Cultural Tourism as a Means of Improving the Quality of Living Environment in a Peripheral Region in Bulgaria (the Mesta River Region)

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Abstract:

The article analyses the quality of the living environment in four municipalities along the Mesta River (Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha) and the possibilities for its improvement through cultural tourism. The region is peripheral, with a weak economy and relatively high unemployment, but it has a rich cultural, historical and natural heritage. A composite index, including economic, social and environmental indicators, shows that despite this heritage, the municipalities lag behind economically and in terms of tourism. In this regard, a model for the development of tourism through four thematic routes is proposed - cultural, ethnographic, natural and festival. This approach does not require large investments, but can increase employment, income, retain young people and extend the stay of tourists. The conclusion is that cultural tourism could be an effective tool for sustainable development and improvement of the living environment through the use of local cultural resources.

Keywords: *cultural heritage; cultural tourism; living environment; peripheral region; River Mesta*

INTRODUCTION

The article examines the quality of the living environment in four municipalities from a peripheral region of Bulgaria along the Mesta River and the opportunities for its improvement through the development of cultural tourism. The municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha are characterized by relatively weak economic development, depopulation and poor quality of part of the municipal and inter-village road network. At the same time, the region has a rich cultural, historical and religious heritage; well-preserved traditions, crafts and local identity; valuable natural resources; and active local communities.

The comparison of the quality of the living environment of these municipalities together with five other neighbouring municipalities using a composite index shows that despite their rich cultural, historical and natural heritage, they report a weak tourist flow and a low share of tourism in the structure of the local economy. On this basis, a model for the development of tourism through four thematic routes is proposed. The model is based on the existing cultural, ethnographic and natural resources. These thematic routes (cultural-historical, rural, natural and event) would contribute economic benefits, increase local employment, retain young people and, ultimately, improve the quality of living environment in this region.

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THE QUALITY OF THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT IN FOUR MUNICIPALITIES ALONG THE MESTA RIVER REGION

General characteristics of the municipalities

The Mesta River region includes four municipalities – Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha. The relief of the region is mountainous with rich water resources from the Mesta River and its tributaries. The economic development of these municipalities is not high. Micro-enterprises from the service sector dominate, followed by those in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The only type of developed transport in these municipalities is the automobile. Transport accessibility is not good. Part of the municipal road network is in poor condition, there are no road signs and plates.

In all municipalities there is a process of depopulation due to high migration and aging of the population. Only for 2024 the municipality of Garmen has a positive natural increase. The mortality rate is lower, but there is demographic aging and an increase in the number of lonely elderly people. The tendency is for the population to migrate to larger settlements. Ethnically, the population in these municipalities is mixed, predominantly including Bulgarians, Bulgarian Mohammedans/Muslims, Turks, Roma and others. Health services are concentrated in the municipality of Gotse Delchev, where the only hospital for active treatment is located. People from other municipalities mainly use the services of this hospital (PIRO of Gotse Delchev, PIRO of Garmen, PIRO of Satovcha, and PIRO of Hadzhidimovo municipalities).

The average gross salary of employees in these municipalities is not high. For example, in the municipality of Gotse Delchev for 2024 it was 708 euros/month, which ranked the municipality in 230th place out of a total of 265 municipalities. In the other three municipality the average gross salary was even lower. The unemployment rate for 2024 was relatively high compared to the national average (4.2%) - from 10.6% in Gotse Delchev municipality to 24.5% in Garmen municipality (Institut za pazarna ikonomika, 2026a).

Analysis of companies from these municipalities shows that the economy is based mainly on textiles and trade (APIS, 2026). Gotse Delchev stands out as a leading economic centre with the largest number of registered companies and the highest average number of employees. Garmen and Satovcha are characterized by smaller-sized companies and lower average profit values. Hadzhidimovo has relatively small companies, but with the highest average profit, which indicates higher productivity or more capital-intensive activities (**Table 1**).

Table 1. General characteristics of the business structure in four municipalities
Source: author's results of data processing from APIS (2026)

Municipality	Number of companies	Average number of staff	Average profit/loss (thousand BGN)
Gotse Delchev	10 332	6.23	26.63
Garmen	4 066	4.95	17.77
Satovcha	3 445	5.66	15.16
Hadzhidimovo	2 546	2.93	45.75

These data confirm the peripheral nature of the region in which the studied municipalities are located. In this analysis, "peripherality" is understood as a complex territorial characteristic, including limited access to specialized services, weaker infrastructure deficits, lower economic diversification and unfavourable demographic profiles (Tsiotas and Tselios, 2023).

Assessment of the quality of the living environment in nine municipalities through a composite index

Methodology for constructing the composite index and its indicators

The concepts of quality of life, quality of living environment and regional well-being are often used as synonyms, but they represent different analytical constructs. Research on quality of life usually integrates objective and subjective aspects of individual well-being, while quality of living environment focuses on the territorial conditions that shape the life of the population – economic, infrastructural and environmental (Rypl, Macků and Pászto, 2024; Uysal, Berbekova and Wang, 2025; Eurostat, 2024).

The approach of a composite index is applied to the analysis of complex and multidimensional phenomena, where individual dimensions cannot be adequately represented by single indicators (Nardo et al., 2005a ; Greco, Ishizaka, Tasiou, and Torrisi, 2019). Since four municipalities are too few for a composite index, we included five more neighbouring municipalities (Bansko, Razlog, Sandanski, Dospat and Sarnitsa), with the focus on the first four.

The structure of the composite index includes three sub-indices – economic, social and environmental and corresponds to the so-called pillar-based approach (OECD, 2008 ; Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019). In total 24 indicators were used, grouped into three sub-indices: economic, social and environmental. The data were taken from the initiative "265 Stories about Economics" (Institut za pazarna ikonomika, 2026a).

With 10 indicators, the economic sub-index covers: entrepreneurship and economic activity; employment and income; local finances; tourism economy. The focus of the social sub-index is on: human capital; demography; education; health and social services with 11 indicators. The environmental sub-index refers to: environment and includes 3 indicators: share of recycled household waste; state of national roads; share of solar RES. Environmental conditions are an important dimension of well-being, especially in peripheral and mountainous areas, where household practices and infrastructure deficits have a significant impact on daily life (OECD, 2008 ; Eurostat, 2024).

All indicators are normalized respectively for positive indicators according to the scheme: (value of x – x minimum) / (x maximum – x minimum), and for negative indicators – vice versa (x maximum – value of x) / (x maximum – x minimum). Thus, all indicator values are between 0 and 1, with 1 being the best performance and 0 being the worst performance. Each sub-index represents an average value of the normalized indicators in the group. Initially, the index was calculated with equal weights for all indicators and sub-indices (Carrino, 2017), and additionally, a sensitivity analysis was conducted for alternative weighting schemes.

Results

Table 2. Results of sub-indices and of a composite index for 9 municipalities

Rank	Municipality	Economic	Social	Ecological	Composite index
1	Bansko	**0.886**	0.415	0.598	**0.633**
2	Gotse Delchev	0.415	**0.638**	**0.709**	**0.587**
3	Razlog	**0.581**	0.524	0.599	**0.568**
4	Sandanski	**0.587**	0.490	0.454	**0.510**
5	Satovcha	0.124	0.424	**0.781**	0.443
6	Garmen	0.090	0.563	0.616	0.423
7	Hadzhidimovo	0.200	0.255	**0.731**	0.395
8	Sarnitsa	0.067	0.412	0.404	0.295
9	Dospat	0.248	0.317	0.190	0.252

The results of the calculation of the composite index and the sub-indices are presented in Table 2, and visually – in Fig.1.

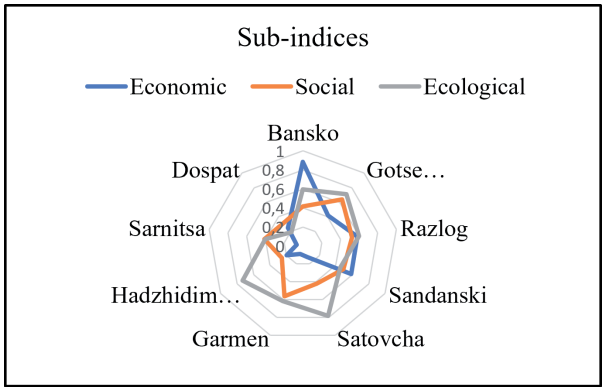


Figure 1. Ranking of municipalities by 3 sub-indices

The values of the composite index outline significant differences between the studied municipalities. Bansko comes in first place mainly due to the economic sub-index: tourism (volume and revenues), income, entrepreneurship, renewable energy and infrastructure. Gotse Delchev occupies a second place mainly due to the high social sub-index (education, services and lower crime). Razlog and Sandanski have a balanced profile with a more stable socio-economic structure. Satovcha, Hadzhidimovo and Gotse Delchev also stand out with real environmental advantages. In general, however, smaller municipalities are structurally limited by demography, economic scale and access to services (Decancq and Lugo, 2013).

As the composite indices are sensitive to the choice of normalization, weights and aggregation, the sensitivity analysis was conducted (Saltelli et al., 2019). The weight scenarios studied are the following (Table 3).

Table 3. Weight scenarios studied

Scenarios	Economic	Social	Ecological
Equal weights (base)	1/3	1/3	1/3
Economic focus	0.50	0.30	0.20
Social focus	0.30	0.50	0.20
Environmental focus	0.30	0.20	0.50

The ranking of municipalities under these scenarios is shown on **Table 4**.

Table 4. Ranking of municipalities under 4 scenarios with different weights

Municipality	Equal weights	Economic focus	Social focus	Ecological focus
Bansko	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**
Gotse Delchev	**2**	3	**2**	**2**
Razlog	**3**	**2**	**3**	**3**
Sandanski	**4**	**4**	**4**	5
Satovcha	5	5	6	4
Garmen	6	6	5	7
Hadzhidimovo	7	7	7	6
Sarnitsa	8	9	8	8
Dospat	9	8	9	9

Bansko is the undisputed leader in all scenarios, regardless of the focus. The first four municipalities (Bansko, Gotse Delchev, Razlog, Sandanski) remain the same under all weighting schemes. There is no "reversal" of the ranks, which confirms the internal consistency of the index.

Additionally, the composite index for the 9 municipalities was calculated without the tourism indicators with the remaining indicators being retained (**Table 5**).

Table 5. Ranking of municipalities by index with tourism and index without tourism

Municipality	Index with tourism	Index without tourism	Difference (with - without)
Gotse Delchev	**0,470**	**0,526**	-0,056
Hadzhidimovo	0,382	0,415	-0,033
Garmen	0,405	0,447	-0,042
Satovcha	0,313	0,343	-0,030
Sandanski	0,439	0,469	-0,030
Bansko	**0,553**	**0,495**	0,058
Razlog	**0,495**	**0,523**	-0,028
Dospat	0,284	0,304	-0,021
Sarnitsa	0,293	0,328	-0,035

The comparison of the ranking of municipalities in the index with and without tourism shows that Bansko clearly "wins" from the inclusion of tourism indicators. Gotse Delchev and Razlog retain their positions as having more balanced development outside of tourism. Small and peripheral municipalities are practically not affected by the removal of tourism (**Table 5**). Therefore, the municipalities along the Mesta River can improve their composite index through more active development of tourism or another alternative source of income

Compared to the leading tourist municipalities in Bulgaria, the four municipalities along the River Mesta report a relatively weak tourist flow (**Table 6**). None of these municipalities reported more than 40 thousand overnight stays, with the exception of the municipality of Garmen in 2023. The number of overnight stays in the municipality of Hadzhidimovo is particularly low.

Table 6. Overnight stays in 9 municipalities

Municipalities/years	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Bansko	151774	233562	307294	313830	309965
Sandanski	83253	113565	142263	146281	151205
Razlog	71888	107916	132173	144672	140262
Garmen	26131	28856	41004	34288	38106
Gotse Delchev	15396	19353	19084	18656	20114
Dospat	5044	5951	9470	10395	10290
Hadzhidimovo	1423	2108	936	1206	n.i.
Satovcha	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.
Sarnitsa	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.

Source: Institut za pazarna ikonomika (2026b).

These data again suggest that despite the cultural, historical and natural heritage of the municipalities along the River Mesta, it is not sufficiently socialized to attract more visitors.

CULTURAL TOURISM AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIVING ENVIRONMENT IN THE MUNICIPALITIES ALONG THE MESTA RIVER

The route model as a strategic solution

The development of tourism in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha can be based on capitalization of existing cultural-historical, religious, ethnographic and natural resources, and not on the construction of infrastructure and capital-intensive tourist complexes. The region has a high concentration of sites of national and international importance - archaeological reserves (Nikopolis ad Nestum), architectural reserves (Kovachevitsa, Leshten, Dolen), religious complexes (St. George the Victorious Monastery – Hadzhidimovo), as well as intangible heritage included in the UNESCO lists (high singing in the Satovcha municipality) (https://www.uvanestum.com/en/experience). The idea is how to turn this rich heritage into an "experience".

The studied municipalities cannot compete with developed resorts with mass winter tourism and large hotel complexes, such as Bansko or Sandanski. It is appropriate for them to start developing *route-based tourism* (1–3 days); slow tourism; cultural-historical and ethnographic tourism; hiking, pilgrimage and festival tourism, i.e., tourism without heavy infrastructure, but with local employment (Pedrosa, Martins, and Breda, 2022). The main idea is to connect the municipalities in thematic routes, and not each municipality on its own (Dayoub B., Yang, Dayoub, A., Omran and Li, 2020). This would ensure a longer stay (2–4 nights for the entire region), more local services (food, guides, crafts, transport), and a more even distribution of benefits.

This model for the development of tourism through thematic routes has the following advantages: it does not require significant investments in road or hotel infrastructure; corresponds to the current tourist capacity of the municipalities; encourages the participation of local communities, community centers, LAGs and NGOs. The specific routes allow the transformation of individual sites and holidays into a connected tourist experience, which extends the stay and increases local income. Such tourism would contribute economic benefits through more local employment – with small but higher incomes for many households; sustainability due to non-seasonal dependence and retention of young people as entrepreneurs, guides, etc. (Beltramo, Taglio, and Bonadonna, 2025).

Tourist routes as a tool for economic development

Four thematic routes are proposed, in which specific objects of the tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage are integrated: Route A – cultural; Route B – rural / ethnographic; Route C – natural / eco; Route D – event (festival). The integrated specific objects are: monastery "St. George the Victorious"; architectural reserves (Dolen, Kovachevitsa, Leshten); Nikopolis ad Nestum; ecozones "Belite Skali", "Omaya"; maintained reserve "Konski Dol". The intangible cultural heritage (high singing) is also included, as well as natural landmarks and ecozones (**Fig. 2**).



Figure 2. Proposed tourist routes[1]

Route A "River Middle Mesta – Culture, Memory and Faith" is a cultural-historical and pilgrimage type and includes the municipalities of Gotse Delchev → Garmen → Hadzhidimovo. The route offers a journey through the history, spirituality and cultural memory of the region – from the Bulgarian National Revival tradition to the ancient heritage and living religious faith. The specific sites along the route are as follows (**Fig. 3**):



Figure 3. Route A

[1] The visual schemas of the routes are made with the help of AI

- 🏛️ Historical Museum - Gotse Delchev (anchor site)
- ⛪ Cathedral "St. Cyril and Methodius and St. Elijah"
- 🕌 Mosque "Karaja Pasha"
- 🏘️ Renaissance village of Delchevo
- 🏺 Nikopolis ad Nestum (national significance)
- 🏘️ Architectural reserves Kovachevitsa and Leshten
- 🙏 Monastery "St. George the Victorious"

Route B "Living Rhodopes – Village, Craft and Intangible Culture" is a type of ethnographic/rural route related to "experience", and includes the municipalities of Satovcha → Garmen → Hadzhidimovo. The route offers a touch of authentic life in the Rhodopes – traditions, customs, music and craftsmanship. The specific sites along the route are as follows (**Fig. 4**):



Figure 4. Route B

- 🏘️ Architectural reserve of the village of Dolen
- 🎶 High singing (UNESCO)
- 🎭 Traditional customs ("Pryadai", "Navik")
- 💍 Wedding rituals in the village of Ribnovo
- 🧶 Crafts and community centre activities
- 🍲 Traditional local cuisine

Route C "Nature and Man in the Western Rhodopes" is a type of natural, eco and educational tourism and includes the municipalities of Satovcha → Hadzhidimovo → Gotse Delchev. The route offers harmony between man and nature – protected areas, biodiversity and environmental education. The specific natural sites are as follows (**Fig. 5**):



Figure 5. Route C

- 🌲 Konski Dol Reserve
- 🌿 Manastirishteto Protected Area
- 🪨 Belite Skali Ecozone and Nevrokop Fish Farm
- 🌊 Omaya Ecozone (village of Gaitaninovo)
- ⛰️ Connection with nature routes to Slavyanka and Stargach



Route D "Cultural Calendar of the Four Municipalities" is a type of event-based tourism, including cultural events in all municipalities. This is a dynamic route that follows the rhythm of local holidays and events throughout the year. Main events are among others the following (**Fig. 6**):

Figure 6. Route D

- 🎉 Holiday of the town of Gotse Delchev
- 🎶 Festival "Folklore Trails" - village of Breznitsa
- 🪗 Traditional fairs and holidays in Satovcha and Garmen
- 🙏 Pilgrimage holidays in Hadzhidimovo

A summary of route types, core value, and target audience is given in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of Routes

Route	Type	Core value	Target audience
A	Cultural-Historical	Heritage and Spirituality	Cultural tourists, pilgrims
B	Ethnographic	Living Tradition	Foreign tourists, lovers of authenticity
C	Natural	Ecology and Nature	Ecotourists, families
D	Cultural events	Traditions and memory	Local people and tourists

The directions of route A (Culture and Faith) are: from Gotse Delchev (villages of Delchevo/Breznitsa) to the village of Garmen (Nikopolis ad Nestum/villages of Kovachevitsa and Leshten) and from there to Hadzhidimovo (Monastery of St. George the Victorious).

The directions of route B (Living Rhodopes) are: from the village of Satovcha (villages of Dolen, Valkosel and Slashten) to the village of Garmen (village of Ribnovo) and from there to Hadzhidimovo (kitchen/guest houses).

The directions of route C (Nature) are from the village of Satovcha (Konski dol area) to Hadzhidimovo (Ecozone Omaya/Manastirishteto), from there to Gotse Delchev (White Rocks/Nevrokop) and connections to the Slavyanka and Sturgech mountains.

The directions of route D (Events) depend on the relevant holidays and events between the four municipalities.

The expected economic effects for people and local businesses from the proposed routes are given in Table 8 (See also Acampa and Pino, 2026 ; Apostolakis and Viskadouraki, 2017).

Table 8. Expected economic effects of the proposed tourist routes

Object / Event	Route	Municipality	Main economic impact
House of Culture	A – cultural	Gotse Delchev	Cultural visits, services, establishments
Historical Museum (after renovation)	A	Gotse Delchev	Guided tours, educational tourism
Folklore Trails Festival – Breznitsa	D – event	Gotse Delchev	Peak income, crafts, accommodation
Architectural Reserve Nikopolis ad Nestum	A	Garmen	Year-round cultural flow
Architectural Reserves Kovachevitsa and Leshten	B – village	Garmen	Guest houses, local products
Traditional Weddings – Ribnovo	B	Garmen	Experience tourism, services
St. George the Victorious Monastery	A / D	Hadzhidimovo	Pilgrimage tourism, food, trade
St. Dimitar Fortress	A	Hadzhidimovo	Cultural and historical visits
White Rocks + Nevrokop Ecozone	C – natural	Hadzhidimovo	Ecotourism, guides, small groups
Dolen Architectural Reserve	B	Satovcha	Overnight stays, handicrafts
High Singing (UNESCO)	B / D	Satovcha	Cultural image, festival tourism
Custom “Pryadai / Navik”	B	Satovcha	Events, local products
Supported Reserve “Konski Dol”	C	Satovcha	Nature, educational tourism
Cultural Festivals (Vaklinovo, etc.)	D	Satovcha	Temporary employment, direct sales

The specifics of these routes are that one site performs several functions (e.g., the St. George the Victorious Monastery offers both cultural and event tourism). One route implies small revenues, but distributed among more households, and small and medium-sized businesses. Each of the routes is associated with low investment risk, since existing heritage is used.

The integration of specific cultural and natural sites into a route structure can turn the currently weak tourist flow along the Mesta River into a real opportunity for sustainable economic development, based on identity, authenticity and local resources (Beták, Suchánková, and Vitková, 2025; Mitrović et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the quality of the living environment in the municipalities along the Mesta River confirms the presence of socio-economic and demographic challenges typical of peripheral regions. However, the results of a composite index show that these municipalities have significant potential, especially in terms of environmental and social indicators, but lag behind in economic development and tourism activity. At the same time, the region has a rich cultural-historical, ethnographic and natural heritage, which is currently not sufficiently socialized through tourism. The inclusion of cultural and natural heritage in economic activity is a realistic way to overcome peripherality and achieve a higher quality of life in these municipalities.

In this regard, the proposed thematic tourist routes represent a solution that does not require large investments, but creates opportunities for generating income and employment. The development of route, culturally-oriented tourism can contribute to a longer stay of visitors and greater economic benefits. Such an approach has been recognized as an effective tool for sustainable regional development based on local resources (Pedrosa, Martins and Breda, 2022 ; Beltramo, Taglio and Bonadonna, 2025). Therefore, the development of cultural tourism can be seen as a tool for improving the quality of the living environment by stimulating the local economy, retaining young people and strengthening local identity.

The successful implementation of this model, however, requires coordinated actions between local authorities and businesses and the active participation of local communities, which is the subject of further research.

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Културният туризъм като средство за подобряване на качеството на жизнената среда в периферен регион в България (регионът на река Места)

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Резюме: Статията анализира качеството на жизнената среда в четири общини по поречието на река Места (Гоце Делчев, Гърмен, Хаджидимово и Сатовча) и възможностите за нейното подобряване чрез културен туризъм. Регионът е периферен, със слаба икономика и относително висока безработица, но разполага с богато културно, историческо и природно наследство. Композитен индекс, включващ икономически, социални и екологични показатели, показва, че въпреки това наследство общините изостават икономически и в областта на туризма. В тази връзка се предлага модел за развитие на туризма чрез четири тематични маршрута – културен, етнографски, природен и фестивален. Този подход не изисква големи инвестиции, но може да доведе до увеличаване на заетостта и доходите, да задържи младите хора и да удължи престоя на туристите. Заключението е, че културният туризъм може да бъде ефективен инструмент за устойчиво развитие и подобряване на условията на живот чрез използването на местните културни ресурси.

Ключови думи: културно наследство; културен туризъм; жизнена среда; периферен регион; река Места



Kovatchevitsa