinguished by a high tourism potential, including transnational attractions, a common history, and fruitful long-term cooperation, including that in the field of tourism. However, the definition of the BSR is debatable, and thus, the delimitation of the destination remains problematic. The most reasonable solution seems to be the adoption of the delimitation of the INTERREG Baltic Sea Region Programme covering the countries located on the Baltic sea coast and Norway. Belarus also sporadically participates in tourism cooperation. The entities that co-manage tourist destinations primarily comprise central and local administrative units, national, regional, and local tourist organizations, and entrepreneurs. Social organizations and academic institutions play a limited role.

Numerous attempts have been made to coordinate tourist cooperation in the BSR. There have been several tourism management structures established and three concepts of destination management implemented to date: marketing, planning, and multilevel governance. The first of them was implemented in the 1990s. The key stakeholders involved in bringing this concept to fruition were the large enterprises (airlines, ferries, hotel chains) that benefited significantly from membership in the Baltic Sea Tourism Commission and thus willingly financed the activities of this institution. The second concept (planning) focused on programming sustainable tourism development. The Network Sustainable Tourism Development in the Baltic Sea Region was created mainly by academic institutions and environmental and social organizations. It developed valuable theoretical solutions, but no instruments to put them into practice. Unfortunately, this cooperation was based on EU funds, and with the completion of the relevant projects, it was not possible to obtain financing for the network's continued operations. The concept of multilevel tourism destination governance, which is currently being implemented, is particularly interesting due to the synergy between Baltic Sea Tourism Center, the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum, and the EUSBSR PA Tourism that underlies it.

The analysis of the evolution of destination management shows that the stability of the management structure requires significant financial involvement from stakeholders. EU funds should be used only to 'start up' management structures, but they cannot serve as the basis for their operations. Currently, the role of the economic sector in the BSR's multi-level tourism governance system is marginalized. Public stakeholders are moderately involved in the development of transnational destinations because they probably do not see sufficient benefits from cooperation. At the same time, individual promotion of the Baltic countries and regions on the tourism market is increasing. This constitutes a serious threat to the further functioning of the BSTC depriving this institution of the possibility of truly managing tourism development. Another threat is the completion of the cross-border project financing its operation. The major weakness of this project was the lack of involvement of entities from some BSR countries. Conversely, one opportunity for the development of destinations is to take advantage of the affordances of a constantly improving EUSBSR. This is an opportunity worth capitalizing on as it would enable the continuation of activities related to the development and promotion of the BSR as an attractive, sustainable, and accessible transnational tourist destination.

Acknowledgments

The study was supported by the grant of Gdynia Maritime University WPiT/2019/PZ/09 „Zarządzanie strategiczne zrównoważonym rozwojem regionów nadmorskich” (‘Strategic management of the sustainable development of coastal regions’)

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