

CULTURAL HERITAGE AS THE BASIS OF TOURISM PLANNING IN DEPOPULATING REGIONS: THE CASE OF THE IRON GATES, SERBIA

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Abstract: *The Iron Gates on the Danube is the longest gorge in Europe. As such, it is primarily known by its natural beauty and scenery. Its size and special natural conditions have also influenced the creation and preservation of interesting places of cultural heritage and folk tradition and culture. The isolation of the Iron Gates as a difficult-to-access gorge divided between two countries – Romania and Serbia – has hindered the development and promotion of this region for many years, causing further extreme depopulation. However, in the last 15 years, better cooperation between the two countries and growing tourism along the Danube as an international river have increasingly revealed the cultural heritage of the gorge to foreign tourists. Spatial and urban planning in the Serbian part of the Iron Gates have significantly contributed to individual places of cultural heritage becoming destinations within this tourist region. This paper presents the positive and negative experience of planning in order to promote the given cultural heritage in this still depopulated region.*

Keywords: *Cultural Heritage; The Iron Gates; Cultural Tourism; Spatial Planning; Tourist Destination.*

Introduction

The Iron Gates (Serb. *Ђердан/Đerdap*) are the longest gorge on the Danube, which is also the longest river in the western half of Europe, i.e., outside Russia. Therefore, this gorge represents a unique region with many peculiarities. First, the gorge is primarily known by its natural beauty and scenery (figure 1).



Figure 1. The narrowest part of the Iron Gates – Veliki Kazan narrow – is a place of magnificent scenery (author: B. Antonić)

The size and physical remoteness of the gorge has formed special conditions that have also influenced the creation and preservation of interesting places of cultural heritage and folk tradition and culture. In addition, the gorge was isolated as a borderland region, divided between Romania (northern side) and Serbia (southern side), for decades, with many negative socio-economic consequences (Băbăţ & Pavel, 2022). Hence, this challenging situation has hindered the recent development of the whole region and the sustainable promotion and use of its rich heritage, further causing extreme depopulation on both sides (Antonić et al., 2019).

However, in the last 15 years, better cooperation between the two countries and growing tourism along the Danube have increasingly revealed the cultural heritage of the gorge to foreign tourists. Spatial and urban planning in the Serbian part of the Iron Gates have significantly contributed to individual places of cultural heritage becoming destinations within this tourist region. This paper presents the positive and negative experience of territorial planning in order to promote the given cultural heritage in this still depopulated region. In this way, the aim of the paper is to contribute to the growing number of researches which examine the role and possibilities of cultural heritage in space with long-term depopulation and shrinkage patterns.

Methodology

This paper is shaped as a contextual analysis, as the complex natural and socio-economical context of the Serbian region of the Iron Gates on the Danube is less known internationally. Knowing that the main purpose of a contextual analysis as a research method is to analyse complex issues in order to better understand it, this paper is organised into several steps to achieve this. First, it begins with the theory that links the role and possibilities of cultural heritage in space with long-term depopulation and spatial and urban shrinkage. Then, it explains the selected context of the Iron Gates, with a focus on territorial planning in depopulating conditions. The main step is an inner analysis, which bridges two previous steps by elaborating positive and negative experience of territorial planning in order to promote the given cultural heritage through tourism in the Iron Gates. Finally, the last step is to give recommendations for the future territorial planning in concluding remarks, both targeting local and international levels, i.e., those recommendations that can be easily implemented for the Iron Gates region and similar depopulating global regions with rich cultural heritage and limited other resources.

A research unit in this scientific work is a characteristic regional context – the Serbian part of the Iron Gates Region. The Iron Gates (Serb. *Ђерџан/Đerdap*) are really a unique place in Europe. Its inner part – the gorge – is the longest one (130 km) in Europe and on the Danube, the second longest river of the continent and, as crossing 10 European countries, the most international river worldwide. However, the cultural and socio-economic influences of the gorge goes beyond its physical prominence; hence, the Iron Gates Region is significantly larger than the gorge itself (figure 2). As it was aforementioned, the gorge is politically divided between Romania and Serbia, where the

Danube is a border. Its left/northern side is Romanian, while the right/southern side is Serbian.

Concerning the aforementioned contextual analysis, used research techniques combine on-desk and on-site research. The on-desk research pertains to (a) the review of relevant literature regarding small shrinking regions with cultural and tourist potential and (b) the analysis of the recent demographic statistics to quantitatively confirm that the Iron Gates Region belongs to this profile. The on-site research is more qualitative as it is based on seven-year experience working with local experts, representatives and citizens from the Iron Gates through fieldwork. Their key observations about local prospects and challenges in regional and urban development from joint workshops and side-talks are scrutinised into the core of this analysis.

Literature review: Cultural heritage in depopulated places

The role and potential of cultural heritage in the space and regions with noticeable or extreme depopulation patterns is still an understudied topic. However, the role of cultural heritage is equally important in shrinking regions and settlements as in growing ones (Evans, 2011). In addition, its role in shrinking regions and settlements is different, too; the sustainable (re)use and promotion of cultural heritage within regional and urban renewal had to make a “positive image” in this case. The worst scenario in this process is to leave cultural heritage without proper function and users (Kaufman, 2011). Finally, in many small communities with extreme shrinking patterns, the proper use of heritage (both cultural and natural) is to see the critical element for their economic survival, as traditional economic sectors (agriculture, forestry, etc.) are not attractive enough for younger generations (Signes-Pont et al., 2022).

As shrinking and depopulation regions and settlements usually have limited local capacities (financial, organisational, professional, etc.), a strategic approach in the sustainable (re)use and promotion of cultural heritage is an imperative (Evans, 2011), (Fernández Agueda, 2014). It is important to make priorities in the process of the (re)use and promotion, as the first examples of revitalised cultural heritage can be utilised as new “magnets” for wider urban and regional renewal in the second step. The limited local capacities sometimes require tough decisions in regional and urban planning and urban design. K. Strauß (Strauß, 2012) states that it cannot be expected that all historical buildings will be preserved in shrinking historic settlements. In eastern part of Germany, such interventions pertain to multiple choices, including full regeneration to complete demolition (Knippschild & Zöllter, 2021). These complex decisions do not exclude intangible cultural heritage, as its decline is also related to depopulation (CUP, 2023).

However, the precondition for triggering local development through cultural heritage is usually related to tangible cultural heritage, where its physical component (“appearance”) is of great importance. Laursen (Laursen, 2009) insists that the positive interpretation of physical interventions in a shrinking environment is critical for their success. Wassenberg et al. (Wassenberg et al., 2007) expand this statement by implying

that there are the multiple impacts of renewed built ambience, where it is not important just to (1) upgrade the physical quality of buildings and open space, but also to (2) visually improve the whole ambience, representing a clear sign that its development is moving in the right direction, and to (3) indirectly enhance local socio-economic prospects through previously explained elements. Finally, such physical interventions on tangible cultural heritage can not be without its function renewal, with their adaptation, modernisation and/or reuse (Ryan, 2012).

The usual aim of the sustainable use of cultural heritage in shrinking and depopulating regions and places is to develop cultural tourism based on it. International literature shows that both external and internal factors can be utilised in these attempts. External factors can make a significant contribution in these regions and places by intervening in the form of “flagship” projects. Their spatial results are mainly renewed or new buildings and complexes related with the facilities of tertiary and quaternary economic sectors, typical for the post-industrial development, where tourism, culture and close sectors (creativity, retail, business, services) are in focus (Smyth, 2005). The main goal of such projects is the promotion and branding of a place (Zenker & Beckmann, 2013). This can be achieved quite quickly. Nevertheless, community-based cultural tourism is better to address the long-term recovery of depopulated places (Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021). Finally, the development of tourism had to be fully controlled as mass and over-tourism can be equally challenging for small shrinking regions and settlements as vulnerable places with limited local resources (Hospers, 2019). This can become even a problem at local level, as citizens start to refuse the further tourist development (Peeters et al, 2018).

Context: Iron Gates Region

The Iron Gates Region (Figure 2) is a very unique place in Europe due to specific natural and cultural conditions.

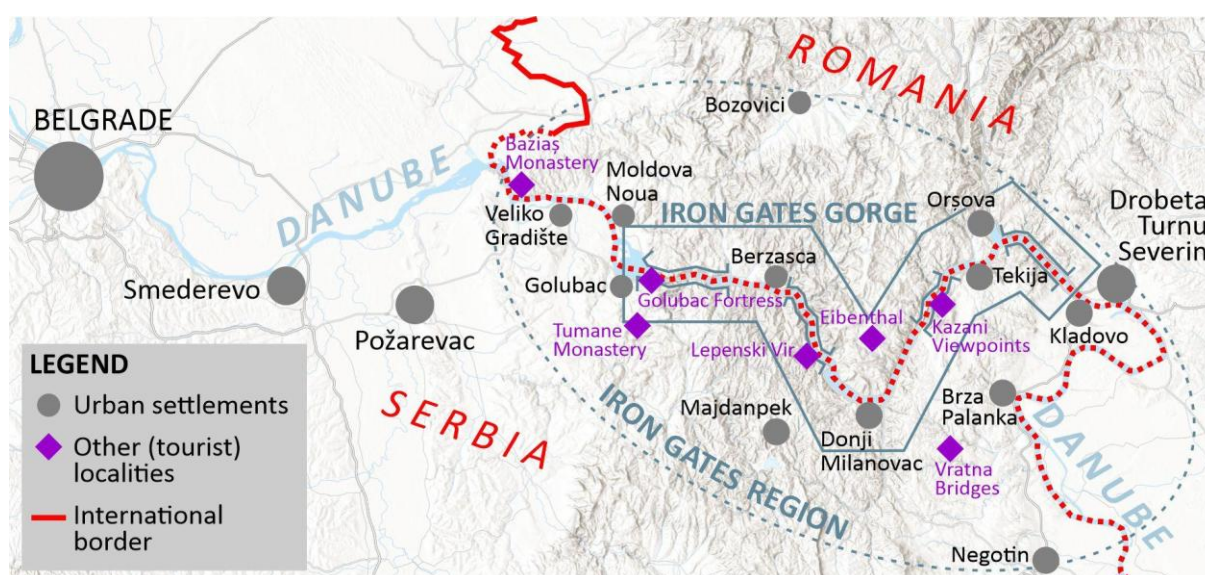


Figure 2. The position of the Iron Gates in Serbia and their main locations (author: B. Antonić).

The gorge is not geomorphologically monolithic, too; there are four inner narrows and three valleys between them. The most extreme narrow is 180-m wide Veliki Kazan (Eng. *Great Cauldron*) in the central section of the Iron Gates (figure 1), where the deepest point (82 m) of any European river can be found (Stanković, 2002). There extraordinary figures for the Iron Gates are followed with many other natural peculiarities, which was decisive to proclaim the Serbian part of the gorge as a national park in 1974. The remoteness of the gorge and its micro-climate significantly contribute to this, including specific flora and fauna, rich biodiversity and many endemic species (Maran Stevanović, 2017). Then, the geomorphological characteristics make the gorge unique, with the variety of the tectonic structures. For example, the largest natural stone bridge in Europe is situated in the eastern edge of the Iron Gates Region (Gavrilović, 2024).

The cultural heritage of the Iron Gates is equally unique due to historical and physical circumstances. One of the first permanent prehistoric settlements in European inland – Lepenski Vir – is discovered in the gorge (Pavlović, 2017). Today, this is one of the gorge museums and the most attractive locations (figure 3). The name of the gorge – the Iron Gates – is derived from two fortresses at its ends, which were the “gates” to control this waterway. Golubac Fortress (figure 4) is on the western entrance of the gorge, while Fetislam Fortress in on its eastern entrance. In addition, there are three monasteries in the gorge’s hinterlands, as well as several preserved and protected examples of rural and ethnic-heritage. The last albeit huge and most visible human-made “heritage” is the largest hydro-plant in Europe excluding Russia – the Iron Gates I – close to the eastern entrance of the gorge. The dam project has formed a spacious artificial lake with the same name, which flooded dozens of settlements in the 1970s. New settlements are unique example of modernist socialist urbanism and architecture in a small format (Antonić, 2021).



Figure 3. Lepenski Vir archaeological site and museum (author: B. AntoniĆ).

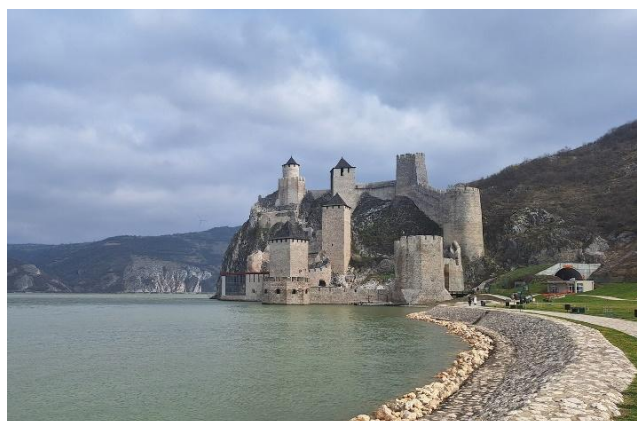


Figure 4. Recently reconstructed Golubac Fortress (author: B. AntoniĆ).

The long-term political division of the Iron Gates just severed its natural remoteness, further causing weak local economy and rampant depopulation since World War II. In the case of the Serbian side, all four municipalities located in the gorge have witnessed significant population loss since the fall of socialism in 1991 (table 1). Similar situations can be noticed for several small towns situated on the Danube banks in the

gorge. They were among the most depopulating urban settlements in Serbia during the post-socialist period, while Brza Palanka was infamous as the most shrinking urban settlement in Serbia for the last intercensal period 2011-2022 (Antonić, 2024).

Table 1. Demographic trends in Serbian municipalities in the Iron Gates Region 1948-2022.

Source: (SORS, 2024), (SORS, 2023).

Municipality	Population census								Trends 1991-2022
	1948	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2011	2022	
Golubac	14,844	15,320	14,178	13,541	12,513	9,913	8,331	6,599	-47.2%
Majdanpek	19,610	23,022	26,120	26,628	27,378	23,703	18,686	14,559	-46.7%
Kladovo	26,161	28,217	33,173	33,376	31,881	23,613	20,635	17,435	-45.3%
Negotin	63,447	65,409	63,706	63,973	59,559	43,418	37,056	28,261	-52.5%

The recent development of cultural tourism on the Danube has been a new driving force for local economic recovery in the gorge. As the demographic data for 2022 shows in Table 1, this is still unnoticeable in the latest population trends. However, Golubac and Donji Milanovac as two “most touristic settlements” have slowed their demographic decline during the period 2011-2022 (Antonić, 2024), which is perhaps the very first signal for the positive effect of (cultural) tourism on the desired repopulation of the Iron Gates Region.

Experience from on-site research

Literature review indicates many important points which should be taken into account to develop cultural tourism in depopulating regions and places. In the case of the Serbian part of the Iron Gates Region, local experience can be scrutinised in several important points.

It is already mentioned that depopulating regions and places usually face the other constraints (aside of depopulation) and limited local capacities. Therefore, a TOP-DOWN APPROACH in local development seems to be necessary in this case, at least in the first phase. For example, the representatives of local tourist offices and other public services in the Iron Gates municipalities agree that the recovery of (cultural) tourism in the gorge, which started a decade ago, was initiated by flagship projects, support from upper levels: national (Serbian government) and international (the EU and Turkish national funds). These flagships include new cultural sites: the reconstruction of two fortresses (Golubac and Fetislam in Kladovo) with new visitor centres, two new museums in Donji Milanovac (the nature of the gorge) and in Lepenski Vir (for the prehistoric archaeological site). Interestingly, Tumane Monastery near Golubac has also recently become a major pilgrimage site, which has fueled religious and cultural tourism.

The recent development of local tourism underpins that these huge investments in flagship projects has made a positive impact on the whole Iron Gates. In general, municipal level and local private sectors have understood the benefits of cultural tourism and have become more active. For example, Golubac Municipality is in process of establishing a municipal museum, while Majdanpek Municipality has recently invested in

the renewal of the centre of Donji Milanovac with a new pedestrian zone. Private sector has also reacted to this new local “energy”. For instance, the number of beds in the tourist sector in Golubac Town has increased more than tenfold in the last ten years (from 50 to 600+), whereas the number of restaurants has had similar patterns – from three to seven in the same period. Kladovo has got one four-state hotel, which is a “backbone” in the tourist offer of the whole region today. There are also many “grassroots” in local cultural tourism, such as boat and walking guides or the destileries of traditional brandy beverages.

The linear character of the Iron Gates as a river gorge was ideal in the initial phase of regional tourist recovery, as activated new and renewed tourist locations are approximately 20 km from each other. The linear character perfectly concurs in easily creating a clear cultural route, where many small locations make together a complete tourist product (Meyer, 2004). This situation also enabled the explained process of prioritisation, i.e., a focus to develop the main locations in the initial phase. This rational approach was successfully implemented in the initial phase, i.e., before 2020. Since then, positive and negative tendencies have been observed. The linear development along the Danube riverbanks has been continued through small-scale private investments, such as restaurants, cafes, cottages, etc. They include both the restoration of already existing buildings and the construction of new ones. There is an interesting fact related to this region, which traditionally have many immigrants in Western and Central Europe (a.k.a. Gastarbeiter), as some of them have returned home and rationally remodelled their unnecessary spacious houses into new tourist guesthouses for local and foreign tourists.

However, it seems that this vigour is not present in the Iron Gates mountainous hinterlands, where many villages are facing complete depopulation. Similarly, more remote settlements along the Danube, such Tekija (figure 5) and Dobra, still facing low-budget and highly seasonal tourism. The previous issue is particularly visible by comparing it with a positive case of Tumane Monastery in Golubac hinterlands, i.e., 10 km south from the town and the Danube. The monastery has become a major pilgrimage site for Orthodox Christians in last five years, so it has risen as an important “tourist hotspot” in the western Iron Gates. As accommodation in Golubac Town has become relatively expensive for pilgrims as financially sensitive visitors of this area, nearby villages in Golubac hinterlands have taken them with inexpensive rooms and guesthouses. Similarly, two restaurants, as well as road shops with specific offer for pilgrims have emerged to service this growing and already numerous tourist group.

Another problem is the restoration and reuse of large socialist buildings and complexes in all municipalities. Again, local representatives emphasise the negative examples of their fast privatisation in the early stage of the post-socialist transition (1990s-2000s). Nowadays, many socialist hotels, which are still nice buildings from the 1970s-1980s, further located in the centres of the towns (figure 6), are still underused or used for low-budget mass tourism, such as school excursions or the trips of pensioners. Then, all towns in the Iron Gates Region have industrial complexes from socialist era, usually located next to the riverbank. Most of them lost their function in the east stage of the post-

socialist transition. However, their reuse of, at least, the reuse of their valuable land is still in a “vacuum” in many cases.

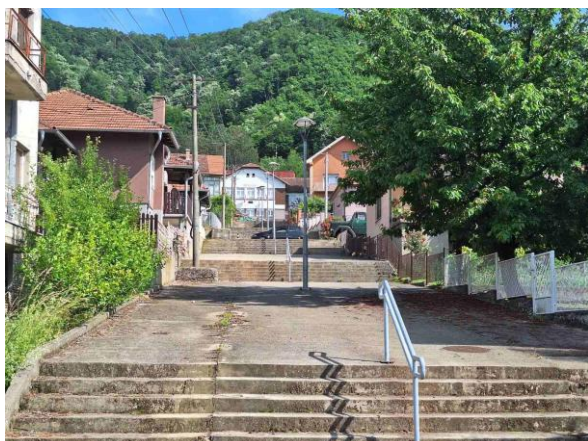


Figure 5. Tekija in late May 2024: the town is “sleepy” out of the main/summer season (author: B. Antić);



Figure 6. “Lepenski vir” Hotel in Donji Milanovac – the hotel from the late socialism is still underused despite the town has been in revitalisation last years (author: B. Antić).

Another problem is the promotion of intangible cultural heritage, such as local tradition, customs and specific skills. Local associations suffer from the previous “brain drain”. The generation in their forties and early fifties, which should be the backbone of this type of local economy, emigrated 20 years ago from the Iron Gates, so this important “link” is missing. Therefore, local skills and products are not promoted in adequate ways. For instance, the association of Golubac women to revive traditional handcrafts is much less successful in promoting and selling its products than the souvenir shops that sell products “from outside”. The producers of local food and drinks are a bit better. Honey from the Iron Gates is protected by geographical origin. Local white fish soup and grilled cheese can be ordered in local restaurants, but they are still without an official protection.

Considering all previous data and trends, local cultural tourism in the Iron Gates Region is much forward than the state it was just 10 years ago. Nevertheless, it is still too much oriented to several main tourist sites as attractions, so the wider community does not have benefits from its rapid development. The quality is behind quantity in local tourism. Thus, tourists tend to stay shorter, usually a few days. As a result, unqualified and low-wage jobs dominate the local tourism labour market. This state is therefore unfriendly for educated and high-skilled workers targeting post-industrial economic sectors (creativity, retail, business, tourism, services), so local “brain drain” is still very much present.

Conclusions

Concluding recommendations are shaped to address both international and local relevance. Thus, they are focused to answer two questions; (a) What can be done to fuel the future development of qualitative cultural tourism in the Iron Gates Region in Serbia as a severely depopulated area to stop or, at least, slow depopulation by reviving its socio-

economic prospects? (b) In addition, which positive and negative experience from the Iron Gates can be used for its future development, as well as for the other world regions with similar challenges?

First, the regions with severe depopulation and accompanied constraints, such as limited local resources, need long-term top-down support. However, after the first stage, based on implementing flagship projects as a well-known approach, this top-down involvement had to be “smarter”, by building local human and organisational capacities for the economic sectors of the 21st century. Apart from tourism, they are creative industries, services, retail, logistics, technology-driven economy, etc. A return to the previously important sectors which require a lot of working force, such as light industry or extensive agriculture, are not an option due to the above explained demographic constraints today.

Second, the issue of “outsourced” educated and high-skilled jobs had to be minimised by properly “nurturing” local capacities in both public and private sector through special funds, programmes and cooperation networks. This can be even developed in the opposite way, by creating conditions for educated and high-skilled professionals. Cultural tourism can be an unorthodox “cornerstone” to support these intentions by attracting digital nomads who can spend days or weeks in their journeys and indirectly captivate more international attention to the host region or place. This leads to another important element – technologies and ICT-driven development – where local level (municipalities) had to form an environment for this very lucrative albeit picky group of tourists, such as coworking places, media libraries, hotspots in open public space, etc.

Taking in account the importance of intangible cultural heritage as a driver for modern cultural tourism, creative industries are also significant. They have a much bigger role than in other places, where tourism has a negligible position. The types of cultural industries are especially welcomed in these constellations – those ones based on local handcrafts, gastronomy or the promotion and branding of local products, skills and customs. In line with this, all municipalities should put in local agenda to form and equip a concrete space in their territory, preferably in their administrative seats-towns, to house creative-digital hubs or startups for both local and traveller young professionals.

A special task in the linear tourist regions such as the Iron Gates is to expand tourist flow in transverse directions, from the main linear route (e.g. the Danube) to spatial peripheries (e.g., mountainous hinterlands). This is not related to new/renewed facilities and attractions in peripheral parts, but also the make better connections and thematic clusters. This is just another argument to underline those local strategies in (cultural) tourism had to be interlinked with territorial planning and development.

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AUTHOR'S DATA WERE PUBLISHED ACCORDING GDPR RULES AND
PUBLICATION ETHICS OF THE JOURNAL (<http://www.math.bas.bg/vt/kin/>)

Received: 08 August 2024

Accepted: 27 December 2024

Published: 30 December 2024

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.55630/KINJ.2024.100202>

Title, Abstract and Keywords in Serbian

КУЛТУРНА БАШТИНА КАО ОСНОВА ПЛАНИРАЊА ТУРИЗМА У ПОДРУЧЈИМА СА ДЕПОПУЛАЦИЈОМ: СЛУЧАЈ СРПСКОГ ЂЕРДАПА

Резиме: Ђердапска клисура на Дунаву је најдужа клисура у Европи. Као таква, она је првенствено позната по природној лепоти и сценичности. Њена величина и посебност природних услова утицали су такође да се ту такође створе и очувају занимљива места културне баштине и народне традиције и културе. Изолованост Ђердапа као тешко приступачне клисуре подељене између две државе – Румуније и Србије – је дуго година ометала развој и промоцију датог подручја, узрокујући додатно и велику депопулацију. Међутим, у последњих 15-ак година са бољом сарадњом две државе и са све јачим туризмом дуж Дунава као међународне реке и културна баштина Ђердапа се све више открива страним туристима. Просторно и урбанистичко планирање у српском делу Ђердапа су у многоме допринели да појединачна места културне баштине постану одредишта у оквиру ове туристичке регије. У овом раду су приказана позитивна и негативна искуства планирања у циљу промоције дате културне баштине у овом и даље депопулационом подручју.

Кључне речи: Културна баштина; Ђердап; културни туризам; просторно планирање; туристичко одредиште

KIN Journal, 2024, Volume 10, Issue 2

Science Series Cultural and Historical Heritage: Preservation, Presentation, Digitalization

Научна поредица Културно-историческо наследство: опазване, представяне, дигитализация

Научная серия Культурное и историческое наследие: сохранение, презентация, оцифровка

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Published by

Institute of Mathematics and Informatics

at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,

Sofia, Bulgaria

Издание на

Институт по математика и

информатика при Българска академия на

науките, София, България

<http://www.math.bas.bg/vt/kin/>

ISSN: 2367-8038