

# EUROPEAN PROJECTS AS A GOOD PRACTICE OF PROVIDING MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN SPORTS TOURISM

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**Abstract** Due to its important effects on individuals and society as a whole, sport is a fundamental right. Sports activities are not evenly distributed across all social categories. As disabled sports participants comprise a small share of the total, and as most public funding for sports in Slovenia falls on the shoulders of local communities, municipalities are forced to develop programs for these groups. Sports tourism is characterized by rapid and dynamic development. As an opportunity for municipalities we describe below an example of good practice in ensuring the accessibility of sports and recreation for people with disabilities in local communities through European projects. We also found that possibilities for people with disabilities in sports tourism are an increasingly important issue and that the field is developing. European and national policies dictate universal accessibility, which, however, is linked to the cost of architectural remodelling.

**Keywords:**

sports tourism,  
people with  
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European projects,  
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## 1 Introduction

According to the UNWTO, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism achieved stable growth internationally and became one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. Modern tourism is closely linked to development and includes an increasing number of new destinations, which has turned tourism into a key driver of socio-economic progress ("Tourism – an economic and social phenomenon", 2018). 2019 was another year of strong growth, though international arrivals grew below the exceptional rates seen in 2017 (+7%) and 2018 (+6%). Demand was somewhat weaker for travel to advanced economy destinations. Uncertainty surrounding Brexit, geopolitical and trade tensions, and the global economic slowdown weighed down growth (UNWTO International Tourism Highlights, 2000). The world has experienced a number of major epidemics/pandemics in the last 40 years, yet none had similar implications for the global economy as the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought global tourism to a near-complete standstill. For 2020, the UNWTO reported a reduction in international tourist arrivals of 70%–75%, which meant huge financial damage to the industry and thus endangered 100–120 million jobs directly related to tourism.

Smith identifies six different types of tourism: ethnic tourism (traveling to non-western countries to visit original or exotic cultural groups), cultural tourism (visiting traditional, picturesque or rural cultural communities in western or modern countries), historical tourism (focused on visiting museums, cathedrals, castles, archaeological sites and other monuments that enable the revival of the memory of the glorious past of a modern society), environmental or ecological tourism (visiting natural sights or destinations that emphasize the connection between man and nature), business tourism (business trips due to conventions, meetings), seminars) and recreational or sports tourism (coastal and ski tourism as well as those types of tourism that include sports or recreational activities), which we will deal with below (Goeldner and Brent Ritchie, 2003).

## **2 Sports tourism**

The article focuses on sports tourism, which Standeven and de Knop (1999) defined as all ways of active and passive participation in organized and unorganized sports, for business or commercial and non-commercial reasons, which include traveling away from home. Sports and tourism were considered in the past as two separate areas (Weed and Bull, 2004), but it soon became clear that sports and tourism were very close and complementary at the same time (Hinch and Higham, 2001).

Glyptis (1982) was one of the pioneers of research into this connection. She divided sports tourism into 5 categories: sports training (trips of top athletes for training), sports holidays (trips for active sports), holiday activities (trips for sports, which is only part of the activity), the opportunity for sports on general holidays (sport is a random accompanying activity), and sports tours (travel related to watching sporting events). Ross (2001), on the other hand, divided sports tourism into three sections: tourism of sporting events, active sports tourism, and nostalgic sports tourism.

Robinson and Gammon (2004) note that sports tourism was first divided into two areas: travel primarily for sport and travel where sport is perceived as a secondary factor. According to the primary or secondary motives for sports or travel, they set four categories of sports tourism. In the first two categories, sport is the most important motive for travel, although the tourism element can be seen as part of a comprehensive experience, and categories 3 and 4 include people who travel and/or stay in places outside their usual environment and actively or passively participate in competitive or recreational activities, with sport as a secondary activity. 1) Active or passive participation in a competitive sporting event (sport is the main reason for traveling). 2) Active recreational participation in selected sports in places outside their usual environment (skiing or cycling holidays). 3) Sport as a secondary enrichment of holidays (passive or active). Sport as an additional reinforcement of the holidays. 4) Sport on a completely random basis to a lesser extent on the trip.

Smith and Weed (in Rauter, 2012) present sports tourism as the connection of tourism with “mega” events, external activities, and the connection of tourism in relation to health. Of these three domains, "mega" sports events have the most direct connection with tourism, as they arouse special interest in both tourists and athletes. There is an inseparable connection between sports tourism and outdoor activities,

such as skiing, cycling, kayaking, water surfing, etc. The development and offer of these activities, of course, depend on a particular tourist destination's natural conditions. The connection between health and tourism is the third discussed area of sports tourism and most often occurs in connection with the importance of movement or engaging in sports activities on trips. Sports tourism is a popular focus of media interest, and thus people are becoming more and more aware of the importance of the movement for maintaining their health. The concept of sports tourism can perhaps be best understood as time spent doing sports while on a trip, and people are increasingly interested in traveling to tourist destinations where sports events are held and where they can attend or participate in many sports activities. In this regard, sports tourism is also appealing to those who want to enjoy the beauty of nature, new places, and customs. From this point of view, it is slightly closer to cultural tourism.

Ross (2001) lists the main factors that contributed to the increasing popularity of sports tourism:

- Economic growth: In order for people to be able to participate in any form of sports tourism, they need to have enough money. Families' incomes have risen, jobs and the way they work have changed, and the amount of free time available for sports tourism activities has increased. Overall, the number of hours in the workplace has declined significantly over the past century. For most Western societies, economic changes in recent history have increased the amount of time and money that people have available and motivated them to engage in sports tourism activities.
- Technological innovation: The best example of this new technology is illustrated by new transport methods. With the invention of cars and air travel over the past century, people were able to travel to a variety of locations to participate in sports tourism activities. The development of mobility was a catalyst for the development of accommodation. In addition to the key role that transport and accommodation played in the increasing popularity of sports tourism, new innovations in media technology also contributed to the development, as radio and television programs popularized theatrical sports.
- Changes in attitudes and values: It is widely acknowledged that there has been a shift in Western societies from work ethical values to values that

emphasize leisure, hedonism and self-realization. As a result of these changes, sport and sports values have a greater social impact than before.

Sports tourism has great business potential and can make a significant contribution to tourism promotion worldwide. As such, the tourism industry has long thought of sports tourism as an important market, and as certain sports venues, events and teams become more famous they attract more international tourists. Of course, more tourists bring large profits to this type of tourism, especially due to high revenues for local, regional, or even national budgets (Pop, Kanovici, Ghic, and Andrei, 2016).

A report from the International Conference on Tourism and Sports (UNWTO) states that sports tourism is the fastest-growing sector in world tourism, posing represents an opportunity for both existing and developing destinations (tourism in connection with: city tours, coast, countryside, mountains, deserts, etc.).

Sports tourism accounts for about 10% of world tourism spending, with Europe being the largest market for sports tourism, followed by North America. The global sports tourism market generated 1.5 billion euros in revenue in 2018. The expected growth by 2023 was 7 billion euros, which means that the annual average growth would be 36% and thus rank the sports tourism market among the fastest growing in tourism (Lobotec and Videmšek, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a major impact on the sports tourism market; among other things, 2020 was also marked by numerous cancellations in the sports world. Two very important sporting events scheduled for 2020 were the European Football Championship and the Tokyo Olympics. Loborec and Videmšek (2021) state that both sports and tourism will play an important role in the recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, with an impact on all of society, both locally and globally.

Research Nuffield Health (2020) found that more than three-quarters (76%) of people in the UK embarked on new forms of exercise during COVID-19 lockdown. Walking, specifically for exercise, has been the most popular new activity, with three in ten (30%) introducing this into their lockdown regimes. Following walking, the next most popular exercises people have taken up are jogging, yoga, HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training), running, home treadmill, weights and cycling outdoors.

## 2.1 Opportunities for people with disabilities in sports tourism

In recent years, the international environment in all areas has become increasingly focused on accessibility or ensuring equal conditions for all. The theme of the international conference on the occasion of World Tourism Day 2016 was *Tourism for All: Promoting Universal Accessibility*. According to the UNWTO, delegates from 60 countries have pledged to promote universal accessibility in all components of tourism so that all citizens can enjoy the benefits of travel, regardless of their disability. A billion people around the world have some kind of disability, so accessibility is becoming and will continue to be a major concern for tourism workers (Sham'aa, 2016).

Different terms are used in the literature for "accessible tourism": "tourism for all", "inclusive tourism", universal tourism", "barrier-free tourism" (Takayama Declaration on the Development of Communities-for-All in Asia and the Pacific, 2009). Darcy (2010) defines accessible tourism as a process that enables people with special needs and seniors to function independently, fairly and with dignity in the enjoyment of universal tourism products, services, and environments. In addition to unhindered access to hotels, restaurants, museums, castles, etc., Linderová and Janěček (2017) point out the accessibility of tourism in tourism for low-income families, pensioners and the socially disadvantaged, as they have the right to tourism all. Citizenship, gender, age and religion are not important. The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism states that tourism activities must respect equality between men and women, promote human rights, and, in particular, the rights of the most vulnerable groups – children, the elderly, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. The possibility of direct and personal access to the discovery and enjoyment of the planet's resources is a right that is equally open to all the inhabitants of the world (UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, 2001). In this article, we will discuss accessible sports tourism for the disabled, so in the following we will focus only on this dimension of accessibility.

Sport must not be the exclusive right of certain social groups, but an opportunity for all. Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires States parties to take appropriate measures to enable people with disabilities to participate in recreational, leisure and sporting activities on an equal basis with others (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008).

Sport in a specific way reflects social differentiation and stratification, which themselves can increase or decrease through sport, depending on the existing social climate. People tend in sports, which is characteristic of the class to which he belongs and in this way maintains or accepts the norms, patterns and values of behaviour of this social group. As a result, sports activities are not evenly distributed across all social categories (Petrovič and Doupona Topič, 1996).

In Slovenia, the importance of playing sports and the impact that active leisure time has on the quality of life has long been widely accepted (Doupona Topič and Petrovič, 2000). The National Sports Program 2014-2023 (2014) states that due to its important, beneficial effects on people and society as a whole, sport should be a fundamental right of every individual, and wide access to sports should be a fundamental guide in realizing public interest. The built network of sports areas provides access to sports for the majority of Slovenes, who are the first in terms of the use of natural sports areas and one of the most sports-active inhabitants of the European Union. 64% of the population is active in sports, while 39% of the population is regularly involved in sports.

A comparative study of the consequences of COVID-19 measures during the first lockdown in Slovenia and Italy (Pišot et al., 2021) showed that sport recreation time increased in Slovenia by 9.7%, while in Italy it decreased drastically (37%), while, Loborec and Videmšek (2021) claim that new sports tourism products will be developed due to the pandemic, such as following the sports routes of famous athletes or photo safaris.

According to the World Health Organization, there are more than 1 billion disabled people in the world or about 15% of the world's population. There are 3.6 million people with disabilities in Canada, 8.5 million people in the UK, 54 million people in the US, and 60 million people in Europe (World Health Organization,).

Due to the aging population in industrialized countries, the rate of people with mobility disabilities is also increasing, which increases the demand for accessible environment, transport and services, in turn increasing the market value of the accessible tourism segment (Rahman in Linderová and Janeček, 2017).

Disability can be defined as limitations on opportunities to participate in society at the same level as other people due to architectural or social barriers (Shaw and Coles, 2004). The Action Program for People with Disabilities shows that more than 15% of the total population of the European Union is disabled, and in Slovenia the approximate estimate of the share of disabled people is around 12-13% of the total population, which does not differ significantly from the EU estimate. Of these, 8% hold official court decisions on disability according to various laws, and the remaining 5% (according to estimates of disability organizations or membership in them) have major physical disabilities (Disability Action Program 2014-2021, 2014).

Ping Kung and Taylor (2013) state that physically challenged sports participants represent a small proportion of sports participants in English public sports centres, but are important for the social inclusion agenda. The survey states that of all those actively involved in sport at 458 English sports centres from 2005 to 2011 just 9% were physically challenged, and most often these people sought training in swimming and general fitness exercises. The authors state that in 2009/10, 18% of people with reduced mobility aged over 16 played sports for at least 30 minutes a week.

Pagan (2012) included people with reduced mobility in their research – those whose disabilities cause problems with daily tasks. He found that people with reduced mobility are less likely to participate in tourism activities than people with reduced mobility. He cites as the main limitations of participation faced by people with disabilities: lack of accessible accommodation, difficulties in finding accessible accommodation even when it exists and inadequate information.

Reklaitiene, Pozeriene, and Ostaseviciene (2016) state that the participation of people with disabilities in sports and recreation is limited by environmental factors, including the physical and social environment. Research on the possibility of participating in recreational and sports services organizations has shown that policy and legislation have helped remove some such barriers, but sports and recreational areas are still difficult to access for people with reduced mobility. They state that cooperation between service providers, people with disabilities, and professionals with extensive knowledge of environments that adapt to needs are essential in addressing accessibility. Providers of sports and recreation services pointed out the reasons for the inaccessibility/unsuitability of infrastructure for the disabled: high

reconstruction costs, low demand for services by the disabled and the lack of qualified trainers.

The authors state (ibid.) that a growing group of consumers of fitness and other sports leisure services are becoming disabled. In terms of physical access, older people have similar needs as people with reduced mobility.

People with special needs are defined as a growing group of consumers in sports tourism, as sport offers them many physical and psychological benefits, such as social mobility, involvement in family and community activities, improving the quality of life, self-confidence, self-esteem and social acceptance. With awareness, technological progress, and the help of volunteers, more and more sports tourism events are becoming accessible for the disabled. The positive effects of participation in sports are the same for both the physically challenged and the physically handicapped. Also, the inclusion of people with disabilities in sports encourages people with disabilities to regain their identity and master the stigma of the disabled body. However, it is precisely physically challenged sports tourists who often face barriers to integration. The main reasons for not including people with disabilities in sports tourism are related to restrictions on accommodation or unsuitable accommodation, and the lack of information on accessible tourist products and services (Khor Poy, Irini and Lim Khong, 2013).

McKercher and Darcy (2018) worked on a four-level hierarchy to better understand the nature, effects, and limitations of disability travel. Previous studies have tended to group barriers and treat people with disabilities as homogeneous groups. The authors list 4 different types of barriers that are either common to all tourists or unique to each dimension of disability:

- 1) Barriers faced by all tourists: religion, health, lack of interest, presence of a travel partner, lack of time, costs, etc. McKercher and Chen (2015) investigated the fact that if someone lacks interest in a tourist trip, they will not decide to travel even if the mentioned obstacles are removed.
- 2) Obstacles faced by everyone with disabilities: (I) Disability is overlooked or omitted. Accordingly, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2016), together with advocacy groups and tourists, calls for greater training and awareness of employees in the tourism industry. Daruwalla and Darcy

(2005) tested the importance of measures to train and raise awareness among tourism students and tourism professionals about the needs of people with disabilities. Both groups showed changes in attitudes towards people with special needs, which included information, video and personal contacts with people with special needs. (II) Neglect, negative attitude and discrimination to the extent that service users prefer to conceal their disability. (III) Lack of information in general and unreliability of information. (IV) Ignorance of the tourism industry, which is still attributed to a rather low awareness of the special needs of people with disabilities.

- 3) Specific barriers according to the type of disability, such as adaptation of rooms for the disabled, visual warnings for the deaf, etc.
- 4) Barriers related to individual conditions, for which we need a higher level of service provision in the entire tourism (medicines, dietary specialties, pets, etc.).

Khor Poy, Irini, and Lim Khong (2013) developed a questionnaire to collect data on the limitations faced by physically challenged sports tourists. The results showed limitations related to access issues and restrictions on the physical nature of the sports destination. Sports tourism providers are proposed to adopt a friendly strategy in the management of transport, facilities and environments for disabled tourists. There is awareness of the great importance of professionally trained employees in sports services and volunteers to help physically challenged tourists. Moreover, researchers are now studying transport issues in relation to sports tourism opportunities for people with reduced mobility, in order for them to overcome some of the issues they face in this context.

To increase the understanding of tourism for physically challenged sports tourists, studies on their needs with destination experiences and the provision of appropriate accommodation are crucial (Darcy, 2010). The results of Darcy's survey (*ibid.*) show that the dimensions of disability and the level of support needs are the most important in the selection of criteria and information preferences for physically challenged sports tourists. The preferred form of providing accessible accommodation information was based on a combination of text, floor plan and digital photography. The implicit implications show that detailed information using this format has benefits for the profitability of accommodation facilities and for social sustainability.

Shaw and Coles (2004) find that access and cost are two important limiting factors for many people with disabilities. Access involves a range of physical barriers, both in public and private spaces, especially in relation to traffic. The authors state that public transport is especially difficult for people with reduced mobility, where there is no room for adjustments. Most people with reduced mobility still face restrictions due to low income.

People with reduced mobility have special needs. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt the various elements in the tourist destination. Customized parking lots are basic needs, special parking spaces with appropriate identification are required, as are adapted communication tools suitable for the physically challenged. If people with reduced mobility also have sensory impairments, destination adjustments are also required with sign language or Braille. In accommodation and other facilities, vertical (elevators) and horizontal adjustments (ramps, stairs) and accessible public hygiene facilities are required. Tourism is not just a stay in a destination, but it is a journey. Thus, passenger vehicles, including rental cars, buses, taxis, trams, cable cars, trains, ferries and passenger ships, must be designed so as to enable safe, comfortable and accessible transport even for the disabled. This also includes access stations and passenger terminals. Disabled tourists need to be offered accommodation facilities with adapted rooms, adapted catering facilities, and accessible cultural (museums, theatres, cinemas) and sports facilities (access to the stadium, racetrack, etc.). Architectural barriers are considered the most important in terms of disabled people's participation in tourism, although the dimensions of a wheelchair and the physical abilities of its user are always crucial (Linderová and Janeček, 2017).

Rabontu (2018) also finds that accessibility for people with reduced mobility depends on the type of disability. This means that tour operators must adjust experiences for all categories of disability. It should also be noted that each person is unique in their own way, so the same category of disability also involves a different approach.

The ADA standards say that tourists must be provided with the four main components of the basic product at the time of choosing a particular tourist product: transport, accommodation, food, and entertainment without discrimination. These standards are designed to ensure the accessibility of people with various hearing, visual, or locomotor disorders. It includes architectural adaptations for all types of

disabilities. These barriers are physical characteristics that limit or prevent a person with reduced mobility from acquiring the goods or services offered (Butnaru, 2010).

Rabontu (2018) dealt with the level of development of tourism for the disabled in Romania and, among other things, explored the possibilities disabled people have for free time and the capacity to increase sports' accessibility. Research has shown that in Romanian tourism, the accessibility of people with disabilities is extremely low, although this category of people has great potential for tourism development. The author states that this is mainly due to the very large investments that would be needed to properly equip accommodation, restoration, sports or entertainment facilities. Romanian transport is also problematic. The author recognizes the solution in compliance with European directives and the principles of equal opportunities in future investments in the elimination of architectural barriers, efforts for which should be significantly increased.

In Slovenia, tourist products and services for the disabled is poorly developed. There are some positive points, but certainly not enough to label it a destination that is friendly to the physically challenged. In terms of accessible tourism, the most accessible cities in Slovenia are Ljubljana and Maribor, along with the country's various health resorts. These also make many efforts for accessibility in culture, especially museums, which is also very important for the development of the entire tourism sector. There are also various accommodation facilities owned by disability associations for members thereof. Perhaps what we miss the most is a bit of courage and imagination from sports activity providers, with which guests could be provided a sports holiday on a larger scale. Thus, this part is often limited to various camps prepared for their members by disability associations (Kores, 2015).

There is no numerical data in the literature on the level of physically active people with reduced mobility in Slovenia. Both disability organizations and action plans state that there is still a big difference between the number of people with disabilities and those with disabilities who play sports. Many projects at various levels are working to reduce inequalities between people with disabilities and the rest of the population. At the national level, the Active, Healthy and Satisfied project in 2017, implemented by the Association for Sports for the Disabled of Slovenia and the Paralympic Committee and funded by Norway, is the most highlighted in the media. The main goal of the project is the integration of people with disabilities into sports

and sports organizations, and the purpose is to reduce health inequalities (Active, Healthy and Satisfied, 2017).

## **2.2 Development of a sports tourism destination for people with disabilities with the help of European projects**

A destination can be defined according to spatial or geographical aspect, content aspect, tourist views, business or strategic aspect and system aspect (Vodeb, 2014).

Hall and Weiler (1992) state that, historically, tourist destinations have developed alongside cultural sights and natural features, and more recently, the fundamental development potentials of tourist destinations have been specific business, leisure and recreational interests. In this context, a particularly dynamic and strong area that offers tourist destinations the opportunity to develop is sport.

Laws (1995) defined tourist destinations as places that attract and meet the needs of visitors. Such places exist when resources, infrastructure and services are provided that facilitate travel to the place and the goal of a satisfied visitor is achieved. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) name destinations as complex and multifaceted tourist systems.

Smith (in Hall 2000) lists a number of criteria that we must consider when defining and identifying destinations:

- The destination should include a set of cultural, physical and social characteristics that together form a regional identity.
- The destination should contain an appropriate tourist infrastructure to support tourism development.
- The destination should not cover only one community or attraction.
- The destination should include existing attractions or have the potential to support the development of successful attractions that are intended to attract tourists.
- The destination should be able to support the planning and marketing of this area, which is a kind of guide and stimulus for future development.
- The destination should be accessible to a (sufficiently) large group of visitors. Accessibility can be provided via road, air or water connection.

Despite the aforementioned approach and the definition of criteria, Smith is of the opinion that determining the exact boundaries of a destination is still difficult. The boundaries of a tourist destination are actually determined by the tourist demand.

Weed and Bull (2004) also note that the reasons why people choose to travel to a particular place can be many or few, but one common reason is participation in a sport, which creates important and heterogeneous travel flows. Sport is associated with a rich and diverse visitor experience and provides a unique tourist destination experience, and an increasing number of destinations have been developed through sports tourism development initiatives.

Tourist resources are conditioned by tourist trends. Namely, the dialectical connection between the development of human society and the development of tourism has been proven. Over different periods, tourists' expectations have changed and thus helped "shape" destinations' tourist products. The tourist in the postmodern era expects much more from a destination than just sun, sea and sand. A destination's natural resources themselves therefore do not meet modern trends in tourist demand. Trends tend toward an individualized, cutting-edge service that also includes activities, sports, recreation, culture, or the arts. New tourism requires an authentic experience that allows contact with the local population and enjoyment of the original environment, in addition to other activities and opportunities (Vodeb, 2014).

Sports tourism destinations can include sports venues (stadiums and arenas), coaching infrastructure and sports health infrastructure, and there is an important distinction between sports resources that are built and those that are of natural origin (Higham, 2005).

Sources of sports tourism at the local level (ibid.) often include local club sports facilities, existing footpaths, cycling paths and recreational facilities (swimming pools, recreational sporting events). Specific challenges facing destinations at the local level are accessibility, distance to the tourist centre that creates the destination, and lack of tourist infrastructure and tourist services.

The National Sport Program in the Republic of Slovenia 2014 – 2023 (2014) states that sport is financed from the budget of the state, local communities, European Structural and Social Funds, FŠO (Fundacija za šport) and FIHO (Fundacija za financiranje invalidskih in humanitarnih organizacij). However, public finances for sports outside the school system account for only 15% of total expenditure on sports. Households contribute the most to sports. They spend around €308 per year or 1.51% of the family budget on sports products and sports services. Private companies, through paying for sponsorship and TV rights, provide 18% of all funding for sports.

Čater and Zovko (2016) state that most public funding for sports in Slovenia falls on local communities, followed by state and EU funds, and a smaller share is contributed by the FŠO. Public funding for sport has risen sharply in nominal terms over the last 15 years, but if we remove the impact of inflation from this nominal increase and then recalculate public funding for sport to a constant level of GDP, this increase is much smaller. Practically all types of public funds for sports are also closely related to the economic situation in the country, which means that funds for sports increase or decrease at the same time as GDP/state and local budgets increase or decrease.

The European Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 was weaker in terms of investment, and more space was devoted to activity-focused projects, including in sports. In 2015, the European Commission published for the first time the Erasmus + Sport call, whose purpose is to finance the promotion of fair play and participation in sport. In the following, we present the development of a sports tourism destination for people with disabilities with the help of European funds. The case study is the municipality of Brežice, which was the only municipality in Slovenia to be successful three times in the Erasmus + Sport tender and received additional funding for project sports activities in the amount of EUR 1,233,485.00.

### **2.2.1 The development of a sports tourism destination for people with disabilities with the help of three projects financed by European Commission: “Sports for healthy aging”, “Feel the freedom of the water” and “Bet on health”**

The “Sport for a Healthy Aging” project was implemented between 1 May 2015 and 30 April 2016. The main objectives of the project were to support the European Week of Sport and to raise public awareness through sport activities that sport is crucial for health and well-being. The project’s aim was to promote voluntary sports activities in the local environments of four countries – Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina together with social inclusion, new experiences and opportunities for people with disabilities and the elderly, and to promote health through greater participation and equal access to sport for all. Key results: (i) a new network of nine partner organizations from four countries: municipalities, NGOs, public institutions and economic operators working in various fields of sport and health, (ii) more than 5,000 people involved in four major sporting events in four countries, as part of the celebration of the European Week of Sport, (iii) a gala event with 3,150 participants that took place throughout the day and promoted sports areas adapted for people with disabilities and the elderly, (iv) 128 hours of intensive training for young volunteers in six different sports to work with people with disabilities and the elderly, (v) a pilot-designed 3-day sports tourism package for people with disabilities and the elderly and tested with 46 included, (vi) performed 3396 hours of guided exercises for people with disabilities and the elderly, (vii) published the brochure “I can do it”, printed in four languages, to promote sports and recreation, (viii) outdoor sports areas adapted for the training of people with disabilities and the elderly.

The project “Feel the Freedom of Water”, which was implemented in the period 1 January 2016 – 31 December 2018, promoted voluntary activity in sports, social inclusion and equal opportunities, as well as awareness of the importance of physical activity for health through greater participation in sports and equal access to sports for all. The project partners established sports for the disabled as an opportunity for all. The project followed the challenge of adapting water sports facilities for use by people with disabilities. The main goal of the project was to provide guided recreational and sports activities for people with disabilities to improve their physical activity and reduce the possibility of later chronic illness. Achieved goals: (i) removed

architectural barriers for easier access to sports grounds for people with disabilities, (ii) research, development and purchase of a specialized line of sports equipment suitable for use by people with disabilities, (iii) one-year test of including people with disabilities in sports activities and measuring their progress, (iv) patenting SUP boards designed for people with reduced mobility, (v) extensive promotional activities in all project partner countries in order to raise awareness of the importance of sports for the health of people with disabilities and those without them, (vi) a plan was developed for municipalities tailored to the needs of people with disabilities, (vii) adaptation and equipment of a youth hostel to be accessible to the disabled and the blind and visually impaired.

The target group of the project "Bet on Health" (BOH), which was implemented in the period 1 November 2019 – 31 October 2020, was young people between 15 and 29 years old. Young people were invited to meet people who roleplayed bookmakers, in which they bet that they would improve their health and physical fitness through the project; in short, they bet on their health. Achieved goals: (i) performed exercises in 12 new innovative forms of sports (intergenerational swimming, water rescue course with elements of self-rescue, street handball, beach handball, smart warm-up, recreation after the end of a sports career, etc.), (ii) 360 regular users involved, (iii) a motivational "BOH" model for greater involvement in sport and recreation was established, (iv) an international conference was held to bring together leading researchers and experts who shared their experiences and research results on sport, well-being and health issues, and the role of local communities in planning, implementing and evaluating policies and practices related to public health issues, (v) everyone was equally involved in the activities – including people with disabilities and people with fewer opportunities.

### **3 Discussion**

A review of the literature shows that modern tourism is closely linked to economic development, as the strengthening of the economic development of society has the effect of strengthening people's travel needs, and covers an increasing number of new destinations, and that more and more tourism.

We found that the possibilities of people with disabilities in sports tourism are an increasingly important issue and that the field is developing. European and national policies dictate universal accessibility, which, however, is linked to the cost of architectural remodelling.

Although sports tourism is the fastest growing sector in world tourism and presents an opportunity for both existing and developing destinations, sports participants with disabilities comprise a small proportion of the total. People with disabilities are also less likely to participate in various tourist activities than people with reduced mobility.

A review of the research shows that cooperation between service providers, people with disabilities, and professionals with extensive knowledge of the environment that is adapting to needs is essential in addressing accessibility. The latter process depends on the dimension of tourist disabilities, which need to be addressed holistically when planning a destination. Data on the restrictions faced by disabled sports tourists indicate three basic items: lack of destination information, lack access to the destination (transport restrictions), and lack of accessible sports destinations.

The findings from the literature review show the need to establish new accessible sports destinations in Europe, or at least to adapt existing ones, which is associated with high costs.

As most public funding for sports falls on local communities, we propose that local communities strengthen their staff and continuously apply for European funds for sports tourism projects. As we learned from the case study of the municipality of Brežice, without European funds from projects, it would not have been possible to involve 2,438 elderly people in organized training, arrange access to sports facilities for people with disabilities, design and test sports tourism packages for people with disabilities, and hold numerous promotional events to involve local people in sports activities and promote a sports tourism destination for people with disabilities. However, EU project funds are only part of the development of sports tourism for people with disabilities at the local level, as after the project usually only infrastructure and equipment are left, and rarely individual activities that applicants undertake to maintain after the project. Rapid and dynamic rise of sports recreation, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, should result in revenues for sports facility

operators, who could use these funds to organize free or cheaper sports exercises for people with disabilities, including the elderly. We also see opportunities in increasing volunteering in sports for people with disabilities.

The literature shows that the boundaries of a tourist destination are determined by tourist demand and that more and more tourist destinations have been developed through sports tourism development initiatives. In the postmodern era, tourists expect much more from their destination than, as is the case in Brežice, swimming in the spa. New tourism requires an authentic experience that allows contact with the local population and enjoying the original environment, which can be achieved with accessible sports and recreational areas, especially accessible forms of non-traditional sports and innovative forms of traditional sports that we have developed through European projects in Brežice.

Also, as we learned in reading the literature, the basic condition of tourist destinations for people with disabilities is accessible accommodations, which are already present in the municipality of Brežice. We suggest that municipal officials continue to tackle EU projects to ensure the greater accessibility and development of sport at the local level. With project funds, it is necessary to invest even more in international promotion for the recognition of established accessible capacities. It will certainly be easier starting next week, as yesterday the municipality of Brežice (21 September 2021) acquired the title of European City of Sports for 2022.

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