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STRATEGY 2040 AND ACTION PLAN FOR EMAJÕGI AND GAUJA RIVERS





Study trip in Estonia, 1–3 July 2024. Photo: TAS

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Society “Jūras Zeme”

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

TAS	Tartu County Development Association
TOL	Association of Municipalities of Tartu County
SATT	Tartu County Tourism Foundation, Visit Tartu
EU	European Union
NCA	Nature Conservation Agency (Latvia)
BIOR	Institute of Food Safety, Animal Health and Environment “BIOR”
LVGMC	Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Center

INTRODUCTION

Tartu County Development Association together with the **Association of Municipalities of Tartu County** and **Society “Jūras Zeme”** have initiated the project **“River Networks”**, that covers the regions of the **Emajõgi** and **Gauja** rivers (lower part).

The aim of the project is to stimulate sustainable socio-economic development along the banks and catchment areas of the rivers (Emajõgi and Gauja River). The focus is on the better use of natural resources, cultural heritage, and economic opportunities, ensuring alignment with environmental protection goals as well as developing a sustainable cooperation network.

The regions are affected by several challenges:

- Eutrophication of water bodies
- Shallow depth, which hinders the development of navigation
- Preservation and sustainable use of cultural heritage
- Development of infrastructure (harbours, mooring sites, etc.)
- Finding a balance between economic development and nature conservation objectives
- Conflicting interests of stakeholders (e.g., fisheries and recreational boating)
- Lacking sustainable cooperation network between different parties

The project has been initiated to respond to these challenges by creating **a joint strategy and action plan** for the river areas to ensure sustainable socio-economic development. In addition to setting goals and an action plan, the strategies include a description of the governing organisation.

The strategy consists of four parts:

1. Strategy process
2. Overview of the current situation
3. Strategy and action plan
4. Strategy implementation

The strategy has the following annexes:

1. Analyses of the current situation in Estonia and Latvia
2. Members of the working groups

The authors express their gratitude to all contributors!



1

STRATEGY PROCESS

The preparation of the strategy and action plan was based on the logic of change management and the principles of co-creation.

Change management is the process of planning, implementing, and reinforcing change.

Co-creation can be defined as a cross-sectoral innovation process in which stake-holders jointly define problems, find new solutions, and implement and evaluate the results.

The activities for preparing the strategy and action plan were based on **service design logic** – moving from understanding the problem to structuring specific actions (*Figure 1*).

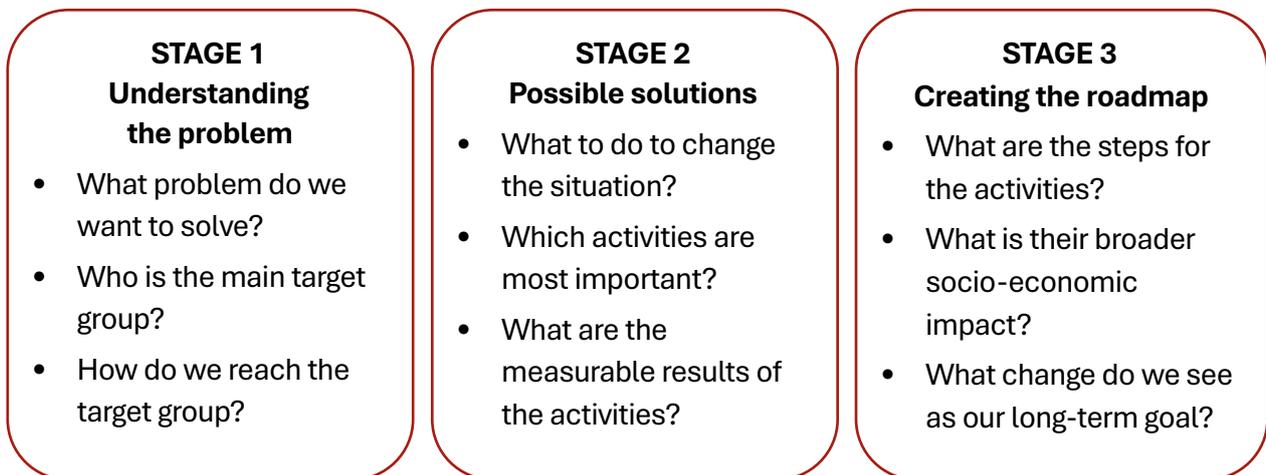


Figure 1. The methodological basis for preparing the strategy and action plan.

During the first stage, existing strategies, studies, and other development documents related to the region were mapped and **synthesized into a summary** (chapter 2 of the document). The analytical summary presents the synthesised findings of the **national analyses** carried out to support the preparation of a joint strategy and action plan for the Rivers Emajõgi and Gauja within the framework of the “River Networks” project.

The analytical work covered the mapping of existing strategies, development documents and projects related to the River Emajõgi and the lower River Gauja areas, as well as the identification of development opportunities and challenges, including aspects related to nature conservation, heritage protection and management planning. The scope of the work was to explore and acknowledge local perspectives, while also considering the cross-border dimensions and the overarching ambitions of the project.

The analysis was conducted mainly as a desk study, including a review of relevant documents and the clarification of uncertainties with the appropriate institutions. Various elements of the

analytical work, such as the scope of the analysis, key findings, including the main opportunities and challenges, were presented during stakeholder seminars. Additionally, critical success factors were determined. The challenges, strengths and critical success factors covered the need for a “classical” SWOT-analysis.

The following structures were created in the strategy process:

1. **Steering group** composed of the national representatives of the project partners and key players. Meetings:
 - a. 27.05.2025: project areas, structure for the analyses, preparation for the 1st stakeholder seminar
 - b. 09.06.2025: discussion and selection of pilot activities
 - c. 5.08.2025: overview of the activities so far, agenda for the 2nd stakeholder seminar
 - d. 29.09.2025: overview of the analyses, preparation for the 3rd stakeholder seminar
 - e. 10.11.2025: preliminary strategy, preparation for the joint meeting
2. **National working groups** (task forces): Estonian and Latvian working groups representing the main players, including relevant municipalities to discuss the national process, priorities, goals, and actions. Meetings:
 - a. **In Estonia:**
 - i. 19.05.2025: expectations to the strategy, defining the project area
 - ii. 28.10.2025: draft strategy, management model
 - b. **In Latvia:**
 - i. 21.05.2025: expectations to the strategy, defining the project area
 - ii. 27.10.2025: draft strategy, management model
3. **Stakeholder seminars** (municipalities, enterprises, NGO-s, state institutions, support structures, etc.) (3+3 in Estonia and Latvia respectively):
 - a. 2.06 in Estonia: strengths and weaknesses, roles, pilots
 - b. 1.07 in Latvia: the same
 - c. 25.08 in Estonia: vision and goals, concrete initiatives, management model
 - d. 25.09 in Latvia: the same
 - e. 3.11 in Estonia: validation of the strategy, action plan, management model
 - f. 3.11 in Latvia: the same

Some **additional meetings-seminars** were also held to clarify specific topics:

1. Discussion about the adjacent areas near Lake Peipus in Estonia (Visit Peipus and relevant municipalities) – past projects, plans and possible co-operation (28.10.2025).
2. Discussion and input to the management model for Estonian network with TAS, TOL, and SATT.
3. Involvement of the local municipalities in Latvia – Ādaži, Sigulda and Saulkrasti (13.11.2025).
4. Individual interviews with Nature Conservation Agency, Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Center, and Research Institute “BIOR” on fish species.



Strategy seminar in Ādaži, 1 July 2025. Photo: Āris Ādlers

Several meetings with the partners (TAS and Jūras Zeme) were also held to keep the project on track.

Very important was a **joint task forces meeting** in Latvia (19.11.2025) to refine the vision, goals, and joint activities.

Basically, to formulate the strategy and action plan local, regional and national priorities were discussed and goals formulated. The steering group meetings were used to align the approach as well as goals. Once the exact wordings were written, a synthesis was compiled based on the national inputs (similar to analytical process).

The action plan (chapter 3) consists of three parts:

1. National actions to be undertaken by the relevant national stakeholders (municipalities, TAS, TOL, SATT, NGOs, Jūras Zeme, etc.)
2. Joint actions¹ to be executed mainly by the project partners (TAS and Jūras Zeme).
3. Pilot actions² to be implemented during the project “River Networks”.

The **management model** is also a part of the strategy. In Estonia, the national network model was discussed and agreed separately (explained in more detail in the relevant chapter). In Latvia, a similar approach was used. However, a national model needs further development in the future. The joint actions will be undertaken by the project partners TAS and Jūras Zeme.

¹ Joint actions may sometimes duplicate the national actions.

² Selection process is explained in more detail in the relevant chapter.

2

OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

2.1. Project area



River Emajõgi. Photo: Sven Začek

The Emajõgi and Gauja project areas differ geographically in size and hydrological characteristics. The River Emajõgi is a waterway approximately 100 km long, connecting Lake Võrtsjärv with Lake Peipus. The River Gauja project area covers the downstream section from Murjāni to the river's mouth at the sea — around 40 km of the Gauja River's total length of 452 km (*Figure 2*).

The River Emajõgi and lakes Võrtsjärv and Peipus form the largest inland water system in Estonia, stretching from southern Estonia

to the northern shore of Lake Peipus. Their hydrographic and ecological characteristics are closely interconnected and largely interdependent, forming a unified river basin. All three water bodies belong to the catchment area of the River Narva and play an important role both in preserving the natural environment and in supporting human activities.

The downstream section of the River Gauja is also unique due to the geological characteristics of its valley and riverbanks, as well as the dynamic exchange of water with the Gulf of Riga.

Administratively, the River Emajõgi area belongs to Tartu County and includes the municipalities of Elva, Luunja, Kambja, Tartu City, Tartu, Kastre and Peipsiääre. The River Gauja project area is located mainly within Ādaži Municipality, as well as in Sigulda Municipality and Saulkrasti Municipality.

The number of inhabitants also differs between the project areas. As of 1 January 2025, 158,183 people resided in the River Emajõgi project area, compared with 30,610 people in the River Gauja project area. Trends indicate a slight increase in population in both areas over the past five years.

From an **ecological** perspective, the River Emajõgi and its surroundings form a diverse freshwater ecosystem, supporting protected species such as eagles, black storks, rare fish and amphibians. Its extensive peatlands function as carbon sinks, nutrient buffers and flood mitigators, while the water bodies help maintain regional groundwater balance and biodiversity.



Figure 2. Map of the River Emajõgi and the lower River Gauja as a central development axis.

The lower River Gauja hosts rare and protected habitats within the project area. To safeguard these values, Piejūra Nature Park has been established, encompassing 24 habitats of EU importance, including wooded dunes, fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation, and old or natural boreal forests. The park is one of Europe's five most important birding sites for the little tern and the steppe pipit, and it plays a vital role in supporting fish migration to and from the mouth of the River Gauja.

The Emajõgi region has contributed to Estonian **cultural heritage** where different identities meet – academic city milieu in Tartu, rural settlements along the riverbanks, and nature protection areas in Alam-Pedja. Emajõgi has provided the means of transportation for centuries, a specific river vessel (barge) has been developed for that purpose. The tradition of barge-building has been kept alive and new vessels have been constructed using the traditional methods.

For centuries, lampreys have been caught at the mouth of the River Gauja, and the ancient traditions and methods of lamprey fishing and processing have been preserved in Carnikava to this day. Since 2019, the skills of catching and processing Carnikava lampreys have been included on the list of intangible cultural heritage. Every year in August, to mark the opening of the lamprey fishing season, the Lamprey Festival is held in Carnikava.

Since 2018, the skills associated with the Gauja rafting craft have been included on the list of intangible cultural heritage. Gauja rafting is a seasonal practice that involves tying and navigating rafts using the river's current and knowledge of the spring flow. The logs incorporated into the rafts were floated from the upper stretches of the River Gauja (Sinoles, Lejasciems, etc.) to Carnikava. Carnikava's Local History Centre educates the public about, and preserves, these aspects of the lower River Gauja cultural heritage.



A Musical Flavors Journey on the barge Suur Sume, 31 July 2025. Photo: Mikko Otsar



Study trip in Latvia, 3–6 September 2024. Photo: TAS

Fishing, tourism and recreation are the main socio-economic activities associated with the use of water resources in both project areas. **A major difference** lies in the number of harbours and piers along the River Emajõgi and the lower River Gauja. There are hundreds of landing sites along the shores of the River Emajõgi, including nine harbours. In contrast, the Gauja is the only major river estuary in Latvia without an official port. However, a landing site in Carnikava serves fishing vessels and boats, where the largest commercial catch is unloaded. At present, the River Gauja is not used as a regular commercial navigation route.

Both project areas are popular destinations for water sports (boating, canoeing, etc.) and nature observation, offering equipment rental and guided tour services. Accommodation and catering services are available in both urban and rural settlements. During the navigation season, boat traffic and guided tours are organized on the River Emajõgi and the downstream section of the Gauja River.

The use of the lower River Gauja project area is linked to the presence of the NATO military polygon “Ādaži”, which determines and limits the development of activities.



Cleaning Up Day 2024 in Luunja. Photo: TAS

2.2. Human impact to water bodies

Eutrophication is a long-term and persistent environmental problem affecting both freshwater bodies and the Baltic Sea, including the Gulf of Riga. It is notable that the main river channel of the River Emajõgi and the lower reach of the River Gauja are not significantly impacted by elevated nutrient concentrations or changes in ecological quality. In contrast, waters in catchment areas around urbanised settlements – such as villages, nearby towns, and inflows from urban wastewater treatment plants – show increased nutrient levels, leading to algal blooms during the summer months. Moreover, decentralised (individual) sewage systems lacking adequate treatment facilities exert additional pressure on water quality in the lower River Gauja. Lake Peipus and Lake Võrtsjärv are both large, shallow lakes with high nutrient levels that cause eutrophication, yet the River Emajõgi maintains a better ecological status.

Fishing is practised both professionally and recreationally (for personal consumption or leisure). The River Emajõgi itself is not an important water body for commercial fishing, although it is an important travel route for the fish. In contrast, the situation is different in the River Gauja, where lamprey fishing is carried out on a commercial scale under licensed regulation. A specific assessment of the impact of fishing on the River Gauja ecosystem is not currently being conducted.

Fishermen are also entitled to catch commercial coastal fish and officially unload their catch in Carnikava. The impact of coastal herring fishing is assessed at the level of the entire Gulf of Riga stock. Therefore, it is not possible to determine the impact of companies or fisheries in the project area on fish resources. The herring stock in the Gulf of Riga has been assessed as being in good status.

Fish in the River Gauja and River Emajõgi is an important target for anglers. The greatest significance is attached to the angling of salmonids in the River Gauja. To reduce anthropogenic pressure and create favourable conditions for the sustainable use of natural resources, the reproduction and protection of fish stocks, and the promotion of fishing tourism, the Ādaži, Saulkrasti and Sigulda Municipality councils have issued binding regulations on licensed salmonid angling in the River Gauja. Licensed angling in the River Gauja is organised by the Gauja Sustainable Development Association. An assessment of the direct impacts of angling has not yet been conducted. Fishing in Emajõgi (and in Estonia as a whole) is licenced nationally by the Environment Board.



Study trip in Latvia, 3–6 September 2024. Photo: TAS



Study trip to Åland, 11–15 May 2025.
Photo: TAS

Historically, rivers such as the River Emajõgi and River Gauja **have been physically modified** to serve human needs. The River Emajõgi, a vital navigable waterway between Lakes Võrtsjärv and Peipus, has undergone riverbed deepening, dredging, and shoreline alterations to improve navigation. In the lower reaches of the River Gauja, the construction of four polders (Carnikava, Carnikava-Sala, Ādaži, and Eimuras-Mangaļi) and eight protective dams has significantly altered the natural riverbanks and hydrological regime. While these interventions support navigation and flood protection, they also disturb the ecological balance – mobilising nutrients, destroying benthic vegetation, altering hydrological regimes, and ultimately reducing biodiversity.

Recreational activities, particularly during the summer, generate noise and disturb breeding birds. The use of motorboats and other watercraft can also disturb fish and waterfowl in both regions.

The most important parameters through which climate change affects the project areas are related to temperature, precipitation, and sea-level rise. An increase in air temperature has been observed in the region. The rise in air temperature consequently affects water temperatures. These increases promote the proliferation of phytoplankton, particularly cyanobacteria, altering the structure of lake biota and increasing the risk of oxygen depletion.

Increased precipitation and more frequent extreme weather events may lead to higher flood risks, changes in sediment transport and accelerated coastal erosion along the estuary. Sea-level rise in the Gulf of Riga can influence the river's estuary, altering water levels, salinity gradients, and habitats for fish and waterfowl. These changes can affect habitats for fish and waterfowl, as well as human activities such as fishing, recreation, and port operations.

Due to climate change, the duration and thickness of ice cover in lakes and rivers are expected to decrease in both the River Emajõgi and the lower River Gauja. Shorter and thinner ice periods may affect aquatic ecosystems, winter fishery activities, and the timing of spring floods. These changes could also influence human activities such as recreation and ice-based transport.

2.3. Water management in existing policies

Both the River Emajõgi and the lower Gauja River are strongly governed by national, regional and local policy frameworks that seek to reconcile economic use, cultural identity, and ecological protection. The national policies are strongly linked to a commitment to EU water governance principles, especially the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC), the Flood Directive (2007/60/EC) and nature conservation legislation.

The River Emajõgi project area system represents an ecosystem-based and functional approach, focusing on improving water quality and resource management through coordinated governance and science-based measures.

The lower River Gauja project area reflects a combination of strategic and action-oriented planning, emphasising the sustainable use of natural assets for tourism and recreation, cultural heritage, flood risk management and climate change adaptation, as well as multi-level, cross-sectoral cooperation and community engagement.

Shared foundations, understandings, and initiatives

Despite national and geographical differences, the two regions reveal a remarkable degree of conceptual convergence in their water policies. Their shared principles can be summarized across six main dimensions:

1. **Integrated Water Resource Management.** This applies basin-level thinking, recognizing rivers and lakes as hydrologically and ecologically connected systems. They emphasize coordinated management across administrative borders and sectors – linking fisheries, tourism, agriculture, and conservation into a unified framework.
2. **Sustainable development and balance of interests.** The guiding narrative in both cases is the search for balance between economic vitality and ecological integrity. Economic activities, such as fishing, tourism, and small-scale navigation are encouraged only insofar as they do not undermine long-term environmental goals.
3. **Ecosystem and nature-based solutions.** Restoration of wetlands, maintenance of floodplains, and use of vegetated buffers to mitigate runoff are seen as cost-effective tools for improving water quality and resilience. The “green infrastructure” approach – floodplain retention in the Gauja area and wetland restoration in the Emajõgi basin – is an emerging shared practice.
4. **Cultural and social embeddedness.** Both frameworks regard water not merely as a biophysical resource but as a carrier of identity and tradition. Water-linked heritage – such as lamprey fishing and raft floating in Gauja or barge-building in Emajõgi – is explicitly recognized as a component of sustainable development.
5. **Transboundary and regional cooperation.** Both regions participate in cross-border cooperation, particularly through Interreg Estonia–Latvia programmes and projects like “River Networks”, which promote joint monitoring, ecotourism routes, and exchange of policy know-how.
6. **Public participation and co-creation.** Both employ participatory governance: workshops, stakeholder platforms, and local festivals serve as venues for community engagement.

These commonalities indicate that both water policy regimes are evolving from traditional “control and regulation” models towards adaptive, participatory, and value-based water governance, consistent with the latest OECD and EU water policy paradigms.

Both regions exhibit a coherent European orientation in their water governance philosophy. They perceive water bodies not as isolated ecosystems but as integrated socio-ecological systems that underpin biodiversity, livelihoods, and regional identity.

Their strategic similarity is visible in the multi-functionality of water landscapes: ecological health, cultural heritage, and economic value are mutually reinforcing policy pillars. Both areas employ cross-sectoral coordination to manage interactions among land use, fisheries, recreation, and conservation.

Moreover, the cultural valorisation of water marks a notable convergence. In both cases, traditions and rituals – be it lamprey fishing in Carnikava or barge-building – are interpreted as instruments of community cohesion and environmental awareness. This socio-ecological framing of water represents a shift from “resource management” to “landscape stewardship.”

Both regions also share a belief in knowledge-based governance. Scientific data, ecological monitoring, and stakeholder learning feed directly into planning processes, enabling adaptive responses to climate variability, eutrophication, and demographic change.

Key divergences

Despite the conceptual overlap, the two areas/countries diverge in implementation and emphasis (*Table 1*):

- **Scale and institutionalization.** Estonia’s approach is basin-wide and institutionally embedded; Latvia’s is place-based and community-oriented.
- **Environmental focus.** Estonia targets nutrient reduction and ecosystem restoration; Latvia focuses on flood resilience and aesthetic landscape management.
- **Economic orientation.** Emajõgi’s water policy integrates resource-based and innovation-driven economic models, while Gauja’s prioritizes heritage tourism and quality of life.



Project Task Force meeting in Latvia, Saulkrasti municipality, 25 September 2025. Photo: Āris Ādlers

Table 1. Comparison of water related policies in the Emajõgi and the lower River Gauja Regions.

POLICY DIMENSION	EMAJÕGI (Estonia)	Lower Gauja River (Latvia)
Strategic scope	Basin-scale integration covering three (Võrtsjärv, Emajõgi, and Peipus) major water bodies and several counties.	Site-specific focus on the lower River Gauja reach (Murjāni–sea) within local and regional planning frameworks.
Policy foundation	Regional and municipal development plans, LEADER and fishery strategies, East-Estonian River Basin Management Plan.	Development and spatial planning instruments, nature park management “Piejūra” nature park, LEADER/LAG strategies, supported by national/ regional tourism and flood policies.
Primary objectives	Improving ecological quality, reducing eutrophication, fostering sustainable fisheries and tourism, ensuring balance between use and protection.	Fostering sustainable development by ensuring balance between different uses and safeguarding nature; improving tourism and recreational values, preserving cultural traditions, managing flood risks.
Ecological status	Mostly moderate to poor, dominated by nutrient overload and eutrophication.	Generally good, yet a few years - moderate; eutrophication mainly affects the Gulf of Riga, not the river itself.
Governance and institutions	Multi-level coordination among ministries, counties, municipalities, and NGOs; strong institutional base.	Predominantly local-level governance by municipalities; “Sea Land” as a local network organisation lead multiple community initiatives.
Economic priorities	Sustainable fisheries, eco-navigation, tourism entrepreneurship, ecosystem services.	Nature-based tourism and recreation along with associated entrepreneurship, a culture- and festival-driven economy
Environmental measures	Focus on nutrient load reduction, wastewater treatment, habitat and wetland restoration.	Emphasis on floodplain management, dune and coastal protection, and landscape aesthetics.
Cultural and social focus	Heritage through livelihoods (angling, barge-building, recreational activities).	Heritage through rituals and events (Lamprey Festival, rafting traditions).
Tourism policy	Development of waterways, ports, and recreation networks linking Emajõgi, Võrtsjärv, Peipus and Tartu.	Construction of promenades, nature trails, and coastal recreation zones to improve accessibility.
Climate and flood management	Addresses eutrophication and water-level fluctuations; promotes adaptive management.	Focused on coastal erosion, polders, and dikes as protective infrastructure.
Public participation	Structured multi-sectoral stakeholder networks and co-creation workshops.	Community-based participation in local initiatives, engagement through festivals, co-creation events.
Monitoring and research	Science-driven: strong involvement of University of Tartu and Estonian University of Life Sciences.	Regulatory: The Latvian Environment, Geology, and Meteorology Centre, Nature Conservation Agency, Research Institute BIOR.

In synthesis, both project areas express complementary trajectories in European water body governance. The Emajõgi framework (in reality, encompassing also Võrtsjärv and Lake Peipus areas) is a model of scientific-institutional integration, illustrating how ecosystem restoration and regional planning can align under a unified management structure. In contrast, the lower River Gauja approach embodies human-ecosystem stewardship, where governance emerges from the lived experiences, traditions, and values of local communities. Together, they offer a Baltic perspective: sustainability achieved through both science and the community – a dual commitment that reflects the evolving European paradigm of “living with water,” rather than merely managing it.

2.4. Cooperation networks

General overview

Both the Emajõgi and the lower Gauja River regions are embedded in a dense web of cooperation networks that combine institutional, municipal, scientific, and community-based actors. These networks reflect the model of multi-level water governance, where environmental management is no longer the exclusive task of a central authority but the outcome of horizontal partnerships among regions, municipalities, and civil society.

The cooperation frameworks in both cases serve two primary purposes:

1. Ensuring the sustainable management of transboundary or large-scale aquatic systems.
2. Enhancing regional cohesion through shared projects in tourism, heritage, and ecosystem protection.

While the institutional geometry differs – Emajõgi being basin-wide and Gauja localised – their logic of collaboration converges around participatory governance and EU-funded network programmes.

Cooperation networks in the Emajõgi region

(also covering Võrtsjärv and Lake Peipus regions)

The Emajõgi region forms a multi-layered governance and cooperation system anchored in the “River Networks” and “Võrtsjärv–Emajõgi–Peipsi Waterway Development” projects, led by the Tartu County Development Association and the Association of Municipalities of Tartu County.

The cooperation structure includes over 50 participating organisations from the public, private, and non-profit sectors. These range from municipalities (Tartu, Elva, Peipsiääre, Kastre, Viljandi, Tõrva) to universities (University of Tartu, Estonian University of Life Sciences), environmental NGOs, small enterprises in tourism and fisheries, and local heritage associations.

Cross-border dimension

Emajõgi region’s cooperation extends into Estonia-Latvia transboundary partnerships, particularly via Interreg projects such as “Riverways”, “WaterAct”, and “Green Heritage Routes”. These promote the harmonisation of ecological monitoring, tourism route development, and shared cultural branding.

Operational logic

The cooperation network operates through a co-creation model – workshops, participatory seminars, and shared databases – designed to align local initiatives with basin-scale environmental targets. This approach mirrors the EU’s concept of “Living Labs,” where stakeholders jointly define problems, prototype solutions, and evaluate outcomes.

Key goals and functions:

- Align local economic strategies (fisheries, recreation) with national water management plans.
- Facilitate knowledge transfer between research institutions and local communities.
- Coordinate the maintenance of navigable waterways, small harbours, and tourism infrastructure.
- Strengthen collective branding of the lake–river–lake corridor as an ecotourism and cultural landscape.

Cooperation networks in the lower Gauja River project area

Currently, the lower River Gauja is being recognized as a distinct area for sustainable development, serving as a platform for stakeholders to collaborate and establish a shared cooperation model. This is the first instance in which such a scope and territorial coverage have been applied.

The stakeholders in the project area, encompassing most of the lower River Gauja, have been networking under the leadership of the local action group “Sea Land”, which brings together communities, municipalities, and other partners from Ādaži and Saulkrasti. Its work focuses on promoting sustainable development, tourism, rural vitality, and addressing the interaction between coastal and inland areas. “Sea Land” is legally established as a non-governmental organization with a membership structure that brings together key local actors from the area, representing different sectors, institutions, and individual community members.

Stakeholder engagement in relation to the Gauja River has been coordinated by public authorities. For example, the Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Centre, as the competent authority for river basin management, has established the “River Gauja Advisory Board,” which convenes to address matters pertaining to planning and implementation of the River Gauja basin management. This represents a thematic cooperation designed to ensure the achievement of a good ecological status of the basin.

In the tourism sector, several public and private actors are cooperating particularly in the medial part of the River Gauja. One example is the tourism brand and platform “Enter Gauja,” which operates as a tourism cluster focused on the Gauja National Park. The cluster aims to position the area as the most competitive tourism destination in Latvia outside of Riga, offering high-quality and diversified tourism products. Its offer is carefully segmented for both domestic and international markets throughout the year, highlighting natural attractions, outdoor activities, cultural heritage, and historically significant sites.

Transboundary and regional links

The project area - the lower River Gauja - has been involved in several cross-border and transboundary projects, engaging a range of organisations, including planning regions, municipalities, public authorities and non-governmental organisations. These projects have addressed various challenges, among others, in joint water and coastal area management, the development of new tourism products, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

The lower River Gauja network coordinated by the local action group “Sea Land” and the River Emajõgi networks coordinated by the local action group “Tartu County Development Association” have strengthened cooperation under the project “River Networks” umbrella. This cooperation, having a project-based character, might turn into a permanent partnership depending on mutual interest and future opportunities. Focus is on exchanging challenges and best practices in water tourism management, cultural heritage, flood risk management, and environmental and nature protection.

2.5. Opportunities and challenges

Strengths of the project areas

Both areas demonstrate interconnected aquatic–terrestrial systems that support biodiversity and ecosystem connectivity. Their strong cultural and historical attachment to lakes, rivers, and coasts – through fishing, boating, and festivals – fosters regional identity and motivates stewardship. Local traditions, including lamprey fishing in the Gauja and river-based livelihoods at Emajõgi, reinforce cultural continuity and community engagement. Multi-actor cooperation among municipalities, NGOs, entrepreneurs, local communities, public institutions, and universities ensures a participatory approach to water management. Policy frameworks aim to harmonize environmental protection with economic use, recognizing water bodies as both ecological assets and development opportunities.

The distinctive natural and cultural landscapes in both areas offer significant ecotourism potential, combining recreation, education, and heritage interpretation, while policy frameworks strive to balance ecological protection with economic use. Knowledge-based management, supported by scientific expertise from institutions such as the University of Tartu, LVÇMC, NCA, and BIOR, enables monitoring, data-driven planning, and adaptive management.



Study trip to Åland, 11–15 May 2025. Photo: TAS

Table 2. Common strengths.

STRENGTH	EMAJÕGI	GAUJA
Interconnected water–landscape systems – both areas represent unique aquatic–terrestrial networks (lake–river–lake and river–coastal systems) that naturally support nature values and ecosystem connectivity.	The area is naturally very diverse and rich in species, the River Emajõgi is one of the most fish-rich rivers in Estonia.	The area forms a nationally significant landscape, high ecological value of coastal and river habitats, migratory lamprey and salmonid populations, and threatened bird species.
Strong regional identity linked to water – the cultural and historical attachment to lakes and rivers and coast (fishing, boating, festivals) provides a shared sense of place and motivation for stewardship.	Rich cultural history and historical heritage, there are both urban and rural environments (different cultures, stories, sights barge-building, etc.).	Strong local fishery culture and heritage, with traditional skills preserved through coastal fishing and lamprey fishing. Long-standing community festivals such as the Gauja, Lamprey, and Fisherman’s Festival.
Strong ecotourism potential – both areas feature distinctive natural and cultural landscapes that are attractive for sustainable tourism, combining recreation, education, and heritage interpretation.	The infrastructure has been consistently developed, several new opportunities have been created (ports, etc.). The (tourist) services offered are diverse (fishing, boating, hunting, boat trips, nature trips, etc.).	Developed urban infrastructure, which is gradually being improved. Ādaži dam as a resource, a popular walking place for residents' recreation. The presence of large enterprises provides opportunities for the development of cooperative tourism and entertainment services.
Active multi-actor cooperation – municipalities, NGOs, entrepreneurs, local communities, public institutions, and universities are involved in water management in various ways, demonstrating a participatory governance approach.	Active networks and leaders in the region.	Active placed-based cooperation network involving local entrepreneurs, municipalities, NGOs and communities. Collaboration driven by defined tasks/duties.

Challenges in the project areas

Both project areas face nutrient enrichment and declining water quality due to agricultural and settlement runoff (mostly affecting Gauja in Latvia and the lakes connected by Emajõgi in Estonia), leading to algal blooms and deteriorating ecological status.

Public access to riverbanks and inland waters is often limited by private ownership and inadequate infrastructure. Growing tourism and recreational pressures – such as boating, bathing, and festivals – are not matched by sufficient waste management or visitor control.

Additional challenges include deficiencies in tourism and recreation infrastructure. Climate-change effects on hydrology and ecosystem stability is an emerging issue recognised by stakeholders. Incomplete monitoring and assessment data, and coordination and leadership gaps among multiple actors hinder effective development and governance.

Table 3. Common challenges.

CHALLENGE	EMAJÕGI	GAUJA
Eutrophication and water quality – both regions face nutrient enrichment from agriculture and settlements leading to algal blooms and deteriorating ecological status.	The lakes connected by Emajõgi are largely affected, Emajõgi itself maintains a better ecological status.	Eutrophication is a long-term and persistent environmental problem affecting both freshwater bodies and the Baltic Sea.
Climate change effects – explicitly refer to changing temperature and precipitation regimes affecting hydrology, ice cover, and ecosystem stability.	Climate change affects the project area that are related to temperature increase in water ecosystems. Climate-induced seasonality sets limits to activities; limited seasons make profitable economic activities difficult.	The Gauja floodplain faces flooding, erosion, and climate-related impacts, with limited risk awareness and uncontrolled waterfront development threatening landscapes and ecosystems.
Pressure from tourism and recreation – both regions experience growing recreational use (boating, bathing, festivals), often without corresponding capacity for waste management or visitor control.	Growing number of tourists have put pressure on nature and supporting infrastructure, e.g. garbage and wastewater management are inadequate.	The geographical location (close to Riga) has created a greater load on resources than the residents living for a long time and independently would like. No official bathing area has been established on the Baltic Sea coast and official inland bathing areas have not been established to ensure safe rest near the waters either.
Limited accessibility of water areas – public access to riverbanks and inland waters is constrained by private land ownership and inadequate infrastructure.	The access is limited mostly by coastal reed and bush. Infrastructure, including beaches, continues to need development, in some places there is no interoperable infrastructure (port, catering, accommodation, etc.).	Limited access to the Gauja and Gulf of Riga coasts caused by unclear access rights: the various signs placed near private properties, confuse about the availability of territories for recreation.
Deficiencies in tourism and recreational services and infrastructure.	Despite the developments, there is a lack of services (intended for tourists) in some places, the coverage is not uniform, there are areas where services are practically non-existent (between Lake Võrtsjärv and Tartu, in the lower reaches of the Emajõgi River).	Limited tourism and recreation infrastructure (e.g., boat piers, access roads), disrupted local access along the Gauja, absence of official bathing areas, and workforce shortages hinder quality services.

<p>Coordination and leadership issues – multiple actors lack clear agreements on development, marketing, and branding; leadership in stakeholder coordination should be reinforced.</p>	<p>There are many different parties between whom there is no clear agreement regarding development activities, including no uniform comprehensive marketing (brand(s) in the international sense, etc.), and information about services is not easily available.</p> <p>No visual identity and common brand.</p>	<p>Weak previous leadership in coordination of cooperation and activities, cooperation between municipalities and authors of ideas/initiatives.</p> <p>No visual identity and common brand.</p>
<p>Insufficient monitoring and assessment coverage – site-specific data, impact assessments, and long-term records necessary for the sustainable use of water resources are incomplete.</p>	<p>The area has data gaps in long-term monitoring and lack of harmonised indicators.</p>	<p>The ecological effects from tourism, recreational activities, flood-protection structures have not been evaluated.</p>



Kick off seminar of the project River Networks at the Emajõgi Barge Hall, 19 March 2024. Photo: TAS

2.6. Conclusion



Strategy seminar in Adaži, Latvia, 19 November 2025. Photo: TAS

This joint strategy and action plan for the rivers Emajõgi and Gauja aims at promoting sustainable socio-economic development by harmonizing economic potential with environmental protection. The analysis reveals a remarkable convergence in the water governance philosophies of the Emajõgi region and the lower River Gauja area, both rooted in the principles of Integrated Water Resource Management and a commitment to balancing economic vitality with ecological integrity.

Both regions share foundational strengths that provide a platform for joint strategy. These include interconnected aquatic-terrestrial systems that support biodiversity, a strong regional identity reinforced by cultural heritage and strong ecotourism potential. This potential is actively supported by joint activities and efforts of multi-actor cooperation networks.

However, these opportunities are tempered by shared, systemic challenges. Environmentally, the water bodies face eutrophication (more common for Gauja) and declining water quality due to **nutrient enrichment from agricultural** and settlement runoff. This is compounded by the emerging impacts of **climate change**, which affect hydrology, ice cover, and ecosystem stability.

Development efforts are further hindered by issues of **limited public access** to water areas and a **growing pressure from recreational use** that often outpaces waste management and visitor control capacity.

Governance is challenged by multi-player coordination with **no clear agreement** on the roles and responsibilities. Also, there is a lack of data for monitoring tourist flows and plan future activities.

The successful execution of the strategy will depend on agreeing upon sustainable coordination model both in Estonia and Latvia, unlocking the full potential of their unique natural and cultural heritage, and ensuring that development is ecologically sound and socially sustainable for the long-term benefit of the region.



3

STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

3.1. Vision 2040

The Emajõgi and lower Gauja are recognizable regions well-known for their sustainable tourism and recreation practices, where unique natural and cultural values unite.

The regions feature accessible and functional waterways and waterfronts, ensuring the careful preservation of their natural and cultural heritage alongside the active protection of the environment.

3.2. Goals and activities

1. Accessible and functional waterway network and infrastructure

- Both regions – Emajõgi and Gauja feature a coherent, safe, and accessible waterways. Functional infrastructure, including mooring facilities, piers, slips, and recreation sites, is developed to support sustainable boating, recreation, fishing and local mobility.

2. A preserved environment and high environmental awareness

- The regions' environmental condition is improving, achieved by balancing nature conservation and economic activities. Efforts are focused on enhancing water quality, restoring fish stocks, protecting riverbanks, and actively promoting environmental education and awareness among residents and visitors.

3. Celebrated cultural heritage

- The unique cultural and historical heritage associated with the waterways is valued, showcased, and integrated into tourism services, local food traditions, educational programs, and community life, strengthening the local identity.

4. A recognizable sustainable tourism destination

- Both regions are developed as a recognizable destination for sustainable tourism. Regions offer diverse, high-quality services and authentic experiences based on their distinct natural and cultural values.

5. Strong cooperation and community engagement

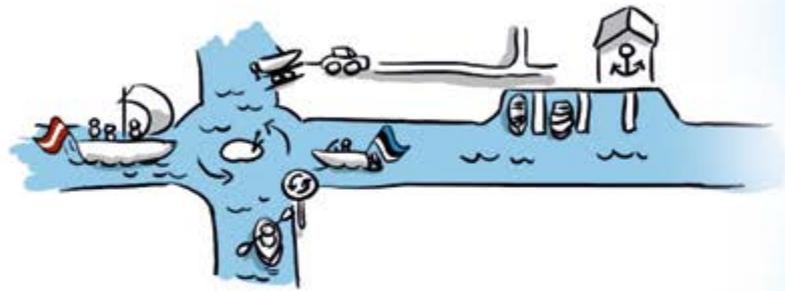
- The regions' development is driven by a strong, broad-based cooperation network involving municipalities, entrepreneurs, and smart local communities. This collaboration ensures coordinated planning, sustainable resource management, and active community participation.

Strategy and action plan for Emajõgi and Gauja rivers

1 Accessible and functional waterway network and infrastructure

Both regions – Emajõgi and Gauja feature a coherent, safe, and accessible waterways.

Functional infrastructure, including mooring facilities, piers, slips, and recreation sites, is developed to support sustainable boating, recreation, fishing and local mobility.



2 A preserved environment and high environmental awareness

The region's environmental condition is improving, achieved by balancing nature conservation and economic activities.

Efforts are focused on enhancing water quality, restoring fish stocks, protecting riverbanks, and actively promoting environmental education and awareness among residents and visitors.



Vision 2040

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The regions feature accessible and functional waterways and waterfronts, ensuring the careful preservation of their natural and cultural heritage alongside the active protection of the environment.

4 A recognizable sustainable tourism destination

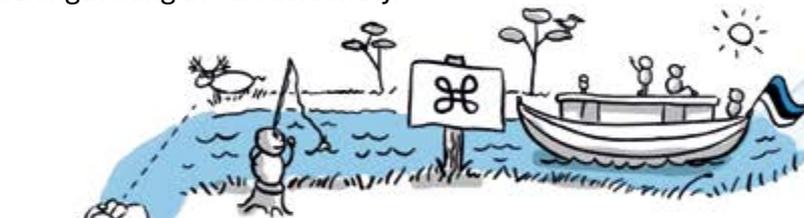
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5 Strong cooperation and community engagement

The regions' development is driven by a strong, broad-based cooperation network involving municipalities, entrepreneurs, and smart local communities. This collaboration ensures coordinated planning, sustainable resource management, and active community participation.



3.2.1. Accessible and functional waterway network and infrastructure

3.2.1.1. Activities in Latvia

	ACTIVITY	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
1.1.	Creation of resting places on the banks of the lower River Gauja, incl. the outflows, the old rivers, tributaries, and the coast of the Gulf of Riga	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marked and recognizable tent, campfire and recreation areas, fishing places, information stands with the rules for the use • Safe bathing areas – Vecgauja, Vējupe, Dzirnupe 	Municipalities, entrepreneurs, NGOs, local communities
1.2.	Developing and implementing a single plan for the sustainable management of river waters	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean riverbanks • Relevant landscaping works carried out to establish and maintain resting places 	Municipalities, planning regions
1.3.	Developing shipping and boating infrastructure	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gauja is navigable (buoys etc.) • New and reconstructed boat berths • A slip in the Gauja river mouth • Access points have been installed by the river for both water transport and vehicles 	Municipalities, NGOs, communities of citizens
1.4.	Developing and building micro-mobility infrastructure	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promenades along the Gauja-Daugava Canal (Baltezers Canal) • The Gauja promenade from the Railway Bridge to Ādaži • Developed pedestrian and bicycle paths along the banks of the Gauja River • Improved motorway along the right bank of the Gauja River (old Riga-St. Petersburg Road) 	Municipality
1.5.	Understanding and implementing of towpath regulation	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information materials, including stands, on towpath conditions • Organised meetings with stakeholders 	Municipality, landowners of adjacent territories, NGOs

3.2.1.2. Activities in Estonia

	ACTIVITY	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
1.1.	Planning and managing the investments in the region	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current investment plans in the framework of the ongoing Võrtsjärve-Emajõgi-Peipus development project have been implemented 	TOL, network partners
1.2.	Mapping of infrastructure and support services in the area, preparation of an investment plan	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A detailed overview of existing and potential slips, mooring sites, ship maintenance places, boat rental, etc. • New investment projects prepared and applications submitted 	TOL, network partners
1.3.	Creating and further developing of an area map application, linking it to existing platforms	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A usable application consisting of relevant information about slips, historical sites, waterways, hiking trails, etc. 	TOL, network partners
1.4.	Creating a concept to mark the waterways, including the strategy for safe and environmental-friendly water traffic	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Necessary preparatory works carried out (projects, permits, etc.) • Strategy for safe and environmental-friendly water traffic 	TOL, network partners
1.5.	Marking the waterways, enhancing the navigability of water bodies, and marking the winter trails	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information boards, signs (speed limits, etc.) • Dredging, where necessary • Tree trunks, etc. removed from the water • Usable winter trails in Emajõe-Suursoo • Signs of the winter trails 	TOL, network partners, incl. Luunja municipality and Emajõe-Suursoo Centre
1.6.	Construction and modernization of waterway-related infrastructure based on the investment plan	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ports, slips, gas stations, wastewater disposal sites, parking lots, recreation areas and toilets, electricity, waste management, beaches, etc. • Pilot activities within the framework of the Võrtsjärve-Emajõgi-Peipus development project – garbage vessel, river guard, rescue service 	TOL, municipalities

3.2.1.3. Joint activities

	ACTIVITY	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
1.1.	Creating and further developing the map application for the regions, links to existing platforms	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A usable application consisting of relevant information about slips, historical sites, waterways, hiking trails, etc. 	TOL, TAS, Jūras Zeme ³ , municipalities in Estonia and Latvia

³Later, a new coordinating organisation (described in Chapter 4.1).



Study trip in Latvia, 3–6 September 2024. Photo: TAS

3.2.2. A preserved environment and high environmental awareness

3.2.2.1. Activities in Latvia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
2.1.	Ensuring uniform sustainable management of waters	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint action plan for the management of waters of the lower reaches of the Gauja river Coordinated implementation of water management actions at local level 	Municipality, NGOs, entrepreneurs, residents
2.2.	Promoting the implementation of nature protection measures	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With the participation of the local community and tourists, nature protection measures have been introduced in accordance with the management plan of the nature park "Piejūra" Nature protection is ensured, as well as the possibility of residents to use the structure of green areas 	Citizens, NGOs, entrepreneurs
2.3.	Organising nature and environmental exploratory activities	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploratory activities explaining natural and environmental processes and values Informative materials on the values of the nature and aquatic ecosystem in the lower reaches of the Gauja River 	Tourism associations, NGOs, residents
2.4.	Restoring and increasing fish resources	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social activities on the issues of conservation of fish resources Measures to protect fish resources – removal of obstacles, restoration of habitats 	NGOs, residents, anglers
2.5.	Assessing and mitigating the impacts of climate change	Local, regional, national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring of erosion and bed dynamics of the Gauja banks A plan for reducing the impact of spring, rainwater flood and windstorm risk areas Evaluation of long-term impacts of changes in coastal erosion in the development of construction and infrastructure The implementation of new innovative nature-based solutions to mitigate the impact of climate change (multifunctionality of ditches – both water storage and the possibility to grow moisture-loving plants) 	Municipality, State Environmental Service, Latvian Environment, Geology and Meteorology Centre

3.2.2.2. Activities in Estonia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
2.1.	<p>Launching a form of cooperation with scientific and environmental institutions to raise awareness about the environmental status of the region, incl. cooperation with international environmental and nature associations</p> <p>Revising restrictions and obligations, compilation of relevant information</p>	Regional, national, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seminars introducing environmental research • Defining the necessary pilot activities (focusing on the environmental status of Võrtsjärv, Emajõgi and Peipus, eutrophication and conservation of fish stocks) • Proposals for state and local government legislation, fishing regulation, etc. 	TAS, institutions
2.2.	Implementing pilot activities to improve the state of the environment	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In cooperation with research institutions, pilot activities have been developed to improve the state of the environment (e.g. the use of reeds, the preservation of natural communities, green refuelling, etc.) 	TAS, network partners
2.3.	Organising volunteer days in the region (cleaning up garbage and fallen trees, repairing mooring facilities)	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer days have been organised throughout the region 	TAS, network partners
2.4.	Promoting nature and environmental education in cooperation with schools and kindergartens	Local, regional, national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different environmental education programmes (new and existing) have been introduced to schools and kindergartens 	NGOs (e.g. Peipus Cooperation Centre, Estonian University of Life Sciences, etc.)
2.5.	Constructing a floating nature study classroom	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A floating classroom has been built (renovating the vessel Vanemuine) 	NGO Emajõe Lodjaselts
2.6.	Organising information campaigns according to the marketing plan	Local, regional, national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A long-term development of environmental culture and awareness • Communication and marketing activities for raised awareness of the public 	TAS, TOL, SATT

3.2.2.3. Joint activities

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
2.1.	Launching a cooperation model with research and environmental institutions to increase awareness of the environmental status of the area (fish preservation, fisheries research)	Inter-national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint seminars • Cooperation on preparing proposals for state and local government legislation, fishing regulation, etc. 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
2.2.	Implementing pilot activities aimed at improving environmental conditions	Inter-national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot activities implemented (see Chapter 3.2.6) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme, network partners, municipalities, NGOs, residents
2.3.	<p>Promoting nature and environmental education in cooperation with schools and kindergartens</p> <p>Conducting joint education programmes to school children (how to use and treat rivers, etc.), cooperation with academia</p>	Inter-national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New environmental programmes to schools and kindergartens • Joint seminars • Increased awareness among the public 	TAS, Jūras Zeme, NGOs (environmental), academic institutions



Carnikava Festival in Latvia, 6 September 2025. Photo: Juris Ross

3.2.3. Celebrated cultural heritage

3.2.3.1. Activities in Latvia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
3.1.	Promoting the fishermen's profession	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information materials • Interactive stands • Informal educational events for young people 	Municipality, tourism NGOs, entrepreneurs, residents
3.2.	Identifying and developing cultural and historical values and objects	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified cultural and historical values • A list of new/additional objects • New cultural and historical objects of sightseeing 	Municipality, entrepreneurs, cultural heritage board, museums
3.3.	Organising cultural events for the preservation of cultural and historical heritage and modern traditions	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditions of the Lamprey Festival continued • Gauja Festival • Pier Festival as an independent tradition • Other area-related cultural activities proposed 	Municipality, NGOs, entrepreneurs, residents
3.4.	Organising cultural and historical events for the public	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events on the values of cultural and historical heritage and their preservation, involving the wider society 	Municipality, NGOs, entrepreneurs, residents, visitors
3.5.	Preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of shipping and boating	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewed wooden boat construction skills • Research and preservation of information on the cultural heritage of Vidzeme coastal brigs • Promoted exposition of the Gauja raft • Inclusion of rafting in tourism products 	NGOs, entrepreneurs, municipality

3.2.3.2. Activities in Estonia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
3.1.	Historical research on region's waterways (shipping, winter routes, fishermen's tales, names of old rivers, legends and traditions, etc.)	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compilation of historical heritage study in key areas creating input for activities, events, and marketing 	TAS, Emajõgi, Võrtsjärv and Peipus communities
3.2.	Organising events to introduce and promote historical and cultural heritage, including Tartu County food heritage	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops, Oktoberfest at Lodjakoda and other events, hikes, inland water festival, tasting tours combined with river cruises, cinema at barge 	TAS
3.3.	Activities related to the display of historical heritage (TV series), outdoor (interactive) exhibitions, website, podcasts, books, etc.	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication activities aimed at the public introducing the historical heritage of the region 	TAS, TOL, SATT
3.4.	Audio guide (EST, ENG, LAT)	Regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Region's stories (e.g. thematic books) and their narrations and summaries for use on boats and ships 	TAS



The riverboat Arabella waiting for visitors. Photo: Maria Kilk

3.2.3.3. Joint activities

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
3.1.	Organising events to introduce and promote historical and cultural heritage	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshops, other events, hikes, inland waters festival, taste journeys, etc. 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.2.	Audio guide (EST, ENG, LAT – possible topics: boat building, rafting, etc.)	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regions' stories (e.g. thematic books) and their narrations and summaries for use on boats and ships 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.3.	Popularising regional cultural heritage	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange visits (e.g. boat restoration, sailing and rafting on rivers, etc.) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.4.	Organising modern festivals and their success stories	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different festivals (e.g. Onion Festival, Lamprey Festival, Dill Festival, etc.) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.5.	Development and marketing of joint routes, focusing on off-season routes	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint routes (e.g. a week in the Baltics) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.6.	Developing transport solutions	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information materials on possible transport solutions (e.g. a train from Tartu to Riga) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.7.	Waterways historical study	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compilation of historical heritage study in key areas. Input for activities, events, and marketing (like the one in Estonia) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
3.8.	Joint promotional video to introduce the regions (similarities, differences, etc.)	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotional video 	TAS, Jūras Zeme

3.2.4. A recognizable sustainable tourism destination

3.2.4.1. Activities in Latvia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
4.1.	Creating a single brand of recognition of the lower reaches of the Gauja	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand and unified visual identity, slogan, etc. • Marketing strategy 	Municipalities, entrepreneurs, tourism associations, NGOs, residents
4.2.	Providing the necessary data and permit mechanism for the management of tourism flows	Local, national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various data (field, digital, satellite, etc.) • Data analysis – tourist flows, available natural resources, etc. • A clear and understandable authorisation system 	Municipalities, scientific research institutions
4.3.	Developing a diverse range of tourism services, incl. facilitating the availability of services by public waters	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (New) active tourism services, incl. the relation with existing military infrastructure in the region (i.e. cafes, museums, sights, equipment rental, etc.) • Innovative tourism solutions (incl. digital) 	Entrepreneurs, municipalities
4.4.	Creating special Gauja routes and tourism products	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New water routes • Development of existing and new tourist trails 	Municipalities, entrepreneurs, tourism NGOs
4.5.	Implementing marketing activities	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information materials/guides • Participation in tourism exhibitions to promote awareness • Active promotion on social media, campaigns 	Municipalities, entrepreneurs, tourism associations
4.6.	Organising trainings for parties involved in tourism	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainings for stakeholders in the field of tourism 	Municipalities, tourism associations, entrepreneurs
4.7.	Developing innovative solutions	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a new region-specific vessel • Innovative solutions for waste reduction 	Municipalities, entrepreneurs, NGOs

3.2.4.2. Activities in Estonia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
4.1.	Coordination of development of regional tourism services	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of the region's tourism services has been coordinated to ensure coherence between the different parties 	SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster, enterprises and other network partners
4.2.	<p>Development of tourism services based on historical heritage and nature.</p> <p>Creation of a tourism services roadmap</p> <p>Trainings for the network members, study trips for developing the tourism services</p>	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different tourism services (e.g. accommodation (incl. water accommodation), catering, ship maintenance and storage, packaging, cooperation with tour operators, inland water theme park, bird watching, winter roads, water sports, fishing tourism, winter swimming, services for the elderly, etc.) Service providers are easily findable on Internet Roadmap for developing the services Trainings (e.g. service development, web visibility, environmental issues, water safety). Study trips to Estonia and Sweden are planned for 2026 	SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster, TAS
4.3.	<p>Expanding Emajõgi river trips to the whole region, creating a unified concept and marketing it</p> <p>Organising local food events by linking trips with food culture and heritage</p>	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trips to connect the region as a whole Food events, involvement of local producers 	SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster, TAS
4.4.	Developing and marketing of a fishing tourism product	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A new product to promote fishing tourism in the region, connecting it with the concept of river trips Trainings for service development 	SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
4.5.	Investments in the development of tourism services	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New services and products based on the infrastructure (e.g. boat accommodation, catering, ship maintenance, etc.) • New tourism routes (e.g. Tartu-Oiu, Tartu-Värskä-Rannapungerja, Tartu-Piirissaare, cruise routes between the harbours) • Renovating ships 	Enterprises, network partners
4.6.	Creating a marketing strategy and plan	Local, regional, national, international	• As a part of the ongoing Võrtsjärve-Emajõgi-Peipus development project, a comprehensive marketing strategy and plan for implementation created	TAS, TOL, SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster
4.7.	Creating region's brand and value-based identity	Local, regional, national, international	• Common brand for the marketing purposes of the region created	TAS, TOL, SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster
4.8.	Implementing the marketing plan	Local, regional, national, international	• Marketing plan implemented	TAS, TOL, SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster
	Marketing of regional tourism services and events			
4.9.	Cooperation with other regional, national, and international organisations	Local, regional, national, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The region has been defined and highlighted in a national and international perspective • The important activities are depicted in the South Estonia Tourism Cluster's strategy 	SATT, South Estonia Tourism Cluster
	Connecting the region's marketing strategy with the strategy of South Estonia Tourism Cluster, activity plan, and budget			

3.2.4.3. Joint activities

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
4.1.	Implementing the marketing plan (focus on fishing tourism)	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various marketing activities implemented according to the marketing plan with a special focus on fishing tourism in Estonia and Latvia 	TAS, SATT, Jūras Zeme
4.2.	Developing innovative tourism solutions	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainings, seminar meetups, and hackathons between the network members in Estonia and Latvia to work out new/innovative tourism products/solutions 	TAS, Jūras Zeme, all network members in Estonia and Latvia
4.3.	Sharing and distributing information materials in tourism information centres in Estonia and Latvia, incl. co-creation of the information materials	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops for co-creation of the materials • Information materials jointly created to be distributed in tourism information centres in Estonia and Latvia 	TAS, SATT, Jūras Zeme



Study trip in Estonia, 1–3 July 2024. Photo: TAS

3.2.5. Strong cooperation and community engagement

3.2.5.1. Activities in Latvia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
5.1.	Coordinating development between counties, communities and stakeholders	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signed memorandum of cooperation (manifesto) between stakeholders, reflecting the role of each participant involved An association established for the management of the development of the lower reaches of the Gauja Establishment of an advisory council to support the association in the implementation of the objectives 	All parties
5.2.	Maintaining networks between local action groups, associations and communities	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Networking events between active Gauja LAG and associations Exchange of information on current events in the implementation of joint projects has been ensured Strengthened cooperation with the association “Jūras Zeme”, “Gauja Partnership”, association “Gauja Society for Sustainable Development” 	LAGs, associations, municipalities, citizens
5.3.	Involving residents in Gauja development planning	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular meetings to discuss and reconcile the interests of local communities and tourism entrepreneurs Regular meetings with the parties involved in the use and management of the nature park “Piejūra” to align the interests of tourism and recreation, residents and environmental protection 	New association ⁴ , citizens, tourism NGOs, entrepreneurs, municipality, NCA
5.4.	Establishing cooperation with National Armed Forces	Local, national	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular meetings with representatives of the National Armed Forces are organised at least twice a year for discussion of tourism issues 	National Armed Forces, municipalities
5.5.	Strengthening cooperation with academia	National, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established cooperation with academic research institutions involved in the acquisition of various data and knowledge and better use of resources Exchange visits between Latvia and Estonia on river ecosystem management Summer school, public science camps 	Higher education institutions, local government, NGOs, associations

⁴A new coordinating organisation (described in Chapter 4.1)

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
5.6.	Cooperating with Estonian societies and associations	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience exchange trips on the implementation of marketing activities • Exchange visits to promote regional cultural heritage • Joint information material • Information materials about the Gauja in tourist points in Estonia and vice versa 	NGO, municipality, Estonian cooperation network
5.7.	Promoting the economic benefits of sustainable use of resources	Local, regional, international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects of various scales have been implemented to attract funding to support the achievement of the vision and objectives 	All parties

3.2.5.2. Activities in Estonia

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
5.1.	Recruitment of a network coordinator	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A network coordinator for the first period of strategy implementation (2026–2029) 	TAS in cooperation with network partners
5.2.	Coordinating the network and regional development work	Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signed memorandum of cooperation (manifesto) between TAS, TOL, SATT, reflecting the role of each partner • Meetings, trainings, application and implementation of development projects, etc. 	TAS, TOL, SATT
5.3.	Publishing the network newsletter	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A newsletter for network members introducing the implementation of the strategy and events (4–6 times a year) 	TAS
5.4.	Participating in international cooperation networks and projects	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different international projects (e.g. Interreg formats, River Cities, cooperation with Gauja river region, etc.) 	TAS
5.5.	Preparing and implementing the development projects	Local, regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection of development ideas • Sources of funding (new events, cooperation and development projects, etc.) 	TAS

3.2.5.3. Joint activities

	ACTION	LEVEL	EXPECTED RESULTS	PARTIES INVOLVED
5.1.	Participating in international cooperation networks and projects	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New development projects • Joint steering group 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
	Establishing a joint steering group for forthcoming projects			
5.2.	Strengthening cooperation with the academic institutions	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint seminars and publications on acute topics 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
5.3.	Publishing a joint yearly magazine about the regions	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A magazine (e.g once a year) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
5.4.	Joint community engagement (e.g. river cleaners exchange)	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint cross-border activities 	TAS, Jūras Zeme
5.5.	Joint trainings	International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint trainings (e.g. boat building, rafting) 	TAS, Jūras Zeme



Strategy seminar at the Emajõgi Barge Hall, 3 November 2025. Photo: TAS

3.2.6. Pilot activities

“River Networks” project foresees implementation of 8 pilot actions altogether in Estonia and Latvia, including 3 plus 3 development and 1 plus 1 investment activities.

Funding available:

- 8000 Euro per development activity
- 17 000 Euro per investment (plus 50% self-financing)

During the 1st stakeholder seminars (2.06.2025, 1.07.2025) in Estonia and Latvia, brainstorming on the possible activities was carried out.

Several ideas occurred:

- Preparation of sketches/construction projects for relevant water infrastructure
- Website (aggregation of information – gas stations, boat rental, mooring sites, etc.)
- Inland waters conference (media, authorities, research institutions, municipalities)
- Inland waterways round table (entrepreneurs, authorities, problems-solutions)
- Laser counters for measuring visitors
- History research (inland waters, fisheries)
- Buoy marking/making visible in the dark
- Mosquito repellent automats
- Brochures with tourist information on inland waters (information updated annually)
- Popup mobile coverage
- Online visibility training for everyone (Google profile, etc.)
- Signs (uniform style)
- Information boards (digital)
- Workshops: culture, food, etc.
- Trainings for the network:
 - Accessibility
 - Markings
 - Traffic
 - Environment
- Mapping the resources
- Unified information field
- Exhibition, awareness campaign (e.g. littering)
- Waterway history study
- Starting the boat transfer service
- List of rental boats
- The first step of info app development
- Riverside information boards and signs
- Historical research initiative group and topic mapping

Three pilots were selected in the first round:

Estonia:

- Local food workshops during the trips on River Emajõgi⁵ (depicted under the goals “Celebrated cultural heritage” and “A recognizable sustainable tourism destination”)
- Conducting a waterway history study for better understanding of the background, vessel types, activities, etc. to build stories and marketing upon⁶ (depicted under the goal “Celebrated cultural heritage”)

⁵ Based on a successful previous experience. Already carried out and to be continued during the next year.

⁶ Currently ongoing

Latvia:

- A new tradition – inland waters festival in Carnikava to increase interest about the possibilities regarding River Gauja⁷

Some additional ideas were also defined during the joint task force meeting (19.11.2025):

Estonia:

- Audio guide in Estonian, Latvian, and English about region’s history and stories for use on boats and ships (depicted under the goal “Celebrated cultural heritage”)
- Joint promotional video in Estonian, Latvian, and English to introduce the regions similarities, differences, etc. (depicted under the goal “Celebrated cultural heritage”)

Latvia⁸:

- Adjustable pier that can be transported to various locations where needed
- 3-day boating experience on Gauja to engage the residents, visit companies near the river, and develop a book(let) out of it on marketing purposes

Also, it was decided to make **an open call for proposals to select the best suitable investment projects** in Estonia and Latvia. The selection of the projects will be based on the following criteria:

- Feasibility – it should be possible to finish the activities by the end of 2026
- Compliance to the main focuses (tourism, environment, and infrastructure, i.e. access to the water)
- Impact – to the development of the network as well as to the area (size of target groups, etc.)

The call including the criteria and the selection process will be published in the beginning of 2026 separately in Estonia and Latvia. The target groups are the network parties (i.e. enterprises, local communities, NGOs, etc. in the areas). The decisions will be made by the joint steering group.

⁷ Already successfully carried out and to be continued during the next year.

⁸ Ideas under development; subject to change during the development process, new ideas may also occur. The final selection of pilot activities will be done by project Steering Group.



Carnikava Festival in Latvia, 6 September 2025. Photo: Ineta Freimane

4

STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

4.1. Management

The management models were discussed separately in Estonia and Latvia. The national activities listed above will be implemented on a national basis and for that purpose, national coordination will be necessary.

In Estonia, three possible options were discussed (new organisation, giving responsibility to SATT, and network-based management). It was decided to pursue with the network-based management, based on three organisations – TAS, TOL, and SATT:

TAS:

- **Managing the implementation of the strategy:**
 - Monitoring the fulfilment of the action plan
 - Finding additional financing and leading development projects
 - Coordination and coordination of the activities of the parties (TOL, SATT, companies, communities, etc.)
- **Development activities and networking:**
 - Organisation of meetings
 - Communication with members, including the collection of necessary input
 - Supporting members in development activities, including the development of new services
 - International cooperation

TOL:

- **Coordination of the investments by the municipalities:**
 - Investment objects mapping
 - Initiating and leading investment projects (both across regions, as well as with specific local governments)

SATT:

- **Monitoring the timeliness and relevance of the marketing strategy:**
 - Gathering input from network members
 - Finding additional marketing funding
 - Ensuring cooperation and coordination with the activities of the South-Estonian Tourism Cluster
 - Implementation of specific marketing activities (general marketing, campaigns, findability of information, etc.)

TAS, TOL and SATT do not form a network without the necessary parties who play a very important role in the implementation of the strategy:

- **Enterprises** – provision of services, development of new ones, creation of packages in cooperation with other parties, investments in tourism infrastructure
- **Communities** – activating the villages in the region, organising events, involving residents
- **Local governments** – involvement of the parties of a specific territory, planning and implementation of investments under the coordination of the TOL (the local government is responsible for specific investments)
- **Third sector organisations** – thematic events, promotion of environmental education
- **Research and development institutions** (institutions of higher education, etc.) – sectoral (environment, etc.) expertise
- **State authorities** (State Forest Management Centre, Environmental Board, etc.) are not directly members of the network, but their involvement and information are necessary, as regulations, information and, to some extent, investments arise from the state level

It is important that different parties can take the initiative and take responsibility in the implementation of a specific activity.

In Latvia, there is a need for a new coordinating body (association). Further discussion is needed to set it up. It has been decided to organise an open call for founders in the beginning of 2026. Until then, Jūras Zeme is responsible for implementing the strategy, including the joint activities.

The following management actions will be undertaken:

- Assigning coordinating bodies for cross-border activities: TAS in Estonia and Jūras Zeme in Latvia, including concrete persons responsible
- Formulating an expanded steering group by including task force members to discuss and prepare the joint activities. The working format will be meetings, seminars, and trainings
- Compiling a funding plan/scheme for the next activities, including source mapping, timetable, and priorities
- Organising cross-border monitoring seminars once a year

Regular coordination meetings will take place between TAS and Jūras Zeme to plan the activities.



Study trip in Latvia, 3–6 September 2024. Photo: TAS

4.2. Monitoring

The strategy has been drawn up until 2040, and the action plan covers the next four years (2026–2029). A joint strategy seminar will be organised annually to assess the fulfilment of the action plan and the relevance of the objectives.

The implementation of the strategy will be monitored on three levels:

- **Action plan level** – reviewed annually (implemented, in progress, not implemented) and necessary corrections made. In addition to joint activities, progress overview of the national plans will also be made.
- **Network level** – the functioning of the network is assessed based on the following indicators:
 - o Number of network members (target level: annually increasing)
 - o Coverage of different target groups (target level: the spectrum of network parties has become more diverse, research and development institutions are also included, the number of companies has increased)
 - o Number of new initiatives initiated by networks members (target level: at least two initiatives per year per country)
 - o Satisfaction of the members of the networks, including the perceived benefits of the network (target level: at least 75% of the members see a direct benefit in being a member of the network)
- **Impact level** – the contribution of the network to the socio-economic development of the regions:
 - o Regional, national and international recognition of the networks
 - o Number of visits to the region – data from networks members and national statistics (target level: growing)
 - o Number of nights spent in the municipalities of the region – data from the members of the networks and national statistics (target level: growing)
 - o Volume of investments in waterway-related areas (private and public investments combined)
 - o Number of jobs in the organisations of the members of the networks (jobs in companies and third sector associations are considered)



Strategy seminar
at the Estonian University of
Life Sciences' Lake Museum,
25 August 2025. Photo: TAS

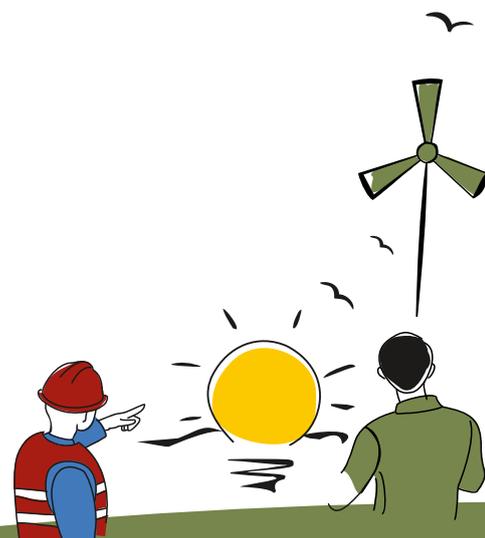
4.3. Critical success factors

Managing networks with several parties and achieving goals is a challenge. For the plans to come true, the realisation of several critical success factors is necessary. These factors include:

- **The existence of a specific leader person(s)** – without a clear responsible person who would bring the parties together and lead and monitor the implementation of the agreed plans, there will be no “owner” for the strategy. This means that in the worst case, the plans remain just a thought.
- **Founding a new organisation in Latvia** – currently, there is no clear “owner” of the strategy. Although Jūras Zeme has led the compilation of the strategy, further implementation requires concrete organisation to be a partner for TAS.
- **Clear division of roles between the leaders of the networks** – in the conditions of limited resources, it must be very clear which party is responsible for which activities.
- **Availability of base funding** – without minimal funding (at least coordinators’ salaries and operating funding), it is not possible to carry out activities and obtain additional funding.
- **Having a value proposition** – members need to feel the benefits of the networks to be motivated to participate and contribute.
- **Consistency** – as there are many parties, it takes time to achieve results. Regular activities are necessary – meetings, idea development, implementation of projects and new initiatives.



Cooperation seminar in Carnikava, Latvia,
4 September 2024. Photo: TAS



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ANNEXIS

Annex no 1. Analyses of the current situation

The overview of the current situation is based on the analyses in Estonia and Latvia. The analyses have been compiled as separate documents in Estonian and Latvian:

- [Võrtsjärve-Emajõe-Peipsi vörgustiku ja veetee arendamine. Lähteolukorra analüüs](#)
- [Stratēģija un rīcības plāns Gaujas upe lejtecei \(no Murjāņiem līdz ietekai jūrā\). Esošās situācijas novērtējums](#)

Annex no 2. Members of the working groups

Steering Group

NO	COUNTRY	NAME	ORGANISATION
1	Estonia	Kristiina Tammets	TAS
2	Estonia	Moonika Einaste	TAS
3	Estonia	Sven Tobreluts	TOL
4	Estonia	Egert Ivask	TOL
5	Latvia	Aris Adlers	Jūras Zeme
6	Latvia	Kristine Zake	Jūras Zeme

National Task Force (Latvia)

NO	NAME	ORGANISATION
1	Rimants Lūsis	Saulkrasti municipality
2	Annija Vinogrādova	Ādaži municipality
3	Inga Pērkone	Ādaži municipality
4	Dace Birnbauma	Ādaži municipality, Carnikava communal services
5	Vents Strautmanis	"Boards You" Enterprise
6	Olga Rinkus	Carnikava Local History Centre
7	Sandra Gulbe	NGO Vidzemes liellaivu
8	Renāte Cāne	NGO "Kalngalieši"
9	Āris Adlers	Jūras Zeme
10	Kristine Zaķe	Jūras Zeme

National Task Force (Estonia)

NO	NAME	ORGANISATION
1	Anmar Pihlak	Võrtsjärve Sõprade Selts NGO
2	Priit Kallas	Oiu harbour
3	Kalle Kütt	Valma adventure park
4	Kertu Vuks	Tartu city municipality
5	Priit Jagomägi, Liisa-Lota Kaivo, Linda Saare	NGO Emajõgi Barge Society
6	Sakari Neuvonen	Rebase harbour
7	Jana Serpak, Tõnis Tõnissoo	Tartu municipality
8	Liis Lainemäe	NGO Onion Route
9	Taivo Tali	Peipsiääre municipality
10	Sven Särki	Alatskivi Castle, Slaker Ltd
11	Priit Lomp	Kastre municipality
12	Lauri Roosiorg	NGO Jõeääre boat harbour
13	Sirli Pippar	Elva municipality
14	Annye Rooväli-Ingli	Visit Elva
15	Jaanus Jakobson	Jõesuu holiday centre
16	Margus Ivask	Elva municipality
17	Jaanika Saar	Elva municipality
18	Maarja Ülper	Luunja municipality
19	Kaire Vahejõe	Luunja municipality
20	Sven Tobreluts	TOL
21	Egert Ivask	TOL
22	Kristiina Tammets	TAS
23	Moonika Einaste	TAS
24	Annika Ojasaar	SATT
25	Kanni Kallastu	South Estonia Tourism Cluster
26	Malle Oras	State Forest Management Centre
27	Tanel Tärna	Environmental Board

Consultants

NO	NAME	ORGANISATION
1	Mihkel Laan	Ltd Cumulus Consulting
2	Jaan Urb	Ltd Cumulus Consulting
3	Kristjan Piirimäe	Ltd Roheline Rada
4	Kristina Veidemane	Baltic Environmental Forum
5	Irina Paegle	Baltic Environmental Forum



Estonia–Latvia Programme seminar in Kuressaare, 24–25 September 2025.

Photo: TAS

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