

AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY – PLOVDIV

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS



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CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN MOUNTAIN AND SEMI-MOUNTAIN AREAS

ABSTRACT

of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**"
in the field of higher education
3. Social, economic and legal sciences;
professional field 3.8. Economics;
scientific speciality: Economics and Management "Agriculture"

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dr Ivan Penov

**PLOVDIV
2026**

The dissertation is structured as an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion, totalling 246 pages. 106 literary sources have been used. 15 tables, 51 figures, and 18 photographs are presented.

The dissertation was discussed and proposed for defence at a meeting of the extended department council of the Department of Economics, Agricultural University - Plovdiv, with Protocol No. 260 / 01.06.2026.

The defence of the dissertation will take place on 10.09.2026 at 11:00 o'clock in hall No. 322 of the Agricultural University - Plovdiv at a meeting of a Specialised Scientific Jury appointed by the Rector of the Agricultural University - Plovdiv with Order No. RD 16-738 / 08.06.2026, composed of:

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The materials on the procedure are available on the website of the Agricultural University - Plovdiv.

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION

The section presents the relevance of the topic, the object and subject of the study, its goal, tasks and research theses. The methodology used, the information base and the structure of the dissertation work are presented.

1. Relevance of the topic

In recent decades, tourism has become an important factor in economic development, diversification of economic activities, and improvement of the quality of life in various regions. Its role is particularly significant in rural, mountainous, and semi-mountainous areas, where opportunities for economic activity are often limited and demographic and socio-economic challenges hinder local development.

Unfavourable trends, including population decline, an ageing population, limited employment opportunities, and underutilisation of available natural resources, characterise rural areas in Bulgaria. In this context, rural tourism is seen as an opportunity to create additional income, stimulate local entrepreneurship, preserve cultural heritage and improve the vitality of local communities.

The development of rural tourism is determined not only by the availability of natural, cultural, and historical resources but also by the complex interaction among numerous factors, including infrastructure provision, institutional support, entrepreneurial activity, marketing policy, and the degree of cooperation among stakeholders.

The mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of the country have significant tourism potential that, in many cases, remains underutilised. This creates a need for a more in-depth study of the factors and conditions that support or hinder the development of tourism activities and the transformation of the available resource potential into a real economic resource.

The relevance of this study stems from the need for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that determine the development of rural tourism in small settlements, as well as from the need to develop practically applicable solutions for more effective management of tourist destinations.

2. Object and subject of the study

The object of the study is the processes of development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria, considered in the context of interactions among natural and cultural-historical resources, socio-economic conditions, and the institutional environment.

The subject of the study is the factors that influence the degree of use of the tourism potential at the local level, as well as the interaction between the main participants in the tourism process - local authorities, tourism businesses, local communities, non-governmental organisations, and visitors. The study is conducted through a comprehensive analysis of the municipality of Brezovo, a small municipality with available tourism potential but limited development of tourism activities.

3. Research thesis

The thesis is that in small settlements with available natural and cultural-historical potential, the development of rural tourism remains limited. This discrepancy between resource potential and actual tourism development is determined by the complex interaction of demographic, infrastructural, institutional, and organisational factors, as well as by the insufficiently effective interaction among the main participants in the tourism process.

With greater cooperation among stakeholders and the implementation of targeted management policies, the existing tourism potential can be used significantly more effectively.

To verify the main research thesis, six interrelated working theses have been formulated to address social capital, marketing activity, the role of the local community and cultural institutions, institutional coordination, infrastructure provision, and the demographic characteristics of the population.

4. Purpose and objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is to analyse the conditions and factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria by examining the interrelationships among resource potential, the local community, the tourism business, visitors, and the institutional environment.

To achieve the set goal, a regional case study was conducted on the municipality of Brezovo, through which the processes and factors that determine the development of rural tourism are analysed. To achieve the goal, the following tasks were set:

1. To analyse theoretical propositions and scientific research related to rural tourism and the management of tourist destinations.
2. To investigate the main factors and conditions influencing the development of rural tourism in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions.
3. To carry out a comprehensive characterisation of the studied region and an assessment of its tourism potential.

4. To analyse the status and characteristics of tourism activities in the municipality of Brezovo.
5. To identify and analyse the main stakeholders and the interactions between them.
6. To identify the main problems and limitations facing the development of rural tourism in the studied region.
7. To formulate conclusions and recommendations for more effective management and development of the tourist destination.

5. Research methods

To achieve the set goal and address the research tasks, an integrated methodological approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.

In the theoretical part, the methods of analysis and synthesis, as well as logical and comparative analysis, were used to review and systematise the scientific literature and existing concepts related to rural tourism and the management of tourist destinations.

Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used to collect primary information. The survey was conducted among visitors to the study region to establish their motives for visiting, assess the tourist environment, and examine perceptions of the tourist offer. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the local government, the tourism business, the local community and the non-governmental sector.

To study the interactions among the main participants in the tourism process, a multi-stakeholder analysis was applied. analysis). It identifies key stakeholders, their interests, roles, resources and degree of influence on the development of the tourist destination. The application of this approach enables the study of existing forms of cooperation, points of conflict, and opportunities to improve coordination among individual participants, all of which are essential for the sustainable development of rural tourism.

The participatory observation method was used to track tourism processes and interactions among stakeholders in a real-world setting. The case study approach was also used to conduct an in-depth study of the region under consideration, enabling analysis of the tourist destination within real socio-economic conditions.

The study's information base includes scientific publications, strategic and regulatory documents, statistical data, survey results, interviews, and field observations. Combining different sources of information creates an opportunity for data triangulation and helps increase the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn.

6. Limitations of the study

The present study focuses on the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria, with the empirical analysis being concretised through a study of the municipality of Brezovo. The municipality was chosen due to its significant natural and cultural-historical potential, combined with limited tourism development, which allows for an in-depth study of the factors influencing tourism at the local level.

The results obtained should be interpreted in the context of the specific socio-economic, demographic, and institutional characteristics of the region under study. Although some of the conclusions drawn may apply to other municipalities with similar characteristics, the study does not claim to be fully representative of all rural areas in the country.

A limitation of the study also stems from the use of survey and interview methods, which may introduce subjectivity into participants' assessments and attitudes. To minimise this influence, a combined methodological approach was applied, drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods and using diverse sources of information.

Regardless of the aforementioned limitations, the applied methodology and the information base used ensure sufficient reliability of the results obtained and enable the formulation of justified conclusions and recommendations regarding the development of rural tourism in the studied region.

CHAPTER I. THEORETICAL BASIS OF RURAL TOURISM

The first chapter of the dissertation provides a critical analysis of the scientific literature on rural tourism, the factors driving its development, the management of tourist destinations, and the role of social capital in the sustainable development of rural areas. The main theoretical concepts and approaches discussed in the international and Bulgarian scientific literature that form the theoretical framework are presented.

1.1. Nature and characteristics of rural tourism

Rural tourism is becoming an important form of tourism activity, based on the use of natural, cultural and social resources of rural areas. In the scientific literature, rural tourism is considered a means of economic diversification, additional income generation, and local development. According to Lane (1994), the main characteristics of rural tourism are small scale, close connection with the local environment and use of authentic natural and cultural resources. Sharpley (2002) emphasises its role in the economic revitalisation of peripheral areas and the preservation of local identity.

In the Bulgarian scientific literature, rural tourism is considered a tool for activating local potential and developing rural areas. According to Petrova (2012), tourist activities create opportunities to expand the economic base and improve the quality of life, while St. Marinov (2015) and Draganov (2013) emphasise their role in regional development and in overcoming socio-economic problems in rural areas.

Modern research considers rural tourism a complex system of interrelated activities, including natural resources, cultural heritage, tourist services, and the local community. Roberts and Hall (2001) define it as part of the processes of economic restructuring in rural areas, and Hall (2004) emphasises the importance of interaction among local government, business, and community for the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

Based on the analysis performed, rural tourism can be defined as a complex socio-economic system whose development depends on both the available resource potential and the effective interaction among the main stakeholders.

1.2. Forms and varieties of rural tourism

The modern development of rural tourism is characterised by a variety of forms that use the specific natural, cultural and social resources of rural areas. The scientific literature assumes that rural tourism is not a homogeneous activity but rather unites different forms of tourism offerings, which are often combined within a single tourism product (Lane, 2009; Sharpley, 2002).

Among the most common forms are agritourism, cultural tourism, culinary tourism, event tourism, ecotourism, religious tourism, and creative tourism. Each of them uses different local resources and creates opportunities for the development of specialised tourism products.

According to Roberts and Hall (2001), combining different forms of tourism creates conditions for more efficient use of local resources and increases the competitiveness of tourist destinations. A similar position is taken by Bulgarian authors, who link the successful development of rural tourism to the combination of natural resources, cultural heritage, local traditions, and modern tourist services (Petrova, 2012; Draganov, 2013).

The analysis shows that the variety of rural tourism forms offers significant opportunities for the development of tourist areas. Their effective use requires integrating local resources and coordinating among the main participants in the tourism process.

1.3. Factors influencing the development of rural tourism

The development of rural tourism is the result of the interaction of many factors of different natures and degrees of influence. Scientific research shows that the successful development of tourism activities in rural areas depends not only on the availability of natural and cultural-historical resources, but also on the state of infrastructure, demographic characteristics, the institutional environment, and the activity of the local community (Roberts & Hall, 2001; Hall, 2004).

Among the main prerequisites for the development of rural tourism are the natural and cultural-historical resources that form the basis of the tourist offer. Several authors emphasise that resource potential alone is not a sufficient condition for successful tourism development (Lane, 2009; Draganov, 2013).

Infrastructural factors that determine the accessibility and quality of tourist services, as well as the socio-demographic characteristics of the population, are of great importance. Processes such as ageing, migration, and limited entrepreneurial activity negatively impact tourism development, whereas an active local community and preserved traditions can be a competitive advantage (Getz, 2008; Petrova, 2012).

Marketing factors related to building a tourist image, promoting local resources, and communicating with potential visitors play an important role (Sharpley, 2002; Marin Marinov, 2007). Along with them, the institutional environment and the quality of local governance significantly impact opportunities for sustainable tourism development.

The analysis shows that the development of rural tourism results from the complex interaction among resource, infrastructural, socio-demographic, marketing, and institutional factors, the effective management of which is a prerequisite for realising the tourism potential of a given territory.

1.4. Tourism destination management

In recent decades, the management of tourist destinations has established itself as an independent direction in tourism research and practice. Modern tourist destinations are considered as complex socio-economic systems, including diverse resources, organisations and stakeholders. According to Buhalis (2000), a tourist destination is an integrated tourist product formed by the set of natural resources, infrastructure, services, attractions and local community.

The scientific literature assumes that effective management of a tourist destination requires coordination among local authorities, tourism businesses, cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations, and the local population (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Destination

development depends not only on the quality of tourism services but also on participants' ability to build partnerships and work towards common goals.

The multi-stakeholder approach is of particular importance, which views the tourist destination as a network of interconnected stakeholders. According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders are all individuals, groups and organisations that can influence or are influenced by a given activity. Applied to tourism, this approach emphasises balancing interests and creating mechanisms for cooperation among participants.

In the context of rural tourism, the active participation of local authorities, businesses, local communities, cultural organisations and the non-governmental sector is a prerequisite for sustainable tourism development. According to Jamal and Getz (1995), building partnerships and coordinated action among stakeholders is a key factor in the successful development of tourist destinations.

Destination management organisations play a significant role in this process, coordinating marketing activities, tourism product development, and interaction among participants. However, in Bulgarian conditions, there are still challenges related to insufficient coordination and limited forms of sustainable cooperation. The analysis shows that effective management of tourist destinations requires an integrated approach based on partnership, coordination and active participation of stakeholders in the planning and development processes.

1.5. Social capital and cooperation in tourism

In recent years, the concept of social capital has occupied an important place in research related to local development and the management of tourist destinations. Social capital is considered a set of social ties, trust, norms of reciprocity, and forms of cooperation that facilitate collective action and create the prerequisites for achieving common goals. The theoretical foundations of the concept are developed in the works of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993).

In the context of tourism, social capital is manifested in stakeholders' ability to build trusting relationships, exchange information, and implement joint initiatives. According to Hall (2011), a high level of trust and cooperation among local authorities, businesses, and the community creates favourable conditions for the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

Of particular importance for rural areas is the role of the local community as a bearer of social capital. By preserving cultural heritage, traditions, and local identity, the population

contributes to the development of the destination's tourist attractiveness and to the sustainable management of local resources.

In Bulgarian conditions, an important role in the formation and maintenance of social capital is played by community centres, local associations and cultural organisations. They function as intermediaries between social groups and create opportunities to implement initiatives for the preservation of traditions, organising events, and promoting cultural heritage. The analysis shows that social capital is an essential factor in the development of rural tourism, as it supports the formation of trust, partnerships, and sustainable cooperation among stakeholders.

1.6. Theoretical models for the development of tourist destinations

Various theoretical models have been developed in the scientific literature to explain the processes of development and management of tourist destinations. They provide a conceptual basis for analysing the factors influencing tourism development and for assessing the opportunities and constraints facing individual tourist regions.

Among the most widely used is the tourism destination life cycle model (Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) developed by Butler (1980). According to this model, the development of a tourist destination goes through successive stages – exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and subsequent renewal or decline. The model emphasises the dynamic nature of tourist development and the need to adapt to changes in the external environment.

Models of competitiveness of tourist destinations also play an important role. Of particular importance is the conceptual model of Ritchie and Crouch (2003), according to which the combined influence of resource potential, destination management, development policies, infrastructure and the external environment determines competitiveness.

In contemporary research, systems and network approaches are increasingly used to view the tourist destination as a system of interconnected actors, resources, and processes. These approaches are particularly applicable to the study of rural areas, where the results depend to a significant extent on the interaction between local government, business, cultural institutions and the local community.

The analysis shows that the study of tourist destinations requires a combination of theoretical approaches that simultaneously consider resource potential, management processes, social interactions, and local environmental characteristics.

1.7. Sustainable development of tourism in rural areas

The concept of sustainable development occupies a central place in modern scientific research on tourism and regional development. Its essence is the understanding that meeting the needs of present generations should not limit future generations' ability to meet their own needs. In the field of tourism, this concept finds expression in the need for a balanced combination of economic, social and environmental aspects of development (WCED, 1987).

According to Swarbrooke (1999), sustainable tourism involves the rational use of natural resources, the preservation of cultural heritage and the provision of long-term economic benefits for local communities. A similar position is taken by Bramwell and Lane (1993), who emphasise the importance of cooperation between stakeholders as a fundamental condition for sustainable tourism development.

In rural areas, sustainable development takes on particular importance because tourism is directly dependent on the state of the natural environment, local traditions, and the community's social structure. Rural tourism creates opportunities for economic diversification, employment, and entrepreneurial activity, but it also requires responsible resource management and the preservation of local identity.

Modern research emphasises that the sustainable development of tourist destinations requires the active participation of the local community in planning and management, as well as the establishment of mechanisms for stakeholder cooperation. In this context, partnership and integrated management approaches are considered important prerequisites for sustainable tourism development.

In Bulgarian conditions, the sustainable development of rural tourism is closely linked to the effective use of local resource potential, the preservation of cultural and historical heritage and the active participation of local communities in tourism development processes. Of particular importance are initiatives aimed at preserving traditions, developing local products and creating tourist experiences that combine economic efficiency with social and cultural sustainability.

The analysis shows that the sustainable development of rural tourism requires an integrated approach that accounts for the interrelationships among the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development. Achieving sustainable results depends not only on the availability of tourism resources but also on the ability of local actors to build partnerships and implement long-term strategies to develop the tourist destination.

Conclusions from Chapter I

The theoretical analysis allows the following main conclusions to be formulated:

1. Rural tourism is an important tool for the socio-economic development of rural areas, combining economic, social, and cultural functions and creating opportunities for diversifying the local economy.
2. The development of rural tourism depends on the complex interaction among natural resources, cultural and historical heritage, infrastructure, the institutional environment, and human capital; the presence of resource potential alone is not a sufficient condition for successful tourism development.
3. Modern forms of rural tourism are characterised by a high degree of diversity and integration, which create opportunities to develop complex tourism products and enhance the competitiveness of tourist destinations.
4. Effective management of tourist destinations requires coordination among local authorities, tourism businesses, cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations, and the local community, with a multi-stakeholder approach providing an appropriate conceptual framework for analysing these interactions.
5. Social capital is emerging as an essential factor in the development of rural tourism by building trust, activating local initiatives, and creating sustainable forms of cooperation among stakeholders.
6. Theoretical models of the development of tourist destinations confirm the need for an integrated approach that simultaneously accounts for resource potential, management processes, social interactions, and the characteristics of the local environment.
7. The sustainable development of rural tourism entails a balanced integration of economic, social, and environmental goals, as well as active participation by the local community in planning and managing tourism development.

The theoretical analysis provides the conceptual basis of the study and justifies the need for an integrated approach to analysing the factors driving the development of rural tourism.

CHAPTER II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The second chapter of the dissertation presents the research methodology used to analyse the factors and conditions influencing the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria. The study's methodological and theoretical framework, as well as the methods and tools used to collect and analyse information, are examined.

The methodological approach combines quantitative and qualitative methods, enabling a comprehensive study of tourism processes and interactions among the main stakeholders. The municipality of Brezovo was chosen as an empirical example, providing an opportunity to analyse the development of rural tourism under conditions of available resource potential and limited tourist activity. The developed methodology creates a basis for verifying the formulated research theses and for achieving the goals of the dissertation.

2.1. Methodological and theoretical framework of the study

In accordance with the study's objective, a methodological framework has been developed using an integrated approach to analyse the factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria. The study is based on the understanding that tourism development results from the interaction among the territory's resource potential, the institutional environment, socio-economic conditions, and the main stakeholders.

The methodological approach combines theoretical analysis and empirical research using quantitative and qualitative methods. This allows for a comprehensive study of both the objective characteristics of the tourist destination and the interactions between the participants in the tourist process. The municipality of Brezovo was chosen as an empirical example, considered to have available tourist potential but limited development of tourism.

Within the study, the author's methodological framework (Figure 1) presents the logical sequence of the research process and the interrelationships among the factors influencing the development of rural tourism. The methodological construction is based on the understanding that resource potential is a necessary prerequisite for tourism development, the effective use of which depends on the quality of management, infrastructure provision, entrepreneurial activity, marketing activities and interaction between stakeholders.

In parallel, an author's theoretical framework (Figure 2) has been developed, integrating the concepts of sustainable tourism development, tourism destination management, and the multi-stakeholder approach into a single analytical system. In the theoretical model, the tourist destination is viewed as a socio-economic system in which the resource potential, the institutional environment and the main stakeholders interact.

Social capital is considered a mediating factor, manifested through trust, cooperation and partnerships between participants in the tourism system. It is assumed that its presence creates prerequisites for more efficient use of resource potential and sustainable tourism development. The proposed theoretical framework systematises the main factors influencing

the development of rural tourism. It serves as a conceptual basis for the subsequent empirical analysis and verification of the formulated research theses.

2.2. Research design and research theses

The research design was developed in accordance with the set goal of analysing the factors and conditions influencing the development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria. The study is organised as a regional case study (case study), which allows for in-depth research into the processes and factors determining the development of tourism activity at the local level.

The object of the study is the processes of development of rural tourism in the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of Bulgaria.

The study examines the factors influencing the degree of utilisation of tourism potential at the local level, as well as the interactions among the main stakeholders in the tourism process.

The municipality of Brezovo was chosen as an empirical site. The choice was determined by the presence of natural and cultural-historical potential, which is not accompanied by a corresponding level of tourism development. This creates an opportunity to analyse the factors that hinder the transformation of available resources into a sustainable tourism product.

In accordance with the developed theoretical framework, the following main research thesis has been formulated:

Main thesis (T1): The development of rural tourism in small settlements with available natural and cultural-historical potential is limited not due to a lack of resources, but due to insufficiently effective interaction between stakeholders, weak institutional coordination and the presence of structural constraints (demographic, infrastructural and organisational).

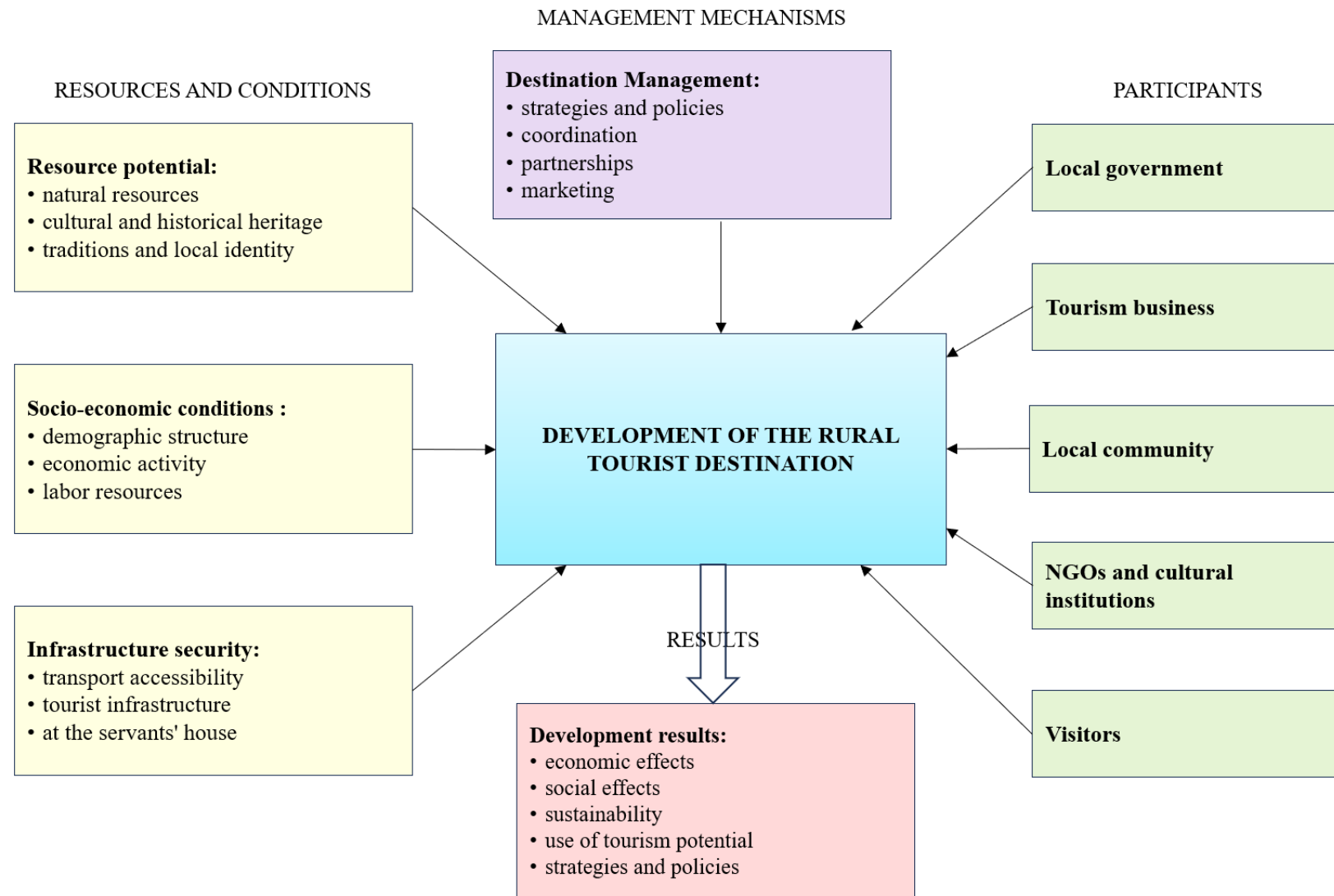
To verify the main thesis, the following working theses have been formulated:

Thesis 1 (T1.1): The low level of social capital (trust, cooperation and partnership) between local authorities, tourism businesses and the local community limits the development of tourism activities.

Thesis 2 (T1.2): The lack of a coordinated marketing policy and insufficient tourism promotion limit the recognition and effective use of tourism potential.

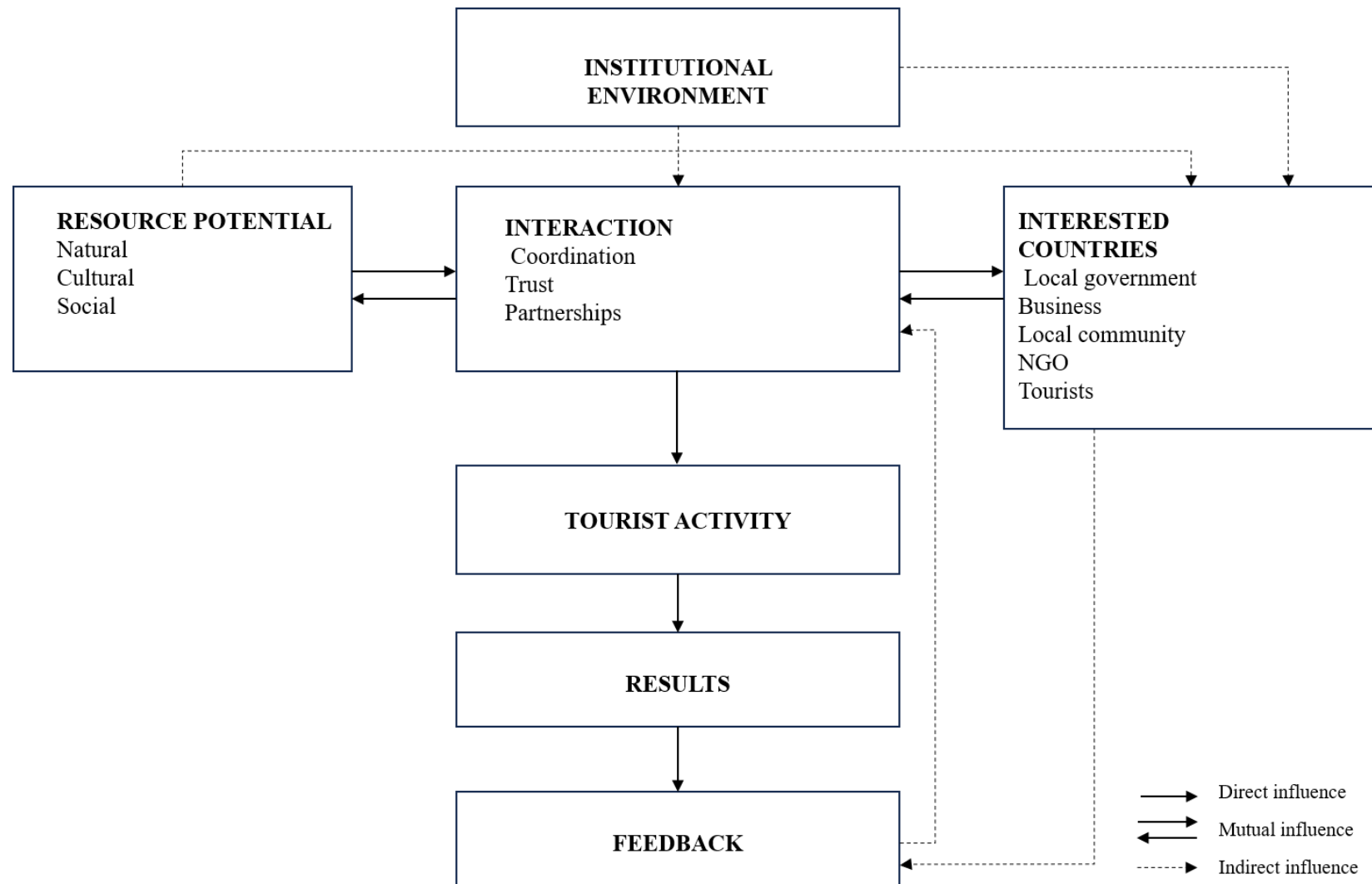
Thesis 3 (T1.3): The active participation of the local community and cultural institutions (including community centres) is essential for the sustainable development of rural tourism.

Figure 1. Methodological framework of the study



Source: author's work based on theoretical analysis

Figure 2. Theoretical framework of the study



Source: author's work

Thesis 4 (T1.4): Insufficient institutional coordination and the lack of a coherent tourism development policy lead to inefficient use of the available resource potential.

Thesis 5 (T1.5): Limited infrastructural provision (transport accessibility, technical and tourist infrastructure) hinders the development of tourism activities in small settlements.

Thesis 6 (T1.6): The unfavourable demographic characteristics of the local population (ageing, reduced economic activity) limit the opportunities for the development of rural tourism.

The formulated research theses determine the logic of the empirical study and serve as the basis for selecting indicators, methods, and tools for collecting and analysing information.

2.3. Methods and organisation of empirical research

To verify the formulated research theses and achieve the set goal, an integrated methodological approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The use of different methods and sources of information provides an opportunity for a comprehensive study of the factors influencing the development of rural tourism, and for increasing the reliability of the results obtained.

The research used a questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document and statistical analysis, and multi-stakeholder analysis. The combination of these methods enables the study of both the characteristics of the tourist destination and the interactions among the main stakeholders.

The empirical research was conducted during 2021–2023 and comprises three consecutive stages: analysis of the scientific literature and formulation of the research statements; preliminary field research and establishment of contacts with stakeholders; and the main field research through questionnaire surveys, interviews, and participatory observation.

The study is organised as a regional case study, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the processes involved in the development of rural tourism in a real socio-economic environment. Additionally, a multi-stakeholder analysis was conducted to identify the main stakeholders, their roles, and their influence on the development of the tourist destination.

The empirical study covers the main participants in the tourism system of the municipality of Brezovo. It includes representatives of the local government, the tourism business, the local community, cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations and visitors. The study covers representatives of the municipal administration, mayors and deputy mayors from 12 settlements, 11 tourist accommodation sites, 91 representatives of the local

community, 10 community centres, and 175 visitors. The collected information provides the necessary empirical basis for verifying the formulated research theses and for assessing the factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the studied region.

Conclusions from Chapter II

As a result of the developed research methodology, the following main conclusions can be formulated:

1. The study is built on an integrated methodological approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse the factors influencing the development of rural tourism.
2. The developed methodological and theoretical framework provides a conceptual basis for studying the interrelationships between resource potential, the institutional environment and the main stakeholders in the tourist destination.
3. The formulated research theses specify the main dependencies and problem areas related to the development of rural tourism in small settlements.
4. The application of a questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, document analysis and multi-stakeholder analysis creates an opportunity for a comprehensive study of the tourism system and for reliable verification of the research theses.
5. The established organisation of the empirical study and the scope of the stakeholders involved provide the necessary information base for analysing the factors and conditions influencing the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo.

CHAPTER III. ANALYSIS OF THE REGION AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The third chapter of the dissertation presents the results of the empirical study of the factors and conditions influencing the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo. The analysis aims to assess the extent of utilisation of tourism potential, identify the main constraints on the development of tourism activities, and examine the interactions among stakeholders in the tourism process.

The research is based on an integrated approach that combines analysis of the natural and cultural-historical resources, the socio-economic characteristics of the region, the state of the tourism infrastructure, the attitudes of visitors and the local community, and the role of institutions and organisations involved in tourism development. The presented results provide

a basis for verifying the formulated research theses and assessing opportunities for more effective use of the tourism potential of the municipality of Brezovo as a tourist destination.

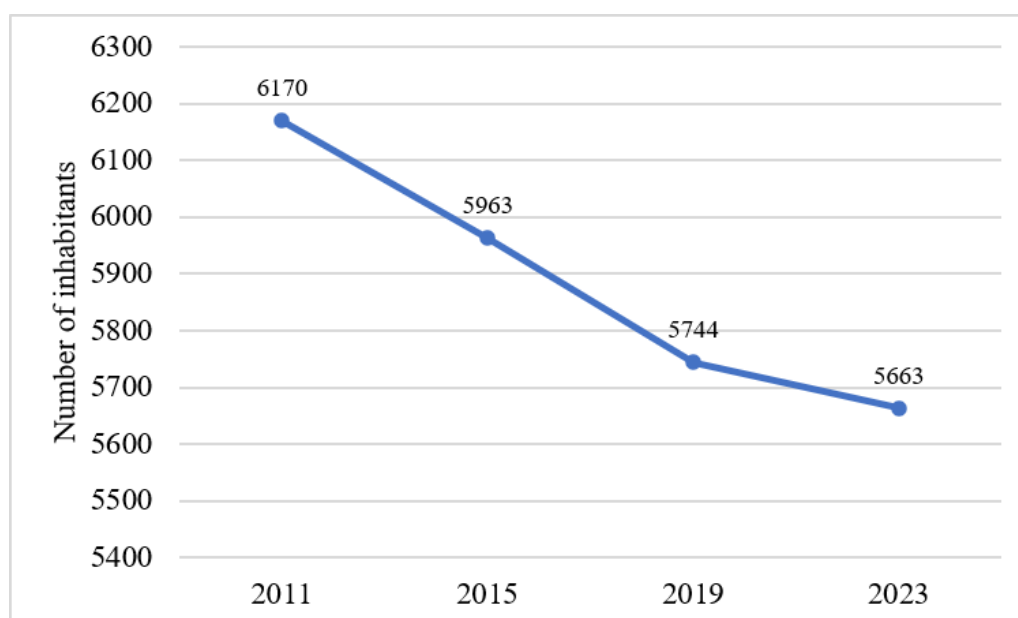
3.1. Characteristics of the studied region

The empirical study was conducted in the municipality of Brezovo, located in the northeastern part of Plovdiv district, in the Sarnena Sredna Gora region. The municipality is a typical rural area characterised by predominantly small settlements, limited economic activity, and unfavourable demographic trends.

The choice of the municipality of Brezovo as a research site is determined by the presence of significant natural and cultural-historical potential, which creates the prerequisites for the development of various forms of rural tourism. However, tourism activity in the area remains underdeveloped, allowing analysis of factors hindering the effective use of available resources.

The demographic analysis shows a steady trend towards population decline. For the period 2011–2023, the number of residents decreased from 6,170 to 5,663, representing a 8.2% decrease (Figure 3). In addition, ageing and depopulation are evident in some settlements, negatively impacting local development.

Figure 3. Population dynamics of the municipality of Brezovo (2011–2023)



Source: NSI; GRAO (2023), author's development

Despite the demographic limitations, the municipality has a preserved natural environment and a rich cultural and historical heritage. The analysis of the region reveals a

discrepancy between tourism potential and the actual level of tourism development, necessitating a study of the factors influencing rural tourism development.

3.2. Tourism potential of the studied region

The analysis of the natural, cultural-historical, and infrastructural resources of the municipality of Brezovo shows that the region has significant potential for rural tourism development. This potential is based on a preserved natural environment, rich cultural-historical heritage and local traditions.

Of particular importance for the development of the tourist destination are the cultural and historical resources, concentrated mainly in the village of Svezhen, which is establishing itself as the main core of cultural and educational tourism in the municipality. The religious, memorial, and archaeological sites create opportunities to develop a range of thematic tourist products. An important element of the tourist potential is also the folk community centres, which preserve local traditions and organise cultural events.

The analysis of the tourism infrastructure shows a functioning material base, including accommodation and catering facilities, but with limited capacity and low utilisation. An uneven distribution of tourist sites and unused capacity is identified.

The results show a discrepancy between the municipality of Brezovo's resource potential and the actual development of tourism activities. The main limitations are related to unfavourable demographic trends, limited infrastructure provision, insufficient marketing activity, and weak coordination among stakeholders. This confirms the need for an integrated approach and active interaction between institutions, business and the local community.

3.3. State of tourism activity

The analysis of tourism activity in the municipality of Brezovo shows that tourism is characterised by a limited scale and mainly local importance. Despite significant resource potential, tourist flows are low, the diversity of tourist services is limited, and the tourist product is insufficiently developed.

It has been found that some tourist sites record a minimum number of overnight stays, indicating insufficient demand and inefficient use of available capacity. Short-term stays, seasonality, and limited economic impact for the local community characterise tourist visits.

The results show that the main problem hindering the development of tourism in the municipality of Brezovo is not a lack of resources but their ineffective use. This confirms the

need for better coordination among participants in the tourism process, the activation of the local community, and more effective management of the tourist destination.

3.4. Main participants in the development of the tourist destination

A multi-stakeholder approach was applied to analyse the participants in the development of the tourist destination, thereby identifying the main stakeholders, their interests, resources, and degree of influence on tourism development in the municipality of Brezovo. This approach creates an opportunity to study interactions among individual participants and assess their roles in the planning and management processes of the tourist destination.

3.4.1 Identification of stakeholders

As a result of the study, five main groups of stakeholders have been identified: public institutions, tourism businesses, local communities, cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations, and visitors. Each of these groups performs a specific function in the tourism system and influences the processes of creation, supply and consumption of the tourism product.

3.4.2. Analysis of interests and degree of influence

To assess the positions of individual stakeholders, an “influence-interest” matrix was applied, which allows for a comparative analysis of their role in the development of the tourist destination. It identifies the groups with the greatest potential for impact on the planning and management processes of tourism development (Table 1).

Table 1. Stakeholder Influence-Interest Matrix

Stakeholder group	Degree of interest	Degree of influence	Role in tourism development
Public institutions	High	High	Key strategic actors
Tourism business	High	Medium	Main performers
Local community	Medium	Medium	Supporting factor
Visitors	High	Low	Consumers of a tourism product
NGOs and cultural institutions	Medium	Medium	Potential partners

Source: author's work

The analysis shows that public institutions occupy a leading position with a high degree of both interest and influence on tourism development. The tourism business is characterised

by high interest, but with a more limited influence on decision-making processes. The local community and cultural institutions occupy an intermediate position, while visitors exert influence mainly by shaping tourism demand and providing feedback on the quality of the tourism supply. An in-depth study of the roles and participation of individual stakeholders, their attitudes, and their participation in the development processes of the tourist destination has been conducted.

3.4.3 Local government

The local government is a key player in the development of the tourist destination through its functions in strategic planning, resource management, infrastructure maintenance, and coordination among stakeholders. The empirical study covers the mayor of Brezovo municipality, mayors and deputy mayors of settlements, as well as representatives of the tourist information centres.

The results show a high level of awareness of the municipality's tourism potential, based on natural resources, cultural and historical heritage, and opportunities for developing event-based forms of tourism. At the same time, significant limitations related to infrastructure problems, insufficient financial resources, limited administrative capacity, and a lack of active partnerships among stakeholders are identified. The data show that 75% of respondents consider the settlements suitable for tourism development, but 66.7% assess the infrastructure as unsatisfactory, and all respondents identify the lack of sewage infrastructure as a serious problem.

There is also insufficient interaction between local participants in the tourism process. A significant number of respondents reported a lack of cooperation among entrepreneurs, and 91.7% stated that they do not have real authority to make decisions related to tourism development. The analysis of the tourist information centres shows limited marketing activity and insufficient interaction with business and cultural institutions. The results confirm that insufficient institutional coordination is one of the main factors limiting the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo.

3.4.4 Tourism business

The tourism business is a major economic participant in the development of the tourist destination, as it shapes the tourist supply and creates conditions for the realisation of tourist

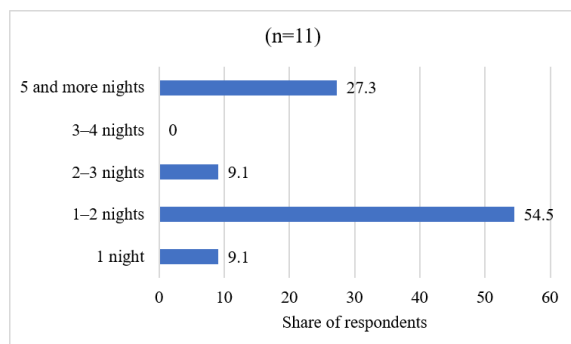
consumption. The empirical study covers 11 operating tourist sites, representing approximately 79% of the functioning accommodation base in the municipality of Brezovo.

The results show a predominance of small family businesses operating on a limited scale. In 63.3% of the sites, the tourist activity is carried out entirely by family members, a characteristic feature of rural tourism that indicates limited opportunities to expand the activity. The analysis of tourist flows shows that visitors are entirely domestic, and their stays are mainly short-term, up to two nights. In addition, there is a clear seasonality of visits, concentrated mainly in the summer months (Figure 4).

The tourism product is primarily oriented towards traditional forms of rural tourism and is based on the natural environment, tranquillity, and the authentic atmosphere of the settlements. Despite the presence of diverse natural resources, the range of specialised tourist activities remains limited. Marketing activity is primarily driven by recommendations from previous visitors and informal communication channels, while the use of professional marketing tools and travel agents remains limited.

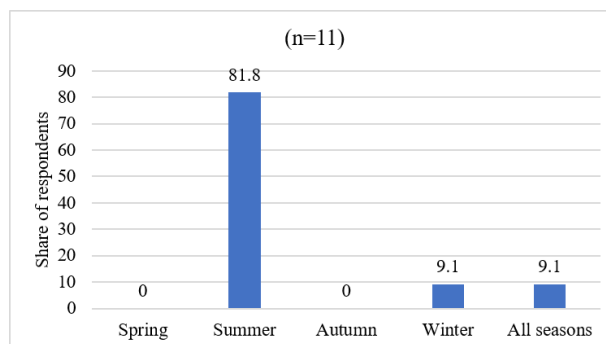
Figure 4. Characteristics of the tourist flow

Question: What is the average length of stay of your guests?



Source: author's survey

Question: When is the peak tourist season in your area?



In terms of investment activity, self-financing is dominant: 72.7% of entrepreneurs have built their tourist sites primarily with their own funds. The analysis of stakeholder interactions indicates a positive social environment but limited cooperation among the tourism business, cultural institutions, and public administration. The lack of sustainable partnerships and joint marketing initiatives hinders the formation of an integrated tourist product and the effective positioning of the destination.

The results show that the tourism business in the municipality of Brezovo operates under conditions of a limited market, insufficient marketing activity, and weak institutional

interaction. This confirms the thesis that the main limitations to the development of rural tourism arise not from a lack of resource potential but from insufficient coordination among stakeholders, limited infrastructure provision, and weak marketing activity.

3.4.5 Local community

The local community is an important participant in the development of the tourist destination, as it preserves local traditions, cultural identity, and the social environment, which together form the authentic character of rural tourism. The empirical study covers 91 respondents from nine settlements in the municipality of Brezovo and aims to analyse the attitudes and degree of participation of the local population in tourism activities.

The results indicate a favourable social environment for tourism development. The majority of respondents (90.1%) express a positive attitude towards the development of rural tourism, and 81.3% have a positive attitude towards the owners of tourist services. More than two-thirds of respondents (72.5%) believe that tourism improves socio-economic conditions and creates employment opportunities for the local population.

Despite the high level of support, the local population's actual participation in tourism activities remains limited, with only 42.9% of respondents directly involved in the sector. The level of activity in local initiatives and events is significantly higher, indicating untapped potential for broader community involvement in tourism development. At the same time, 64.8% of respondents consider events organised by the municipality and community centres to be effective tools for attracting tourists, and 65.9% positively assess the municipality's actions to improve infrastructure.

A significant characteristic of the studied community is its age structure, with 75.9% of respondents aged 45 or older. This confirms the presence of unfavourable demographic trends, including population ageing and limited participation by young people in local development. The results show that the local community strongly supports the development of rural tourism, but its actual participation remains limited. This confirms the presence of untapped social potential and the need for more active involvement of the local population in the processes of development and management of the tourist destination.

3.4.6. Cultural institutions and non-governmental organisations

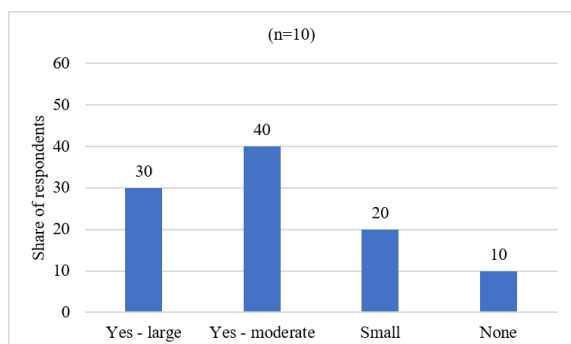
Cultural institutions and non-governmental organisations, particularly community centres, play a significant role in preserving local cultural heritage, maintaining social activity,

and promoting local identity. The empirical study analysed 10 community centres in the Brezovo municipality, which serve as major cultural and social hubs in both urban and rural areas.

The results show that community centres have significant potential to participate in the development of rural tourism. 70% of the surveyed community centres indicate that they have resources that are attractive to tourists. The most common are holidays and festivals (70%) and ethnographic collections and museum exhibitions (60%), which provide an important basis for creating tourist products rooted in local cultural identity and traditions (Figure 5).

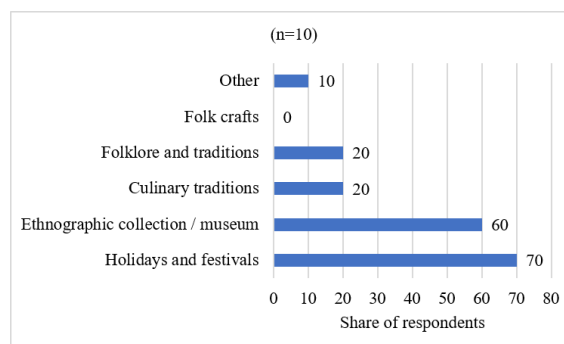
Figure 5. Resource potential of community centres for tourism development

Question: In your opinion, does the community centre have the potential to develop tourist activities?



Source: author's survey

Question: What attractive resources for tourists does the community centre have?



Despite the significant potential, its practical use remains limited. While 80% of community centres participate in tourism-related activities, only 10% independently organise initiatives specifically targeting tourists. The study also shows better cooperation with local authorities than with the tourism business, which limits opportunities to create partnerships and integrated tourism products.

Among the main constraints on the more active participation of community centres are insufficient funding (70%), lack of staff (60%), weak advertising (40%), and insufficiently developed infrastructure (30%). The results show that community centres are important carriers of cultural resources, local identity, and social capital. Still, their potential to participate in tourism development remains partially realised due to financial, organisational, and coordination constraints.

3.4.7. Visitors

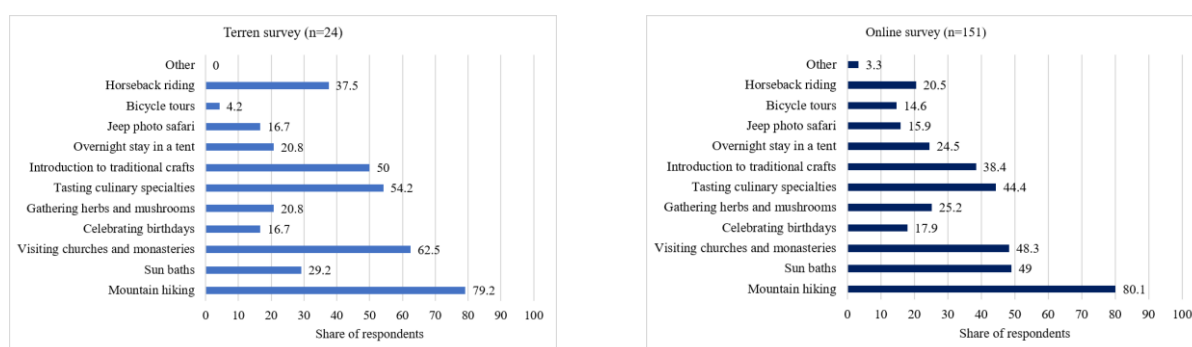
Visitors are key players in the tourism system, as their preferences, behaviour, and assessments shape tourism demand and influence the development of the tourist destination. The study includes 175 respondents, reached through field and online questionnaire surveys, enabling analysis of both actual visitors and potential tourists.

Visitors to the municipality of Brezovo are mainly people with a high level of education and an active social status, who are interested in nature, local culture, and the peaceful environment typical of rural areas. Visits are concentrated mainly during the spring-summer season, which confirms the presence of seasonality in tourist demand.

The most preferred tourist activities include nature walks, visits to cultural and historical sites, participation in local events and festivals, and activities related to local traditions and lifestyle. This confirms the existence of favourable conditions for the development of various forms of rural, cultural and event tourism (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Preferred tourist activities

Question: Which of the following activities would you practice?



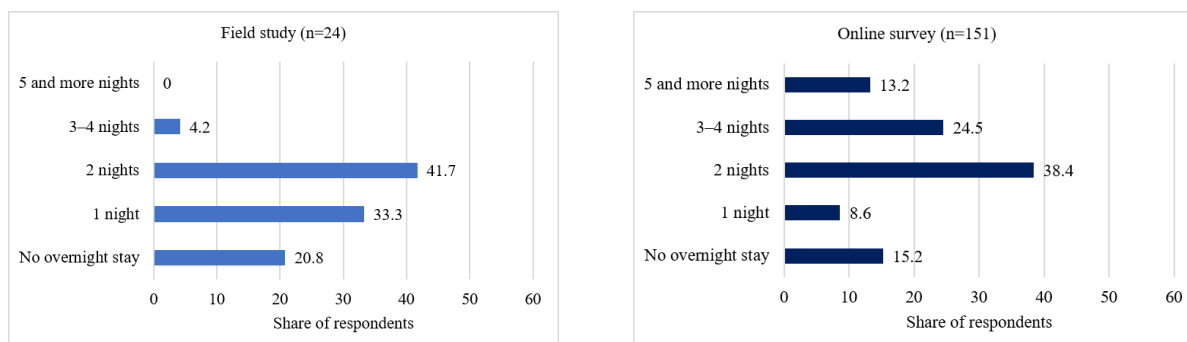
Source: author's survey

An essential indicator of the economic efficiency of the tourist destination is the length of stay. The data show that the majority of visitors stay in the area for a short period – up to two nights, which limits opportunities to generate higher tourism revenues and indicates insufficient development of additional tourism products and services capable of retaining visitors for longer (Figure 7).

The analysis shows a predominance of low and medium spending levels, typical of destinations with a limited tourist offering and short visit durations. A mismatch is evident between visitors' preferences and the level of development of the tourist offer, which limits opportunities for longer stays and the realisation of a greater economic impact from tourism activity.

Figure 7. Distribution of visitors by length of stay

Question: How long will you stay here (number of nights)?



Source: author's survey

3.4.8. Synthesised multi-stakeholder analysis

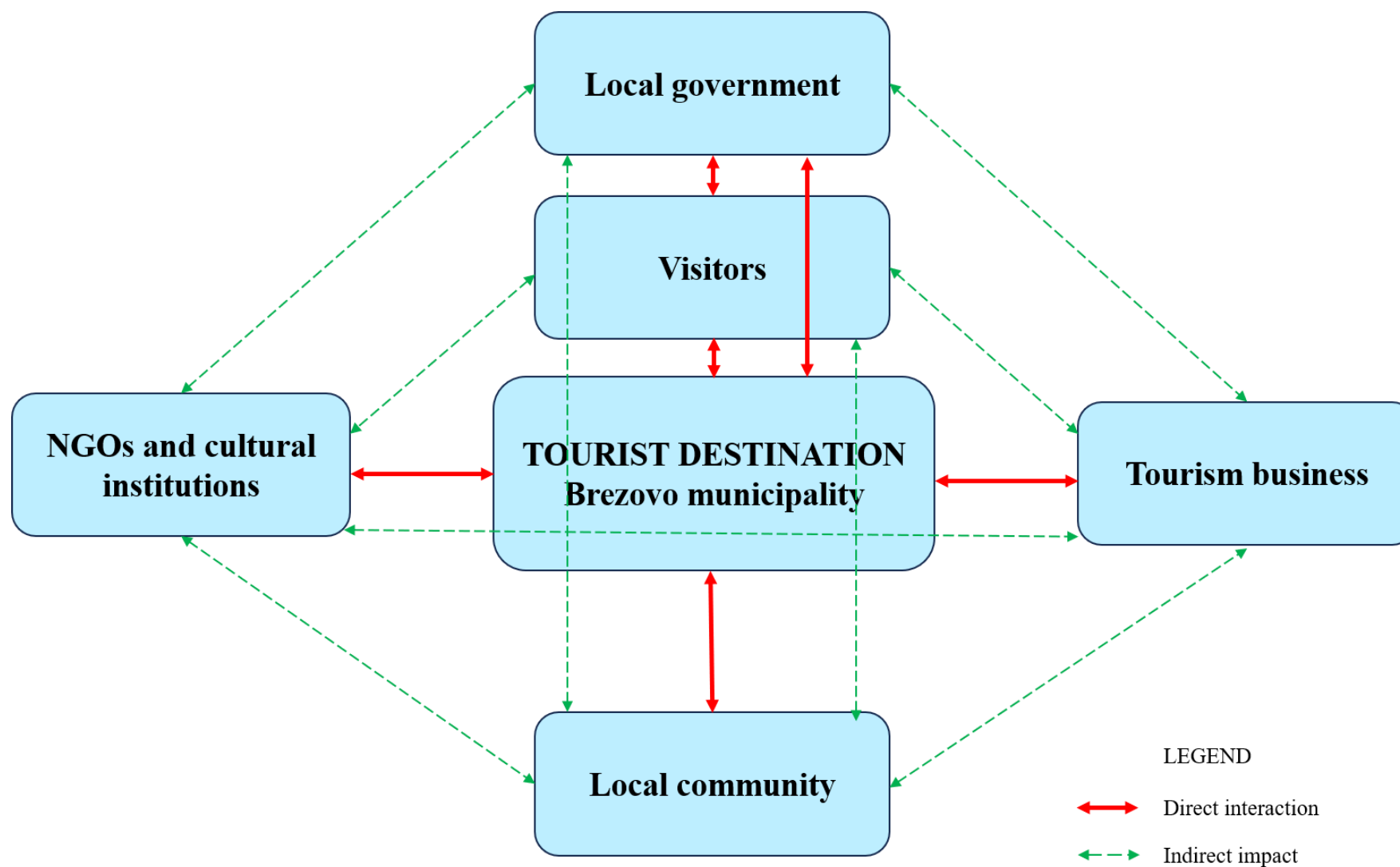
The analysis of the main stakeholders shows that interactions among public institutions, the tourism business, the local community, cultural institutions, and visitors determine the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo. Each of these groups has specific resources, interests and opportunities to influence the processes of tourism development.

The results show that public institutions occupy a leading position in the system due to their management and coordination functions. Still, limited financial and human resources make it difficult to implement a consistent tourism development policy. The tourism business provides the main part of the tourism supply, but a lack of cooperation and joint marketing initiatives limits opportunities to create an integrated tourism product.

The local community demonstrates strong support for tourism development, but its participation in tourism activities remains limited. At the same time, community centres and other cultural institutions possess significant cultural and social capital, which creates the prerequisites for developing tourism products rooted in local identity and traditions. The analysis of visitor data shows genuine tourist demand, but the short length of stay and relatively low spending limit the economic impact of tourism.

The synthesised analysis confirms that the main problem facing the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo is not the lack of natural, cultural or human resources, but the insufficient coordination between stakeholders and the absence of sustainable cooperation mechanisms. The identified discrepancy between the available potential and the extent of its use confirms the study's main thesis. It underscores the need to implement a more integrated management model based on partnership, coordination, and the active participation of the local community and cultural institutions.

Figure 8. The author's model of stakeholder interaction



Source: author's work

3.5. Interaction and coordination between participants

Effective development of a tourist destination requires active interaction and coordination between key stakeholders. In rural areas, cooperation between local authorities, tourism businesses, local communities, cultural institutions and visitors is key to sustainable tourism development.

The empirical study shows that interaction among participants in the tourism process in the municipality of Brezovo is primarily informal and occurs mainly when organising individual initiatives, events and projects. There is a lack of sustainable mechanisms for coordination, joint planning and development of integrated tourism products. A particularly important role is played by community centres and cultural institutions, which serve as intermediaries among stakeholders and contribute to the preservation and promotion of local cultural heritage. However, cooperation between them and the tourism business remains limited.

Based on the empirical research conducted, the author developed a model of interaction among the main stakeholders in the tourist destination (Figure 8). The model presents the tourism system as a network of interconnected participants who, through the exchange of resources, information, and partnerships, influence tourism development.

The results confirm the importance of social capital, partnership, and coordination as key factors in the development of rural tourism and in the more effective use of the tourist destination's resource potential.

3.6. Marketing and management of the tourist destination

The effective development of the tourist destination requires targeted management and a consistent marketing policy. The analysis of the municipality of Brezovo shows that tourism is included in the strategic documents for local development, but the practical implementation of the set goals remains limited.

The management of tourism activities is primarily carried out by the municipal administration, with insufficient stakeholder participation in planning processes and limited coordination in implementing tourism initiatives. The lack of a specialised destination management structure makes it difficult to implement a consistent tourism development policy.

Marketing activities are carried out mainly through local events, websites, social networks, and informational materials. Still, there is a lack of an integrated marketing strategy and a clear positioning of the tourist destination. This limits its recognition and its opportunities

to attract new visitors. The results show the need to improve management mechanisms and develop an integrated marketing strategy to more effectively use resource potential and increase the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

3.7. Participation in the development of the tourist destination of the municipality of Brezovo

From May 2022 to October 2023, the author directly participated in the development activities of the Brezovo Municipality tourist destination as a tourism specialist at the Svezhen Architectural and Historical Reserve. This participation enables the use of the participatory observation method and provides an opportunity to verify the empirical study's conclusions through practical observation.

The implemented activities are aimed at several main areas: promoting the tourist destination, developing tourist products, engaging the local community, organising events, and building partnerships among stakeholders. Among the more significant initiatives are the creation of a digital presence of AIR - Svezhen, the development of interactive forms for presenting the cultural and historical heritage, the organisation of cultural events and the creation of the "Feast of the Mekichki" as an example of using local resources for the development of a tourist product.

The practical work also includes building cooperation with the tourism industry, tour operators, cultural institutions, and the local community, as well as implementing initiatives to secure additional resources to improve tourism services. The results show an increase in destination recognition, activation of the local community, and the creation of prerequisites for more effective use of the available tourism potential.

The practical participation confirms the study's main thesis that the development of rural tourism depends not only on the availability of natural and cultural-historical resources but above all on effective coordination among stakeholders, active participation by the local community, and the implementation of targeted marketing and management approaches. The results demonstrate the possibilities for practical application of the study's conclusions and outline specific guidelines for the development of the tourist destination in the municipality of Brezovo.

3.8. Conclusions and generalisations from the empirical study

The empirical study provides a comprehensive assessment of the factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo. The results show that the

municipality has significant natural, cultural-historical, and social potential for tourism development, but the extent of its actual use remains limited. The analysis confirms the study's main thesis that the limitations to the development of tourism do not arise from a lack of resources, but from ineffective stakeholder interaction, limited institutional coordination, and structural constraints.

Low levels of cooperation among the main participants in the tourism process, insufficient marketing activity, and a lack of a consistent policy for the development of the tourist destination have been established. The local community and cultural institutions, including community centres, have significant potential to participate in tourism development, a potential that is currently underutilised. Infrastructure limitations and unfavourable demographic trends significantly affect tourism development. At the same time, empirical data indicate the presence of social capital and local initiatives, which can serve as a basis for future development with a higher degree of coordination and partnership among stakeholders.

The empirical study also shows that, despite the importance of national and regional policies for tourism development, the scope for their direct influence at the local level is limited. The results confirm that there is real potential to advance tourism development through factors that can be managed locally – building partnerships, developing social capital, engaging the local community, and improving coordination among stakeholders. The summary of the main results of the empirical study is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of the results of the empirical study

Direction of analysis	Main result	Rating
General conclusion	Available potential with limited tourism development	Confirming
Social capital	Limited collaboration and partnerships between stakeholders	Confirming
Marketing	Insufficient marketing activity and low recognition of the destination	Confirming
Local community	Availability of potential with limited participation in tourism development	Partially confirmed
Institutional environment	Insufficient coordination and inconsistency of actions	Confirming
Infrastructure	Limited transport accessibility and tourist security	Confirming
Demographics	Unfavourable demographic trends and limited human resources	Partially confirmed

Source: author's work

The results of the empirical study confirm the formulated research theses and outline the key factors determining the development of rural tourism in small settlements. They create a basis for formulating conclusions, recommendations and a model for the development of a tourist destination in a rural area.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The theoretical and empirical research conducted enables the formulation of the main conclusions on the factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo, as well as recommendations for the more effective use of the available tourism potential.

Main conclusions from the study

1. The municipality of Brezovo has significant natural, cultural, historical and social potential for the development of rural tourism, which is currently not fully utilised.
2. The main constraints to tourism development do not stem from a lack of resources, but from ineffective stakeholder interaction, limited institutional coordination, and a lack of an integrated approach to developing the tourist destination.
3. Unfavourable demographic trends, limited entrepreneurial activity, and insufficient engagement from the local population have a significant impact on tourism development.
4. Marketing activities are characterised by insufficient systematicity, limited recognition of the destination, and a lack of a consistent communication strategy.
5. Community centres, the local community, and cultural institutions have significant potential to participate in tourism development. Still, this potential is not being used effectively enough due to a lack of coordination and sustainable mechanisms for cooperation.
6. The interaction among local authorities, tourism businesses, cultural institutions, and the local community is a key factor in the sustainable development of rural tourism and in transforming resource potential into a real tourism product.
7. The development of rural tourism requires an integrated management model based on coordination, partnership and active participation of stakeholders.
8. Public policies create the regulatory, strategic, and financial framework for the development of rural tourism, but opportunities for direct local-level impact on these

policies are limited. The study shows that factors that can be managed locally are of more importance for the practical development of the tourist destination - the establishment of partnerships, the development of social capital, the active participation of the local community and effective coordination between stakeholders. It is through them that some structural constraints can be overcome and the full potential of tourism can be realised.

Assessment of development factors

The results of the study show that the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo is determined by the interaction between natural, cultural-historical, socio-economic, infrastructural, institutional and marketing factors. The analysis shows that some of these factors underpin the destination's tourist potential, while others limit its effective use. Table 4 presents a summarised assessment of the main factors influencing the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo.

Table 4. Assessment of the main factors for the development of rural tourism

Group of factors	Degree of influence
Natural factors	Strong potential
Cultural and historical factors	Strong potential
Socio-economic factors	Limiting factor
Infrastructure factors	Limiting factor
Institutional factors	Key meaning
Marketing factors	Key meaning

Source: author's development

The overall assessment shows that natural and cultural-historical resources form the main competitive advantage of the tourist destination. The main constraints are related to socio-economic conditions, infrastructure provision, management and marketing. The realisation of the available tourism potential depends on the degree of coordination among stakeholders and the implementation of an integrated approach to developing the tourist destination.

The results show that the external political and institutional environment shapes certain factors influencing tourism development and that these factors are difficult to change at the local level. At the same time, the study establishes significant potential for impact through local

mechanisms, including building partnerships, developing social capital, activating the local community, and improving coordination among stakeholders.

Concept for developing a tourist destination in a rural area

Based on theoretical and empirical research, the author's concept for the development of a tourist destination in a rural area was developed and applied to the municipality of Brezovo (Figure 9). The concept views tourism development as the result of interactions among resource potential, stakeholders, destination management, marketing activities, and social capital.

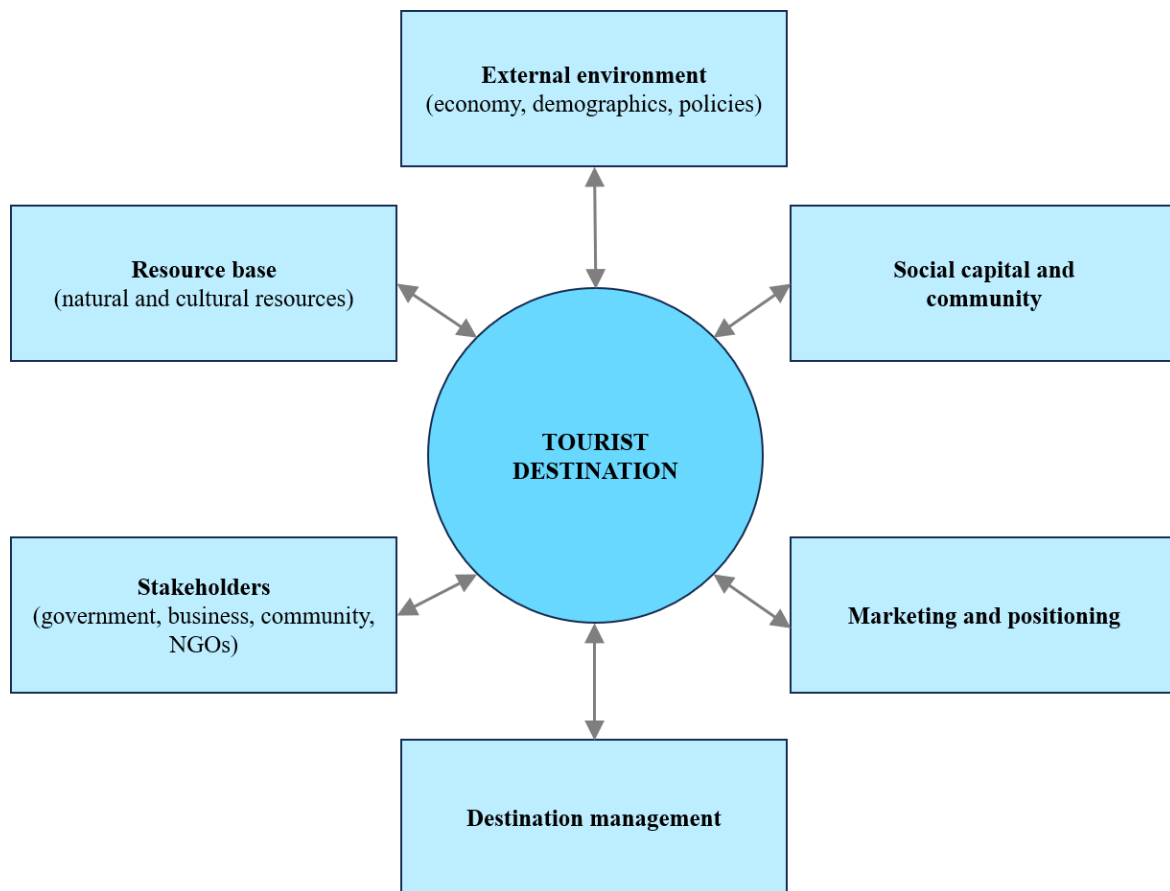
The concept is based on the understanding that the presence of natural and cultural-historical resources is a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for tourism development. The actual use of this potential depends on the degree of coordination among participants, the effectiveness of management mechanisms, and the ability to integrate individual elements into a unified tourism system.

The proposed concept presents the tourist destination as an integrated system of interconnected components, including:

- resource-based shaping the attractiveness of the destination;
- stakeholders involved in the creation and delivery of the tourism product;
- destination management, providing coordination, planning and strategic direction;
- marketing activity, establishing the connection between the destination and the tourist market;
- social capital, supporting trust, cooperation and sustainability of interactions between participants.

The concept views management as a central coordination mechanism that integrates individual participants' activities and provides strategic direction for development. Marketing activity serves as a link between the destination and the tourism market, and social capital creates the prerequisites for sustainable partnerships and effective interaction among stakeholders. The concept has both analytical and applied value and can serve as a framework for developing strategies and policies for rural tourism.

Figure 9. Concept for developing a tourist destination in a rural area



Source: author's work

Recommendations for the development of rural tourism

Based on the results of the conducted research, the following main recommendations for the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo can be formulated:

To local policies and governance:

- developing and implementing an integrated tourism development strategy with clearly defined goals, measures and responsibilities;
- creating sustainable mechanisms for coordination between local authorities, tourism businesses, community centres, and the local community;
- increasing project activity and attracting external funding to develop tourism infrastructure and services.
- promoting local partnerships and networks for cooperation between institutions, businesses, community centres, and the local community to more effectively use available resources, regardless of the limitations of the external political environment.

To the tourism business:

- development of joint tourist products and package offers;
- expanding the services offered by including local traditions, cultural events and experiences;
- improving digital presence and using modern marketing tools.

To the community centres and the local community:

- more active participation in the creation and promotion of tourism products based on local cultural heritage;
- development of partnerships with the tourism business and local authorities;
- increasing the publicity of local initiatives through the use of digital communication channels and participation in tourism events and projects.

The implementation of the above recommendations would contribute to a more effective use of the available tourism potential, improve coordination among stakeholders, and increase the competitiveness of the tourist destination.

Directions for future research

Future research could focus on applying the proposed concept to other rural tourism destinations, conducting comparative analyses across different regions, and exploring the impact of digital marketing, social capital, and local partnerships on the sustainable development of rural tourism.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical and empirical research conducted confirms that the development of rural tourism in small municipalities results from the interaction among natural, cultural-historical, socio-economic, institutional, and management factors. The analysis of the municipality of Brezovo shows that the presence of significant tourism potential is not a sufficient condition for the development of tourism activities without effective coordination among stakeholders, a consistent marketing policy, and sustainable mechanisms for managing the tourist destination.

The results confirm the study's main thesis: the constraints on the development of rural tourism do not stem from a lack of resources but from inefficient use of resources. It has been established that infrastructure constraints, unfavourable demographic trends, weak marketing activity, and insufficient coordination among participants significantly impact the development of the tourist destination.

The study also shows that public policies create the framework conditions for the development of rural tourism through regulatory mechanisms, strategic documents and financial instruments. However, opportunities for direct impact on local policies are limited. For this reason, factors that can be managed at the local level – building partnerships, engaging the local community, developing social capital, and improving coordination among stakeholders – take on particular importance. It is these mechanisms that emerge as a realistic tool for overcoming some existing limitations and for more effective use of tourism potential.

The main result of the dissertation work is the development of an author's concept for the development of a tourist destination in a rural area, which integrates resource potential, stakeholders, management, marketing and social capital into a single system. The proposed concept and the formulated recommendations can be used to develop local policies and strategies for tourism development in municipalities with similar characteristics.

In conclusion, the sustainable development of rural tourism depends on the effective use of available resources through coordinated actions, strategic management, and active stakeholder participation. This is precisely what creates the prerequisites for transforming tourism potential into a real driver of the economic and social development of rural areas.

SCIENTIFIC AND SCIENTIFIC-APPLICATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

As a result of the theoretical and empirical research conducted, scientific and applied contributions have been formulated, stemming from the developed conceptual framework, the applied methodology, and the obtained results. They reflect both the enrichment of scientific knowledge in rural tourism and the possibilities for the practical application of the conclusions and recommendations in the development of rural tourist destinations.

Contributions of a theoretical nature

1. An author's concept for the development of a tourist destination in a rural area has been developed, integrating resource potential, stakeholders, destination management, marketing activities, and social capital into a single analytical system.
2. It has been found that, despite the limitations arising from the macro-framework of public policies, there are manageable factors at the local level – partnerships, social capital, local community, and coordination among stakeholders – that can be used as tools to activate the development of rural tourism.

3. The main factors influencing the development of rural tourism in small settlements are systematised and substantiated, highlighting the roles of the institutional environment, social capital, and stakeholder interaction in the effective use of tourism potential.
4. A complex methodological approach has been developed to analyse the development of rural tourism at the local level, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Contributions of a scientific and applied nature

1. Through a comprehensive empirical study, the main factors, dependencies, and limitations determining the development of rural tourism in the municipality of Brezovo have been identified, including resource potential, infrastructure provision, marketing activities, demographic processes, and stakeholder interactions.
2. Practical guidelines have been formulated to improve the management, coordination, and marketing activities of tourist destinations in rural areas, and apply to other municipalities with similar characteristics.
3. The practical applicability of the developed concept has been confirmed through implemented initiatives to promote local cultural heritage, develop event tourism, activate the local community, and increase recognition of the tourism potential of the Brezovo municipality.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION

1. Elka Genova, Ivan Penov, (2020), Evaluation of a project for the construction of a house for rural tourism, Agricultural University – Plovdiv, Scientific Works, vol. LXII, book. 2
2. Elka Genova, Milko Genov (2020), Research on the profile of the consumer of rural tourism services in the tourist destination Svezhen, Agricultural University – Plovdiv, Scientific Papers, vol. LXII, book 1