

## SHAR MOUNTAIN POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND KOSOVO

### POTENCIAL E DESAFIOS DO DESENVOLVIMENTO TURÍSTICO DA MONTANHA SHAR NAS REGIÕES DA REPÚBLICA DA MACEDÔNIA DO NORTE E DO KOSOVO

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#### Abstract

Traveling to the mountains of Macedonia means entering a world of sublime natural harmony, where beauty is preserved without overwhelming extremes. The Shar Mountains, located in the northwestern region of the country, form one of the most complete and balanced mountain ranges in the world. Their steep cliffs rise dramatically into the sky, evoking the majesty of the Alps, Andes, Pamirs, or Himalayas—yet always within a scale that remains accessible and human, a defining trait of Macedonia's landscape. What truly distinguishes the Shar Mountains are their vast alpine meadows, bursting with an extraordinary diversity of wildflowers. According to leading European encyclopedias, no other mountain range in Europe offers such a compact and uninterrupted grassy expanse. This richness, once only implied, is now increasingly recognized as a unique ecological treasure. The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between the Shar Mountains as a tourist destination and the broader regions of North Macedonia and Kosovo. It explores how the mountain's natural, cultural, and recreational value contributes to regional development, cross-border cooperation, and sustainable tourism. By highlighting the Shar's exceptional qualities, the study seeks to position it as a central pillar of ecological and cultural identity in the Balkans.

**Keywords:** Shar Mountain. Law. North Macedonia. Kosovo. Economy.

#### Resumo

*Viajar para as montanhas da Macedônia significa entrar em um mundo de harmonia natural sublime, onde a beleza é preservada sem extremos avassaladores. As Montanhas Šar, localizadas na região noroeste do país, formam uma das cadeias montanhosas mais completas e equilibradas do mundo. Seus penhascos íngremes se erguem dramaticamente em direção ao céu, evocando a majestade dos Alpes, Andes, Pamir ou Himalaia — mas sempre dentro de uma escala acessível e humana, uma característica definidora da paisagem macedônia. O que realmente distingue as Montanhas Šar são seus vastos prados alpinos, repletos de uma extraordinária diversidade de flores silvestres. Segundo enciclopédias europeias de referência, nenhuma outra cadeia montanhosa na Europa oferece uma extensão gramínea tão compacta e ininterrupta. Essa riqueza, antes apenas implícita, é agora cada vez mais reconhecida como um tesouro ecológico único. O objetivo desta pesquisa é examinar a relação entre as Montanhas Šar como destino turístico e as regiões mais amplas da Macedônia do Norte e do Kosovo. Explora-se como o valor natural, cultural e recreativo da montanha contribui para o desenvolvimento regional, a cooperação transfronteiriça e o turismo sustentável. Ao destacar as qualidades excepcionais das Šar, o estudo busca posicioná-las como um pilar central da identidade ecológica e cultural dos Bálcãs.*



*Palavras-chave: Montanha Shar. Altitude Baixa. Macedônia do Norte. Kosovo. Economia.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Shar Mountain was declared a national park in 1986, covering an area of 39,000 hectares. Geographically and touristically, Shar Mountain spans the northern part of Kosovo and the southern part of North Macedonia. The mountain is bordered to the northwest by the Prizren Basin, to the north by the Kosovo Basin, and to the south (in North Macedonia) by the Polog and Mavrovo Basins.

The tourist position is favorable due to its proximity to several transportation routes. A major route is the Novi Sad, Belgrade, Kragujevac, Prishtina, Ferizaj, ShtRPCe corridor. The formation of the mountain's relief has been shaped by fluvial-denudational, abrasive, glacial, and karst forms. Ski slopes have been built in areas composed of crystalline schist. The minimum snow depth required is 15 cm if the ground is pasture, 50 cm if the terrain is a combination of grass and stone, and over 2 meters if the ground is purely rocky. The most significant locations are: ShtRPCe, Brezovica, Prevalac, Kara Nikola, Brodosavce, Brod, and Careve Livade.

The climatic conditions are suitable for sports and recreational activities. The average annual temperature at the base of the mountain is around 10-12°C, while in the highest parts, it ranges from 0°C to -2°C. In the higher regions of the mountain, precipitation ranges from 1,250 to 1,500 mm annually, with a snow cover averaging about 120 cm.

### 1.1 Hydrographic values

In terms of hydrographic significance, the area contains numerous valuable water features such as springs, fountains, lakes, and rivers. The most important rivers in the area are Lepenac, Prizrenska Bistrica, Plavska, and Radeška. Shar Mountain is rich in lakes, with 70 glacial lakes and 20 nivaciopnic (depression) lakes. The most common inhabitants of these lakes are small tritons. Beneath the ridges of Shar Mountain lie numerous cirques containing glacial lakes, known as the "Mountain Eyes."

These glacial lakes receive water from precipitation and snowmelt. Depending on weather conditions, the lakes remain covered with snow and ice from November to May. The "Mountain Eyes" change color depending on the angle of the sunlight, and they are home to brown trout, which cannot reproduce due to the harsh conditions. The most significant lakes include: Bogovinsko, Crno, Livadičko, Veliko Jažinačko, Golemo, and Veliko Šutmansko.

## 1.2 Biogeographical values

Shar Mountain is home to many relic species, such as the Bosnian pine (molika), the Macedonian pine (munika), mountain maple, and alpine rose. Several locations have been designated as natural reserves, the most significant of which are Ošljak, Popovo Prase, Golem Bor, and Rusenice.

## 1.3 Anthropogenic values

Near the park is the city of Prizren, which is rich in cultural and historical significance. The city is often described as an "open-air museum," containing 59 cultural monuments. The national park is also home to numerous churches and monasteries, including: the Monastery of St. Peter of Koriško and the Church of the Holy Virgin from the 13th century, the Churches of St. Petka, St. George, and the Church of the Holy Virgin Odigitrije from the 14th century, the Monastery of St. Archangel from the 14th century, and the Monastery of the Holy Trinity from the 15th century, among others.

### Protection Regimes, Issues, and Conservation Measures

The draft Law on the National Park "Shar Mountain" establishes protection regimes at three levels: I, II, and III.

- Level I: 32.3% of the territory;
- Level II: 13.1% of the territory;
- Level III: 54.6% of the territory.

The most significant issue facing the national park is the disappearance, degradation, and destruction of forests. Forest protection within and outside the park must be elevated to a higher level to prevent the high-mountain pine forests and other plants and animals in them from becoming "anthropogenic deserts," as has already occurred in

significant parts of the Shar Mountain ridges. The Park also faces challenges due to inadequate protection of this natural asset, which are linked to the unresolved political and difficult economic situation in Kosovo.

## **2 SHAR MOUNTAIN – THE TOURIST BRIDGE BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND KOSOVO**

Shar Mountain is located in the northwestern part of North Macedonia and the southern part of Kosovo. The massif spans approximately 80 km in length and covers an area of 160 km<sup>2</sup>, with an average peak height of 2,200 meters. The average summer temperature is around 17°C, while in winter it is about -1.5°C. Snow depth ranges from 1 meter to over 4 meters, lasting for more than 4 months during the winter season.

The mountain is bordered by the Prizren Basin to the northwest, the Kosovo Basin to the north, and the Polosh and Mavrovo Basins to the south (in North Macedonia).

Shar Mountain was declared a national park in 1986. The Park covers an area of 39,000 ha and is the highest national park in Kosovo. The elevations of the park range from 1,220 m to 2,565 m (with 30 peaks exceeding 2,500 m). The national park includes the municipalities of Kaqanik, Ferizaj, Prizren, Štrpce, and Suva Reka. Its strategic location is favorable for tourism, as it is situated near several major transportation routes. One key route is the Novi Sad Belgrade Kragujevac Priština Uroševac Štrpce corridor.

This region boasts more than 200 endemic plant species and over 44 wildlife species, including the most famous: wild goat, bear, lynx, and wild boar. Endemic bird species include eagles, falcons, and hawks. The Shar Mountain Shepherd Dog (Sharplaninac) is the most characteristic native animal of the region. The mountain is home to around 25 glacial lakes, also known as "mountain eyes," and more than 200 freshwater springs. Shar has approximately 25 peaks above 2,500 meters, with the highest peak being Titov (2,747 m).

In addition to its natural resources, the Shar region has a rich cultural and historical heritage, with artifacts dating from ancient times to the present. Important historical sites include the Tetovo Menada, the painted mosques of Arabati Baba Tekija, Tetovo Fortress, the Old Hammam, and the Stone Bridge.

Settlements have existed in the Shar region for centuries, and the presence of different nations and cultures has contributed to the development of regional traditions

and a unique cultural identity. This gives the region special significance, with its distinct cuisine, regional festivals, and cultural traditions.

At an altitude of 1,700 meters lies the oldest and most famous mountain resort, Sunny Hill, which is one of the most attractive ski destinations not only in North Macedonia but in the entire region. The first efforts to develop this mountain landscape into a winter tourist center date back to before World War II, when a small group of enthusiasts began using the area for hiking and winter sports. The first resort facility was built in 1934. Additionally, the Shara Cup, the oldest international skiing competition in the Balkans, was first held in 1947. Teams from Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and all the former Yugoslav republics, including North Macedonia, competed in the event. In 1954, Shara was included in the World Ski Federation (FIS) calendar. This ski center is located 18 km from Tetovo and 53 km from the capital, Skopje, accessible by a well-maintained asphalt road and a 7 km cable car. The total length of the ski slopes is around 10 km, with a capacity of 8,000 skiers per hour.

The geostrategic position of Shar Mountain is highly important and ideal for tourism development. The proximity to Corridor 8 and Corridor 10, as well as the close distance to two airports and major cities in the country, provide an excellent opportunity for the development of sustainable tourism. The existing resorts, one in North Macedonia and one in Kosovo, are clear indicators that this region should be further developed and is an ideal location for tourism investment. This potential can improve the existing tourism facilities and infrastructure, as well as develop other types of tourism, as outlined below.

The development of Popova Sapka into a modern tourist center and the recognition of the Shar region as a regional tourist destination is a priority for the region and for national tourism development. With its potential, the region could become a key tourist destination in the next decade, attracting visitors from North Macedonia, Kosovo, other Western countries, and beyond. Relatively speaking, with winter centers like Bansko (Bulgaria), Brezovica (Kosovo), and Kopaonik (Serbia), Popova Sapka, with its natural and human resources and strategic location, is well-positioned to be competitive among regional tourist destinations for the development of winter sports, which is the primary goal of this research.

By developing tourism products in line with market demands, including sports activities complemented by regional cultural and historical offerings, as well as all forms

of rural and alternative tourism, the competitiveness of the region will increase. This will contribute to establishing a positive image of North Macedonia and Shar Mountain on the foreign (and domestic) tourism market as a leading tourist destination, while ensuring the full protection of its natural and cultural heritage as the main attraction for tourism development. The result will be increased foreign currency inflows from tourism, higher investments in supporting tourism activities, and overall regional development.

## 2.1 Natural values – relief

The relief of Shar Mountain has been shaped by fluvial-denudational, abrasive, glacial, and karst processes. The ski slopes were constructed on terrains made up of crystalline schists. The minimum snow thickness required for the creation of skiing conditions is 15 cm when the base is pasture, 50 cm when the terrain is a mix of grass and stone, and over 2 meters when the base is purely rocky.

The most significant locations in the region include: Štrpce, Brezovica, Prevalac, Kara Nikola, Brodosavce, Brod, and Careve Livade. The climatic conditions are suitable for sports and recreational activities. The average annual temperature at the foot of the mountain is around 10-12°C, while at the highest points, it ranges from 0°C to -2°C. In the higher regions of the mountain, the annual precipitation ranges from 1250 to 1500 mm. The average snow cover is about 120 cm.

### Figure 1

*WTTC Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2016*



In terms of hydrographic values, sources, springs, lakes, and watercourses are of significant tourist importance. Among the watercourses, the most important are the Lepenac, Prizrenska Bistrica, Plavska, and Radeška rivers.

Shar Mountain is rich in lakes, with 70 glacial lakes and 20 nivaciop lakes. The most common inhabitant of these lakes is the small triton.

Beneath the ridge of Shar Mountain lie numerous cirques, which contain glacial lakes known as the "Mountain Eyes." These glacial lakes receive water from precipitation and the melting of snow, depending on the weather conditions. All the lakes are covered by snow and ice from November to May. The "Mountain Eyes" change color depending on the angle of sunlight. The lakes are inhabited by brook trout, which, due to the harsh conditions, are unable to reproduce.

The most significant of these lakes are: Bogovinsko, Crno, Livadičko, Veliko Jažinačko, Golemo, and Veliko Šutmansko.

## Figura 2

*WTTC Travel and Tourism Economic impact 2016*



## 2.2 Analysis of the situation

### 2.2.1 Legislative framework

Macedonia is in the process of adopting the National Tourism Development Strategy for 2016-2020, which defines the key elements of tourism products, target tourists, promotion, and marketing. As part of the preparation for this strategy, there has been a call for the establishment of a national tourism organization responsible for the implementation and support of tourism development at the national level. As a result, the Agency for Tourism Support and Promotion was established in 2016. The agency's role is to promote tourism in the Republic of Macedonia abroad, professionally present all

segments and regions of the tourism offer, and ultimately aim to improve and develop tourism in the country (Scowsill, 2016).

The agency achieves this through: (Scowsill, 2016)

- 1) Promotion of tourism and tourism products;
- 2) Preparation and implementation of tourism promotion and support programs;
- 3) Providing promotional materials to highlight tourist values;
- 4) Actively promoting overall tourism potential;
- 5) Conducting objective analyses and forecasts regarding tourism trends for future activities;
- 6) Preparing marketing analyses of domestic and foreign tourism markets;
- 7) Initiating and conducting international cooperation with similar organizations and institutions;
- 8) Proposing quality measures and activities for promoting tourism in underdeveloped parts of the country;
- 9) Assisting in attracting investments from major hotel chains and globally recognized tour operators to bring in more tourists;
- 10) Collaborating with domestic and foreign entrepreneurs.

However, while the agency has a clear function, it is still not fully operational, and it is not realistic to expect that it will take a leading role in the short term in terms of tourism development in the country. In the future, the agency should coordinate all promotional activities at the national level, including marketing and promotional activities for the Shara region. Additionally, within the Ministry of Economy, there is a tourism sector responsible for hospitality services, the Tourism Law, the Law on Temporary Stay Fees, and for taking measures for the application of these laws and preparing and implementing work programs.

This sector plays a crucial role in formulating and implementing tourism policies, participating in the preparation and realization of key strategic documents, and undertaking activities under international tourism organizations. Measures for increasing the overall economic performance of tourism-related activities, promoting programs for tourism content development, and promoting tourism products need to be proposed.

### *2.2.2 Local tourism development documents in the region*

The Shara region locally covers the municipalities of Tetovo, Bogovinje, Tearce, Jegunovce, and Vrapčište, but there are no specific studies or programs dedicated to tourism development. Most of these municipalities have local economic development strategies and sustainable development strategies, where tourism development is incorporated into the broader framework of socio-economic development.

All municipalities in the region have identified tourism as a potential opportunity for economic development. The development of tourism is gradual and at different stages in each municipality. Since this region consists of five municipalities with only one urban center Tetovo (which was previously the center for the other four rural municipalities) most tourism-related facilities are concentrated in this municipality.

Tetovo is consistently working on the promotion and development of tourism, with a focus on the region's largest tourism potential Popova Šapka, which offers winter tourism and winter sports. However, other historical, cultural, archaeological, and natural attractions in the area are also being developed. The municipality has a tourist-information center, in cooperation with the Italian organization CRIC, which collects data, analyzes the situation, and produces promotional materials for tourism development in the region. The municipality of Tetovo has hired a foreign consultant to analyze field activities. At this point, it is still premature to define concrete activities related to local tourism development before a comprehensive tourism development strategy for the region is developed.

The private sector in this region is the most active and has recognized the potential for tourism investment. This is evident from the constant investment in infrastructure such as accommodation, restaurants, farms, and other sectors. The number of restaurants and food establishments is significantly higher in this region compared to other regions in the country. The other four municipalities face constraints in terms of capacity and lack of information about tourism opportunities and are still working on developing promotional materials from their respective project revenues.

### *2.2.3 Spatial plans and detailed urban planning*

Spatial planning is a significant challenge for all municipalities in the region. Preparing General Urban Plans (GUP) and Detailed Urban Plans (DUP) requires substantial resources, which the municipalities currently do not have. Moreover, any

serious investment or development planning requires a comprehensive review of zoning, specific locations, and property rights.

Some of the most pressing issues in this area include the lack of an urban plan for Popova Šapka and the large number of illegal structures still existing in the region. There is also a lack of urban plans for potential tourism development sites in the other municipalities, and outdated GUPs for the municipalities. It is especially important to mention the lack of urban planning for rural areas (villages) surrounding Shar Mountain, which still do not have urban plans.

The issue of urban planning in rural areas is becoming increasingly significant, as the number of buildings constructed without urban planning continues to grow. In terms of urban development and land ownership, it is particularly important that municipalities do not own land, and most of the land is state-owned. Any interest in investment or development must involve the state, which controls the transport links and land management. This is a major problem for all municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia, and addressing this issue through changes and reforms in construction legislation, where municipalities will have a greater role and more decision-making power, is crucial for economic development.

The actual capacity to implement investments and coordinate tourism-related investments across all municipalities in the region is limited to Tetovo. The remaining rural municipalities in the Shara region have limited financial and human resources to support the development of tourism. Given the regional location of the Shara region, tourism development must be approached from a regional perspective, with particular attention to the role of the Polog Regional Development Center in tourism development in the region.

### **2.3 Studies on regional development**

The establishment of eight statistical regions in Macedonia has placed the Polog region as the second-largest region in the country, after Skopje, both in terms of population and economic activities. Within this region, there exists the Polog Regional Development Center, which is located in a rural village and currently employs only four staff members. The center is still in its formation phase. A Regional Development Strategy has been adopted for this region, outlining key directions and goals for

development, with tourism identified as a significant potential and opportunity for future growth.

The Polog Regional Development Center plays a crucial role in the region's development, as it is intended to be the main driving force behind initiatives, planning, and project implementation. One of its core functions is to manage and facilitate projects across the region. On the other hand, the center is attractive to donors, as it has the potential to establish mechanisms and a financial system for managing projects, something that many municipalities in the region lack the capacity to do.

The center should serve as a representative of all municipalities in the region, advocating for and protecting their interests, especially for the smaller, rural municipalities that have limited planning capacities, access to financial resources, and mechanisms for project implementation. Having such a center is essential for partners and foreign collaborators, particularly for potential investors, as it should be able to provide all the necessary information on regional development opportunities and tourism prospects at the local level.

In collaboration with working groups and representatives from the Ministry of Economy, the EPI Center International has proposed the Polog Regional Development Center as the owner of the Shara Region Tourism Study. This study specifically identifies and proposes projects that should be implemented to support the development of tourism in the region. By guiding the implementation of these projects, the center can help build the infrastructure and resources necessary to unlock the tourism potential of the Shara region.

#### Key Points:

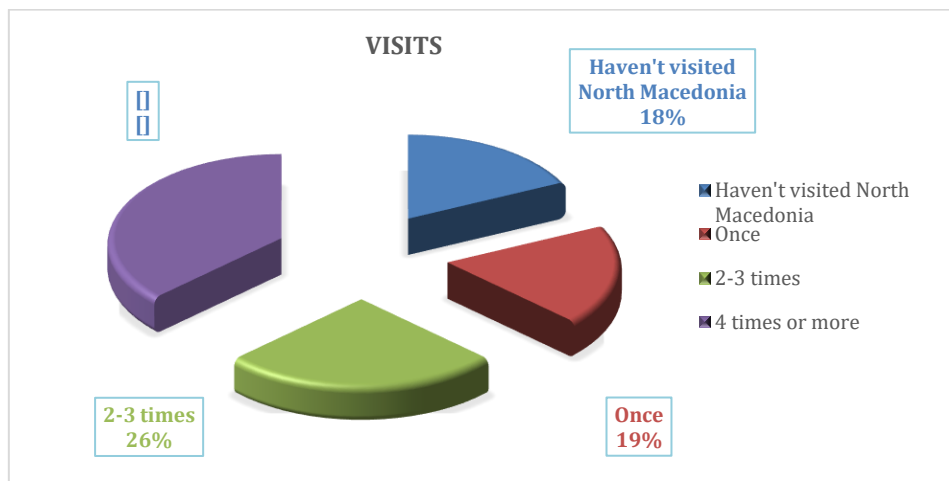
1. Polog Region's Role: The region is one of the largest in Macedonia in terms of population and economic activity, and tourism is recognized as a key driver for economic development.
2. Polog Regional Development Center: Though still in its formative stage, the center is essential for guiding regional development projects, including tourism-related initiatives. It provides the organizational and financial support that municipalities in the region often lack.
3. Tourism as a Regional Development Priority: Tourism has been identified as a significant economic opportunity, and the Shara Region Tourism Study outlines projects that could enhance the region's tourism sector.

4. Coordination and Implementation: The development center is crucial for coordinating efforts across multiple municipalities and ensuring that smaller, rural municipalities can participate in and benefit from regional tourism development projects.

By providing the structure for project management and supporting the development of regional tourism products, the Polog Regional Development Center is positioned as a key player in driving the future success of tourism in the Shara region. (Crisis, 2013) Considering that the percentage of visitors increases with the number of visits, it shows that the majority of visitors return to Macedonia and Kosovo

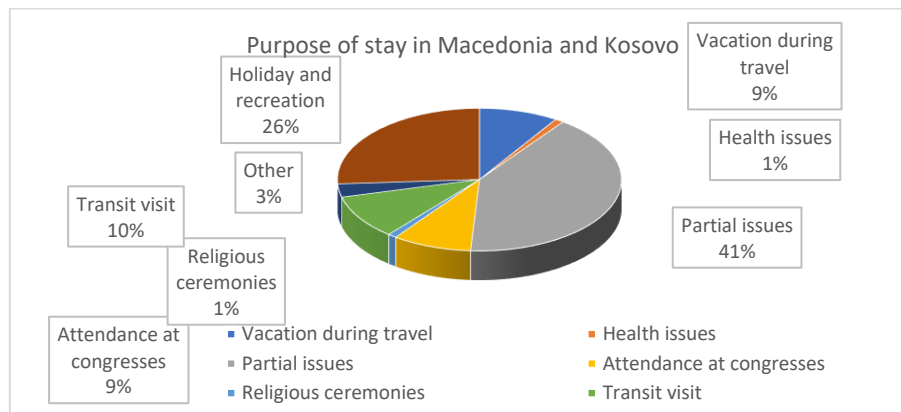
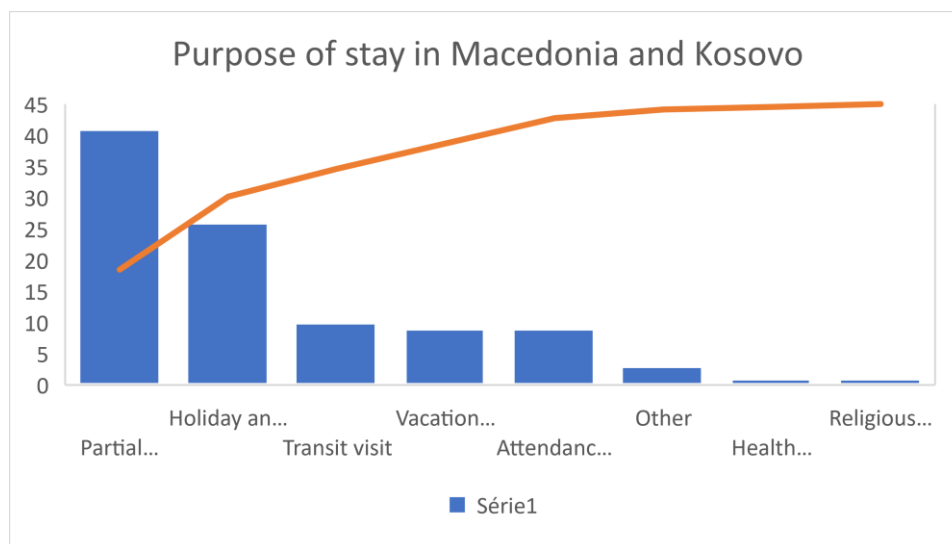
**Figure 3**

*Tourist visits in North Macedonia and Kosovo*



Although the aforementioned indicators show that the majority of visitors return to North Macedonia and Kosovo, it should be noted that, despite the return of visitors, most of them (50%) stayed in the same accommodations, and the percentage of those returning is significantly lower. These figures potentially point to the need to improve services or conditions in accommodation facilities.

According to a survey of foreign tourists conducted in 2018, the largest number of visitors came to the country for business purposes (40%), 25% for rest and recreation, 10% were transit passengers, and 9% visited the country due to congress events. This indicates that the largest influx of tourists is still primarily driven by business activities rather than the country's natural and cultural attractions.

**Figure 4***Purpose of tourists' stay in Macedonia and Kosovo***Figure 5***Purpose of tourists' stay in Macedonia and Kosovo.*

### 3 METHODS

What is particularly important in the applied methodology for this study is that the process involved more than 60 participants from various institutions and organizations. The process was facilitated by the EPI Center International in coordination and collaboration with the Center for Regional Development and representatives from the Ministry of Economy. As a result of this participatory approach, we succeeded in defining a list of the most important projects for tourism development in the region, which will serve as the basis for future development.

During the preparation of the study, data was used from the State Statistical Office, the National Tourism Development Strategy, feasibility studies for declaring Shar Mountain National Park, municipal documents on economic development, environmental protection, the regional development strategy of the Polosh region, and others.

In the process of data collection and analysis, due to the lack of relevant new data on tourism development, we prepared a questionnaire that gathered information on tourist facilities, potentials, and opportunities, barriers to development, existing initiatives, and ongoing projects. The questionnaire was completed by all municipalities in the Shara region, and this data has been included as part of the study.

A key conclusion in the development of this study is the need for better coordination at the regional level, as well as between regional and national institutions, and the establishment of a tourist bridge between Kosovo and North Macedonia through Shar Mountain.

#### **4 RESULTS**

The establishment of eight statistical regions in Macedonia has placed the Polog region as the second-largest region in the country, after Skopje, both in terms of population and economic activities. Within this region, there exists the Polog Regional Development Center, which is located in a rural village and currently employs only four staff members. The center is still in its formation phase. A Regional Development Strategy has been adopted for this region, outlining key directions and goals for development, with tourism identified as a significant potential and opportunity for future growth.

The Polog Regional Development Center plays a crucial role in the region's development, as it is intended to be the main driving force behind initiatives, planning, and project implementation. One of its core functions is to manage and facilitate projects across the region. On the other hand, the center is attractive to donors, as it has the potential to establish mechanisms and a financial system for managing projects, something that many municipalities in the region lack the capacity to do.

The center should serve as a representative of all municipalities in the region, advocating for and protecting their interests, especially for the smaller, rural municipalities that have limited planning capacities, access to financial resources, and

mechanisms for project implementation. Having such a center is essential for partners and foreign collaborators, particularly for potential investors, as it should be able to provide all the necessary information on regional development opportunities and tourism prospects at the local level.

In collaboration with working groups and representatives from the Ministry of Economy, the EPI Center International has proposed the Polog Regional Development Center as the owner of the Shara Region Tourism Study. This study specifically identifies and proposes projects that should be implemented to support the development of tourism in the region. By guiding the implementation of these projects, the center can help build the infrastructure and resources necessary to unlock the tourism potential of the Shara region.

#### Key Points:

1. Polog Region's Role: The region is one of the largest in Macedonia in terms of population and economic activity, and tourism is recognized as a key driver for economic development.
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(50%) stayed in the same accommodations, and the percentage of those returning is significantly lower. These figures potentially point to the need to improve services or conditions in accommodation facilities.

According to a survey of foreign tourists conducted in 2018, the largest number of visitors came to the country for business purposes (40%), 25% for rest and recreation, 10% were transit passengers, and 9% visited the country due to congress events. This indicates that the largest influx of tourists is still primarily driven by business activities rather than the country's natural and cultural attractions.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this topic is to familiarize ourselves with the natural beauties of the Shara Mountains in Kosovo and North Macedonia, natural resources, and possibilities for the development of winter (skiing), summer (archaeology/archaeological sites, cycling, golf, horseback riding, hiking, or simply strolling around the surrounding mountains and mountain lakes), and other forms of tourism, as well as ecology, etc. The Kosovo-Macedonian Alps are highly interesting and attractive for various forms of mountaineering, among other activities.

Moreover, there is significant potential and space for the development of urban tourism, such as visiting the old parts of towns with historical landmarks, museum visits, interesting and diverse offers of traditional souvenirs, and a good selection of restaurants (with healthy ecological food, etc.).

In the near future, Kosovo could, with the development of winter and summer tourism, or year-round tourism, leverage its tourism potential and natural resources, such as the Shara Mountains on the Kosovo-Macedonian side, along with the Kosovo, Albanian, Montenegrin Alps (or the Prokletije) and the Kosovo-Serbian Kopaonik, to generate a minimum turnover of 1-3 billion euros annually. This would drastically increase Kosovo's economic standard, create many new jobs, and lead to the rapid development of Kosovo as well as the surrounding regions and countries.

Currently, the rapid construction of infrastructure, such as highways, hotels, and other resources and capacities that are underway, will significantly increase and facilitate the path for the rapid development of Kosovo's tourism, offering highly attractive tourism

products not only for tourists from the nearby region but also for tourists from other European countries and the rest of the world.

Kosovo, "protected by high and seemingly impassable mountains, such as the Kosovo/Albanian/Montenegrin Alps or Prokletije (2,656m), the Kosovo, Macedonian, Albanian Shara Mountain (2,651m), and the Kosovo, Serbian Kopaonik (2,017m)", has historically been easily accessible to various civilizations due to its location. The region lies at the crossroads of eight major routes, some of which served as the main communication links between Europe and the Adriatic Sea, as well as the Near, Middle, and Far East. The complex geographical and historical conditions, determined by geomorphological features such as numerous canyons, gorges, and high mountains, the specific position between the coastal and continental parts of the Balkans, and the fact that it is home to the hydrographic center of the Balkan Peninsula, have contributed to Kosovo becoming a center for European biodiversity due to its fascinating nature.

The Shara region has significant potential for tourism development based on natural resources, historical and cultural heritage, tradition, a highly developed entrepreneurial spirit, and an established system of higher education with two universities and many secondary schools. The development of tourism in the Shara region requires the wide involvement of all interested parties, including the Polog Development Center, municipalities, tourism entities, educational institutions, government institutions, and the business sector. On the other hand, successful tourism development requires focusing on specific types of tourist products, which will be promoted and supported by national and regional institutions/organizations. Tourism development at the regional level, in all its aspects, must align with the national framework for supporting and promoting tourism.

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completing the questionnaires and providing valuable information about tourism potentials and challenges.

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### Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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