



Interreg
CENTRAL EUROPE



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Central Mountains

CSTP WORK PLAN

D.2.2.1. Designing and testing a new Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform Cooperation System

Deliverable 2.2.1

Final version

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A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Work Plan outlines a pilot framework for testing a new cooperation model within the **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)** for the period 2025-2026. It is developed in alignment with the methodology and structure introduced in the **Central Mountains (CM) Project** and directly builds on the **Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Carpathians (Deliverable D.1.4.2)**.

The Plan focuses on four thematic Pan-Carpathian priorities jointly agreed by the CSTP Centres and national stakeholders:

1. **Ecotourism destinations** - supporting the development of nature-based, culturally grounded tourism locations,
2. **Long-distance trails** - creating integrated hiking and cycling routes across mountain and lowland areas,
3. **Local gastro points** - promoting regional culinary heritage and local food networks,
4. **Sustainability standards** - facilitating the introduction of and compliance with common frameworks for sustainable infrastructure, services and certification schemes in mountain tourism.

This Work Plan serves as a **testing tool** for in-depth, thematic cooperation, coordination and implementation of actions under these four pillars, carried out by the **CSTP Centers in selected Carpathian countries**, with the potential to scale up across the region. Each thematic area will be managed through **Cross-Border Working Team**, coordinated by the national CSTP Centers aligned into the **Coordination Committee** and with the guidelines of the **Carpathian Convention Protocol on Sustainable Tourism**.

Key steps include:

- defining shared SMART objectives across the Carpathians,
- conducting rapid national assessments based on a common methodology,
- preparing country-specific action plans and
- initiating pilot actions in each priority area.

The overarching objective of this Plan is to **strengthen institutional capacity**, enhance multi-level stakeholder engagement and establish a coordinated mechanism for sustainable tourism governance. It introduces a pragmatic, step-by-step approach to building a more coherent, functional and scalable model of CSTP cooperation across the Carpathians.

B. INTRODUCTION

This Work Plan is a result of the D.2.2.1. Pilot Action developed under the Central Mountains (CM) Project, co-funded by the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme. The Work Plan aligns with the



Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Carpathians (D.1.4.2) and reflects the broader goals set by the Joint Strategy for Community-Led Sustainable Development in Mountain Areas (CM D.1.3.2).

The **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)** is a coordination mechanism developed under the **Carpathian Convention's Protocol on Sustainable Tourism**, aiming to promote sustainable tourism development across the Carpathian region. It facilitates cross-border cooperation between national tourism stakeholders, institutions and local actors while ensuring that tourism contributes to both the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and the socio-economic development of local communities. Its four thematic priorities—ecotourism destinations, long-distance trails, local gastro points and sustainability standards—correspond closely with the Protocol's objectives to promote high-quality sustainable tourism, preserve cultural and natural heritage and strengthen transboundary cooperation, as follows:

1. Sustainable Destination Development The Work Plan's focus on creating ecotourism destinations and long-distance trails implements the Protocol's call for joint tourism products that relieve pressure on sensitive areas while highlighting the region's biodiversity and landscapes. Pilot actions to identify and plan at least one ecotourism site per country directly support the Protocol's mandate for ecologically responsible tourism offers.

2. Preservation of Cultural Heritage and Local Economies Through local gastro points, the CSTP Work Plan operationalizes the Protocol's emphasis on valorising traditional knowledge, gastronomy and crafts as integral elements of Carpathian tourism. By promoting local food networks and authentic cultural experiences, the Work Plan reinforces community-based economic benefits in line with the Protocol's principles of cultural preservation and local empowerment.

3. Common Standards and Impact Management The Work Plan's testing of facilitation on sustainability standards for destinations, services and infrastructure directly addresses the Protocol's provisions on quality frameworks and impact management. The introduction of shared criteria and monitoring tools within CSTP aligns with the requirement for harmonized standards across the Carpathians, while quarterly and annual reporting mechanisms contribute to the Protocol's monitoring and evaluation provisions.

4. Governance and Cooperation The CSTP's establishment of a Coordination Committee and Cross-Border Working Teams gives structural shape to the Protocol's call for cooperation, stakeholder engagement and capacity building. Moreover, the proposed role of the Carpathian Euroregion as a coordination backbone reflects the Protocol's vision of strengthening transboundary institutions to facilitate dialogue, communication and resource pooling across borders.

5. Branding, Communication and Awareness The integration of the Carpathia brand into the Work Plan complements the Protocol's provisions on promoting the Carpathians as a sustainable tourism destination. By providing a unified marketing and identity tool, the Work Plan ensures coherence in external communication and enhances the region's visibility in line with Protocol objectives.

Thus, the current CSTP Work Plan **translates the Protocol's strategic commitments into practical, testable actions**. By aligning its pilot initiatives with specific Protocol articles—destination development, cultural valorisation, sustainability standards, governance mechanisms,



and branding – the Work Plan not only advances Carpathian-wide sustainable tourism but also strengthens CSTP's role as the operational arm of the Carpathian Convention in this field.

The Plan focuses on operationalizing four thematic Pan-Carpathian priorities identified by the CM project and validated by stakeholders:

- **Ecotourism destinations,**
- **Long-distance trails (hiking and cycling),**
- **Local gastro points,**
- **Sustainability standards for destinations, services and infrastructure.**

The **pilot nature** of this Plan lies in its testing of CSTP's capacity to coordinate and guide sustainable tourism actions in a multi-country, cross-border context. The actions proposed are intended to be jointly implemented by the **CSTP national Centers** in Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine (where feasible), based on common objectives, shared methodologies and coordinated stakeholder engagement.

In addition to supporting the implementation of the Carpathian Strategy and Protocol on Sustainable Tourism, the Work Plan contributes to building a **more structured and functional CSTP mechanism**, through the formation of thematic **Cross-Border Working Teams**, the use of common planning tools and monitoring procedures and a shared governance mechanism and structure.

The document also serves as a basis for **dialogue with national authorities and the Carpathian Convention Secretariat** and provides a structured approach to regional action planning for the years 2025-2026. Its implementation will be subject to evaluation and refinement, with a view to long-term institutionalization and replication across all Carpathian countries.

C. OVERVIEW OF THE CENTRAL MOUNTAINS PROJECT

The **Central Mountains (CM) Project** is a transnational initiative co-financed by the **Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme**, aiming to support community-led sustainable development in mountain areas of Central Europe. It connects stakeholders and institutions across the **Alps, the Carpathians and the Sudetes**, with a strong focus on improving cross-border cooperation, participatory governance and sustainable tourism management.

Within CM, the Carpathians represent a **key focus area**, and the **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)** has been selected as one of the project's pilot structures for testing improved governance mechanisms. This Work Plan directly results from activities carried out under:

- **Work Package 1 (WP1)** - which delivered the **Joint Strategy for Community-Led Sustainable Development** (Deliverable D.1.3.2) and the **Action Plan for Sustainable Tourism in the Carpathians** (Deliverable D.1.4.2),
- and continues under **Work Package 2 (WP2)** - which tests cross-border solutions through pilot actions.

The role of CSTP in this context is twofold:



- ⇒ To serve as a **practical governance mechanism** for implementing the strategic vision of CM in the Carpathians,
- ⇒ To act as a **testbed for coordination, stakeholder engagement and thematic cooperation** in sustainable tourism across national borders.

By aligning with the Action Plan D.1.4.2, this Work Plan contributes to implementing shared objectives across CSTP countries. It translates strategic directions into **operational actions**, tailored to the Carpathian context and grounded in the needs and capacities of the national CSTP Centers.

The Central Mountains project provides:

- a **common framework and methodology** for action planning and stakeholder involvement,
- tools for **monitoring, capacity building and communication**,
- and a platform for **knowledge exchange** among mountain regions in Central Europe.

Through the implementation and evaluation of this Work Plan, the CM project aims to generate **replicable models of cooperation** for sustainable tourism development and support the **long-term institutional strengthening of CSTP** as a platform for regional integration and joint action in the Carpathians.

D. CSTP DESCRIPTION AND CURRENT SITUATION

The **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)** was established under the framework of the **Carpathian Convention's Protocol on Sustainable Tourism**, as a mechanism to support implementation of the **Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Carpathians**. Its main function is to coordinate sustainable tourism efforts across the seven Convention Parties and to support stakeholder cooperation at multiple levels.

As of 2024, CSTP remains in an **emerging and evolving phase**, with different levels of development across the participating countries. Four national CSTP Centers have been established or reactivated to date:

- **Poland** - coordinated by the Association of the Carpathian Euroregion Poland (operational),
- **Romania** - coordinated by Braşov County Council (pending formalization),
- **Slovakia** - newly initiated (pending formalization),
- **Ukraine** - (suspended) affected by war-related disruptions.

In this context, a promising coordination non-formal, but structured framework has been proposed by the Polish CSTP Center: to use the **Carpathian Euroregion** as the organizational backbone supporting CSTP coordination. This entity already operates across CSTP countries and brings together local and regional authorities in a consistent and internationally recognized governance structure. The Euroregion offers:

- a **uniform organizational culture** and shared experience in cross-border cooperation,
- an **established membership base** composed of territorial governments,
- the increased ability to **pool financial contributions from members and involved parties**,
- and enhanced **project management and coordination capacity**.



The current CSTP structure is **not formalized as a permanent governance body** and significant disparities exist in terms of institutional mandate, staffing, funding and legal arrangements across the Centers. While the **Strategy and Protocol** provide the normative framework, the CSTP's day-to-day functioning still requires consolidation.

The present Work Plan has been developed specifically to:

- **reactivate and operationalize the CSTP**, using a pragmatic, step-by-step thematic testing approach,
- **address current limitations in coordination and engagement**, and
- **develop a common platform for potential future institutionalization**, informed by the results of pilot actions carried out under the Central Mountains Project.

In line with the **Protocol on Sustainable Tourism and the Strategy for the Sustainable Tourism Development of the Carpathians**, this Work Plan acknowledges that CSTP is currently functioning **without a unified legal personality** and that its structure must be tested and gradually adapted through collaborative work on concrete thematic priorities. The Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP) is a cooperation framework established under the Carpathian Convention to implement the Protocol on Sustainable Tourism and promote sustainable development in the Carpathian region. It is coordinated by national CSTP Centers in various Carpathian countries and facilitates collaboration among stakeholders to develop sustainable tourism initiatives. The platform aims to create a sustainable tourism destination of global significance by developing effective cooperation systems, supporting community-led development, and sharing best practices.

This pilot phase offers a unique opportunity to assess CSTP's role and capacity, build trust among actors and define a **thematic cooperation mechanism** for future implementation across the full Carpathian region.

E. ROLE OF THE CSTP

The **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)** is intended to serve as the **coordination and support mechanism** for implementing the **Protocol on Sustainable Tourism** and the **Carpathian Tourism Strategy** adopted under the Carpathian Convention.

Its envisioned functions include:

- coordinating cross-border and national tourism policies,
- supporting implementation of country-specific and joint action plans,
- facilitating stakeholder engagement and capacity building,
- ensuring monitoring and evaluation of tourism development,
- and promoting the Carpathians as a sustainable tourism destination.

However, as of the current stage of development, **these functions are only partially in place**, and CSTP remains a **pilot structure** under assessment. The present Work Plan is designed to **test and gradually build CSTP's capacity** to perform these functions in a real, operational context. The pilot implementation focuses on four thematic priorities: **ecotourism destinations, long-distance trails, local gastro points and sustainability standards**.



In this context, CSTP will act as:

- > a **facilitator of transnational coordination**, through the creation of thematic **Cross-Border Working Teams**,
- > a **platform for dialogue and shared learning** among CSTP Centers and national stakeholders,
- > a **testing ground** for governance mechanisms, including reporting, communication and decision-making procedures,
- > and a **scaling mechanism**, supporting the institutional development of the CSTP model across all Carpathian countries.

The long-term role of CSTP will depend on the **outcomes of this testing phase** and its ability to demonstrate value-added in:

- creating shared standards and tools,
- generating synergies among national efforts,
- and strengthening the visibility and credibility of sustainable tourism policies in the Carpathians.

The Work Plan explicitly recognizes that **CSTP is not currently a formal legal entity** and that its operational structure—including the Coordination Committee, national Centres and thematic teams—will evolve dynamically during the implementation phase. Roles and responsibilities may be distributed **rotationally or experimentally**, based on available capacity and partner commitment.

This flexible and adaptive model reflects the Central Mountains Project's overarching goal: to enable the **gradual emergence of functional governance structures**, built on practical cooperation and tangible results, rather than formal declarations alone.

F. CSTP Actions

This Work Plan defines a structured set of **pilot activities to be implemented during the CM period 2025-2026**, piloting the CSTP Centres in Romania and Poland. The actions are based on the identified **thematic priorities** and are intended to **test CSTP's capacity to act as a thematic transnational cooperation platform** for sustainable tourism development.

The logic of the Work Plan follows a stepwise structure:

- > **Common Ground** - establishing shared goals, governance and working formats,
- > **National Contexts** - conducting rapid assessments and developing country-specific plans,
- > **Pilot Actions** - initiating implementation of selected activities in each country,
- > **Coordination and Monitoring** - testing reporting, communication and feedback mechanisms,
- > **Scaling and Institutional Learning** - documenting outcomes and recommendations for future rollout.

Each priority will be coordinated and managed by a **Cross-Border Working Team**, facilitated by the CSTP Coordination Committee. These teams will ensure information exchange, alignment of national efforts and support for cross-border common initiatives.



The CSTP may also benefit from shared communication and identity tools. One such instrument is the **Carpathia brand**, developed and managed by the Carpathian Euroregion. Carpathia functions as both a **symbolic identity platform** and a **strategic communication tool** for the Carpathians, supporting visibility, recognition and consistency in sustainable tourism messaging across the region.

The pilot nature of the Work Plan means that results will inform and advance towards future governance design and no formal institutional model is assumed at this stage.

The goal is to generate evidence on what works, what needs improvement and what can be scaled across the Carpathians.

1. Governance and Coordination

Action 1.1.: Refresh the CSTP cooperation and governance by establishing a more engaged CSTP Coordination Committee composed of national centre representatives. Piloting Centers: PL/SK/RO

Timeline: Q2 - Q3 2025

Output: Quarterly (virtual) meetings for alignment and strategic adjustments.

Action 1.2.: Establish 4 Cross-Border Working Teams (CBWTs), specific to each priority (ecotourism destinations, trails, gastro and sustainability). These Teams will ensure the cooperation, communication and monitoring of the progress at the Carpathian level. The Coordination Committee will facilitate quarterly meetings with working team leads to review progress and address challenges.

Timeline: Q4 2025

Outcome: 4 cross border Working Teams

Action 1.3.: Foster closer collaboration between CSTP and DMOs and local or regional governments. Piloting Centres: PL/SK/RO

Timeline: by end of 2026

Output: MoCs agreements with regional tourism boards and local municipalities, 2 per each participating pilot centre.

Action 1.4.: Establish a cooperation and evaluation mechanism, specific to each of the four priorities through four cross border Working Teams.

Timeline: semestrial meetings and annual reporting

Output: 4 CBWTs' semestrial and annual reports

Action 1.5.: Assess current situation on each of the four priorities, in each participating Centre

Timeline: Kick off Q2 2025, Q2 2026

Outcome: 4 reports on each of the priority



2. Strategic Planning and Implementation

Action 2.1: Defining and assuming of clear objectives for the activity of each Centre, specific to the four major priorities:

1. ecotourism destinations.
2. local gastronomic points.
3. long-distance pedestrian and cycle trails.
4. sustainable mountain tourism destinations.

On each of the four topics, there is a specific pathway for each country of the Carpathian Convention, so it is necessary to initiate and strengthen this approach in accordance with the national context. However, it is necessary to identify and agree on common objectives at the level of the Carpathian region that have a SMART character and are based on the action plan assumed at the level of each country. This process must be performed in agreement with all the Centres in the Carpathians, the CSTP. Moreover, these objectives should be presented in the Working Group for Sustainable Tourism the Carpathian Convention.

Timeline: Q4 2025

Output: A set of clear objectives for each centre/country, generating a set of objectives at the Carpathian level.

Action 2.2.: Carry out a rapid assessment of the existing situation in each country.

On each of the four topics, a quick analysis of the situation in each country needs to be carried out, based on a common set of questions. This assessment will consider the following aspects:

1. the legislative framework related to each topic,
2. analysis of the factors involved,
3. existing initiatives on each topic,
4. the maturity framework of each initiative.

This rapid analysis will generate a snapshot of the situation in each country that can generate a cross-border understanding of the current situation on each of the four topics.

Timeline: Q2 2025

Output: an analysis performed by each national Centre/Coordinating Entity

Action 2.3: Develop a country-specific action plan

This action plan will be able to give action directions for achieving each SMART objective within action 2.1. Actions must be specific to each of the four themes and specific to the situation in each country.

Timeline: Q2 2026

Output: Country Specific Action Plans

Action 2.4: Identify and initiate the development of at least one ecotourism destination per country.



Timeline: Q2 2026

Output: At least one potential ecotourism destination identified in each country and initialization of the process of planning and developing as an ecotourism destination.

Action 2.5: Identify and initiate a network of local gastronomic points (or similar) in each country that emphasize local food and cultural heritage.

Timeline: Q2 2026

Output: Launch at least 3 local gastronomic points per country/a network of cross-border local gastro-points.

Action 2.6: Identify long-distance trails in the highland area and lowland.

Timeline: Q2 2026

Output: at least one identified trail per country, together with a first assessment of the necessary equipment and services.

Action 2.7: Initiate discussion and clear paths towards the endorsement and promotion into the development and adoption of sustainable standards for mountain destinations.

Timeline: Q2 2026

Output: A set of sustainable tourism criteria tested for a mountain resort.

Action 2.8.: Identify the needs of main stakeholders engaged in each of the four priorities.

Timeline: Q2-4 2025

Output: a list with the main stakeholders and their needs to increase their capacity

Action 2.9.: Develop a plan to enhance the capacity of stakeholders and present it to the national and Carpathian authorities.

Timeline: Q4 2025

Output: Country Specific Plans.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation

Action 3.1: Develop a mechanism for regular monitoring and evaluation.

Output: A common set of progress indicators agreed at the CSTP level, and within the CBWTs

Quarterly Reviews: National centers will report progress to the CSTP Coordination Committee.

Annual Review

Timeline: Q1 2026



4. Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Action 4.1: Marketing strategy - Identify and address tourist target groups, associated with specific products and practices, in the Carpathians.

Timeline: Q4 2025

Outcome: A report to be discussed among CSTP and the CC Tourism Working Group, a common marketing strategy.

Action 4.2.: Stakeholder communication strategy - Identify and draw the list of major stakeholders specific for each priority and country and define the communication aspects and tools for each of them.

Timeline: Q2 2025

Outcome: An updated, extended list of stakeholders and specific communication tools for each of them.

Action 4.3.: Initiate semestrial meetings with the main stakeholders relevant for each priority

Timeline: Q2 2025, Q4 2025, Q2 2025, Q4 2026.

Outcome: at least two meetings per priority per year.

5. Sustainability and Scaling (plus financing/future governance)

See below chapters

G. GOVERNANCE MECHANISM

The governance model proposed in this Work Plan is intended to **test a functional, themed, project-based coordination system** for the **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)**, rather than establish a formal legal entity. While the long-term institutional future of CSTP remains open, this Plan focuses on **building and evaluating practical mechanisms of transnational pillar-based cooperation** for the existing and future national CSTP Centres.

The proposed governance structure is composed of:

- > a **CSTP Coordination Committee**, formed by representatives of the national Centres and project partners involved in the pilot implementation,
- > **Cross-Border Working Teams**, established for each of the four thematic priorities (ecotourism destinations, long-distance trails, local gastro points and sustainability),
- > and **national stakeholder networks**, coordinated by the CSTP Centres in each country.

This governance model aims to:

- support **co-decision and shared responsibility** between national partners,



- enable **flexible coordination** of actions at regional and Pan-Carpathian levels,
- and provide a testing ground for communication, reporting and decision-making routines.

The CSTP operates as a **functional network**, driven by shared objectives, common planning tools and a coordinated monitoring system. The Coordination Committee facilitates strategic oversight, while the Working Teams focus on technical implementation, stakeholder engagement and pilot action delivery.

During the pilot phase (2025-2026), these structures will be (re)defined and adjusted based on their role, performance and feedback from partners and stakeholders.

*One proposal under consideration is to **test the Carpathian Euroregion as the coordinating host structure** for CSTP, given its international scope, organizational consistency and political legitimacy. As a transnational body with a proven track record, it could support CSTP's long-term coordination needs and provide a stable platform for project development, stakeholder engagement and financial sustainability. Its strong ties to local authorities also offer a valuable link between CSTP activities and on-the-ground implementation.*

H. STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

The effective involvement of stakeholders is a key success factor for the Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP). This Work Plan accommodates a **country-driven and test-oriented approach** to stakeholder involvement, recognizing the diversity of institutional frameworks, tourism ecosystems and civic engagement cultures across the Carpathian countries.

Each **CSTP Centre** is responsible for coordinating stakeholder processes within its national context, focusing on actors relevant to the four thematic priorities: **ecotourism destinations, long-distance trails, local gastro points and sustainability standards**.

The Plan distinguishes between two levels of participation:

- **Stakeholder involvement:** being informed, consulted or invited to contribute to selected activities or decisions,
- **Stakeholder engagement:** participating actively and regularly, taking shared responsibility for results, and contributing to strategic directions.

The involvement strategy is based on tested tools and methods developed under the **Central Mountains Project**, including:

- stakeholder mapping by priority and country,
- participatory needs assessments,
- country-specific workshops and thematic meetings,
- feedback loops built into action planning and monitoring.

A special focus will be placed on **local communities, tourism SMEs, NGOs and public authorities**, with tailored engagement strategies and communication tools for each group. Youth organizations and Local Action Groups (LAGs) are also identified as important partners, particularly in pilot actions linked to community-based tourism.



Each national CSTC network base contributes to a natural platform for engaging stakeholders in a coordinated and consistent manner.

The engagement processes in this Work Plan are understood as **pilots in themselves** - designed to test how participatory governance in tourism can be structured, scaled and sustained. The CSTP Centres, via the Cross-Border Working Teams, will be responsible for collecting feedback, identifying barriers and good practices and feeding results into the common progress on tourism development in the Carpathians.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a **more open, inclusive and collaborative governance culture** for sustainable tourism in the Carpathians, grounded in real experience and built from the bottom up.

I. FINANCING OPTIONS FOR LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Given that the **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)** currently operates as a **functional coordination network** without formal legal personality, financing must rely on **existing institutions and projects**, including national CSTP Centres and partner organizations.

This Work Plan proposes a **phased approach to financing**, aligned with the pilot nature of CSTP activities and focused on building a practical understanding of funding opportunities for future scale-up.

Phase 1: Project-Based Financing (2025-2026)

In the current phase, CSTP pilot actions will be financed through:

- **Interreg Central Europe funds** (via the Central Mountains Project),
- **national and regional project budgets** of CSTP Centres and partners,
- possible **synergies with existing national programs** (e.g. rural development, tourism promotion, youth engagement).

The CSTP Centres will act as **lead applicants or intermediaries**, coordinating pilot initiatives under the thematic priorities.

Phase 2: Exploration of Structural Funding Options

Based on the outcomes of the pilot phase and subject to a collective evaluation, CSTP partners may explore more permanent funding channels, including:

- joint applications to **EU programs** (Interreg, Horizon Europe, LIFE, etc.),
- **targeted national funding** for tourism, environment or regional development,
- **public-private cooperation frameworks** at local or regional level (especially for local gastro or trail initiatives).

Any future discussions on membership models or permanent structures will depend on:

- the demonstrated added value of CSTP,
- the willingness and capacity of national authorities and centres to contribute,



- and the institutional format that CSTP may adopt in the long term.

*In this scenario, the Carpathian Euroregion could serve as the non-formal administrative framework through which CSTP resources are pooled and managed. Its **internal membership contributions** could complement external project funding, while allowing for joint planning and accountability mechanisms. This model also allows for **collective project applications**, avoiding fragmentation and enhancing financial coherence.*

At this stage, the goal is not to design a definitive financial model, but to **test feasible mechanisms**, identify capacity gaps and create a **portfolio of funding options** that can support the next steps of CSTP development beyond the Central Mountains Project.

J. SCALING TO OTHER CARPATHIAN COUNTRIES

The **scaling of CSTP cooperation mechanisms** to all Carpathian countries is a long-term objective that depends on the **success of the pilot phase (2025-2026)** and the **readiness of national stakeholders** to engage in structured, thematic collaboration.

At present, this Work Plan is to be implemented in the following countries:

- Poland,
- Romania,
- possibly Slovakia, (emerging CSTC)
- and (when possible) Ukraine.

These countries (Ro/Pl) represent the **testing ground** for CSTP coordination structures, thematic priorities and stakeholder engagement processes. The lessons learned during this phase will be **documented, evaluated and shared** with the broader Carpathian Convention community.

The **scaling process** will be based on:

- the development of **transferable tools and resources**, such as the Alpine-Carpathian Toolbox (O.3.1) and Action Plan templates,
- **peer learning formats**, including exchange visits, joint workshops and online platforms,
- and **knowledge-sharing mechanisms** embedded in the Central Mountains Project and CSTP structures (e.g. annual meetings, Working Group on Sustainable Tourism).

The CSTP Centres and Coordination Committee will act as facilitators of this process, ensuring that countries currently outside the pilot phase (e.g. Hungary, Czech Republic, Serbia) can **access results, tools and guidance** and join future implementation phases when appropriate.

Scaling will be **demand-driven and adaptive**, based on:

- political and institutional interest from other countries,
- the availability of operational partners,
- and compatibility with national tourism and development strategies.

The CSTP pilot is designed not only to generate results in the participating countries, but also to serve as a **proof of concept** for broader regional coordination in the spirit of the Carpathian



Convention. The use of the Carpathian Euroregion as a coordination model could also facilitate the onboarding of additional countries, given its recognized transnational status and established cooperation mechanisms across borders.

K. CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The implementation of this Work Plan faces several **critical challenges and risks**, which reflect the complex realities of coordinating sustainable tourism development in a multi-country, multi-level governance context.

Key risks identified include:

1. **Uneven institutional capacity across CSTP Centers** - Some Centers are well-established and active, while others remain in early stages of development. Differences in mandate, staffing and political support may affect the consistency of implementation and communication.
2. **Lack of dedicated financial and human resources** Without stable funding streams or dedicated teams in each country, pilot actions risk being delayed, under-resourced or dependent on external projects.
3. **Limited stakeholder engagement in some countries or regions** Varying levels of awareness and motivation among local authorities, tourism actors or civil society may result in inconsistent involvement across the Carpathians.
4. **Legal and administrative barriers to cross-border cooperation** Differences in legislation, public procurement rules or certification schemes may complicate the creation of joint tourism products or the mutual recognition of sustainability standards.
5. **Geopolitical uncertainties and external shocks**
Ongoing challenges such as the war in Ukraine or shifts in EU/regional policy priorities may limit the operational scope or flexibility of certain actions.
6. **Risk of fragmentation and fatigue**
Without clear value added or results, CSTP could be perceived as an additional administrative burden, leading to a loss of momentum and trust among partners.

Mitigation approach - Despite these risks, this Work Plan explicitly embraces a **test-and-learn approach**. The goal is not to eliminate all challenges in advance, but to:

- **identify and analyse** them during implementation,
- develop **adaptive responses** and mitigation strategies,
- and **use the experience to** inform future decisions on CSTP governance and scaling.

Monitoring mechanisms (see Chapter: Monitoring and Evaluation) and the coordination role and in-depth cooperation of the **CSTP Committee and Working Teams** become key to addressing these risks in a timely and collaborative manner.



Ultimately, the **acknowledgment and management of these risks** are part of the pilot's strategic value - helping to **shape a more specific, resilient and realistic model of transnational** tourism governance in the Carpathians.

L. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

To ensure the successful implementation of the CSTP Work Plan and its alignment with the strategic objectives of the **Carpathian Convention Protocol on Sustainable Tourism** and the **Central Mountains Project**, the following recommendations are proposed:

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1. Start with a Coordinated and Shared Kick-Off Phase

- Organize a joint **kick-off meeting** of all CSTP Centres and pilot country partners.
- Validate and agree on the roles of the **CSTP Coordination Committee** and the **Cross-Border Working Teams**.
- Develop a common calendar of activities and reporting formats for 2025-2026.

2. Build on What Exists - Use National CSTP Centres (Romania and Poland) as Anchors

- Assign clear coordination responsibilities to the existing **CSTP national Centres**, using their administrative and institutional anchoring.
- Ensure that Centres act as **coordinators of stakeholder engagement, pilot actions and reporting** at national level.

3. Treat Actions as Tests, Not Final Models

- Implement all actions as **pilots**, documenting challenges, innovations and deviations.
- Use the four thematic priorities to **experiment with governance, engagement and communication tools**, collecting feedback throughout.

4. Ensure ongoing Strategic Dialogue with the Carpathian Convention

- Present Work Plan progress regularly to the **Working Group on Sustainable Tourism**.
- Use this dialogue to reflect on **policy relevance, transfer potential and alignment with broader Carpathian processes**.

5. Avoid Premature Steps towards Institutionalization

- Do not aim to formalize CSTP as a legal entity at this stage.
- Focus on **functionality, flexibility and learning** to inform future decisions about institutional design.



6. Capture Learning and Communicate It Clearly

- Use CSTP CBWorking Teams to produce concise, actionable **lessons learned and policy recommendations**.
- Feed results into materials for wider dissemination across Carpathian countries.

7. Pilot the Use of the Carpathian Euroregion as a Backbone

Test the operational feasibility of using the Carpathian Euroregion as a transnational host and coordination entity for CSTP. Assess its advantages in terms of project capacity, unified management, membership-based financing and institutional linkages to regional and local authorities.

These recommendations are meant to **guide practical coordination**, support partner ownership and maintain realistic expectations. They reflect the pilot nature of this Work Plan and the need to balance strategic vision with operational feasibility.

M. FINAL REMARKS AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This Work Plan represents a **pragmatic step forward** in testing a new cooperation manner within the **Carpathian Sustainable Tourism Platform (CSTP)**. Rather than proposing a finalized structure or legal entity, it aims to **pilot thematic coordination, strengthen national and cross-border capacities and generate shared tools and practices** that can inform future transnational tourism governance in the Carpathians.

The **proposed actions** will:

- clarify the potential role and scope of CSTP as a **functional cooperation platform**,
- test operational coordination among **national CSTP Centers**,
- assess the effectiveness of **Cross-Border Working Teams**,
- and engage local stakeholders in **pilot shared initiatives** linked to ecotourism, trails, gastronomy and sustainability standards.

Key expected outcomes include:

- a **tested coordination model** for CSTP governance, based on existing institutional anchors,
- improved **stakeholder collaboration**, within and across countries,
- practical experience in the **joint implementation of thematic priorities**,
- and a **consolidated knowledge base** to inform future decisions by the Carpathian Convention and its Working Group on Sustainable Tourism.

The pilot phase (2025-2026) will be monitored and evaluated through CSTP coordination structures, with **lessons documented and discussed** both nationally and at the Pan-Carpathian



level. Based on these results, further steps may be taken toward scaling up or institutionalizing selected elements of the Work Plan.

Above all, this Plan is about **building trust, testing what works and creating a shared operational culture** of sustainable tourism development in the Carpathians. It does not assume final answers but provides the space and structure to develop them—together.

Key Take-Aways

- ⇒ Rather than positioning CSTP as a ready-to-launch institutional structure, the revised version emphasizes **testing practical in-depth cooperation mechanisms, thematic coordination and national-level implementation** through existing CSTP Centres.
- ⇒ It reinforces **strategic visibility** of CSTP.
- ⇒ It adds **flexibility, sustainability and institutional backing**.
- ⇒ The WPlan offers a realistic, **pillar-based cooperation mechanism**, into a more unified framework and technical specific capacity.
- ⇒ It introduces the **Carpathian Euroregion as a proposed organizational framework** for CSTP coordination, no formalization - leveraging its cross-border membership, operational experience and political legitimacy.
- ⇒ It puts forward the **Carpathia brand** (managed by the Carpathian Euroregion), proposed as a symbolic identity and communication platform for CSTP activities.

The CSTP Work Plan is a **pilot instrument** developed under the Central Mountains Project, designed to test how pillar-based, **in-depth cooperation** among existing CSTP Centres can function in practice and lead to a more visible, grounded cooperation structured mechanism. Lessons learned from this phase - including governance, stakeholder engagement and branding through the Carpathia identity - will inform decisions on how CSTP can evolve into a **coherent and sustainable cooperation mechanism for the Carpathians**.

