

Article

Transnational and Cross-Border Cooperation for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Baltic Sea Region

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Abstract: This article highlights policy in the field of sustainable tourism development being implemented at various institutional levels with particular attention to Russia as one of the participants in this cooperation. The author of this paper examines the processes aimed at achieving sustainable development goals in tourism at each of these levels. The initial focus of this article is to investigate how the territorial cooperation programs operating in the Baltic Sea Region in 2014–2020 contributed to sustainable development of tourism. There were more than 1000 projects investigated within the research area and the author found that 155 of them contribute to sustainable tourism development. The programs with the highest number of projects are in Latvia–Russia, Poland–Russia and Lithuania–Russia. They are mostly targeted at ecotourism development (35) or historical and cognitive projects (28). This supports our hypothesis regarding the importance of cross-border cooperation programs in implementing United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: sustainability; sustainable tourism; ecotourism; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); policy; national projects in Russia; biodiversity; the Baltic Sea Region; cross-border cooperation programmes; territorial cooperation



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1. Introduction

In this paper the author will follow the definition of sustainable tourism, provided by UNWTO as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” [1]. The capacity of these components will be determined by the development of new activities in the tourism sector. Each action is subject to the influence of biophysical, environmental, social and managerial factors, which changes the conditions of functioning and provision of these resources. These factors play a key role in assessing the sustainability of each action. It is important that tourism meets certain principals directing it towards Sustainable Development SD. In this study we suggest the following: minimization of negative tourism impacts on the environment; efficient use of resources; natural and cultural preservation and conservation; participation and information of both people and companies involved in recreation activity; promotion of visitors’ observation and comprehension of the culture and of the environment; sensitivity towards local people and other stakeholders; importance of policy, planning and management to both tourism enterprises and tourism destinations; emphasis on limits to tourism development; generation of economic profit and employment for local people, taking into consideration gender equality [2].

Decisions on sustainable tourism development are undertaken at different institutional levels (Figure 1). The main stream starts at UN or UNWTO level [1]. There is strong guidance towards sustainability from the European Union (EU), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). There are some bilateral agreements that demand agreement of at least two countries on specific issues of sustainability [3]. Interregional projects could be provided at either transborder level [4,5] or under national regional cooperation. Euroregions, being transborder constructions, are rather

common institutions as far as transborder ecological issues are concerned [6,7]. Regional level initiatives are strongly dependent on national policy in general [8]. At the same time, local-level projects could be driven by local community initiatives and in some cases could even be considered to be a strong force for sustainable development transferring from local to global effect, as happened in some municipalities in Scandinavian countries in the 1980s [9].



Figure 1. Institutional levels of sustainable development (SD) (compiled by the author).

There are different approaches to the definition of the Baltic Sea Region. They depend on the objectives of the study. In this study, the author concentrates on the Baltic Sea Region being the territory of countries with access to the Baltic Sea and Norway.

The aim of this particular study was to investigate in which way different actors contribute to sustainable tourism development at various institutional levels. One of the efficient tools considers being cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs. Scientists from different countries have contributed in previous research on cross-border cooperation issues and found out the role of CBC programs in this process [8,10–13].

According to some researchers [14], most of the cooperation programs could not be considered as economically effective. Contrarily, according to some other researchers, there is great value to them as far as the socioeconomic effect is concerned [8,10,15–17]. The objective in this study was to find out how CBC programs in 2014–2020 operating in the Baltic Sea Region contributed to sustainable development of tourism, which is considered to influence both the social and economic spheres, but not damage the environment.

Russia is actively involved in CBC programs [12,18,19] but at the same time has its own way of development towards sustainability as well [2]. In 2020, there has been a sharp increase in research in the fields of domestic tourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism [20]. This is not surprisingly since all these types of tourism could be considered as sustainable [21,22]. Although there is some research on SD and Russia [23,24], there is not so much on sustainable tourism. At the same time, Russia is presented in European literature only to a limited extent [25], which limits knowledge on the processes happening in this country in connection to SD. So our research will also focus on the Russian policy issues on reaching SDGs.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was carried out in the Baltic Federal University (Russia) by young scientists under the supervision of Dr. E. Kropinova. The research aimed at investigating the territorial cooperation programs for sustainable tourism development in the Baltic Sea Region.

In order to investigate the contribution of the territorial cooperation programs for sustainable tourism development in the Baltic Sea Region, the research was divided into the following stages:

- (1) analytical method (findings for a research framework)
- (2) bibliometric method (program search and analysis)
- (3) comparative method (intercomparison of programs, and in them, compliance with SDGs and practical results oriented towards SD)
- (4) categorization of the selected projects according to their contribution to SD
- (5) participatory observation method.

2.1. Analytical Method (Findings for a Research Framework)

In order to identify the criteria for further selection procedure, 17 SDGs were analyzed. Among them, those were selected that are relevant for sustainable tourism development. They are as follows: 1,3,5,8,9,10,11,12,14,15,17. The results can be found in Section 3 below.

2.2. Bibliometric Method (Programmes Search and Analysis)

Under the territorial cooperation programs the author considers in this research are cross-border cooperation programs and transnational cooperation programs operating in the Baltic Sea Region. All CBC programs within the Baltic Sea Region launched in 2014–2020 were investigated, namely Karelia, Kolarctic, Lithuania–Russia, Latvia–Russia, Estonia–Russia, Poland–Russia, Estonia–Latvia, Latvia–Lithuania, Lithuania–Poland, Germany–Denmark, Germany (Brandenburg)–Poland, Germany (Mecklenburg, West Pomerania, Brandenburg)–Poland. Among Interreg programs the author involved in the research were just three programs operating in the Baltic: Baltic Sea Region (Interreg A—European cross-border cooperation program), Central Baltic and South Baltic (Interreg B—transnational cooperation).

2.3. Comparative Method (Intercomparison of Programs, and in Them, Compliance with SDGs and Practical Results Oriented towards SD)

As it is a requirement of EU programs to make their activities visual, all of the projects are presented on program websites. As a second stage, by investigating projects one by one, researchers found in total 1078 projects which were launched by March 2020, and analyzed web pages containing information about them, including goals, objectives, and the financial component of such projects. All the information has been processed [26].

2.4. Categorization of the Selected Projects According to Their Contribution to SD

While investigating projects one by one the authors asked two questions: (1) whether the project directed tourism development, and (2) whether it contributed to at least one of 17 SDGs, identified in Section 3 below. If both answers were positive, this project was selected as contributing to sustainable tourism development. Among all projects, only those 155 were selected that met these two main characteristics. The results are presented in Section 7 below.

2.5. Participatory Observation Method

In order to demonstrate the practical contribution of the programs to sustainable tourism development, the author provides in Section 6 an example of one of the projects being implemented under the author's supervision.

3. Sustainable Development Goals for Sustainable Tourism

In regards to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNWTO encourages the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There were 17 goals indicated in total. Tourism is so universal that it is hardly possible to find any goal among 17 SDGs which is not relevant to sustainable tourism development. Its pervasive characteristics make it an effective tool for achieving all 17 goals. The former Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization, Dr. Taleb Rifai, underlined that only three of

17 universal goals apply to tourism, being: Goal 8—decent work and economic growth; Goal 12—responsible consumption and production; and Goal 14—life below water [27]. From our point of view, tourism can also promote gender equality (Goal 5), contribute to the creation of sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), and do away with poverty (Goal 1). Accordingly, by realizing these goals, tourism is able to contribute to the achievement of the overarching objective of the SDGs and the United Nations: promoting social progress, peace, and human rights [27]. In our opinion, this list can be expanded further because tourism contributes to almost every one of the 17 goals. For example, Goal 3—good health and well-being—is ensured by the very goals of tourism and recreation activities: recovery, new emotions, relaxation. Goal 9—industry, innovation and infrastructure—has become doubly relevant in the coronavirus era: innovations are being introduced everywhere, from airports and aircraft provided with innovative ventilation, control systems, etc., to innovative individual beach cabins with bathtubs equipped with seawater systems. Goal 15—life on land—can be achieved, among other things, through sustainable use of natural resources within specially protected natural areas, through the development of ecotourism [3]. Tourism is an appropriate economic activity to reduce inequality (Goal 10). This could ensure the socioeconomic development of less developed territories (for example, the periphery) only based on natural or cultural resources. It is difficult to achieve global goals without a strong partnership. Tourism is an area where partnership is the number one prerequisite for success. Cooperation programs provide an opportunity to bring together different participants to achieve a common goal. So tourism also works towards Goal 17—partnership for goals.

In the previous work “Tourism and the sustainable development of the Baltic Sea region”, the author has identified the principals of sustainable tourism [2]. Implementation of these principals could contribute to facilitating achievement of SDGs highlighted above.

4. Transnational Level: Priorities of the EU in Tourism and Cultural Heritage

Underlining the role of tourism and culture in the Baltic Sea Region, the EU has at least two policy areas (PAs) in its strategy: PA culture—culture and creative sectors, and PA tourism—reinforcing cohesiveness of the macro-region through tourism. As with other PAs, they are aimed at three EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) objectives as follows: objective 1: save the sea; objective 2: connect the region; objective 3: increase prosperity [28]. It is worth mentioning that PA culture as well as PA education were in third place (with 33 replies each) among the most popular policy areas, in line with “innovation” with 43 replies, and “bio economy”, with 34 replies according to the report of the EC [29].

Some of the directorates general in the European Commission are dealing with tourism issues although not created directly for responsibility in this sphere. For instance, in a report for the 12th Baltic Sea Tourism Forum on (13 November 2019), Ms Ramune Genzbigelyte-Venturi (DG GROW), among others, distinguished the EU tourism policy priorities as follows [30]:

- Smart tourism, oriented towards innovation in different spheres of this industry and digital transformation;
- Sustainable and responsible tourism, where sustainability addresses resource efficiency, mitigating climate change impacts—orienting towards the circular economy, which is up-to-date with the hospitality industry;
- Meeting the needs of consumers who are becoming “greener” and diversification of tourism offerings in order to mitigate the pressure on natural complexes, balancing management of tourism flows etc.
- Resilience of workforce: skills, competences, and quality of jobs.

Among the main activities of the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW), there are the following areas supported for sustainable tourism: transnational partnerships, involving more than 150 SMEs and 200 tourism stakeholders from 31 European countries with 37 million EUR; related infrastructure with investment of more than 4 billion EUR in tourism-related projects; support

under Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, Creative Europe; improving green skills for tourism professionals; providing tools for sustainable tourism management (such as EU-ecolabel, EMAS etc.); stimulating sustainable tourism by “EDEN” awards for achievements in social, cultural, and environmental sustainability [30].

With regard to EU support for tourism via The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2014–2020, the largest allocation to tourism and cultural heritage in BSR went to Poland (more than 13 million EUR), Lithuania got a bit less than 2 million EUR; Latvia and Estonia, less than 1 million EUR (Figure 2) [31].

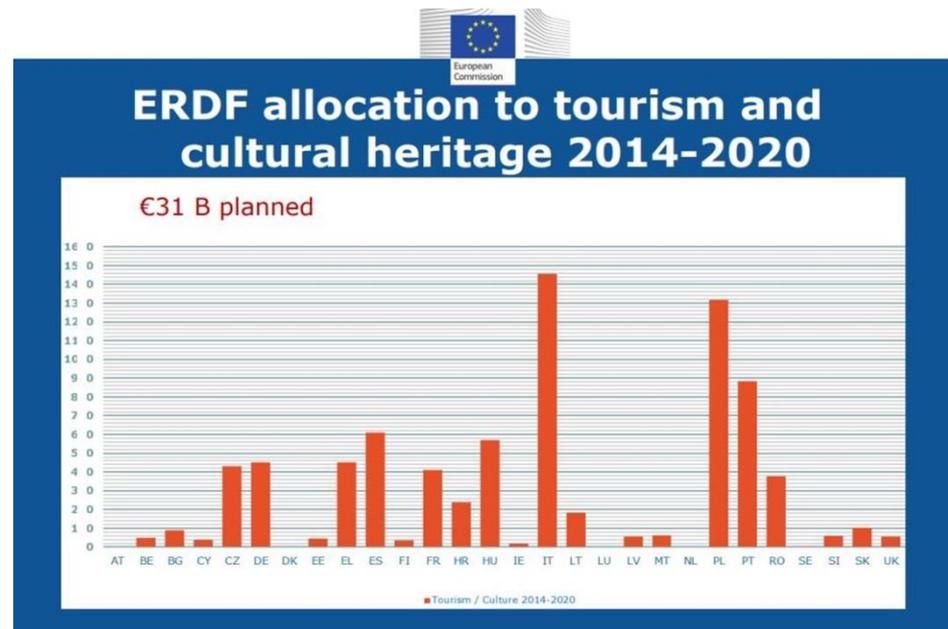


Figure 2. European Region Development Fund (ERDF) allocation to tourism and cultural heritage [31] (source: ESIF open data).

As was stressed by Ms Joanna Mouliou Niessler (DG REGIO) during her presentation for the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum (November 2019, Brussels), in the Interreg 2014–2020 “sustainable tourism” was the 3rd most popular topic after “SMEs’ development” and “cultural heritage and arts” [31]. The distribution of Interreg expenditure on tourism by BSR countries demonstrates the leading position of Finland (37%), followed by Germany (33%) and Norway (15%), Poland (7%), and Latvia (6%). Other countries got less than 1% [31].

Even most of the projects investigated in this paper were in the active stage (being not implemented yet) while under investigation; the author could already find some visual examples of their contribution to sustainable development. For example, within the project “Common Heritage of Curonian Lagoon: From Extraordinary to Familiar—CROSS-HERITAGE” of the cross-border cooperation program of Lithuania–Russia 2014–2020 (started in August 2019), there were two cross-border tourist routes developed. They combined water–land routes, using bicycles and boats. These new routes are “From Museum to Museum on the River of Time” and “From the Spit to the Mainland”. They have been already introduced by tourist companies and included into their tourist programs. The national parts of the routes have been of special value now during the pandemic period and isolation from international activities. After the end of pandemic they could be used as international routes.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States is another strong actor as far as sustainability is concerned. That is due to the fact that developing a sustainable and prosperous region is one of its three priority areas. This organization aims to develop the Baltic Sea Region as a

model region of sustainable societies [32]. Its idea is to provide a platform for sub-national actors for better understanding of their role in promoting and achieving SDGs.

5. National Level: Russia

In the Russian Federation, most of the SDGs are being implemented now within national projects. They are presented in Figure 3.

National Projects

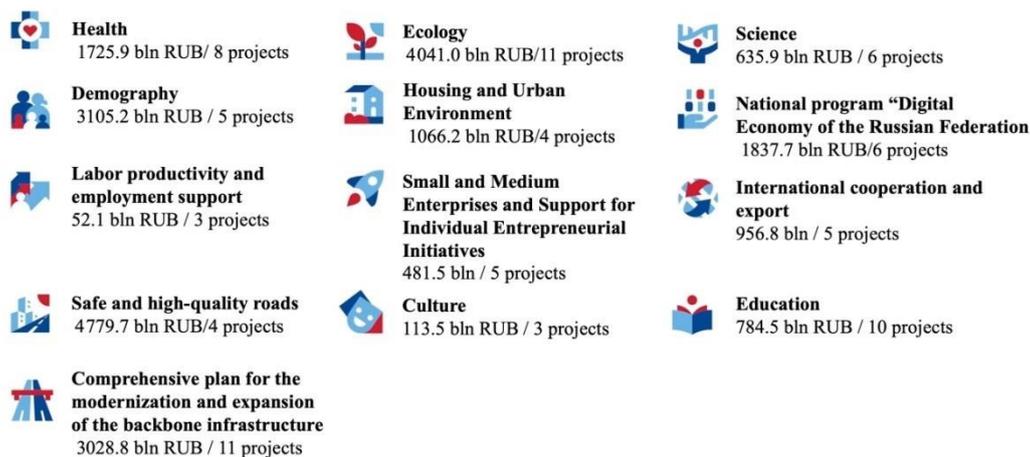


Figure 3. National projects in the Russian Federation (name of the national project, billion RUB, number of federal projects) (source: Future of Russia, National Projects [33]).

In 2018 research was conducted by Skolkovo experts (Moscow School of Management, which is in a high-tech business area called Skolkovo, Moscow Oblast, Russia). Russia is ranked in the middle of 42 countries according to the sustainability index [34]. In July 2020, Russian experts developed the Voluntary National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals [35]. The most successful goals were announced as follows: SDG 1—no poverty, SDG 4—quality education, SDG 8—decent work and economic growth.

It is worth mentioning that environmental issues are acute for Russian citizens. The Russian people are among the leading countries which indicated sustainability to be one of three factors they consider when planning holidays (21.9% of respondents). They are above Germany with 16.8% and Sweden with 15.4%. Thus, ecological tours are a priority for them [36].

The main tasks in governmental management of sustainable tourism are development of an effective mechanism for implementation of investment projects aimed at development of tourism infrastructure and work on nature protection and recovery [37].

The main precondition for the success of international projects is that intergovernmental and national goals coincide. The CBC projects are very much oriented towards this target. Below there is an example of one of the projects which is among the approved CBC program of Lithuania–Russia 2014–2020 projects.

6. Case Study: Ecotour4Natur

One of the projects of the Lithuania–Russia cross-border cooperation program 2014–2020 “Ecotourism as a tool for preservation natural and cultural heritage” (LT-RU-2-089), is an example of the continuity of program projects. All partners are former participants of the cross-border cooperation program Poland–Lithuania–Kaliningrad region of RF 2007–2013. I. Kant Baltic Federal University (Russia), the lead partner of the project, initiated a project aimed at joint study, preservation, and popularization of the natural, historical, and cultural heritage of the coastal regions of Russia and Lithuania. The project involved

scientists from Russian and Lithuanian universities, employees of natural parks of the two countries and a non-profit organization—the Kaliningrad Charitable Foundation for the Preservation and Development of the Curonian Spit National Park. As a result of the project, two resource centers will be created and equipped on the territory of natural parks in Russia and Lithuania. In Rybachy settlement (RF) in the historical building of the former exhibition pavilion of the first European ornithological station (former Rossitten Biological Station) will be created an exhibition “The Feathered World of the Baltic”, which will become one of the destinations of the new tourist route “Geological and geomorphological chronicle of the Baltic Sea”. The partners are also expected to develop an educational program “Ecotour4Natur”, which will be a new educational product that integrates environmental learning, both in the classroom and outdoors. The project is being implemented under the cross-border cooperation program of Lithuania–Russia 2014–2020. The budget of the project is 299,823.04 EUR, out of which 224,741.04 EUR will be financed by the EU and 45,099.69 EUR will be financed by the RF; the duration of the project will be 24 months [38].

The project is related to the priority goal restoration and adaptation of historical and natural heritage, promotion of culture, cultural networking and tourism development, which is directly targeted at sustainable tourism development, with stress on SDGs as follows:

- Goal 1 and Goal 8—since the new tourist object will create new jobs for the local population in a small settlement on the territory of the national park, being far from main economic activity and the regional center;
- Goal 9—since the new exhibition will demonstrate new technology (via bionic objects) and will work in hand with the regional technopark;
- Goal 11—since the resource center will work with local community to raise awareness of environment, natural and cultural heritage;
- Goal 14—since the new educational program developed within the project will use the cases for interaction between water and land in coastal and gulf ecosystems;
- Goal 15—since there will be a new tourist route developed “Geological and ecological chronicle of the Baltic” from hard work of people on protecting the valuable coastal zone from the sea and settlements of the Curonian spit from the sand (moving dunes).

7. Results and Discussion

In order to determine the contribution of territorial cooperation programs to sustainable tourism development, to identify the specifics of its regulation, as well as to identify growth points for sustainable tourism in the Baltic border regions, an analysis of cross-border cooperation programs in the Baltic Sea Region was carried out. Within the research, 1078 projects were analyzed. The projects in order to be selected had to meet two main points: to be related to tourism and contributing to the achievement of one of the SDGs relevant to tourism (see Section 3 above). Of all programs specified above and implemented according to various priorities, 155 projects have been identified as aimed at sustainable tourism development. According to the results obtained, it was calculated that out of 1049.9 million EUR spent in the framework of the projects considered, 246.73 million EUR were directed towards sustainable development of the tourism sector. The share of co-financing of projects aimed at tourism development was about 20% against the total amount of supported projects of territorial cooperation programs.

For analysis, the author selected projects of cross-border cooperation programs in accordance with the SDGs (see Section 3). The priority goals and objectives of the Baltic Sea Region programs are in line with the SDGs set by the UNWTO organization, which means that all projects (including in tourism) matched the specific research framework. It is necessary to clarify that in addition to the compliance of projects with the SDGs, projects were selected that have a direct impact on the development of tourism in the border areas of the Baltic Sea Region. One of the research outcomes was the classification of projects according to the development of one of the types of tourism that they mostly promote. So author distinguished: cultural–cognitive, ecotourism, sport tourism, water tourism,

beach tourism, industrial, pilgrim and agro-tourism (Table 1). It is worth mentioning that there were both tangible and intangible outputs, such as events and new infrastructural objects (both newly created and reconstructed).

Table 1. Share of outputs of sustainable tourism-promoting projects in various types of tourism (compiled by the author based on Vagapova [26]).

Outputs/Types of Tourism	Investment, Million EUR	Objects, Pieces	Restoration/Improvement, Pieces	Routes, Pieces	Events, Pieces
Cultural—cognitive tourism	58.98	8	0	15	5
Ecological tourism	17.37	17	11	3	4
Sport tourism	29.72	1	0	11	0
Water tourism	8.09	1	1	0	0
Beach tourism	1.1	0	0	1	0
Industrial tourism	1.1	0	0	1	0
Pilgrim tourism	1.5	0	0	1	0
Agro-tourism	3.03	2	0	0	0

Most often, projects of programs between Russia and neighboring countries of the research area are aimed at cooperation in the fields of cultural and educational tourism and ecology, and rarely sports. Additionally, there were often projects aimed at solving the issues of tourist infrastructure of border areas (transport accessibility). Looking at the regions of Russia that are involved in cross-border cooperation, they are mainly the Kaliningrad and Pskov regions. The Leningrad region is less active. While the Kaliningrad and Pskov regions are generally active in attracting tourists to the border areas (reconstruction of cultural and historical sites; the creation of tourist routes or trails), the Leningrad region is engaged in the development of tourist infrastructure in the border area: road repairs, arrangement of border crossings (mainly at the border with Finland), resolving the issue of a simplified border crossing procedure.

The diagram shows that a significant number of projects relating to the development of sustainable tourism are projects of the Poland–Russia and Latvia–Russia programs (Figure 4).

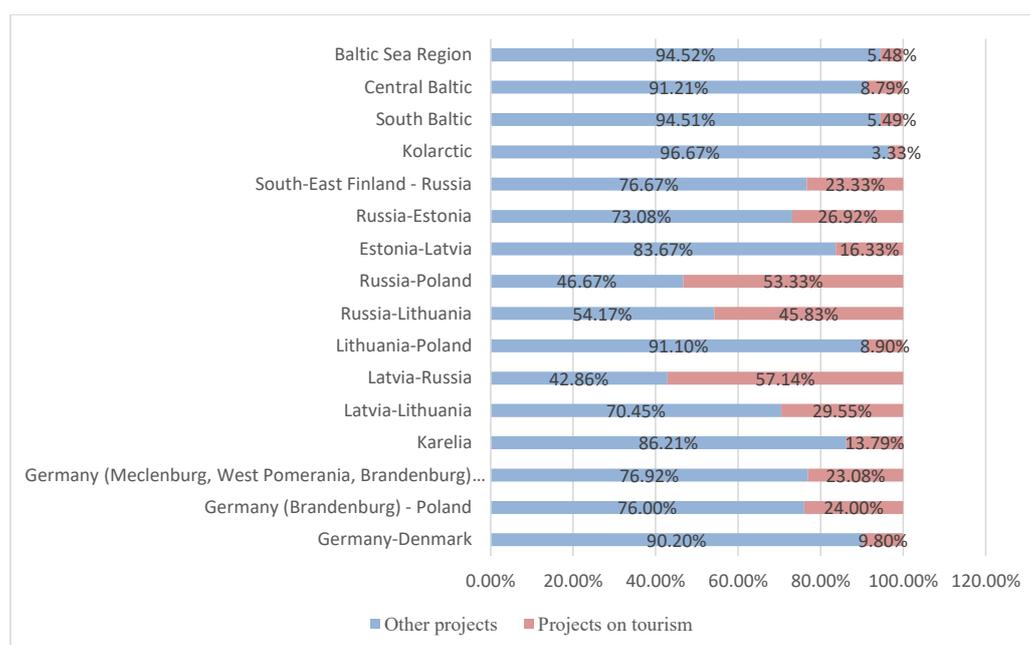


Figure 4. The ratio of all types of cross-border projects to projects targeted at sustainable tourism development in the BSR programs 2014–2020 (compiled by E. Kropinova based on Vagapova [26]).

Apart from tourism, the Central Baltic and South Baltic programs have other priorities in the development of cross-border cooperation. The Karelia program is aimed at solving environmental issues and developing small and medium-sized businesses. The Lithuania–Poland program, as noted earlier, has identified a priority in addressing issues related to the development of entrepreneurship and employment. As far as the Kolarctic program is concerned, it has a priority in developing the business sector, protecting the environment, improving the accessibility of the participating countries' regions, and promoting border management.

8. Conclusions

After analyzing the programs of territorial cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region in the framework of sustainable tourism development for the period 2014–2020, it can be concluded that the border territories are actively using the frameworks laid down in programs at various levels (from global to local). Projects launched for implementation under the 2014–2020 programs are to a great extent focused on SDG compliance. Sustainable tourism projects implemented within the framework of the studied programs aimed at achieving, first of all, sustainable economic development (targeted at Goals 8,12), improving the quality of life and social well-being (targeted at Goals 1,3,5,10,11), and nature conservation and protection (targeted at Goals 14,15). The very existence of territorial cooperation programs guarantees the implementation of Goal 17–partnership for goals.

A significant part of the projects, which are supported within the framework of cross-border cooperation programs, have the necessary foundation for continued development and expansion. In the course of the research, it was found that many projects of the countries of the Baltic Sea Region relied on similar or identical history, cultural, natural and other resources, and that there are also many more opportunities for further use of the existing potential. To determine further prospects and problems of cross-border cooperation of countries in the field of sustainable tourism, it is necessary to conduct a statistical analysis of tourist flows to the countries of the Baltic Sea Region and the regional specifics of travel, which are expected to reveal certain trends in the development of this direction in tourism. But since the programs have not yet come to their completion and the analysis carried out so far was focused primarily on the targets and activities indicated in the projects at the stage of approved applications, it will be possible to illuminate the whole picture of the results of the programs only in 2–3 years' time, when the projects will be completed. At the same time, it is possible to conclude that even now it is obvious that these territorial programs are of great value as far as contributing to sustainable tourism development in the BSR is concerned.

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