



The Potential for Sustainable Tourism Development and Branding. Analysis of Krushevo and Elbasan Destinations

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Received: November 29, 2022

Accepted: January 13, 2023

Published: June 12, 2023

Keywords:

Adventure tourism;
Natural environment;
Cultural immersion;
Physical activity



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Abstract: *UNWTO forecasted that international arrivals or outbound travelers worldwide will reach up to 1.8 billion by 2030, thus securing tourism as one of the fastest-growing economic activities fostering overall development, introducing new investments, and generating income and new employment. Tourism's overall impact on a nation also influences the local economy although it is quite challenging to measure this impact and its dimension. Over the last few years, tourism in Albania and North Macedonia has had ups and downs considering the Covid-19 pandemic situation which also determined the importance of sustainable tourism development and its influence in the tourism sector. The study provides a framework analysis of Krushevo and Elbasan as a single thematic tourism destination by using primary and secondary data and reveals evidence-based recommendations for local and national policymakers to design innovative tourism programs in these cities. The findings show that Krushevo and Elbasan have similarities mostly in the category of access points, attractions, and amenities and variations in the type and quality of the activities offered.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is considered one of the most profitable sectors in the economy. It plays an increasingly significant role in Albania's and North Macedonia's economies. The paper elaborates on the situation analysis of both destinations Krushevo and Elbasan, in line to set a joint strategic direction for further development of the destination of Krushevo and Elbasan as a single thematic tourism destination focusing on active and adventure tourism products. It is structured into five sections. The introduction section is followed by an overview of the potential of the tourism sector for economic development. The third section provides an analysis of the current situation regarding strategies and policies at local, regional, and national levels. The fourth section presents the used methodology in this paper and follows by results. The fifth section concludes and provides recommendations on how to solve some tourism problems in both destinations.

2. TOURISM SECTOR AND THE POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Tourism plays an important role in the economic development of a country. Many governments see tourism as a suitable tool for improving the balance of payments, attracting foreign investments, and mitigating unemployment. Besides the direct effects of tourism, like increased income and growth of working places, the "multiplier effect of tourism" exists. This means that the right way to measure the overall impact of tourism on a country's economy must consider not only the direct beneficiaries of tourism income but also indirect beneficiaries.

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According to UNWTO (2019), “The international arrivals or outbound travelers worldwide will reach up to 1.8 billion by 2030, thus securing tourism as one of the fastest-growing economic activities fostering overall development, introducing new investments, and generating income and new employment”. Before COVID-19 travel restrictions, evidence shows a growing popularity of Krushevo and Prilep as a destination for paragliding. This has visibly increased tourism in the area of Pelagonija. According to local providers’ estimation in 2017, outside of paragliding championships, “Krushevo welcomed at least 1 000 international guests who visited for leisure paragliding activities or to prepare for upcoming competitions”. Based on the interviews with the providers of accommodation in Krushevo (KET Project, 2022), which is supported by the official statistics as well, the greatest portion (up to 90%) of the total arrivals in 2021 count to the domestic tourism encompassing all market segments within the national economy: families, couples, friends, private groups, small organized groups; traveling per one-day visit, long weekends, holiday, event attending. Most visits included at least one physical activity like walking in nature, hiking, biking, and horseback riding. Below is presented in a table the number of overnights in Krushevo and Elbasan.

Table 1. The overnights in Elbasan and Krushevo

Year	No. of overnights in Elbasan	No. of overnights in Krushevo
2017	11756	46741
2018	12809	51526
2019	13654	56660
2020	10800	44273
2021	12300	52454

Source: Municipality of Elbasan, 2021 & MacStat database 2022

Due to its geographical position, Elbasan must rely upon specific types of tourism, mainly adventure, historical and health-related. Within Albania, Elbasan must compete with other regions with coastlines and regions that are already popular as mountainous destinations. Besides these, Elbasan has created the image of a polluted city for many years, where the main business activities focus on industrial production, not services or tourism. But not everything is grey from the perspective of Elbasan as a tourist destination. Being situated at the very center of Albania makes it easily accessible from the main entry points in Albania. It also is rich with potential tourism resources and has a long tradition of hospitality, which form a solid base to turn Elbasan into a distinctive tourism destination. Most tourist visits to Elbasan are related to thermal spas in Llixha (Tregan), about 7-to-10-night stays. These visits are active during spring and autumn when the weather is favorable for thermal-related health treatments. Another destination that involves overnight stay is Gjinar, a mountainous destination situated about 24 km from Elbasan. Although it is well known as a beautiful tourist destination, few activities are offered there, resulting in tourists staying no more than 1-2 nights. Most of them make a day visit, enjoying traditional food, clean air, and wonderful nature. Elbasan is known for organizing the “Summer Day” feast every year on March 14, also a national holiday. Thousands of visitors come that day or a day before to enjoy traditional food and outdoor picnics, creating a festive atmosphere in Elbasan and nearby surroundings. But the duration of tourists is not more than one night, and most are one-day visitors.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION REGARDING STRATEGIES AND POLICIES AT LOCAL, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL LEVELS

The consulted literature presented in the table below sets the foundation for further development of the local destinations of Krushevo and Elbasan. It comprises a depth presentation of the local destination potential and their development directions from a strategic point of view. Both national and local level strategic documents align with current EU trends in tourism development in general. Several aspects specific to the local destination (active tourism, wellness tourism, rural tourism) are highlighted as the most potent touristic features for further destination development. Below is a summary of the strategic planning for the destination development of Krushevo and Elbasan, respectively.

	Organization	Strategies/Plans/Research documents
1	Municipality of Krushevo	Tourism Development Strategy of Municipality of Krushevo 2020-2025
2	Municipality of Krushevo	An integrated plan for local development of the municipality of Krushevo, 2019-2022
3	Centre for development of Pelagonija region	Program for development of Pelagonija region 2021-2026
4	Centre for development of Pelagonija region	Study for the development of Pelagonija as a destination for adventure tourism “Pelagonija - Shaped for adventure”
5	Bureau for regional development of North Macedonia	National strategy for regional development 2021-2031
6	Ministry of Economy of North Macedonia, sector Tourism	National Tourism Strategy Republic Of Macedonia The Final Version Of Kohl & Partner, 2016-2021
7	Ministry of Economy of North Macedonia, sector Tourism Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism in the Republic of Northern Macedonia	National Strategy for rural tourism 2012-2017
8	LRCP	Tourism Development Plans for Ten Destinations across North Macedonia Volume 1 – Methodology, Background, and Market Analysis 2016
9	LRCP	Tourism Development Plans For Ten Destinations Across North Macedonia Volume II – Destination Development Plans November 2016
10	LRCP	Destination Development plan No.3 Pelagonija, 2017
11	Ministry for local-self-government, North Macedonia	IPA CBC Programme the Republic of North Macedonia - Republic of Albania 2014-2020 IPA III CBC 2021-2027 Programming between North Macedonia and Albania
12	Municipality of Elbasan	Territory Development Strategy for Municipality of Elbasan
13	Municipality of Elbasan	Strategic Development Plan of the City of Elbasan 2010 - 2020
14	The Republic of Albania, Council of Ministers	National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI II) 2015-2020
15	Ministry of Tourism, Albania	The Strategy for Tourism Development in Albania for 2019-2023
16	Ministry of Tourism, Albania	Integrated Program for Rural Development (IPRD) - The program of 100 Villages

17	Law on Tourism	The Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia Ministry of Economy, Republic of North Macedonia
18	Law on tourism	Albania
19	Legal and Institutional Framework on Tourism, Albania 2018	Investment Council Secretariat, Albania
20	Beyond Borders – Introducing Smart Tourism and Sharing Economy, an EU-funded project	Study of the natural and cultural heritage of the CBC region
21		Study of Sustainable Tourism in Cross-Border Region
22	Beyond Borders – Introducing Smart Tourism and Sharing Economy, IPA II CBC MK-AL funded project	Study on Supply of Available Tourist Services and Tourist Potential in Cross-Border Region

According to the [Municipality of Krushevo \(2020\)](#), “The Municipality of Krushevo claims to become one of the most visited tourist destination centers, both in North Macedonia and more widely in the Balkans and Europe”. That is why this municipality was involved in a series of projects in the field of tourism, and the ultimate goal is the development of adventure tourism with which the city can grow into a destination visited throughout the year. Furthermore, Krushevo is recognized as a hard adventure destination (Krushevo, Prilep, and the surrounding areas) where there is sufficient market proof for the international competitiveness of the assets for paragliding. As per the analysis in-depth concerning the LRCP project funded by the EU and implemented by the World Bank, “growth in this segment, as well as diversification of the hard adventure offering with other activities such as rock climbing, bouldering, and others, has very strong potential to create new business opportunities and new high-skilled jobs”.

Centre of Development stated that there is a very rich cultural and historical heritage of various kinds, of which the archaeological site of Heraclea, the city architecture of Bitola, and the traditional architecture of Krushevo, as well as numerous churches, monasteries, museums, urban and rural memorial units, etc., numerous natural sites, that represent a huge potential for developing different types of tourism (lake, mountain, monastery, village, etc.), and improving the economy in the region.

Albania is appreciated by many international operators and visitors for its beautiful nature and landscapes. Natural and rural areas in Albania offer opportunities for developing rural tourism, mountain tourism, ecotourism, and outdoor activities (rafting, paragliding, hang gliding, mountain biking, fishing, trekking, mountaineering, hiking, horseback riding, study tours, etc.). Some of these activities are the main motive for visits by foreign visitors to the natural areas.

Development of mountain tourism resulted in the stabilization of a considerable number of tours organized in Theth, Vermosh-Lepusha, Valbona, and Tropoja, in the Albanian Alps, Diber and Bulqiza area, in the mountainous area of Tirana, the mountainous area of Elbasan and Librazhd, the mountainous area of Korça, the mountain of Tomor, Llogara and Karaburun and the mountainous region of Gjirokastra and Permet. On the other hand, tourism in environmentally protected areas is also added to the category. This category includes several forms of tourism, such as agro-tourism, event and business tourism, cultural tourism (heritage, history, religion, etc.), ethno-gastronomic tourism, and health tourism (thermal, welfare, and medical).

According to the [Ministry of Tourism \(2019\)](#), “The Municipality of Elbasan is the main actor that coordinates and pushes tourism policies locally, in concordance with National Strategy for

Sustainable Tourism Development and there are efforts to promote Elbasan as a tourist destination, evidencing its main attractions and organizing several events and feasts during the year”. **Municipality of Elbasan (2010)** stated, “According to the Territory Development Strategy for the Municipality of Elbasan, Elbasan has good potential for developing ecological, natural, agricultural, health, mountainous, and historical/cultural tourism”. Some of the projects planned to be prepared are (i) a complete map with historical assets of the municipality of Elbasan; (ii) identification of needs for restorative interventions in historical assets and designing of respective technical projects; (iii) improvement of road infrastructure for main touristic destinations in Elbasan municipality.

4. METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of this document is to develop a robust understanding and elaborate possible opportunities for destination development and gain valuable insights into the actual situation of tourism in Krushevo and Elbasan. This paper adopts combined research methods using primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected using two methods; workshops and in-depth interviews.

Two joint cross-border workshops with the main tourism stakeholders were organized in North Macedonia and Albania to collect local experiences, possibilities, views, and ideas from relevant stakeholders and beneficiaries from Krushevo – Elbasan cross-border area. There were 48 participants (32 men and 16 women), all representatives from tour operators, hospitality businesses, local government, non-profit organizations, cultural institutions, and academia.

The in-depth interviews were organized after the workshops. The participants took part in structured interviews held in the framework of this study. In-depth interviews were useful for fully understanding the opinions, experiences, and suggestions of the main actors of the tourism sector in Krushevo and Elbasan. During these interviews, the following list of themes and questions were covered:

- How can be Krushevo and Elbasan viewed as tourist attractions? What is its identity?
- What events and activities have been done about tourism in Krushevo and Elbasan, and what can be done more?
- How to improve the marketing of Krushevo and Elbasan as tourist destinations? How can it be promoted?
- How to improve the tourist infrastructure?
- What can be done to improve tourism services in general?

The secondary data were also part of the research input. Extensive desk research was conducted through analysis and review of the whole documents, plans, and strategies available in the field. Desk research was mainly employed to create a general view of Krushevo and Elbasan’s local destinations and their tourism potential.

5. RESULTS

The analysis of the primary data gathered from in-depth interviews and joint discussions at the cross-border workshops and the secondary data from consulting relevant literature supported forming a general situation analysis of tourism development potentials in Krushevo and Elbasan.

In general, both Krushevo and Elbasan can be perceived as adventure & active destinations following the above analysis regarding the ATTA definition of adventure tourism as a trip that includes at least two of the following three elements: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion.

Furthermore, the extensive analysis of the 5As, presented above, on the key elements of the destination: access, accommodation, attractions, activities, and amenities revealed:

- Similarities mostly in the category of access points, attractions, and amenities;
- Moderate consistency in the variety of accommodation capacities, and
- Variations in the type and quality of the activities offered.

Regarding amenities, both Krushevo and Elbasan offer standard and regular internet access coverage at satisfying levels and health protection institutions. There is a lack of locally organized transport.

The conducted research contributed to identifying some of the problems and challenges for further development of tourism in Krushevo and Elbasan:

- Lack of a distinctive strategy for tourism development at Elbasan Municipality.
- There is no one-stop-shop - Tourist Info Centre in Krushevo offering systemized and promotional information on touristic offers in the town;
- There is no systemized and integrated touristic offer in the form of ready-to-use products, such as guided tours to attractions in Krushevo and Elbasan;
- There is a great lack of certified local guides in multiple languages, even in English;
- Waste management requires improvements;
- Capacity building for hospitality service providers is required to meet travelers' expectations.
- Modernizing the curriculum in the high school for hospitality and upgrading the cooperation with the private sector are needed;
- No digital access for self-guided tours (biking and hiking) in multilanguage is available;
- There is no dedicated directory for tourism development and policies in the Municipality of Elbasan;
- Poor road infrastructure to main tourist points of interest.

6. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic period influenced in decreasing number of tourists in Albania and North Macedonia. The restrictions of COVID-19 made tourism pause for some months and the number of tourists was lower compared with previous years. Because of its interdependence with other sectors of the economy, from one side, tourism triggers development across the local economy. On the other side, it is quite challenging to determine the exact economic impact tourism as a sector has on the local economy. In addition, it is also a complex exercise to determine which investment is purely touristic related when once investing in road or health infrastructure, the destination benefits as well in regards to more accessible and safer tourist areas to visit.

Amenities are of particular interest to adventure tourism development as they include safety logistics, internet access, health insurance, and access to first-aid facilities, etc. Recent developments due to COVID-19 introduced anti-spread amenities, including special measures for cleaning the accommodation and transport facilities, public spaces, and sites of great attraction.

Based on the results stated in the paper, Elbasan and Krushevo have so many touristic places to be visited by foreigners and so many activities they can do there. Though, those cities do not offer a very comfortable infrastructure, along with the impossibility of having multilanguage guides, missing additional tourism information from the central and local government, or even non-existent.

Krushevo offers clean air and an unpolluted natural environment due to its specific location and lack of transport. Food is of great attraction potential as well as both territories can still offer healthy and homemade food, whether served in traditional restaurants or B&Bs.

Increased infrastructural investments in Krushevo and Elbasan highly contribute towards the attractiveness of the local destinations in terms of accessibility to sites for adventure, fostering the overall economic development in the cross-border area, which leads to more jobs, higher income, and higher export of services.

To conclude, Krushevo and Elbasan will not have only a project together to promote sustainable tourism, but also a change, a development, and a solution to the tourism problems in those cities.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the above analysis of the two local destinations and investigating possibilities for developing joint adventure touristic packages, it is conclusive that both Krushevo and Elbasan should follow further tourism development in adventure travel, as their greatest potential is that specific type of tourism.

In that regard, both destinations share elements that are base for linking the offer at the current situation and use that as a foundation for further development, following the recommendations below:

- Setting up local DMO for Krushevo (municipality),
- Developing USP and UVP for Krushevo (DMO),
- Developing consistent and unique promotional messages for all-year-round adventure Krushevo (DMO),
- Developing and implementing a national advertising campaign on Krushevo (a joint effort of all stakeholders),
- Developing and promoting digital tools (web-based) for self-guided hiking and biking tours in Krushevo,
- Further marking of hiking and biking trails in Krushevo,
- Introducing downhill biking trails during the summer on the ski runs (private concessioner, municipality),
- Further improvement of the paragliding infrastructure, extra take-off spot, and large facility at the site,
- Further refinement of the road network, focus on road access to attractions: Meckin Kamen and Adventure Park,
- Building long and greater capacity zip line in Krushevo,
- Establishing a dedicated directory for tourism and tourism policies and development in the Municipality of Elbasan,
- Developing a dedicated web page for tourism in Elbasan,
- Evidencing, signaling, marking and promoting hiking and biking trails in Elbasan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research is developed in the frame of the project titled: “Krushevo and Elbasan – acknowledged cross-border tourism destination”. The project is supported by the IPA II CBC Programme North Macedonia-Albania and implemented by Alka, Skopje and Tjeter Vizion, Elbasan

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