



People. Places. Potential.

Observatory Case Update

**Grünmetropole, Belgium – Germany –
Netherlands**

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The Grünmetropole project is a project implemented in the Belgian-Dutch-German border region in 2008 – aimed at rehabilitating the shared mining past of this region. The end of the mining industry in the second half of the 20th century created many challenges concerning the conversion of the region, which strongly resonate with heritage management issues. The Grünmetropole project aimed at addressing these issues. Its objectives were to renew the post-industrial landscape, to strengthen the common identity of the region, and to create a touristic impulse. This was done by implementing two touristic routes along relicts of the mining past, one for cars and one for bicycles, connecting 72 points of interest in the region.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, touristic activities were limited, and moreover, cross-border traffic was forbidden, making that the aim of the Grünmetropole was not really achievable during this period. Before elaborating in more detail on these issues, it is good to mention that the transnational Grünmetropole project didn't really exist anymore at the time that the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The Grünmetropole project was implemented in 2008, and the supporting associated cooperation stimulating cross-border cooperation, and touristic implementation, was abolished shortly after 2008. Nevertheless, the two touristic routes remained present in the landscape, albeit not maintained. At the time of covid-pandemic, for example, some information signs as well as signs indicating the route, can still be found in the landscape whereas others are gone due to vandalism, renovation works, or changes in the spatial context (e.g. new infrastructure). Thus tourists who come to the region nowadays can't possibly cycle the entire route as signs are missing, but may wonder what this route and the signs are about. Maps or other information can however not be found anymore since the website is not maintained and information leaflets were never reprinted after they were sold out. All in all this resulted in a situation that nowadays the signs and the routes work 'alienating'. In fact, the routes are hardly used nowadays, and the Grünmetropole is relatively unknown to both locals and tourists.

Given this background, the Covid-pandemic even exacerbated this situation, touristic activities in general were limited due to for instance curfews being imposed. And even at times of less restrictive means, tourism was restricted as police officers and traffic controllers were limiting the amount of tourists, in this quite touristic region. In the Dutch part of the Grünmetropole for instance, people from outside the region (i.e. from other parts of the Netherlands), were not allowed to visit the Grünmetropole region to avoid contaminations. Moreover indeed, borders were closed for all not essential traffic, obviously including touristic traffic. The Dutch-Belgian border was closed for quite some time, making even cross-border family visits impossible, let alone touristic visits. The Dutch-German border remained open, however with the strict advise not to travel cross-border. At the same time, during and shortly after the Covid-pandemic, it was often mentioned that people were more and more exploring their own region and country, instead

of traveling abroad to explore exotic destinations. There are however no numbers available on the decline or growth of tourist on this particular touristic route.

Also on the institutional side, the pandemic led to some difficulties. As mentioned above, one of the aims of the project was to strengthen the common identity of the region, this was done by stimulating cross-border cooperation. During the pandemic, governments were mostly, and sometimes only focusing on domestic matters, making that cross-border cooperation was discontinued and sometimes even put on hold. At present day (2022), more and more initiatives are being implemented to restart this cross-border cooperation once more, for instance by organizing conferences to get new initiatives off the ground.

Another impact of the Covid-pandemic, is the consequence on new touristic investments in the region. Already before the pandemic, many new touristic investments were planned to be implemented in the region. In the aftermath of the pandemic however, these investments were questioned due to budget cuts, and a new vision on the (lack of) importance of touristic routes. As a result new investments had to deal with budget cuts, and new touristic routes were implemented in a down-scaled form. This, in potential, could lead to a renewed attention for already existing routes such as the Grünmetropole.