



THE ROLE OF CULTURAL RESOURCES AS A FACTOR OF COMPETITIVENESS IN SOUTHEAST SERBIA

Katarina Ranković*,
Ivana Brdar,
Petar Jović

Singidunum University,
Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract:

One of the important factors of the tourism offer of any destination are the cultural resources that a destination possesses. Cultural resources depict everything that is characteristic of the destination and can introduce tourists to the specifics of the people living in those areas. Bearing in mind that attractiveness of the destination is one of the major factors that dictates the position on tourism market, development of cultural resources can significantly improve the tourist offer of the destination. A potential problem can be lack of investments, which can lead to stagnation in the destination development. Better understanding the role of cultural resources in tourism development can, to some extent, contribute to solving the problem of destination development and directly influence the increase in the competitiveness of the destinations in Southeast Serbia. This paper will discuss the role of cultural resources as a factor of competitiveness of Southeastern Serbia in order to better familiarize with the current situation and propose measures for more efficient development.

Keywords:

competitiveness, Southeast Serbia destinations, cultural resources, cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an activity that has a direct impact on economic and social development and greatly contributes to the gross domestic product. Competition is increasing due to an increasing development of destinations and tourist offers. What characterizes competitiveness in tourism are destination's natural and cultural resources, infrastructure, and accommodation facilities that the destination offers. World Economic Forum developed the TTCI¹ methodology, i.e., Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, for the purpose of measuring competitiveness. This index indicates how competitiveness is moving and factors that have a direct impact. Also, it provides an insight into the areas that the attention should be paid to in terms of improving the resources available and can be crucial in development of the offer of a specific destination. (Jovanović *et al.*, 2015). The subject of the work is to research into the role of cultural resources in competitiveness of the Southeast Serbia. The aim of the work is a proposal for the development of cultural resources and their impact on tourist offer competitiveness.

Correspondence:
Katarina Ranković

e-mail:
krankovic@singidunum.ac.rs

1 TTCI (Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index) was developed by World Economic Forum.



Competitiveness and sustainability of cultural resources

According to Petković, 2019 the only certain cultural resources categorized as cultural assets can be tourist attractions. The biggest attractions are the cultural assets which are most authentic and valuable. Cultural resources can be divided into tangible and intangible. Tangible cultural resources include all sites and facilities of cultural and historical importance, whereas the intangible ones include traditions, religion, art, and everything that makes up the culture and spirit of a nation. (Petković, 2019)

Due to the use of cultural resources for tourist purposes, tourism has branched out into cultural tourism, which has proven to be a very good way of increasing competitiveness. The advantage of cultural tourism is that it highlights cultural resources of a destination. Tourists are offered authentic products of a specific destination, so that each destination can be distinctive and recognized on tourism market for what it has to offer. (Li and Du, 2021)

Competitiveness of a destination reflects in its ability to properly use the resources it has to create a unique tourist offer that will be competitive on the tourism market while taking care of sustainability of those resources. (Kumar and Dhir, 2020) Tangible and intangible cultural resources can greatly influence the positioning of the destination on the tourism market. For example, competitiveness can be increased by creating thematic tours with cultural and historical features of the destination.

Sustainability of resources is the adequate use of those resources in order to preserve them for future generations. Socio-cultural sustainability is the connection between people and the environment with the protection of cultural resources in mind.

In order to preserve cultural identity of a tourist destination, overtourism must be avoided because it can have harmful consequences on the socio-cultural environment. (Santos *et al.*, 2022)

Authenticity of cultural resources is based on the cultural and historical heritage of a particular destination. In addition to exceptional natural resources, Serbia is a destination rich in history, so part of the tourism offer is based on its cultural resources. The basis of the competitive advantage are the resources of the destination. Along the attractiveness and authenticity of the resources, it is very important to take care of sustainability in order to build the destination's competitive advantage. It is necessary to have professional staff who will deal with maintenance of resources, as well as staff who will adequately present these resources as a tourism offer. Infrastructure, tourism infrastructure and the preservation of historical and cultural heritage must be considered as well. (Popesku, Pavlović, 2013)

The aim of the TTCI index is to measure how different factors affect competitiveness of a destination, influence attractiveness and development of tourism at different destinations (Jovanović *et al.*, 2013). The index and sub-index indicate what needs are to be improved in order to increase the growth of a certain sector. Subindexes used to measure competitiveness are: Enabling Environment, T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions, Infrastructure and Natural and Cultural resources. (Milutinović and Vasović, 2017)

As shown in Table 1, and according to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, in 2019, Serbia was ranked 83rd in the world in terms of competitiveness. If we make comparison between 2015 and 2019, Serbia has reached a better position in the world list (Table 1). (TTCI report, 2019)

Table 1. TTCI Past performance of Serbia (2015 – 2019)

Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Edition	2015	2017	2019
Rank	95/141	95/136	83/140
Score	3.3	3.4	3.6

Source: Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 edition (link: <https://reports.weforum.org/travel-and-tourism-competitiveness-report-2019/country-profiles/#economy=SRB>)



According to the Travel and Tourism Development Index, Serbia was ranked 70th in the world. The subindex measuring development of the destination based on the reason for travel is Travel and Tourism Demand Drivers. This subindex contains three pillars, one of which is cultural resources. (Table 2)

Table 2. TTDI Performance of Serbia 2021

Travel & Tourism Development	2021
Rank	70/117
Score	3.8

Source: Travel & Tourism Development Index 2021 edition (link https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Travel_Tourism_Development_2021.pdf)

Destination's competitiveness is improved when the cultural resources are on the UNESCO World Heritage List, as this attracts many foreign tourists. Having cultural heritage on the World Heritage List is of great importance for it increases destination's historical and cultural value. It is necessary to protect cultural property in order to prolong its life and preserve its quality and values. Implementation of the sustainable development system in the field of tourism can bring benefits and increase the standard of living for the local population while preserving and improving the locality for future generations. (Jovanović *et al.*, 2015)

An interesting fact is that in 2019 Serbia ranked 67th in terms of cultural resources. There are 5 important cultural resources on the UNESCO list, where only 3 are intangible and another one belongs to the category of cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand. (Table 3).

Table 3. TTCI Cultural resources performance of Serbia 2019

2019	VALUE	RANK
Cultural resources and business travel	1.7	67
Number of World Heritage cultural sites	5	49
Oral and intangible cultural heritage	3	52
Cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand	1	112

Source: Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 edition (link: <https://reports.weforum.org/travel-and-tourism-competitiveness-report-2019/country-profiles/#economy=SRB>)

Cultural heritage in Southeast Serbia

Southeast Serbia is rich in both cultural and historical heritage. Part of that historical heritage dates back to the Roman period. This area is rich in colorful customs, traditions and gastronomy that should not be neglected. (Trkulja, 2010; Đukić *et al.*, 2016; Began *et al.*, 2017; Sančanin and Dramićanin, 2019) The largest city in southeastern Serbia is Niš, which is also the birthplace of Constantine the Great.

This part of Serbia boasts many monuments, museums, galleries, cultural events, archaeological sites, monasteries, and churches and three significant fortresses. Examples of historical heritage from the Roman period are the archaeological site of Mediana in Niš and Justinian Primus in Leskovac. Also, part of the heritage dates back to the Turkish period, so we have the famous Skull tower monument in Niš. In addition, significant cultural manifestations and festivals are organized in this part of Serbia. According to the authors, the most famous and significant cultural and historical sites are:

The stone village of Gostuša is located 25 km from Pirot. Fortifications from the Roman period can be found close to the village. The village is characteristic in its appearance with the houses covered with stone slabs. It is considered the oldest village in the Pirot area. (Turistička organizacija Pirot, 2022)



The Ponišavlje Museum dates back to the 19th century and authentically shows how people lived back then. The museum exhibits clothes from that period, jewelry, pottery, furniture, and everything that represents the spirit of the time. Due to its authentic appearance and preserved cultural heritage, our famous film director Zdravko Šotra used the museum as the setting in two of his films that well depicted the life of the people from the southeastern part of Serbia. (Turistička organizacija Pirot, 2022)

Bora Stanković House Museum is the birthplace of the famous writer Bora Stanković. The house was converted into a museum in 1967 and it displays the items that belonged to the writer. The museum also exhibits his books, posters, and photos of theater performances. (Turistička organizacija Vranja, 2022)

Justiniana Prima is an archaeological site located 29 km from Leskovac and is an important landmark of that city. This archaeological site represents Empress's city, founded by Justinian V in the 6th century. (Turistička organizacija Leskovca, 2022)

Mediana is an archaeological site that represents the remains of the ancient city of Naissus, which was built at the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century by the Roman emperor Constantine the Great. It is one of the most important archaeological sites in Serbia. (Turistička organizacija Niš, 2022)

The Skull tower is in Niš and is a unique monument in the world which, according to the Tourism Organization of the city of Niš, is visited by over 30,000 visitors annually. It was built after the battle on Čegar from the skulls of the Serbian soldiers in order to intimidate the local population. (Turistička organizacija Niš, 2019)

METHODOLOGY

Considering the large number of cultural resources in the area of southeastern Serbia, the previously specified localities are the most famous and the most significant according to the opinion of the authors of the paper. Type of the research is survey based. The Questionnaire has 17 questions. It was conducted in August 2022 and represents the experience of tourists in the localities. Based on these data, we will show the attendance of the localities, the accessibility, and the conditions of the localities. Also, the results shall indicate where investments are needed and what could be done to make this region more competitive on the market. The survey was completed by 61 respondents, with 63.9% being women and 36.1% men. The majority of respondents (48.3%) belong to the age group of 25-40 years, 31.1% belong to the age group between 18-25 years, 19.7% to the age group of 40-60 and 1.6% to the group over 60 years. As for education, the majority of respondents, i.e., 34.4%, have a college or university degree, 29.5% have graduated from secondary school, 27.9% of respondents possess a master's degree, 6.6% of respondents completed PhD, whereas 1.6 % of the respondents completed only elementary school.

RESULTS OF THE CONDUCTED RESEARCH

Visiting cultural resources can be a very interesting and educational part of a trip. Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that 90.2% of tourists include visiting cultural resources when planning their trip, whereas only 9.8% of respondents declared that they did not plan to visit cultural resources (Table 4).

Table 4. Results of question number 4 in the research

Are you planning a tour of the destination's cultural resources during your trip?	
YES	90.2%
NO	9.8%

Source: Authors' analysis



As seen in the Table 5, the majority of the people (68.9%), plan their visits and get information from the social networks thus implying that digital marketing has to be high priority when promoting cultural resources.

It certainly cannot be ignored that the majority of respondents belong to the age group 25-40, so that may be the reason why the most common answer is social networks. It must be kept in mind that the information about cultural resources must be presented in different ways and adapted to different ages. In addition to digital marketing, creative ways to advertise the resources must be found and different platforms providing the information about the resources included. (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of the question number 5 in the research

Where do you get information about the cultural resources you plan to visit?	
Social networks	68.9%
Website of the tourism organization	13.1%
Going to the tourism information center	4.9%
Travel agencies	3.3%
Locality brochures	9.8%

Source: Authors' analysis

Based on the results, 80,3% of respondents visited the localities individually. This is not a problem of the tourist offer of the destination, but the insufficiency of local travel agencies, because the emphasis is not often placed on the offer of visiting the localities of the destination. If more visits and a better presentation of the locality is the goal, the above said needs to be a priority. (Table 6)

Table 6. Results of the question number 6 in the research

I visit cultural sights most often:	
Individually	80.3%
Organized visit	19.7%

Source: Authors' analysis

73.8% of people visited the Skull Tower and Mediana, sites in the City of Niš which is the largest city in the region. Therefore, it is only natural that sites around it, are the most visited ones. The results show that the presentation of the localities in Leskovac, Vranje and Pirot must be improved because they are unique, rich in history and culture and are a significant part of the tourism offer of Southeastern Serbia. (Table 7)

Table 7. Results of the question number 7 in the research

What cultural recourses did you visit?	
Mediana and Skull tower	73.8%
The Ponišavlje Museum and The stone village of Gostuša	4.9%
Justiniana Prima	13.1%
Bora Stanković House Museum	8.2%

Source: Authors' analysis

As results indicate, 39.9% of the respondents said that the information about the sites were easily accessible. This is very important, because most tourists inform themselves about the sights to visit before visiting the destination. Also, in accordance with what was previously stated, this can help them decide on a destination to visit. When it comes to competitiveness, this is something that cannot be ignored (Table 8).



Table 8. Results of the question number 9 in the research

Rate the level of information available about the sites	
Very easily accessible	23%
Easily accessible	39.3%
Accessible	27.9%
Hardly accessible	8.2%
Inaccessible	1.6%

Source: Authors' analysis

Table 9 shows that the majority of respondents, i.e., 44.3%, consider traffic infrastructure to be very good. (Table 9) Bearing in mind that most of the answers refer to Mediana and Skull tower, it is necessary to create better traffic infrastructure and tourist signage in other localities in order to improve wayfinding for better tourist experience. This can be a big minus when it comes to competition because traffic infrastructure and tourist signage are necessary when planning development of a tourist destination and locality. The most common answer for tourist signage is that it is well placed and accurate. (Table 10)

Table 9. Results of the question number 9 in the research

Rate the sites traffic infrastructure	
Excellent	14.8%
Very good	44.3%
Good	29.5%
Poor	9.8%
Very poor	1.6%

Source: Authors' analysis

Table 10. Results of the question number 10 in the research

Rate the tourist signage of the locality	
Excellent	14.8%
Very good	29.5%
Good	37.7%
Poor	14.8%
Very poor	3.3%

Source: Authors' analysis

Attention should be paid to localities' accessibility for the disabled, because based on the research results, it can be concluded that the localities are not easily accessed. This refers not only to the need to employ professionals who will be at their disposal during the visit, but also to the adaptation of complete facilities. Also, this will be helpful for the elderly, people with reduced mobility and parents with strollers (Table 11).



Table 11. Results of the question number 12 in the research

Rate the adaptability of the locality to people with disabilities	
Excellent	9.8%
Very good	14.8%
Good	37.7%
Poor	26.2%
Very poor	11.5%

Source: Authors' analysis

The content of the locality is the most important item when evaluating competitiveness of cultural resources. It enables us to learn about the culture and history of the destination. Also, tourists can get closer to the traditions, customs, and way of life of a certain area.

The results provide us with the conclusion that tourists are satisfied with the content of the cultural resources highlighted in the paper. Certainly, in order to stand out on the tourism market and be competitive, the content must be improved. When considering innovation, part of the content can be digitalized, and thus promotion of the locality would be increased to a higher level (Table 12).

Table 12. Results of the question number 14 in the research

To what extent were You satisfied with the composition of the locality	
Extremely satisfied	31.1%
Very satisfied	47.5%
Satisfied	19.7%
Unsatisfied	1.6%
Very unsatisfied	0%

Source: Authors' analysis

Human resources play a major role in competitiveness. In tourism, the relationship between employees and tourists is very important because the attitude and approach of the employees will leave a great impression on the tourists and thus influence their decision whether to visit the destination again. When we talk about cultural resources, it is very important to have a good local tour guide who will know how to properly convey the story and interesting things about the locality and thereby evoke the culture and history of the destination. According to the results, we can see that the employees at the localities have left a good impression on the tourists (Table 13).

Table 13. Results of the question number 15 in the research

Rate the level of service provided by local employees	
Extremely satisfied	29.5%
Very satisfied	39.3%
Satisfied	27.9%
Unsatisfied	1.6%
Very unsatisfied	1.6%

Source: Authors' analysis



DISCUSSION

As the results of the survey indicate, the current state of the presented cultural resources is good, with a lot of room for improvement. First of all, we should think about better organization of receptive tourism. Namely, travel agencies should be included in organizing interesting tours because, based on the research results, most tourists opt for individual organization when it comes to tours. Also, one should consider digital marketing, given that most respondents get information about destinations through social networks. The reason the locations of Mediana and Skull tower are better visited is better marketing implementation in the features of the city.

Results indicate that the information about localities is easily accessible, which is rather good for the destinations. Still, more should be invested in traffic infrastructure and tourist signage in order for the localities to be further improved and more competitive on the market. Also, awareness must be raised, and conditions for people with disabilities must be improved. This can be done by employing a professional who knows sign language, adapting accesses to localities and acquiring digital guides. Although the majority of respondents gave a positive response to the question regarding tourist infrastructure, there is certainly room for improvement, one possibility being to better adapt some accommodation facilities that would show the history of people's lives in these areas.

The positive attitude of the respondents regarding providing the services by employees in this area is of no surprise given that they are known for their hospitality. Content on the sites is satisfactory but should be improved in order to make the resources more attractive for visitors and thereby increase competitiveness. Promotion of the locality should be on a higher level, as mentioned earlier in the paper. Digital marketing and innovative promotional activities should take up a greater part in promotion activities.

This research had some limitations. It would be better if a larger number of respondents participated in the survey so as to have a larger sample and a more precise picture of the state of the localities included in the research. However, this can be a very good basis for further research.

CONCLUSION

Competitiveness of a destination is a very important part of any tourist offer and all elements must be included. The Southeastern part of Serbia boasts its competitiveness precisely with its cultural resources, which is the main reason why more attention should be paid to them. With competent professional staff and elimination of deficiencies, greater competitiveness can be achieved, as well as a greater degree of resource conservation. It is necessary to pay more attention to the prominent localities in the paper, related to Pirot, Leskovac and Vranje, bearing in mind that they are historically and culturally of exceptional importance for this area. Preservation and improvement of these can result in increasing competitiveness of Southeastern Serbia.

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