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Empowering Open Innovation Tourism Networks

Innovation-Based Collaboration in the Visegrad Region: Best Practices

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Preface

Innovation plays a crucial role in securing competitive advantage and ensuring long-term success for businesses in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Traditionally, innovation was seen as the outcome of individual organizations. However, this view has evolved, with innovation now being recognized as an outcome of collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders. The open innovation paradigm highlights the importance of extending innovation activities beyond organizational boundaries. It underscores the interactive nature of innovation process, driven by the exchange of knowledge and skills among various stakeholders and organizations. In the highly competitive landscape of tourism and hospitality, collaborative innovation is particularly valuable, as it enhances the competitiveness of both firms and destinations.

This report was developed as part of the International Visegrad Fund project "Empowering Open Innovation Tourism Networks". Its primary objective is to analyze innovation collaboration networks within each of the participating countries – Republic of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary – destinations such as: Krakow, Liberec, and Veszprém. These case studies serve as examples of best practices that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature of open innovation collaboration networks. The analysis employed a qualitative methodological approach, including in-depth interviews with leading stakeholders involved in innovation networks in each of the selected destinations. The aim of the report is to offer valuable insights into how collaborative innovation networks operate and what factors influence their development and dynamics.

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of all stakeholders involved in the qualitative analysis in all three examined networks (Kraków Network, Crystal Valley network and Balatoni Kör).

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Case Study 1: Kraków Network – Tourism Business Network Analysis in the Małopolska Region, Poland

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Kraków, 2025

Characteristics of Kraków and business tourism

Kraków is one of the largest cities in Poland, covering an area of 327 km² and home to 809,000 residents (as of 2024). The historical Royal Capital City of Kraków boasts over a 1,000-year history, is famous for its magnificent heritage and various other attractions, buzzes with academic life (132,000 students in 2024) and numerous diverse events, which together create its unique atmosphere. The city has immense tourism potential, drawing numerous visitors. At the same time, Kraków is an important business center. Its status is confirmed by its rankings in various assessments.

In the European Cities and Regions of the Future 2024 ranking, Kraków (in the category of large European cities) was recognized in the following categories:

- 1st place in Business Friendliness
- 1st place in Human Capital and Lifestyle
- 4th place Overall among large cities
- 6th place in Economic Potential

The development of many business centers in the city has also increased the significance of business tourism.

Tourism in Kraków

In 2024, the number of visitors in the city reached 14.72 million, including 7.95 million tourists. Foreign guests accounted for just under 16% of all visitors. For many years, the largest numbers of foreign visitors have come from the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France, and Spain. In 2024, visitors from the USA and Ukraine joined this top five. Tourists from these seven countries made up almost 57% of all foreign visitors. Foreign tourists made up nearly 20% of all tourists in Kraków in 2024.

Kraków's tourism appeal was highlighted by awards and recognitions in 2024, including:

- 2nd place in the ranking of best cities in Poland for an autumn city break by Travelist.pl, based on internet users' reviews.
- 4th place in the Post Office Travel Money City Costs Barometer among the most attractive cities for a European city break.
- Airbnb ranked Kraków 5th among cities offering the cleanest accommodation.
- Kraków was one of only two Polish cities included in the latest edition of the 100 Best Cities in the World ranking by Resonance Consultancy.
- The portal timeout.com declared Kraków's Christmas tree the most beautiful in the world.

Reasons for visiting the city in 2024 varied. The most common were leisure (45%), sightseeing (20%), and religious purposes (6%). Business tourism (both individual and group) accounted for over 6% and continues to be one of the most dynamically developing forms of tourism in Kraków.

Role of the business tourism

In 2024, Kraków hosted 4,647 group business meetings with a total of 1.24 million participants (Report: *Meeting Industry in Kraków* 2024, Foundation of Krakow University of Economics

2025). From 2022 to 2024, the number of participants in the meetings industry in Kraków increased steadily. Of all the 2024 events:

- Corporate/incentive events made up nearly 58%,
- Conferences and congresses: 40%,
- Trade fairs/exhibitions: 2%.

However, conferences and congresses attracted the most participants - 547,000 in 2024. Trade fairs and exhibitions drew 366,000 participants, while corporate events attracted 326,000 (Report: *Meeting Industry in Kraków* 2024, Foundation of Krakow University of Economics 2025).

The monthly distribution of meetings in 2024 followed a typical pattern for the industry. Most events occurred in the fall (September–November) and spring. Attendance naturally corresponded with the number of events, peaking in October (over 183,000 attendees).

An analysis of attendees by domestic vs. international events showed, as in previous years, that the number of participants in domestic events in 2024 was twice as high.

Regarding event organizers, businesses were the most active clients over the last three years. In 2024, they commissioned 72% of all meetings.

By sector, the largest number of events in 2024 was commissioned by the trade and services sector (2,271), followed by the humanities (894), and the technical sector (409) (Report: *Meeting Industry in Kraków* 2024, Foundation of Krakow University of Economics 2025).

The average duration of group business meetings in Kraków in 2024 was over one and a half days. As usual, trade fairs and exhibitions lasted the longest - over 3 days - while the other two event types (conferences/congresses and corporate events) typically lasted less than two days.

A major asset of Kraków is its infrastructure. In 2024, the city had 202 venues equipped with rooms suitable for hosting meetings and events, offering a total capacity of 107,360 seats. These venues varied in type, ranging from hotels with 1–3 conference rooms (usually accommodating 100–200 people), to 23 higher education institutions with conference facilities, to dedicated convention and conference centers (ICE Kraków, Fabryczna CKF_13 Conference Center), exhibition halls (Expo Kraków), and multifunctional facilities (Tauron Arena sports and entertainment hall).

City Ecosystem in Tourism Management

In countries with advanced tourism markets, the urban tourism economy is typically managed by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). In Poland, DMOs are partially represented by Regional or Local Tourism Organizations. What' s more, in major cities like Kraków, tourism policy does not function in isolation - it is closely embedded within the broader framework of urban policy. Urban policy refers to the structured and intentional actions undertaken by local authorities, developed and implemented in collaboration with various stakeholders who operate within the city to achieve their goals and fulfill their needs (Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities, 2007).

In Kraków, various non-governmental entities focus on improving tourism quality, including (www.krakow.pl):

- Małopolska Tourist Organization
- Kraków Tourist Organization
- Kraków Chamber of Tourism
- Federation of Tour Guide Associations
- Małopolska Hotel Chamber "Gremium"
- Kraków Tourism Alliance (Association of the Capital Royal City of Kraków Tourism Organization)

Metropolitan tourism management relies on cross-sectoral partnerships, linking tourism with cultural, recreational, and economic functions such as the meetings industry (Polityka…, 2021).

One of the most important institutions in managing the Krakow meetings industry is the Kraków Convention Bureau (KCB), which promotes the city as a meetings destination, collaborates with event organizers, provides information, and supports competitive bidding for events. Its work strengthens a corporate approach to tourism governance (Polityka…, 2021).

The Tourism Department of Kraków City Hall coordinates tourism policy in line with the Kraków Sustainable Tourism Policy 2021–2028. It cooperates with Kraków Festival Office, Arena Kraków S.A., and ARMK Sp. z o.o., and includes the role of Night Mayor (Order No. 3200/2024) who serves as the Chairperson of the Sustainable Nighttime Economy Commission.

Co-management is based on stakeholder agreements that clarify roles and responsibilities in tourism governance, highlighting the need for cooperation mechanisms (Jordan et al., 2018). One such platform is the Kraków Network initiative.

The Kraków Network Initiative: origins, assumptions and perspectives

The Kraków Network project aims to develop a cohesive group of entities within the MICE sector that, through mutual cooperation, strive to increase the number of business and scientific events held in Kraków. At the same time, the group seeks to shape Kraków's image as a strong brand within the meetings industry.

The initiative also involves analyzing the industry's development directions, assessing the effectiveness of actions taken, and monitoring the economic impact of the meetings industry on the city's economy. Kraków Network serves as a platform for discussion, experience sharing, knowledge exchange, and the promotion of best practices among its participants.

History of the creation of Kraków Network

Understanding the origins of the Kraków Network initiative, established in 2015, requires examining the events that led to its creation. These relate to both Poland's geopolitical situation as well as regional and local factors, and the energy and impact of individual decisions and actions.

The process that eventually led to the formation of the Kraków Network began nearly a decade earlier and was one of the outcomes of the dynamic growth of business tourism and the MICE sector (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions/Conferences, Exhibitions/Events) in Kraków. In 2004, Poland became a member of the European Union. That same year, as part of the Kraków Festival Office within the structure of the City of Kraków, the Kraków Convention Bureau (KCB) was established. Its main task was to build the city's brand as a business destination both nationally and internationally. From the very beginning, the KCB served as a partner connecting the business and academic communities with the local government and often functioned as the first point of contact for event organizers planning to host events in Kraków.

Since 2004, business tourism has been growing dynamically in tandem with the city's expanding potential. That year, Kraków had 83 hotel facilities; ten years later, the number had risen to 130. In 2014, the city's MICE infrastructure was significantly strengthened with the opening of three large, professional venues:

- ICE Kraków Congress Centre, which hosts a wide variety of events in terms of format, subject matter, and scale - including congresses, conferences, symposia, business meetings, and cultural events such as concerts, opera, theatre and ballet performances, as well as community-oriented gatherings. It features four main halls (the largest of which accommodates nearly 2,000 participants) and a three-level foyer offering space for up to 3,200 attendees.
- TAURON Arena Kraków, the largest entertainment and sports venue in Poland, with a capacity of over 22,000 people. In addition to the main arena, it offers conference rooms, a smaller arena, facilities for athletes and performers, and advanced multimedia and stage systems, which make it a highly versatile venue.
- EXPO Kraków, the largest trade fair and exhibition facility in the Małopolska region, offering 15,000 m² of flat, open-plan space. This infrastructure enables the venue to successfully host a wide range of events - mainly trade fairs and exhibitions - tailored to various thematic and organizational requirements.

The opening of these venues significantly boosted the further development of business tourism and the MICE sector, as measured by the growing number of events organized in Kraków. In 2004, 3,976 events were held; just three years later, that number rose to 6,013, continuing to grow each year until the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognizing the potential of Kraków's meetings industry and the need for cross-sector collaboration, representatives from municipal institutions, the cultural sector, the restaurant and hotel industries, museums, and consulting firms met on March 27, 2015, at the ICE Kraków Congress Centre at the invitation of the Krakow Festival Office. The aim of this meeting was to create a strong business group - Kraków Network - whose joint efforts across various segments of the business tourism sector would strengthen the city's and the region's image both domestically and internationally. This event is considered the first official meeting of the Kraków Network.

The essence of functioning

The initiative's target group includes tourism and business sector stakeholders interested in building relationships based on the opportunities offered by Kraków's growing MICE

infrastructure. This includes venue operators, local restaurants and hotel businesses, PCOs, DMCs, event agencies, and the transport sector.

In addition to experts and representatives of the meetings industry who make up the Kraków Network, the group also includes members of Kraków's academic community interested in organizing scientific congresses in their respective fields. These individuals form a group known as the Kraków Congress Ambassadors Club. Currently, the Kraków Network brings together 600 registered members across nine thematic groups (figure 1).

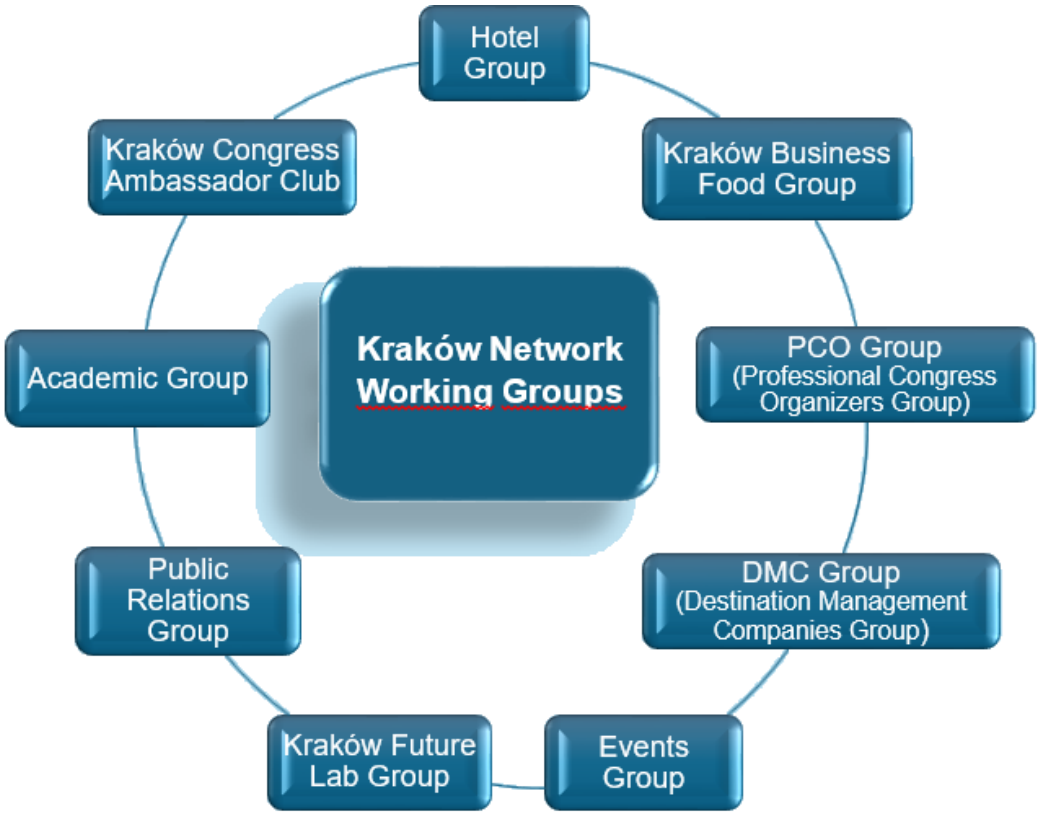

Figure. Working Groups of Kraków Network

The Kraków Network initiative operates through thematic working groups that facilitate information sharing and relationship building among its members. These groups bring together representatives from the local MICE sector to explore important and engaging topics. This collaborative format fosters the development of new connections, fresh initiatives, and best business practices.

Participants in these groups also have the chance to engage with the broader Kraków Network community during joint sessions known as "large network" meetings. These gatherings typically attract between 80 and 120 attendees, including representatives from businesses, NGOs, public institutions, and universities involved in Kraków's meetings and events industry.

Within the scope of the Kraków Network business network, a wide range of projects has been initiated, differing in their scale and influence on both the local and national meetings industry. Among these, three initiatives are particularly noteworthy due to their relevance to the Kraków Network and the unique circumstances surrounding their implementation.

The **Kraków Network Protocol**, created during the pandemic, introduced new event organization standards built on broad industry consensus. The **Kraków New Hospitality** model, developed through participatory collaboration among network members, helped define new directions for the network's evolution. Meanwhile, the **Kraków Tech Summit**, a congress highlighting the city's innovation landscape, showcased cutting-edge technologies and disruptive innovations.

Together, these initiatives highlight the impact of collective action within the Kraków Network and its contribution to shaping the future of the meetings and events sector.

Over the decade of functioning, Kraków Network would initiate many successful projects, as evidenced by the city's current standing and the international recognition of its meetings sector. One indicator of the initiative's success was receiving awards in two categories of the *Best Marketing Awards* presented by the global industry association ICCA.

Current state to Kraków Network 2.0

The Kraków Network project was initially developed by the Krakow Festival Office and later by the Kraków5020 company. In 2025, it was transferred to the structures of the Krakow City Office. It currently operates within the Department of Tourism, in the Congress Bureau Unit, under the new name Kraków Network 2.0.

Kraków Network 2.0 is a continuation of the original idea of Krakow Network, bringing together representatives of the meetings industry, tourism, science, and culture to jointly develop the city as a leading congress and event hub. Kraków Network 2.0 aims to introduce new energy and respond to new challenges, as the implementation and coordination by the City of Kraków opens up wide opportunities for its growth and integration with the city's tourism strategy.

In the spring of 2025, a survey was conducted among KN members regarding the vision for the development of KN2.0. The current concept is a response to the findings of that research.

The main goal of the project remains the creation of a strong, multi-sector business group that, through collaborative efforts, can increase the number and quality of congress, conference, cultural, and business events held in Kraków. Thanks to such initiatives, Kraków has the opportunity to strengthen its position as a European leader in the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) industry by combining science, culture, and business.

The Kraków 2.0 project is part of the city's broader policy on tourism and the meetings industry development. Kraków Network 2.0 is not only a platform for networking but also an important tool supporting the building of a local ecosystem of innovation, cooperation, and international promotion of the city.

Members of the Kraków Network declare their willingness to continue cooperation with all entities operating in tourism, culture, science, and business, as well as with city authorities, in order to jointly shape the future of Kraków as a modern, sustainable, and attractive events center.

Methodology of the study

The study explored the development of open innovation networks in Kraków's business tourism sector using qualitative methods. Due to limited existing research on such networks at the city level - especially within tourism, where innovation develops under specific conditions - an exploratory approach was adopted. The research focused on factors supporting knowledge sharing, relationship-building, and identifying cooperation challenges within business networks.

Data was gathered through 11 in-depth interviews with current and former leaders of Kraków Network working groups. Participants contributed voluntarily and could freely express their views. The dual-informant method enabled diverse perspectives, often from two leaders per group. Interviews, totaling over six hours, were conducted via MS Teams, transcribed automatically, then edited and authorized by participants.

All interviews and analysis were conducted in Polish, and the final report was translated into English using commercial translation tools.

Results

The motivation for participating in the Kraków Network initiative was, in most cases, driven by participants' need to stay updated on developments within the industry and Kraków itself: *"The event industry is undergoing significant changes, and we needed a space to discuss adaptation strategies"* R.5. The initiative successfully brought together key representatives from the sector, which served as an incentive for others to join: *"I wanted to be among the leaders from the very beginning"* R.5; *…I also decided to join Kraków Network based on the caliber of individuals already involved in the initiative* R.9. It provided a platform for addressing important and current issues *"(…) here we could focus on what truly matters - from operational challenges to strategic matters"* R.5. For some, KN's business-oriented nature was particularly appealing: *"What really motivated us to participate in this network was its business-centric character"* R.4; *"(...) participating in Kraków Network is invaluable and aligns with our mission"* R.4; *"(...) joining Kraków Network, my thoughts were strictly business-oriented"* R.10.

The motivation behind joining KN also involved fostering relationships within the industry: *"When KN was established, I believe it aimed to bring the industry closer together - to network, share experiences, and build new relationships"* R.11; *"(...) we understood that collaboration and relationship-building within the sector are essential"* R.3. Respondents emphasized the importance of professionalizing the industry: *"Professionalization of the sector - collective efforts contribute to increasing professionalism, which is perhaps the most significant aspect"* R.1).

In some cases, existing members encouraged others to join *"(...) you need to be here with us, they said to me"* R.6. Achieving business goals for their companies through networking within the industry and adjacent sectors, and strengthening relationships, were also motivations for joining the initiative *"(...) acquiring new clients, gaining insight into local DMC and PCO bases and agencies we mostly knew, yet hoping to meet new contacts or deepen existing relationships"* R.2; *"(...) exploring a broader event-related Kraków network, as we've crossed*

paths professionally before, but gaining insight into their business mindset, methods of sourcing opportunities, and networking" R.10.

Participation was further motivated by the possibility and willingness to collaborate based on established contacts *"(...) as we joined KN, we understood that mutual support was feasible, that there are enough business and tourism clients for us to share in a way that benefits everyone"* R.10; *"(...) the willingness to collaborate. I am always very open to such cooperation"* R.9. KN was designed to achieve business (marketing) objectives for the city, which were also aligned with the goals of individual entities, giving their representatives a reason to engage in KN activities: *"The assumptions of Kraków Network were in line with our strategy to attract groups, predominantly foreign ones"* R.2. Participants perceived synergies between KN's goals and their own, viewing involvement as an opportunity to influence the sector's operations in the city: *"The primary objective of Kraków Network was to enhance collaboration across various sectors of the tourism industry to increase the number of events held in Kraków and the Małopolska region. As a representative of the hotel industry, I could not overlook this initiative. I wanted to have a tangible impact on the types of events being secured and organized in Kraków, anticipating this would lead to increased bookings at the establishments I represented"* R.7.

A particularly uplifting aspect was participants' willingness to share their broader knowledge, stemming from their firms' positions and access to information, for the benefit of the city and enhancing its offerings as a tourism destination: *"We recognized that sharing knowledge and experiences is valuable for elevating Kraków to a higher level while remaining open to other ideas"* R.2. Participants felt a sense of mission to contribute to building Kraków's position and image in the long term: *"Initiatives like Kraków Network ... provide the feeling that we are co-creating something future generations will benefit from"*; *"Beyond business advantages, it also reflects local patriotism and contributes to the image of Kraków as a city offering a diverse, professional range of services"* R.1.

Another motivating factor was the sense of belonging, fitting into Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In this case, it referred to professional belonging: *"One feels they belong to a specific professional community"* R.1. This sense of belonging also fosters expectations of support. *"The network also provides support in relationships and external communication (e.g., with foreign firms)"* R.1. Statements also expressed the belief that KN membership reinforces accountability within the industry: *"Initiatives like Kraków Network strengthen industry responsibility"* R.1.

Respondents identified various benefits of participating in the Kraków Network. From the perspective of individual participants and the companies they represent, one key benefit was access to up-to-date information through contacts and discussions with representatives of other entities: "The benefits include the ability to discuss what is truly important in a fair and open manner" R.5; *"(...) The greatest advantage is the creation of a "safe space" for exchanging experiences and knowledge"* R.1.

The exchange of knowledge was frequently highlighted as a significant advantage: *"(...) The desire to broaden and deepen knowledge and expand the network of contacts was extremely important to me"*; *"In Kraków Network, one could meet numerous experts, making joining this group still a substantial benefit for new members - they can gain knowledge from professionals willing to share it"* R.7.

Participation in KN was perceived as an opportunity for personal and professional development: *"(...) I joined Kraków Network primarily to grow - both personally and professionally"* R.8.

Contacts established through the platform enable more effective implementation of business tasks: *"(...) I am a very relationship-oriented person and building relationships and forming new connections are extremely important to me - both personally and professionally. I must admit that Kraków Network offered me this possibility."* R.7. Relationships within the initiative also had a purely business-oriented character: *"(...) Above all, I emphasize the importance of expanding the network of contacts because it should be noted that in thematic groups, we not only collaborate substantively but also become clients for each other"* R.7.

"During the COVID-19 pandemic, such contacts proved invaluable in organizing catering, for example, by sharing vehicle fleets, which were scarce and in demand" (R.6). Thanks to KN, particularly through initiatives undertaken by specific groups, networking extended beyond the event industry: *"(...) From the beginning, it was a cross-disciplinary group, inviting everyone with links to a specific topic or meeting theme. From experience, we know that such meetings led to collaboration between companies. This is our added value. As leaders of this group, we can be proud of planting the seeds that contributed to the further development of cooperation among entities"* R.8.

Another benefit was identifying future challenges and development directions: *"(...) This forum allows us to better prepare for future challenges* R.5; *"(...) For instance, we discussed ESG - many companies weren't aware that without implementing this standard, they could lose corporate clients"; "Such discussions inspire action and help avoid risks"* R.5.

The KN's value lies in connecting individuals from various entities, showcasing business diversity: *"An enormous advantage of Kraków Network is its diverse environment, bringing together different perspectives, people with unique experiences, and distinct approaches. This fosters a better understanding of the market and reveals new opportunities for collaboration and growth"* R.4.

Respondents also noted the dynamic nature of knowledge-sharing and its timeliness: *"(...) We rarely have opportunities to confront our ideas in such a dynamic way - to share knowledge and experiences practically in real-time"* R.4.

KN was recognized as an open network of contacts and a platform for sharing best practices: *"Kraków Network, as a network of entities not so much formal as operating within an open space for discussion and exchanging best practices, represents significant value"* R.3.

Initiators of KN considered it a factor for industry integration: *"(...) The key challenge was arranging relationships, so everyone felt we were striving toward the same goal"* R.3.

The opportunity to establish and implement cooperation was another advantage: *"Collaboration developed positively - unifying rather than dividing. This is a significant value of this initiative"* R.4; *"(...) We quickly realized that this "pie" is large enough for everyone to get a piece, and it's more profitable to cooperate than to focus solely on oneself - for the short term, because nothing good will come from working individually"* R.2; *"(...) Very often, especially in services such as hospitality, catering, or others, we receive multiple inquiries for the same date. We are*

physically unable to handle everything, so the advantage is that we all know and respect each other well, and we can share the business among us. I believe this is the main benefit of Kraków Network" R.10.

Participants also appreciated the potential for collaboration: *"I believe there is strength in a group, especially in implementing international projects"* R.1. However, those sharing knowledge also expected reciprocity: *"(...) The sense of reciprocity - giving something and expecting similar support from the other side"* R.1.

The emphasis on sustainability in relationships was vital: *"(...) The foundation of activity lies in long-term relationships and investing time. Trust is built through mutual projects, relationships, and time"* R.1.

Some statements reflected a mezzo-economic perspective - benefits for the city: *"(...) We have a sense that by sharing experiences, we strengthen the industry's overall position"* R.5.

Respondents considered attracting congresses to the city as advantageous for both Kraków and individual entities: *"(...) Over the past 10 years, I believe the acquisition of major, prestigious congresses must be highlighted. "* R.2.

Creating a cohesive image of the city's offerings for clients was another benefit. Often, it is impossible to accommodate all participants in one facility. Collaboration among participants, coordinated by the Convention Bureau, allowed for creating offers fulfilled by multiple Kraków entities at a similar high level. Clients recognized and appreciated this: *"Clients were satisfied with what they received in Kraków. The offer was relatively unified, with similar conditions, exceptional service, etc. We collaborated, providing 50 rooms, another hotel adding 50 more, and so forth. Clients appreciated that we internally cooperated, shared information"* R.2.

Participants emphasized that knowledge of business partners' offerings gained through KN meetings allowed for effective collaboration in preparing proposals for clients: *"I always see relief in clients' eyes when we say, "You tell us what you want, and we already know each other, trust each other, understand our capabilities, and will make it work. Agencies know what is feasible in our hotel, and we know the capabilities of the agency, the service level - it builds mutual trust, and our services complement each other. Clients tell us how important it is to eliminate the negotiation process between DMC and the hotel or DMC and transport, and instead, they can focus on their guests and meeting programs"* R.2.

Bringing the ICCA congress to Kraków in 2022 was a success and was perceived as such by individual entities. KN members felt a significant contribution to its acquisition: *"(...) The success of bringing ICCA to Kraków and the fact that this bold idea originated here. We organized a joint online site inspection during the difficult pandemic times. In hotels, we showcased our facilities, while ICE set up a hybrid conference studio. I believe it surprised them that during such a critical time, the entire city stood united, promising to fulfill everything based on "You tell us what you want, and we will arrange it among ourselves". I think this is very valuable for the end client"* R.2.

KN is also a source of knowledge regarding the operating principles of various entities. The initiative brings together representatives of organizations with diverse ownership forms and

statuses, influencing their work methodologies. Understanding these differences leads to better communication and cooperation: *"(…) Understanding these distinct business worlds was invaluable"* R.2.

Collaboration among individuals with varying experiences, often reflecting the life cycle stage of their represented entities, proved highly valuable. Enthusiastic attitudes were observed, characterized by a willingness to share knowledge with less experienced individuals: *"(…) At a certain stage of company development, the satisfaction of sharing experiences arises, especially with those less experienced"* R.1.

Best Practices for Innovation-Based Collaboration gathered from the Kraków Network study

The analysis of the collected research material also made it possible to identify good practices which, in the context of open innovation networks in tourism, pertain to the identified challenges and the strategies that enhance knowledge transfer leading to the adaptation of innovative solutions resulting from industry collaboration. Among the key difficulties faced by the leaders of thematic groups - difficulties that hindered the development of cooperation centered on the pursuit of innovative solutions - several stand out. One of the most prominent was a lack of trust: *"(...) The barrier lies in the lack of complete trust between companies and the conviction that it is worth joining Kraków Network"* R.5; *"(…) If we do not trust each other, openness becomes difficult"* R.1.

Personality traits were also considered a barrier: *"(…) The only barrier seems to be the mentality of certain individuals who may not see the benefits of sharing business opportunities"* R.10.

Some respondents framed this issue within the context of mutual competition: *"Sharing knowledge can be risky, as acquiring it involves time, money, or energy. There's always the question of how much can and should be revealed"* R.1.

A significant barrier was the reluctance to share information, which, in certain cases, was procedural in nature: *"I represent a large hotel chain. In such structures, highly detailed procedures related to privacy policies are in place, meaning certain information simply cannot be shared. This doesn't concern numerical data alone but also specific projects, operational solutions, or strategies that define the uniqueness of an establishment. This concern over competition and sharing crucial data remains one of the main obstacles to collaboration"* R.7.

Frequently mentioned was the lack of engagement from existing members and the reluctance of key representatives from Kraków's market entities to participate: *"(...) Barriers are tied to the lack of engagement. While larger Network meetings were attended by quite a few individuals and thematic ones were as well, there was an issue with active, further involvement of other individuals. Essentially, it was always the same people who contributed, organized, and attended"* R.2.

Another barrier was the lack of time to meet: *"(...) The most significant barrier seems to be time, truly time, to meet so that everyone can find the right moment"* R.6; *"(...) Time, precious time - the biggest barrier in networking, one must admit"* R.11; *"(...) The greatest barrier is time - or rather the lack of it"* R.7.

Ineffective internal communication was also noted as a barrier: *"(...) Internal communication was lacking, as no one managed it effectively to stimulate people - to enable subcontractors and potential clients… to exchange experiences, to learn more about one another. It simply didn't work out. This is both a communication and logistical barrier in Kraków Network"* R.11.

Some believed that the absence of a technological platform for continuous contact was a barrier: *"(...) It seems to me that if, beyond these meetings, there existed a space for real and regular knowledge exchange, it would significantly facilitate collaboration"* R.4.

Others pointed to administrative barriers - for example, the lack of access to member lists for group leaders: *"(...) Access to databases was restricted, making it unclear how many hotels expressed willingness to join, due to GDPR regulations"* R.2.

A communication-related barrier was outdated contact information: *"We have 10 years of history and hundreds of members, but many contacts are essentially "dead souls" who registered after hearing about it once"* R.2.

A lack of transparency in institutional matters was also identified as a barrier: *"(...) Key barriers include the lack of transparency"* R.8.

Administrative restrictions and a certain decline in enthusiasm post-pandemic further hindered progress: *"(...) After the pandemic, the project somewhat weakened. We are now striving to reactivate it effectively"* R.2; *"(...) There is a need for new momentum"* R.8.

The analysis of leaders statements revealed specific mechanisms and tools facilitating knowledge transfer, not only within Kraków Network itself but also across the entire tourism industry. Furthermore, the responses highlighted the social and organizational context that either supports or hinders the process, as well as the challenges associated with it. The analyzed statements reflect the complexity of both grassroots and institutional efforts undertaken within the network, as well as the diversity of experiences and expectations among its participants.

One of the most frequently mentioned methods in respondents' statements was the mechanism of regular networking meetings and working groups, serving as a primary channel for knowledge exchange and forming the foundation of the network's operations. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that KN is built around regular meetings – both general sessions involving the wider network and thematic gatherings held within smaller working groups. These meetings fostered a network of relationships and served as a platform for sharing experiences, discussing challenges, and collaboratively seeking solutions – *"for me, the network is above all an opportunity to meet and build relationships – and that's what I find most important"* R.4. For many participants, the value of these meetings stemmed precisely from their informal and intimate character – *"the main cohesive force remains the regular meetings and thematic discussions held in smaller groups"* R.1, and further: *"that's where we discuss the most important matters, and the foundation is a good atmosphere and direct*

relationships" R.1, what highlights the strong relational value of this form of collaboration. Participants pointed to the diverse nature of these meetings – *"the sessions in smaller groups were more productive in terms of actual outcomes (...). Through these discussions, these brainstorming sessions, we often developed some solutions"* R.5. These meetings not only facilitated the exchange of operational knowledge, but also helped build trust-based relationships between entities that often compete on the market. Their openness and added value were also emphasized: *"(...) it turned out that competitors can actually talk to each other, because they face very similar problems and can work together to solve them"* R.11, and *"this openness and trust that we had previously mentioned – that's what built Kraków Network"* R.5. In this context, interpersonal relationships and trust emerge as key determinants of knowledge transfer. Participants not only exchange information but also share real-life challenges and operational experience, which fosters the development of joint solutions. As one respondent emphasized: *"during the discussions, people opened up. They talked about their real problems and challenges (...)"* R.5. The relational nature of this exchange proved especially important during the pandemic, when rapidly changing conditions required quick access to information and coordinated action – *"we shared knowledge while carrying out joint projects that we were engaged in together, especially during the pandemic. That was when it became clear how crucial continuous knowledge exchange and up-to-date information were, because the situation was changing extremely fast. During that time, we organized webinars together to share updates on new legislative changes and the rules introduced in different countries and regions"* R.3.

One of the most important channels of knowledge transfer involved the organizational formats through which it was delivered, combining expert input, practical issues, and modern, implementation-oriented solutions. These included webinars, training sessions, and presentations conducted not only by external experts but also by KN members themselves – *"a great deal of knowledge also came from the entities operating on the market, who had many years of experience. The people who have been running this business for years willingly shared their knowledge, and we benefited from their experience"* R.3. The aim was not only to share theoretical knowledge, but above all to present specific tools and examples of implementation – *"we absorb knowledge from the speakers, so we needed experts and specialists in a given area, and we brought them in"* R.3. Meetings focused on ESG were of particular value to KN members: *"these were workshops where I received a real injection of knowledge – the kind I never would have gotten within my own company"* R.10. The practical nature of these sessions was also emphasized: *"these weren't just talks you could listen to and take notes from – this was hands-on (...), because in our industry, it's not about talking, it's about doing"* R.10. This approach clearly demonstrates that knowledge transfer within Kraków Network was strongly action-oriented and tailored to the realities of the MICE sector. A key feature was the immediate applicability of the knowledge gained – a critical added value in the fast-paced environment of business tourism.

The topic of ESG has become one of the most notable examples of successful knowledge transfer and educational efforts – not only for KN members themselves but also beyond the network. Thematic meetings with representatives of the city and the Convention Bureau *"provided access to information about various city initiatives that we should know about, because we can then share that further"* R.2. ESG emerged as an important, forward-looking topic that required understanding and familiarization, especially among private sector entities – *"for me, it was no longer an unfamiliar topic, because we've been reporting for years and I*

know how important it is. We ask our contractors to implement procedures, and they ask the same of us. For me, it's obvious and simple. But I understand that for private hotels it's still terra incognita. And it has to be explored, learned, and most importantly – people need to be convinced that it matters and that it makes sense" R.2. Respondents stressed the relevance and significance of this knowledge for themselves personally: *"working in a company that had never touched this topic before, I would go to a Kraków Network meeting and just get an injection of knowledge that I never would have received within my own organization"* R.10. This type of knowledge sharing – combining elements of education and inspiration – serves as a flagship example of the added value derived from participation in the network. The case of ESG also illustrates how KN functioned as a platform for identifying and promoting emerging trends, helping members prepare for regulatory and market shifts – *"it was a topic that had already started to sprout in the industry, that was really beginning to surface (...). We started integrating it into KN's activities"* R.10. The network not only signaled the importance of this issue, but also created space for in-depth discussion and practical application.

Knowledge transfer within KN was also supported by various communication tools and specific dissemination practices developed within the network – such as the website, social media channels, and standardized forms of meeting documentation. *"There was a website, social media profiles (...), communication was key to the success of this project because members identified with it primarily through its form and content"* R.3. A core aim of KN was to develop mechanisms for documenting activities and sharing them among members, which *"provides all kinds of training and educational materials, recorded during presentations (...), so we can always go back to them and see exactly what happened"* R.7.

The identified practices in the area of network cooperation in Kraków - primarily involving entities engaged in servicing participants of the meetings industry (business tourism) - enabled a more detailed presentation of the key aspects of this collaboration. Both the motivations underlying this format of business relations and the challenges faced by the leaders of working groups aligned with the emerging good practices of Kraków's business community, which aim to intensify knowledge exchange and, over time, foster the development of new service-oriented solutions based on innovative concepts.

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Case Study 2: Crystal Valley in the Liberec Region, Czech Republic

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Liberec, 2025

This case study examines Crystal Valley, a unique and innovative network operating within the tourism sector of the Liberec Region in the Czech Republic. The region is distinguished by an exceptionally high concentration of glassworks within a relatively small geographic area. Glassmaking not only represents a traditional craft with deep historical roots but also holds significant potential for developing a novel form of tourism.

This case study explores Crystal Valley as a model of an innovative collaborative network in the tourism industry, illustrating its role in integrating traditional craftsmanship with contemporary tourism development strategies.

Characteristics of the Liberec Region

The Liberec Region covers an area of 3,163 km² and has a population of approximately 443,000 inhabitants. It is strategically located on the northern border of the Czech Republic, offering good transport accessibility to the capital city, Prague.

Administratively, the region comprises 215 municipalities distributed across four districts: Liberec, Jablonec nad Nisou, Česká Lípa, and Semily.

Natural and Economic Resources

The Liberec Region boasts a diverse natural landscape, featuring the Jizera, Lusatian, and Giant Mountains, abundant protected areas, and significant water and mineral resources (including unique glass and foundry sands, uranium, and building materials). It's also home to the Jizerskohorské bučiny primeval beech forest, a UNESCO World Heritage site renowned for its biodiversity.

Historically an industrial powerhouse within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly in textiles, glass, and jewelry, the region's economy remains industry-focused today, with strong automotive, glass, and mineral extraction sectors. While facing challenges like higher unemployment and lower wages than the national average and a shortage of skilled technical workers for its traditional industries, the region shows above-average innovation. This is supported by institutions such as the Technical University of Liberec, various research organizations, and the Lipo.ink business incubator, which drive technological advancement and entrepreneurship.

Tourism Potential and Challenges

Tourism represents a significant economic opportunity for the region. However, tourism infrastructure remains underdeveloped, and some areas experience excessive visitor pressure. The region is served by five Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) - see Figure:

- Bohemian Paradise
- Giant Mountains
- Lusatian and Zittau Mountains
- Jizera Mountains
- Macha’s Region

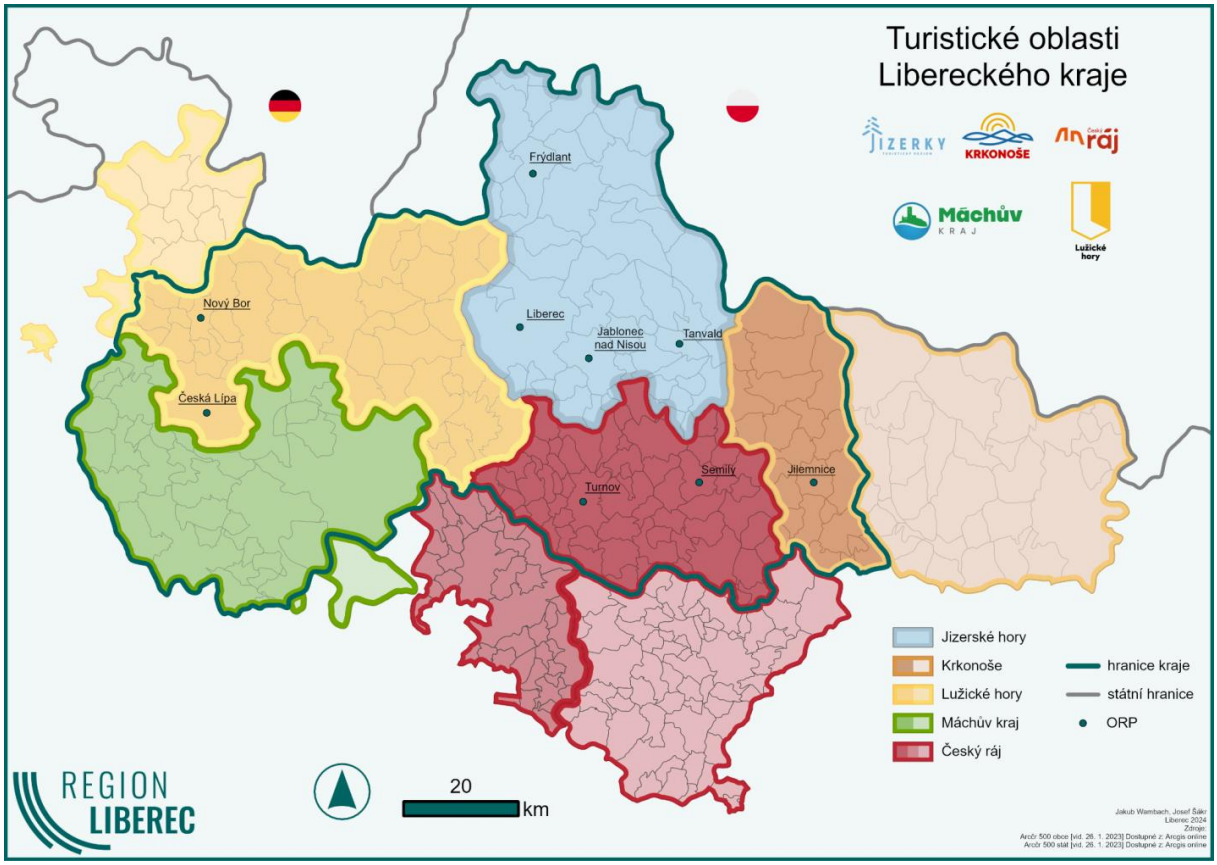

Figure: DMOs in the Liberec Region. Source: Červová, Ungerman (2024).

Several structural and operational issues hinder the full development of the tourism sector. These include insufficient qualifications and language skills among tourism workers, inadequate parking facilities, winter maintenance challenges, and the poor structural and technical condition of railways (Červová, Ungerman, 2024).

The following table presents key data regarding the visitor statistics for the region. In 2024, nearly 1.2 million tourists visited the Liberec Region, spending more than 3.3 million overnight stays. Compared to other regions in the Czech Republic, the Liberec Region ranks in the top half in terms of visitor numbers.

Table: Key tourism indicators for the Liberec Region (2024)

	Liberec Region	Czech Republic	Liberec Region rank order (comparison to other Czech Regions except Prague)
Number of arrivals	1,173,053	22,809,596	6
Number of overnight stays	3,318,481	57,236,086	5
Average stay (days)	3.83	3.51	4

Source: Own processing according to CzechTourism (2025)

In terms of visitor structure, domestic tourists (residents of the Czech Republic) account for approximately 82% of the total. Among the main international source markets are Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and the Netherlands (see Figure).

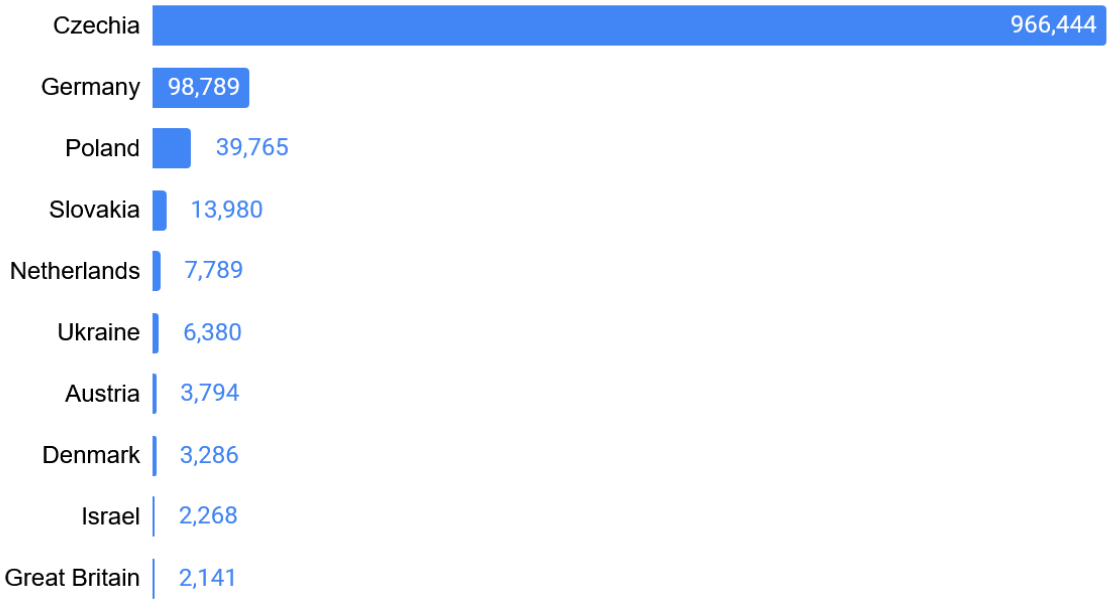

Figure: Top 10 countries according to the number of arrivals

Source: Own processing according to CzechTourism (2025)

Glass and Jewelry Industry

The Liberec Region remains a key center of glassmaking and jewelry production, maintaining its historical legacy. Approximately 240 legal entities and 2,300 self-employed individuals are engaged in glass, jewelry, and related industries, contributing to the region's cultural and economic identity (ARR, 2020). This tradition is recognized by UNESCO through two listings: the handmade Christmas ornaments from blown glass beads in Poniklá and the craft of manual glass production (Červová, Ungerman, 2024).

The Crystal Valley Project: Integration, Development, and Stakeholder Engagement

The Liberec Region is spearheading the Crystal Valley project, managed by the Regional Development Agency, with a strong focus on tourism. This initiative is a core part of the region's development strategy. For Crystal Valley to become a recognized brand, it needs to be integrated across all sectors, institutions, and communities within the Liberec Region. This involves a multi-faceted approach:

- Sectoral: Engaging areas like transport, education, and healthcare.
- Territorial: Ensuring representation across all parts of the region.
- Social: Involving both authorities and the general public.

The project's success relies on a blend of top-down leadership from regional and municipal authorities and bottom-up engagement from citizens. It was launched by a diverse group of individuals, including experts, craftspeople, artists, educators, and mayors, who established centers of excellence and fostered a collaborative, multi-level network.

To ensure Crystal Valley's continued growth, it's vital to involve all stakeholders. This inclusive approach will strengthen the implementation of related ideas and projects. The unique identity of Crystal Valley is defined by its rich traditions, including glassmaking, jewelry production, and stonemasonry, which are crucial for the region's cultural heritage and economic future.

Methodology of research

For the study of the Crystal Valley network, qualitative research methods were employed. Data collection was conducted through meticulously prepared and individualised in-depth interviews, designed to address the following research questions:

1. What approaches are used to foster trust and long-term partnerships?
2. What strategies enable effective R&D collaboration between partners?
3. What are examples of digital platforms that facilitate collaborative innovation?
4. How does collaboration across different sectors (e.g., public-private, academia-industry) enhance innovation?
5. How does the government in the Liberec Region support innovation collaboration?
6. How do the partners ensure the sustainability of their cooperation?
7. What barriers emerge in collaboration within the network?
8. How are intellectual property rights managed within the network?
9. What obstacles and risks may arise in sustaining long-term collaboration in the future?

Respondents selection

The target group for this research consists of two main categories: first, representatives of various organisational units within the regional tourism sector, and second, members of Crystal Valley, including both small entrepreneurs and larger companies. The selection of respondents for in-depth interviews was conducted purposefully to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. In collaboration with Crystal Valley project manager David Pastva, the following 13 respondents were chosen:

- David Pastva – Manager of the Crystal Valley project
- Marie Kárová – Manager of the Lusatian Mountains destination
- Denisa Merenusová – Manager of the Jizera Mountains destination
- Museum of Glass and Jewellery in Jablonec nad Nisou – Glass and jewellery museum
- Ajeto Glassworks Lindava – Traditional glassworks
- Pačinek Glass – Artistic glass studio
- Rautis Poniklá – Handcrafted glass bead producer
- Fabos - Jewellery studio
- Crafts Alley Turnov – Traditional crafts alley
- Karolína Kopřivová – Art jewellery creator
- Stephany Jewels - Jewellery and stone cutting studio
- Viktor Novotný - Glass studio and restaurant
- Crystal Valley random tourist from the Czech Republic

In-depth interviews

Given the diversity of respondents, a core set of questions was developed and then tailored to suit each respondent's specific background and expertise. For instance, destination managers were asked different questions than glassmaking companies to ensure relevance and depth in their responses. The structured approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of key themes related to collaboration, innovation, and sustainability within Crystal Valley.

A part of the in-depth interviews was conducted in person at the business premises of the respective companies. Another part took place via telephone, while the remaining interviews were carried out through online video calls. This mixed approach allowed for greater flexibility and accessibility, depending on the preferences and availability of the participants.

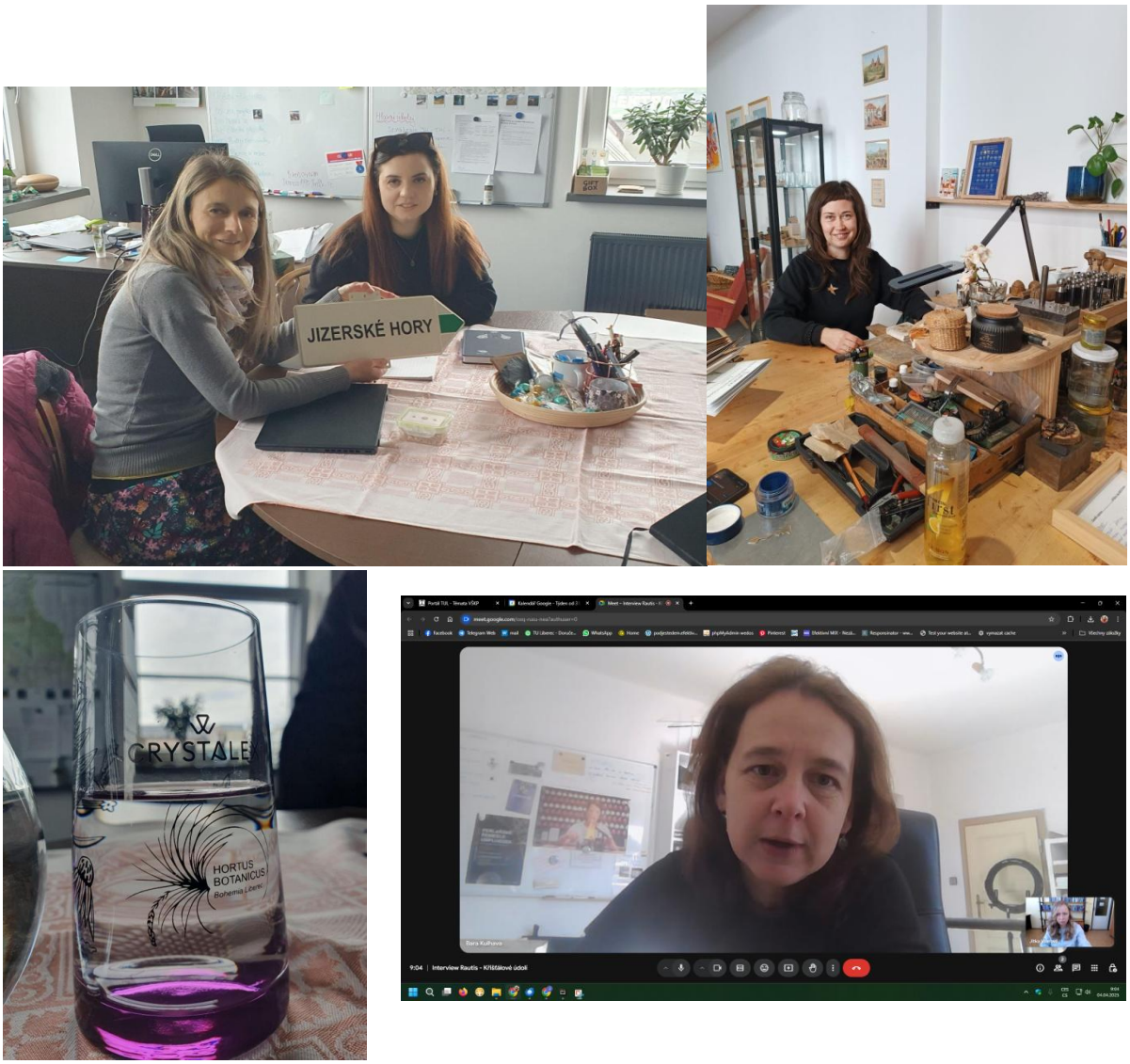

Figure: Photogallery from selected interviews

Results

This section examines the drivers of innovation collaboration within the Crystal Valley project, a tourism-focused regional initiative promoting glassmaking and jewelry in the Liberec Region of Czechia. The project's success hinges on the interplay of four key factors:

- Economic factors: Access to funding and market opportunities are crucial for fostering collaborative innovation, driving local economic growth, and revitalizing traditional industries.
- Cultural factors: Respect for local craftsmanship and shared heritage are vital in shaping communication and decision-making within partnerships, creating a unique collaborative environment.
- Policy and governance: Government regulations and innovation policies (including intellectual property rights) significantly influence the potential and sustainability of partnerships.
- Technology: Advancements in digital platforms are critical enablers for collaboration.

The Crystal Valley initiative itself unites traditional craft producers, cultural institutions, public bodies, and marketing platforms to build a recognizable regional brand based on heritage, creativity, and experiential tourism. A cognitive map further illustrates these interconnected factors.

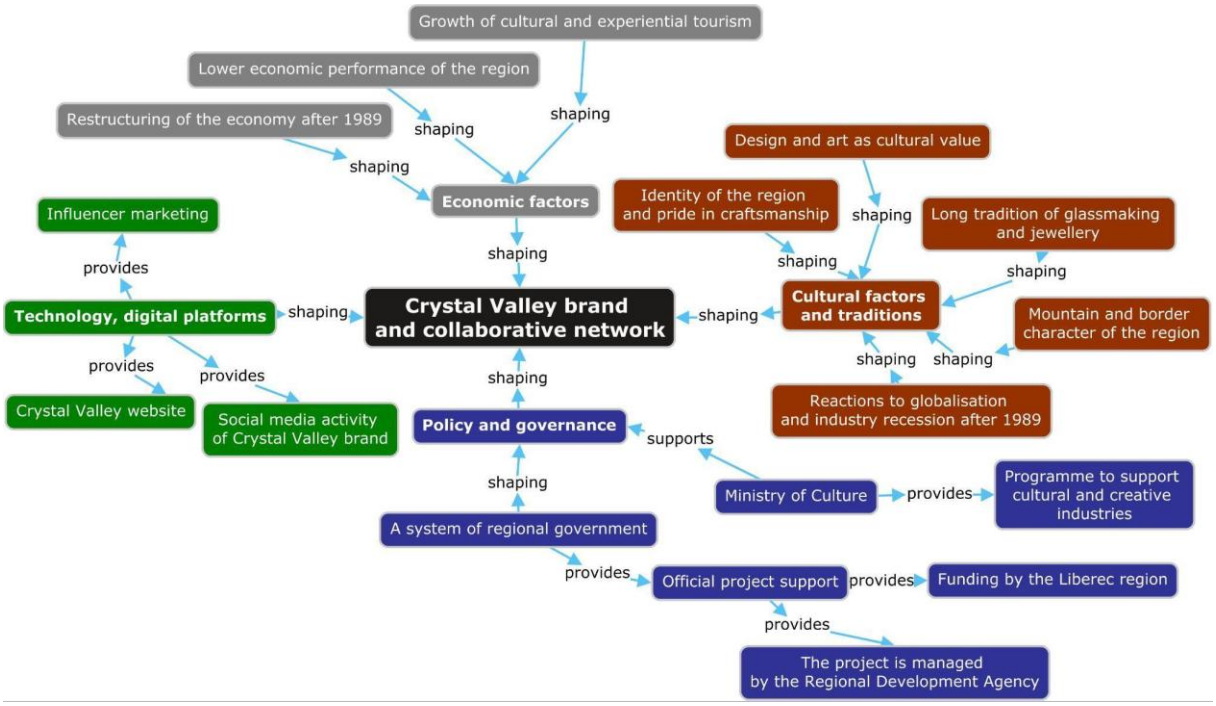

Figure: Cognitive map: Crystal Valley brand and collaborative network

The second cognitive map below outlines the main activities carried out under the Crystal Valley initiative, highlighting the roles of the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and project partners. These activities contribute to the promotion of the regional brand, knowledge exchange, and the engagement of both professionals and the public.

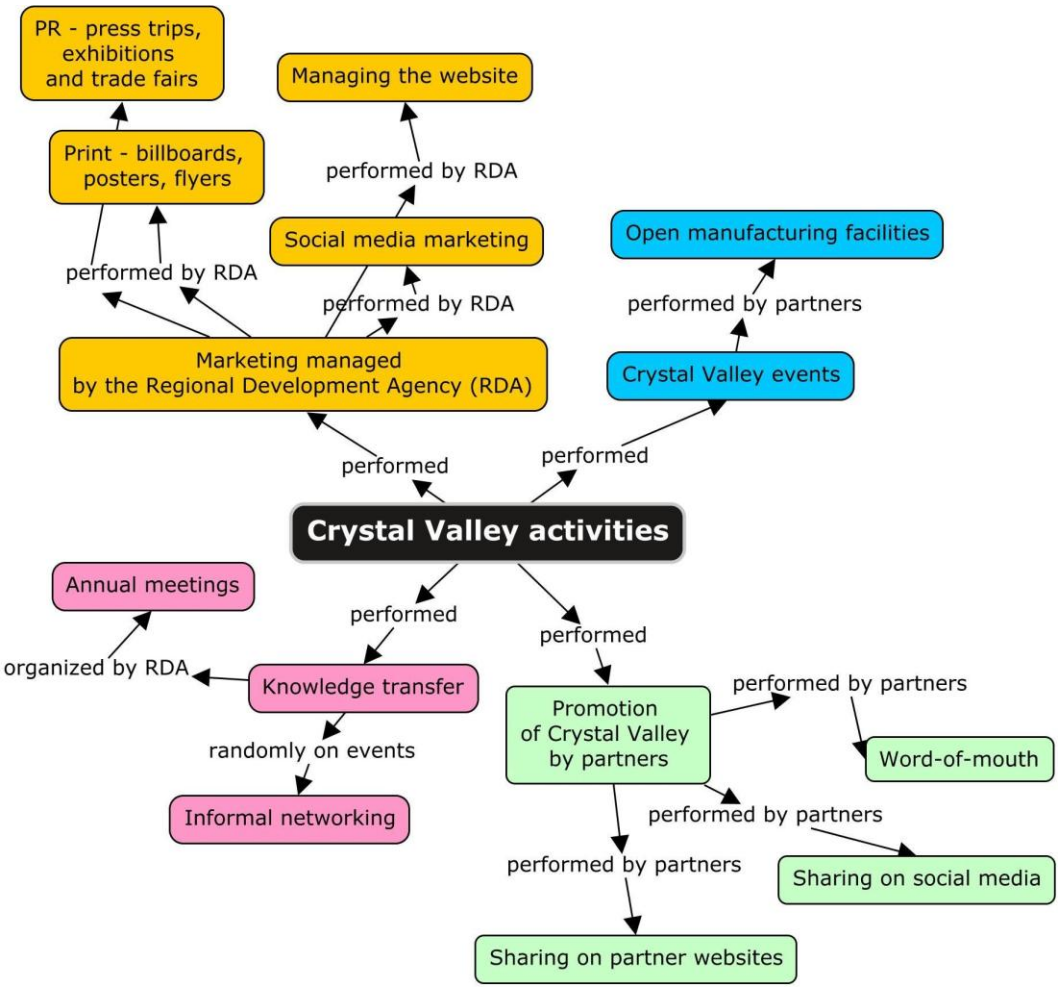

Figure: Cognitive map: Crystal Valley activities

The Regional Development Agency (RDA) centrally manages the Crystal Valley project's marketing, which includes traditional print materials and digital strategies like social media and website management, ensuring consistent branding and visibility of the region's glassmaking and jewelry heritage. Public relations activities, such as press trips and exhibitions, are also key, with Crystal Valley increasingly coordinating them.

A major component of the initiative involves Crystal Valley events, where partner organizations open their manufacturing facilities to the public. These open-door events provide authentic experiences and foster understanding and emotional connections to local craftsmanship. Additionally, partner-led promotion through websites, social media, and word-of-mouth expands the brand's reach and creates shared ownership.

The project also facilitates knowledge transfer through formal annual meetings organized by the RDA and informal networking at events, promoting collaboration and the exchange of best practices.

Weaknesses and Future Development Potential

The Crystal Valley project, though a recognized regional brand, is currently stagnant. Interviews reveal insufficient promotional efforts, especially in neighboring Germany and Poland, and low awareness even within the Liberec Region.

Key Issues Identified:

- **Misplaced Hub**: Positioning Liberec city as the central hub is problematic as glass and jewelry production is in surrounding areas, not the city itself. This **weakens authenticity**.
- **Lack of Collaboration**: There's a **missing link with hotels and accommodation providers**, hindering integrated visitor experiences.
- **Limited Facility Openness**: Many affiliated businesses are **unwilling or unable to open to visitors**, leading to a fragmented and inconsistent visitor offer. They often see their role as production, not tourism.
- **Underutilized Storytelling**: The project isn't leveraging storytelling on its website and social media to create emotional connections with tourists.

Path Forward:

For Crystal Valley to reach its full potential, it needs to:

- **Define Target Groups**: Systematically direct marketing and offerings to specific audiences.
- **Address Infrastructure Gaps**: Improve parking, public transport, restaurants, and accommodation.
- **Enhance Physical Identity**: Integrate design elements like sculptures to boost brand recognition.
- **Develop Tourism Products**: Create packages combining gastronomy with glassworks visits.
- **Consider a Mobile App**: As part of a broader regional tourism concept.

Figure: Photogallery of the Crystal Valley (left: Museum of Glass and Jewellery in Jablonec and Nisou, Glassworks Ajeto Lindava, Rautis workshop; right: Glass path in Brniště, Christmas ornaments Rautis)

Best Practices for Innovation-Based Collaboration gathered from the Crystal Valley case study

The Crystal Valley project in Czechia's Liberec Region offers a compelling example of innovation-driven tourism collaboration, revitalizing traditional crafts like glassmaking and jewelry. Key best practices from this model include:

- **Build on Regional Identity and Cultural Heritage**: Leverage authentic local assets like traditional craftsmanship to create unique, experience-based tourism offerings.
- **Foster Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration**: Bring together public, private, educational, and cultural entities for a rich innovation ecosystem and holistic development.
- **Combine Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches**: Integrate institutional support with grassroots initiatives for sustainable and resilient networks.
- **Invest in Storytelling and Emotional Engagement**: Share artisan stories and historical narratives to deepen emotional appeal and enhance visitor experience.
- **Utilize Digital Tools to Amplify Impact**: Use websites, social media, and influencer partnerships for outreach, visibility, and network coordination.
- **Encourage Flexibility and Open Access**: Support businesses in opening production sites for public access through guided tours and educational facilities.
- **Nurture Trust and Long-Term Relationships**: Foster sustained cooperation through mutual respect, transparency, and long-term commitment among partners.

- **Integrate Tourism with Regional Development Strategies**: Align tourism initiatives with broader economic and social policies for long-term regional goals.
- **Adapt to Changing Visitor Preferences**: Continuously adapt to trends like slow tourism and experience-driven travel with authentic offerings.

Ultimately, Crystal Valley demonstrates that successful innovation in tourism is inclusive, heritage-driven, strategically coordinated, and emotionally resonant, providing a transferable framework for other regions.

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Case Study 3: Balatoni Kör, Lake Balaton, Hungary

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Veszprem, 2025

Introduction

Cooperation in tourism networks

In the case of a tourist destination cooperation between operators is essential for the area to prevail and to penetrate the market, but once tourists arrive in the destination, operators become competitors (Ritchie & Ritchie, 2002; von Friedrichs Grängsjö 2003; von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson 2006; Ermen, 2011). This is particularly true for operators that target the same groups. If the actors in the destination cannot overcome individual interests, this can cause serious difficulties for the future of the destination, so it is important to consider how best to represent and enforce this special situation and these different interests in an organisational structure (Ermen, 2011).

Open innovation in tourism

Open innovation networks are increasingly recognized as crucial for enhancing competitiveness and adaptability in the dynamic tourism sector. Recent systematic reviews highlight the growing academic interest in this field, emphasizing collaboration, co-creation, and stakeholder engagement as key dimensions (Cardoso et al., 2024; Mota et al., 2023). Digital technologies, innovation culture, and sustainability emerge as important themes, driving the development of innovative tourism experiences and services (Cardoso et al., 2024). Bibliometric analyses reveal a surge in research since 2017, with focus areas including overtourism, sustainability, value co-creation, and the impact of open innovation on organizational performance in hospitality (Robayo-Acuña & Chams-Anturi, 2023). The literature also explores cooperative behavior among firms, knowledge transfer, and innovation policies (Marasco et al., 2018). These studies collectively underscore the complexity and relevance of open innovation networks in tourism, highlighting their potential to foster sustainable success and competitive advantage in the sector.

Lake Balaton (Hungary)

Lake Balaton, located in western Hungary, is the second most frequently visited tourism destination in the country after the capital Budapest. According to Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) data, the Lake Balaton tourist region has a territory of 3,886 km2 (4.2% of the country territory) and a permanent population of more than 270,000 (5.7% of the Hungarian population). The area can be considered rural: of the approximately 180 settlements in the region, 18 are cities, and 51 are located near the shore. Tourism is a leading industry in the area around Lake Balaton, and the core destination attraction is the natural environment. The lake warms during the summer period, so summer holidays that feature swimming and water sports are a dominant tourism product. The beautiful scenery of the Balaton uplands, visitor centres at the Balaton Upland National Park, active tourism opportunities (i.e., hiking and cycling routes), wine and gastronomy tourism, and a wide range of cultural heritages offer a complex, memorable visitor experience. According to HCSO data, commercial accommodation units around Lake Balaton register approximately 6 million guest nights per year. This number is supplemented by a high volume of second-home owners and day visitors not regularly monitored in the statistical data. Tourism at Lake Balaton is characterized by strong temporal (i.e., the summer period) and spatial (i.e., shore-area attractions) imbalances. However, tourism

development emphasizes establishing tourism offerings that are available throughout the year. The Veszprém–Balaton region was recognized as the European Capital of Culture in 2023. The programme strongly focused on year-round attractions and events (Lőrincz et al., 2021) as well as sustainability (Lőrincz, 2017), particularly with respect to transport connections.[1]

The population of the region in 2022 was 332 459. 40.7% of the population live in coastal and peri-coastal settlements and 63.0% in cities. Similar to national trends, the population of the Lake Balaton region has been declining over the last two decades. For the non-coastal settlements, significant population decreases can be identified on both the northern and southern shores. Between 2001 and 2022, population growth is observed in the western basin around Keszthely and Hévíz, and in the eastern basin around Veszprém, Balatonfüred and Siófok. As a result of these agglomeration processes, the population of Keszthely, Veszprém and Balatonfüred has decreased significantly. The proportion of people with tertiary education is higher than average in coastal and peri-coastal settlements, probably due to the influx of older people of higher social status. Digital skill is an important factor in the knowledge and skills of the population. In this respect, the eastern region of Lake Balaton (Veszprém - Tihany - Balatonalmádi triangle) clearly stands out. For non-nearshore settlements, the southern shore is in a less favourable position.

The structure of employment in the Lake Balaton region is similar to the national average, but differs along the following points. As an indication of the role of tourism in the economy, the share of commercial and service occupations in total employment is much higher (14.7%) than the national average (11.7%). Within the region, this share is even higher (16.2%) in coastal and near-shore settlements. Lakeside and peri-coastal municipalities have a high share of managerial occupations, with one in seven people employed in the economic, administrative and representative sectors. In contrast to the national and regional figures, in the lakeside and peri-coastal municipalities and towns of the Balaton region, the share of white-collar workers is significantly higher than the share of blue-collar workers. The role of industry, agriculture and low-skilled and unskilled occupations is less important in the Lake Balaton region than at national level.

Tourism-oriented regional associations, networks

Balaton Association / Balatoni Szövetség

The Balatoni Szövetség, or Balaton Association, serves as a cornerstone for the ongoing development and promotion of the Balaton region in Hungary. Founded in the picturesque town of Siófok in 1904, this significant non-profit organization has spent over a century dedicated to the welfare and enhancement of the Lake Balaton area, a region celebrated not only for its stunning natural beauty but also for its rich tapestry of cultural and historical significance.

With a representation extending to over 90 municipalities lining the shores of Lake Balaton, the Balatoni Szövetség plays a pivotal role in fostering regional development initiatives. The region itself is a thriving hub of tourism, attracting approximately 1.5 million visitors annually, drawn by the lake's scenic landscapes, recreational activities, and numerous cultural festivals. These

[1] Source for this paragraph: Sulyok, J. - Madarász, E. (2025): Mapping intra-destination movement of leisure tourists at a rural lakeside destination: Role of transport mode, and place of accommodation (under publication)

visitors contribute significantly to the local economy, a fact not lost on the association as it strategizes to promote sustainable tourism practices that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship.

One of the notable recent projects initiated by the Balatoni Szövetség is aimed at creating a comprehensive ecological management plan for the Lake Balaton region. This project includes partnerships with environmental NGOs, governmental organizations, and academic institutions to ensure effective implementation and monitoring of sustainability practices across the area.

In summary, the Balatoni Szövetség stands as an essential entity within the Balaton region, tirelessly advocating for development while prioritizing the preservation of its ecological and cultural heritage. Whether through accelerating economic initiatives, fostering community ties, or spearheading environmental and cultural conservation efforts, the association enhances the overall quality of life for both residents and the multitude of visitors who cherish the beauty and vibrancy of Lake Balaton. Through its ongoing commitment to these principles, the Balatoni Szövetség plays a critical role in shaping a sustainable, thriving future for this beloved region.

Source: https://www.balatoniszovetseg.hu/

Balatoni Turizmus Szövetség (DMO)

The Balaton Tourism Association operates as a regional destination management organization in the area, representing approximately 2,000 businesses in various tourism forums through its member organizations. According to information from the association, in 2024, the Balaton Tourism Association sent nearly 90 leisure and travel-related topics to the press, which appeared more than 400 times in authoritative media outlets. The press coverage, worth tens of millions of forints, clearly shows that with the right cooperation and expertise, the Balaton region can generate significant publicity in the national media. One of their best-known marketing campaigns is the 'Balaton Ice Cream' competition, which is being organised for the 12th time this year by the Balaton Tourism Association.

"Éltető Balaton Uplands" Association

The "Éltető Balaton Uplands" Association (hereinafter: ÉLTETŐ) coordinates the rural development of 59 settlements.

The Association was established in 2008 by 134 civil organizations, enterprises, and local governments. Its goal, according to the founding deed, is rural development. With the cooperation of ÉLTETŐ's staff and partners, it performs expert activities, which generally include:

1. Mapping and preserving local values; conveying the spiritual heritage and message of the Balaton Uplands to the broadest segments of the public.
2. Promoting greater social cohesion, strengthening local identity, encouraging community thinking and work, and ensuring the conditions for these.
3. Increasing awareness of locally produced products and services, supporting their sales. (https://eltetovedjegy.hu/termekkatalogus/)
4. Strengthening the quality and coordination of local tourism offerings.
5. Supporting the retention of young people locally, facilitating their settlement, and preventing migration.

Visegrad Fund

Main independent activities of ÉLTETŐ:

1. Coordinating the LEADER rural development program – preparing regional rural development strategies, issuing tenders, and evaluating applications. (https://eltetobalatonfelvidek.hu/helyi-fejlesztesi-strategia-2023/)
2. Operating the "Rural Quality" – Éltető Balaton Uplands logo (www.eltetovedjegy.hu).
3. In 2014, ÉLTETŐ registered the "Éltető Balaton Uplands" trademark and joined the international "Rural Quality" certification system.
   The certification process for the "Rural Quality – Éltető Balaton Uplands" trademark generally follows uniform international standards, meaning that businesses authorized to use the trademark are also members of the European "Rural Quality" system. However, the certification system includes unique features specific to certain rural areas and sectors, defined by local producers, service providers, and entrepreneurs.
   The goal of the European collaboration is to promote producers, entrepreneurs, and service providers across countries, regions, and localities that represent exceptional quality, also emphasizing social, environmental, and economic responsibility, and to strengthen their competitiveness.
4. Operating the website www.balatonfelvidekitura.hu (
5. Strengthening cooperation among businesses, civil organizations, and local governments operating in the Balaton Uplands.
6. Assisting with Hungarian and EU tenders.

Membership in ÉLTETŐ is open to individuals, civil organizations, and local governments that meet the requirements specified in the founding deed and are accepted by the association's members.
By 2016, ÉLTETŐ had become one of the largest civil organizations in the Balaton Uplands.

Source of the chapter: https://eltetobalatonfelvidek.hu/

Veszprém - Balaton 2023 - European Capital of Culture

The European Capital of Culture title has been won by the municipal city of Veszprém, with the involvement of the city's and the region's institutions, actors of their cultural scenes, and civil organisations. Regionality and joint coordination are warranted by Veszprém-Balaton Jsc. itself, as among the owners of the firm there are bigger regional as well as important micro-regional organisations along with the most significant local self-governments. Once the title was won, our JSc. became the planner, organiser and executor of project development, international relations, and cultural-artistic activities.

The title of European Capital of Culture is to raise awareness that the common space of European culture is the result of the joint contribution of various countries and cities. As the voice of the arts, it conveys the message that European culture is common and it is always the result of cultural activity in a given region.

With their local cultural product, the city and region holding the title will become the focus of European attention, thus improving the image of the city, increasing the efficiency of the local creative industry and its touristic appeal.

Community building: contributes to the connection of fragmented and non-communicative social strata.

Volunteering: By involving the community it helps residents of the region to gain new experiences.

Tradition: it supports project development with the awareness of local values and plans to make improvements considering these.

Innovation: stimulates cultural and economic demand for the region by producing new market goods and intellectual products.

Balatoni Kör

Introduction of the network

The network was established in 2014, with the leading actors of the Lake Balaton tourism region's wineries and gastronomy service providers, all with a strong commitment towards the destination's sustainable development and all-year attractiveness. By now, the Balatoni Kör has members not only from the catering sector, but also event organizers, attractions, bike service providers, dogfriendly beach are also among the members. The members are located not only on the shore areas, but also represent places within the region, but not located directly at the lakeside. As a consequence of recent years' unplanned events (such as Covid-19, geopolitical conflicts, economic recession etc.), the existence of such networks like the Balatoni Kör is even more important.

Already the **founding** of the Balatoni Kör can be regarded as an innovation. Arriving in the middle of the lake, the founders unveiled a four-metre silhouette of Lake Balaton from glasses filled with their wines and toasted with them to the solemn founding of the Balaton Circle. Then, in addition to the wines, the founding restaurants, a confectionery and a brandy house offered their guests tastings. As strategic partners, they invited the leaders of the Hungarian National Tourist Office, the Balaton Tourism Association, the Balaton Development Council and Balaton Shipping Company, as well as the Ministerial Commissioner responsible for the development of the wine sector, to discuss the vision for the region during the cruise.

The members of the Balatoni Kör are representatives of high quality wineries and gastronomy from the Balaton region who are open all year round. The main **aim** of the organisation is to build on local ingredients and services to make the Lake Balaton region an attractive tourism destination in all four seasons. The vision of the 'four season Balaton' goes beyond tourism and gastronomy, it is a fundamental value members share. The strong commitment of the members builds a strong and well functioning community, as well.

The main objective of the Balatoni Kör is not only to raise the level of gastronomy and hospitality, but also to improve the quality of life around Lake Balaton in general through a region-centred approach, by working together to treat the lake and its surroundings as a natural entity. Among the long-term goals, the development of the image elements of Lake Balaton and to create a vision for the region are also formulated. In the hospitality sector, the Balatoni Kör wants to achieve what is already common in the French and Italian regions, namely local products and local wines are on the menus. A particular problem in this respect is that the suspension of fishing in Lake Balaton means that restaurants have theoretically no legal access to fish from Lake Balaton. The Balaton Fish Management Non-Profit Ltd. is responsible for

fishing and coordination. This is a major problem for quality gastronomy, but also a serious competitive disadvantage for tourism compared to the coastal areas or even other lakes in Europe, as guests coming to Lake Balaton today do not have the experience of fishing boats mooring, selling fresh fish and drying their nets on the shore, which traditionally defines the image of most waterfronts. Furthermore, an important objective of the network is the reliable, trustworthy communication about Lake Balaton tourism, so the members put a great emphasis on it.

The Balatoni Kör is not only a marketing organisation, but primarily serves the public interest of the entire Balaton region. Therefore, the network is not keen on increasing the volume of members, but rather by opening up their main projects to partners who share their principles.

Members

The Balatoni Kör association is the **largest professional organisation** that brings together quality restaurants and wineries in the Lake Balaton region. By 2025, it has more than 60 members who promote and follow the concept of year-round Balaton hospitality. Membership categories include normal member, advocate member, and honorary member.

BalatonBor

The most significant, tangible innovation of the association is the **BalatonBor** and the **Hegybor**. The coordinated marketing activities resulted in an excellent joint product in the form of BalatonBor. The unified bottle and image symbolise the unity and common thinking of the Balaton vineyards and wineries.

In 2015, BalatonBor was born as the first regional brand in Hungary and the first example of how to build a regional brand on a community basis. Since then, more than 20 wineries' wines have met the strict criteria of BalatonBor in every vintage, thus creating a unified BalatonBor image, which also includes the name of the winery that produced the Italian Riesling. In this way, winemakers can further embrace this community wine brand, while representing Lake Balaton and its most characteristic white wine variety. The first of these common Balaton wines is an Italian Riesling, as more than two thirds of the most popular Italian Rieslings in competitions and on the market are already from the Balaton region giving the wine region a historical responsibility for the most popular grape variety in the country.

Beach Food of the Year competition

Also since 2015 the Beach Food of the Year competition has been held every year, which contributes significantly to improving the gastronomic offer of lakeside buffets and bistros. Instead of copying international street food standards, a real beach food revolution has taken place at Lake Balaton, with a focus on regional ingredients and healthier dishes than the previous ‘retro’ beach offer. As part of the offer, original and innovative dishes have become available to visitors on the shores of Lake Balaton, which can be considered a kind of Hungarikum.

‘Kóstold Körbe’ brochure

With the 'Kóstold Körbe' (taste around) initiative, the Balatoni Kör draws attention to the fact that from September onwards tourism at Lake Balaton does not stop, but changes. The focus of the autumn-winter months is on high-quality programmes and regional values. At the ‘Kóstold Körbe’ gastronomic festivals, the restaurants, bakeries and wineries of the members showcase their products, furthermore music and family programmes are on offer.

This innovation has a tangible output, namely a printed brochure to be found at all the participating service providers. The brochure helps in finding the right experience among others for families, for those travelling with dogs, travellers seeking for a lakeside restaurant, a place for a romantic stay, an exclusive hotel etc.

Others

In 2021, the Balatoni Kör has set up new working groups, the first of which are the event, communication and social responsibility working groups, the later one speaking out also on the protection of the built and natural environment. "As we grow, we have a wider network of contacts and more influence. It is essential for an NGO to be involved in social responsibility and to make its voice heard on issues that are important to it, but that others cannot. We will continue to stay out of politics, but we will stand firmly for the values and opinions expressed by our members," said the actual President, Lajos Szilágyi.

Interviews with members

Spring 2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the Balatoni Kör. The interviews were organized online, one interview lasted approx. 30-40 minutes. The interviews were recorded, the current summary is based on the transcript. The translation - as the interviews were conducted in Hungarian - are done by the authors of the case study.

Results - innovation practices

Over the past 5-10 years, each of the enterprises has implemented significant innovations. All the participants are open to innovation, constantly striving to improve primarily based on the needs of their existing customer base, as well as domestic and international trends and examples.

“The idea to build the hotel alongside the restaurant arose from our desire to create a place where guests can enjoy not only a culinary experience but also comfortable accommodation. The hotel aims to attract tourists interested in gastronomy and to serve as a gastronomic hub where visitors can not only enjoy our restaurant but also participate in various gastronomic programs, such as visits to wineries or cheese factories. We believe that the Balaton area offers excellent opportunities for gastronomic tourism, and our goal is to contribute to increasing the region’s gastronomic appeal.”

Innovation and new approaches appear across many areas of the businesses, which are detailed below.

Product Development

Significant accommodation developments have been made at the restaurant and one of the wineries so that guests do not have to leave after meals and drinks. In each case, there were also improvements related to core activities: expanding the winery, redesigning the restaurant, creating garden or winter garden venues, opening a delicatessen shop, and implementing advanced innovations in winemaking technology.

"I am fundamentally very receptive to innovation, and we strive to utilize new technologies across all areas. During the implementation of our winery, we applied modern, innovative solutions - establishing a technologically well-equipped winery that is now among the most prominent on Lake Balaton. A recent example of innovation is that we've been using an AI-based system for about a year, which captures images of our vineyards every two to three days via satellites. This data is analyzed using artificial intelligence, providing advice for plant protection (for example, when to spray) and indicating critical areas for irrigation. It also supplies information about nutrient supply and helps us determine the optimal harvest time. It's an extremely smart and useful system. Among the first in Hungary, we connected it for vineyard management purposes."

Sales and Communication

One winery has been engaged in online sales, initially driven by the pandemic as a survival strategy, which led to a conscious focus on social media presence. This resulted in an eightfold increase in sales and allowed them to enter the online sales market, which remains their most significant revenue source today.

"At that time, we decided to move away from the sales network of three to four wholesale partners and shift to direct online sales. This made us more independent and enabled us to better control brand development and the customer experience. From a marketing perspective, it was a significant step forward - today, we can target our communications to customers via email and easily retarget them for repeat purchases. Online presence has now become not just a supplementary channel but one of the most important sales and communication platforms. Our online operations continue through a subcontractor on a commission basis, while we retain strategic oversight."

Sustainability

All three businesses incorporate sustainability as an integral part of their operations, consistently focusing on development aspects related to environmentally conscious practices: the wineries mention their efforts in viticulture sustainability, while the restaurant emphasizes using local products, involving local producers, and seasonal ingredients.

"We continuously strive for sustainable operation, especially in viticulture, which has become even more critical in recent years due to increasing drought conditions."

Effective operation is of course essential for sustainability, and in a tourism-based enterprise, people and workforce are the driving force. The management of the wineries emphasized their

focus on retaining employees and highlighted the importance of staff who have been with them for 15 to 30 years.

"Including the design of our wine cellar to improve efficiency in working hours and make employees' jobs easier. For every development, we pay particular attention to improving working conditions because we consider it important that our colleagues work in a comfortable, safe, and modern environment."

The sources of funding for innovations and developments are similar across all the participants: they always start with their own resources, and if opportunities permit, additional financing is secured through bank loans and various grant programs (such as in viticulture, tourism, or agricultural diversification). This multi-source financing approach is a deliberate decision aimed at ensuring that the day-to-day operations are not jeopardized by new investments.

"For these investments, considering the level of intensity, support levels typically ranged from 30% to 70%. This means that approximately 30% of the costs were covered by grant funding, with the remaining part financed through own resources and bank loans."

Results - membership in Balatoni Kör association

Membership, reasons for joining the association

The interviewed stakeholders are new or old members, so both perspectives were shared. Founding members still have a voice in strategic issues, although they are not necessarily active in daily work, communication. The membership points out a strong commitment towards Lake Balaton, and its quality tourism. Furthermore, the membership also means that member businesses include the Balatoni Kör in their communication. For those producing BalatonBor or Hegybor, it is more evident. The members see that other members think and communicate in a similar way like the ones involved in the interviews. This collective action can give the community a strong presence and a resounding force. Another important reason for joining the network is knowledge sharing and open attitude towards cooperation.

'Yes, I am a member of the Balaton Circle. It is important to point out that in this case it is not companies but individuals who join. We have gathered around us people who really want to do something, are willing to work and believe in the common spirit and objective that we have formulated together. I joined the Balaton Circle in early 2024, so I have been a member for over a year. I think I have been relatively active in the work. Within the organisation I am active in several groups: I am a member of the communication group and I am also involved in the work of the "BalatonBor" committee.'

Benefits of the membership for the company

The benefits formulated by the companies goes beyond the individual interests. Besides understanding the power of a community - compared with a small family business - the respondents highlighted tangible benefits, as well. Both strategic (such as developement of Lake Balaton tourism), and operational (such as communication, knowledge sharing) level was mentioned.

'We work mainly with the secretary in our relations with the Balatoni Kör, through whom most communication takes place. She passes on the information to the members, but in addition to that, there are also several smaller groups, such as the Facebook communication group or the internal group of the board. The same structure is in place within the BalatonBor community, where we are also in close contact with the President. We hold monthly meetings to discuss current issues, decisions and directions. We are not only active in external communication, but also try to create concrete benefits for our members. For example, we had an initiative where members could get a discounted credit card reader through a scheme provided by a partner company. This shows that community work is not only for the benefit of the Lake Balaton region, but that we can also provide tangible benefits to our members through the power of joining forces.'

Resources, knowledge sharing

The members share their resources actively with the network. First of all, it is important that member companies are open all year around, supporting the strategic goal of the destination being a 'four season' place for visitors. Members ensure locations for certain events of the Balatoni Kör. Another important resource is that the members are 'ambassadors' of Lake Balaton and the values they represent.

'We actively participate in the events of the Balatoni Kör. Several times we have hosted the Balatoni Kör Breakfasts, where members gather, discuss and think together about the future of the region. We also regularly support events: we are happy to provide wine for events. A particularly exciting project is the 'Kóstold Körbe brochure, which features a number of wineries and restaurants from Lake Balaton. This year, on my initiative, we managed to get the magazine published in Chinese and English. This is thanks to a Chinese contact who supports the translation, printing and distribution of the magazine. This shows the diversity of our communication and the increasing diversification of our activities, not only at the domestic level but also at the international level.'

How does the membership support innovation?

The membership strongly supports innovation that is a clear output of the interviews. The innovation might be tangible (such as the BalatonBor, or a new international cooperation with the Chinese Shandong district) or intangible (such as knowledge sharing).

'I think that these community and professional collaborations are very similar to travelling when you go around a country or the world, a lot of the experiences are not immediately conscious. It's not always tangible exactly where you've seen or heard something, but it still affects you. The same is true of these professional communities, where a good idea, a word, is often enough to set us off in a new direction.'

Results - membership in other networks

The involved entrepreneurs participate in various professional collaborations beyond the Balaton Circle, including local or regional partnerships, the Pannon Gastronomic Academy, the Hungarian Bocuse d'Or Academy, and others.

One of the most significant collaborations from the wineries' perspective is the **Rizling Generáció**, which led to the creation of Balaton Bor. Essentially, this is a new category of wine that, as a core element of brand building, currently represents all six wine regions and will continue to do so in the future.

"This is an initiative that specifically serves to benefit and strengthen not just a single winery, but the entire region. With a unified branding, quality standards, and a well-communicated Balaton identity, it contributes to ensuring that the Balaton area is increasingly recognized on the gastronomic and wine tourism map - both domestically and internationally."

An important partner for service providers in the region is the **Éltető Balaton-felvidékért Association**, where the primary benefit cited is information sharing.

"A good example of this is the revitalization of seed and shell grape waste; since we connected with suitable partners through this channel, we process all our by-products and have created new products from them."

In terms of hospitality, the community of **Stylish Rural Hotels** is noteworthy, with the queried restaurant and hotel being members. In this community, respect for traditions, sustainability, the beauty of rural life, the strength of community, and guest hospitality are the most valued principles.

"We are members of the Stylish Rural Hotels community, which brings together accommodations we ourselves are also part of."

Among the collaborations mentioned, partnerships with **universities** also appeared in several aspects:

- terroir research,
- educational and awareness-raising lectures,
- providing practical placements and opportunities for recent graduates.

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Conclusion

Open innovation networks are increasingly seen as vital for boosting competitiveness and adaptability in the fast-changing tourism industry. Recent academic literature shows rising interest in the topic, highlighting the importance of collaboration, co-creation, and active stakeholder participation. Key themes such as digital transformation, innovation-driven culture, and sustainability are central to shaping new and creative tourism offerings. The literature also examines inter-firm collaboration, knowledge sharing, and innovation-related policies. Overall, these findings emphasize the complexity and strategic importance of open innovation networks in tourism, showcasing their role in achieving long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

The Report presents cases of collaborative innovation practices in three different tourism destinations (city, lake and mountain) within the Visegrad region. As such, the Report offers examples of good practice related to innovation-based collaboration of tourism stakeholders, recommendations, as well as limitations and challenges of existing collaborative networks. The methodology employed for the purpose of making this report involved desk research and interviews with stakeholders from the collaborative innovation networks. Results and conclusions reveal strengths and weaknesses of examined networks, thus providing implications for improving the networks and, at the same time, models for creating innovation-based collaborative networks in other tourism destinations.

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