Научни известия „Наследство БГ“ е периодично издание, публикувано от Центъра за върхови постижения „Наследство БГ“ с водеща организация Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“. То излиза два пъти в годината и се разпространява във всички институции, партньори на центъра. Издава се като печатно и онлайн издание с отворен достъп https://periodicals.uni-sofia.bg/index.php/AR-NBg/bg.

Research Announcements “Heritage BG” is e serial, published by the “Heritage BG” centre of Excellence, whose leading institution is Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. It is published twice a year and distributed to all partner institutions of the Centre. It is published as an open-access journal https://periodicals.uni-sofia.bg/index.php/AR-NBg/en

Текстовете са оценени чрез peer-review, като преминалите успешно тази процедура се публикуват в този брой.

The articles have undergone peer review, and those that have successfully passed this process are published in this issue.

Корица I: Вила „Армира“ – мраморните херми около басейна
Корица IV: Вила „Армира“ – спалня на собствениците
Снимки: Георги Запрянов

Cover I: Villa “Armira” – the marble herms around the pool
Cover IV: Villa “Armira” – the owners’ bedroom
Photo: Georgi Zapryanov

Художник на корицата Даниел Нечев
Cover designed by Daniel Nechev

Печат Дайрект сървисиз
Printed by Direct Services

Център за върхови постижения „Наследство БГ“
Centre of Excellence “Heritage BG“
НАУЧНИ ИЗВЕСТИЯ „НАСЛЕДСТВО БГ“
RESEARCH ANNOUNCEMENTS “HERITAGE BG“
Рецензирано издание в два броя годишно
Peer-reviewed periodical in two issues per year
Година VI, брой 10 / Year VI, issue 10^{h}
София, 2026

Център за върхови постижения „Наследство БГ“
Centre of Excellence “Heritage BG“

НАУЧНИ ИЗВЕСТИЯ „НАСЛЕДСТВО БГ“
RESEARCH ANNOUNCEMENTS “HERITAGE BG“

Рецензирано издание в два броя годишно
Peer-reviewed periodical in two issues per year

Година V, брой 10 / Year V, issue 10h
София, 2026

Научни известия „Наследство БГ“
Година V, брой 10, 2026

Research Announcements “Heritage BG“
Year V, Issue 10th, 2026

Главен редактор: акад. проф. дин Иван Илчев (Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2970-0321

Заместник-главен редактор: доц. д-р Биляна Яврукова (Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-3487

Editor-in-Chief: Acad. Prof. Ivan Ilchev (Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2970-0321

Deputy Editor in Chief: Assoc. prof. Bilyana Yavrukova (Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-3487

Редакционна колегия:

акад. проф. дин Иван Илчев *(председател на редакционната колегия, Софийски университет “Св. Климент Охридски”)*, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2970-0321

чл.-кор. проф. дин Александър Костов (Институт по балканистика с център по тракология при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7350-0984

проф. дин Диляна Ботева-Боянова (Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2724-5457

проф. дн Емануел Мутафов (Институт за изследване на изкуствата при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0695-473X

проф. дн Маргарита Серафимова (Институт за литература при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3789-8876

проф. дн Николай Хинов (Технически университет), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0308-4858

проф. дфн Оля Харизанова (Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3643-4410

проф. д-р Гергана Антова (Университет по архитектура, строителство и геодезия), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0926-8033

проф. д-р Йоана Спасова (Институт за изследване на изкуствата при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3270-0154

проф. д-р Йорданка Кандулкова (Университет по архитектура, строителство и геодезия), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6580-522X

проф. д-р Марияна Николова (Национален институт по геофизика, геодезия и география при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4878-3051

проф. д-р Николай Кънев (Великотърновски университет „Св. св. Кирил и Методий), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0570-8078

проф. д-р Славия Бърлиева (Кирило-методиевски научен център при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6495-8344

доц. д-р Биляна Яврукова (Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-3487

доц. д-р Елка Димитрова (Институт за литература при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8918-7200

доц. д-р Емад Абдулахад (Университет по архитектура, строителство и геодезия), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8649-2100

доц. д-р Мила Маева (Институт за етнология и фолклористика с Етнографски музей при Българска академия на науките), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1708-2631
доц. д-р Росина Костова (Великотърновски университет „Св. св. Кирил и Методий), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5016-7410

Editorial Board

Acad. Prof. Ivan Ilchev *(Editor-in-chief, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria)*, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2970-0321

Corr. Mem. Prof. Aleksandar Kostov (Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7350-0984

Prof. Dilyana Boteva-Boyanova (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2724-5457

Prof. Emmanuel Moutafov (Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0695-473X

Prof. Margarita Serafimova (Institute for Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/10.46687/BDAS7544

Prof. Nikolay Hinov (Technical University, Sofia), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0308-4858

Prof. Olya Harizanova (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3643-4410

Prof. Gergana Antova (University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0926-8033

Prof. Yoana Spasova (Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3270-0154

Prof. Yordanka Kandulkova (University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6580-522X

Prof. Mariyana Nikolova (National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4878-3051

Prof. Nikolay Kanev (University of Veliko Turnovo St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0570-8078

Prof. Slavia Barlieva (Cyrillo-Methodian Research Centre at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6495-8344
Assoc. prof. Bilyana Yavrukova (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-3487

Assoc. Prof. Elka Dimitrova (Institute for Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8918-7200

Assoc. Prof. Emad Abdulahad (University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8649-2100

Assoc. Prof. Mila Maeva (Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1708-2631

Assoc. Prof. Rosina Kostova (University of Veliko Turnovo St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Bulgaria), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5016-7410

Международна редакционна колегия / International Advisory Board

Corr. Mem. Vujadin Ivanišević, Prof. Arno Strohmeyer (Institute for Habsburg and Balkan Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4077-8840

Prof. Damir Agičić (University of Zagreb, Croatia), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5145-9880

Prof. Francesco Guida (Roma Tre University, Italy)

Prof. François De Callataÿ (Royal Academy of Belgium),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5381-2534

Prof. Harald Hepner (Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Austria)
Prof. Iakovos Michailidis (Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7295-8806

Prof. Ma Xipu (retired, People's Republic of China)

Prof. Mihailo Popovic (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3128-2210

Prof. Mikhail Stanchev (Kharkiv National University, Ukraine),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2034-5087

Prof. Oliver Jens Schmitt (Institut für Osteuropäische Geschichte, Austria),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8418-6222

Prof. Predrag Matejic (Ohio State University, USA)

Prof. Robert Austin (University of Toronto, Canada),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8355-9881

Prof. Rudolf Graf (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania)

Prof. Ulrich Pfisterer (Munich University, Germany), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4090-6275

Prof. Ulrike Peter (Project Director and Research Coordinator of the long term project "Imagines Nummorum: Thesaurus Iconographicus Nummorum Graecorum Online" at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Germany), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0954-4322

Prof. Vasileios Gounaris (Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4997-1911

Prof. Vladimir Stolba (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities; Fellow of the Royal Danish Academy), ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7362-8646

Prof. Wolfgang Höpken (University of Leipzig, Germany),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7466-6938

Prof. Wolfgang Schmale (University of Vienna, Austria),
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8772-341X

Prof. Zhanjun Liang (Capital Normal University, People's Republic of China)

Издател
© Сдружение „Център за върхови постижения „Наследство БГ"
София 1000, ул. „Ген. Йосиф В. Гурко" № 7, 2026
yearbook@nasledstvo.bg

Publisher
© Association Centre for Excellence "Heritage BG"
Sofia 1000, 7 General Iosif V. Gurko Street, 2026
yearbook@nasledstvo.bg

ISSN 2815-3138 (Print)
ISSN 2815-3316 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10

Contents / Съдържание

CULTURAL HISTORY AND MODERNITY

Strandzha as an Economic-Geographical Region: Heritage, Revitalisation and Regional Transformation / Странджа като икономогеографски регион: наследство, ревитализация и регионална трансформация
Косьо Стойчев / Kosyo Stoychev 6

The Strandzha Brand: Values, Components, and Promotion / Брандът „Странджа“: ценности, компоненти и популяризиране
Иванка Мавродиева / Ivanka Mavrodieva 18

Chitalishta and Libraries as Carriers of Cultural Capital and Factors in the Social Sustainability of Local Communities in a Peripheral Region / Читалищата и библиотеките като носители на културен капитал и фактор за социалната устойчивост на местните общности в периферен район
Желю Владимиров, Биляна Яврукова / Zhelyu Vladimirov, Bilyana Yavrukova 30

The Ideological Narrative of the “Golden Rose” Film Festival (1956 – 1989) / Идеологическият наратив на филмовия фестивал „Златна роза“ (1956 – 1989)
Диян Статулов / Deyan Statulov 52

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONS IN MODERN SOCIETY

Traditional Bulgarian Folk Dances in the Contemporary Cultural Environment: Public Awareness, Cultural Identity, and Perspectives for Their Promotion / Българските народни танци в съвременната културна среда: обществена информираност, културна идентичност и перспективи за популяризиране
Ирина Петкова-Нешева / Irina Petkova-Nesheva 58

NATURAL HERITAGE AND MODERN SOCIETY

Methodological Issues of the Complex Study of the Natural and Cultural-Historical Heritage in the Yantra River Basin / Някои методологически въпроси на комплексното изследване на природното и културно-историческото наследство в Янтренското поречие
Галин Петров, Румен Янков / Galin Petrov, Rumen Yankov 70

Therapeutic Effects of Adapted Aquatic Practices in Students with Overweight and Obesity / Терапевтични ефекти на адаптираните аквапрактики при ученици с наднормено тегло и затлъстяване
Величка Александрова / Velichka Aleksandrova 86

Hot Stone Massage – A Traditional and Innovative Medical-Wellness Practice / Hot stone massage – традиционна и иновативна медикъл-уелнес практика
Мариана Ангелчева, Татяна Томова Mariana Angelcheva, Tatyana Tomova 96

Strandzha as an Economic-Geographical Region: heritage, Revitalisation and Regional Transformation

Kosyo Stoychev
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.6-17

Abstract: *Strandzha is considered here as an economic-geographical region shaped by the relationship between population, employment, infrastructure, accessibility, services and heritage. The analysis uses the categories of position, function, dependence and transformation, together with territorial profiling, site passports, route planning and adaptive governance. The operational study area covers the municipalities of Malko Tarnovo, Tsarevo and Sredets. Available evidence points to a marked contrast between a coast supported by tourism and an interior affected by demographic decline. Protected landscapes and living traditions are not simply development assets; they also define the limits within which change can take place. Heritage acquires a regional economic role when a visit supports local guiding, accommodation, food, interpretation and product sales. Revitalisation should therefore be judged by its effects on population, employment and infrastructure, and by the amount of value that remains locally, rather than by visitor numbers alone.*

Keywords: *peripheral territories; place-based development; experience economy; accessibility; local value chains; sustainable tourism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Regions with a rich cultural and natural heritage are often presented through catalogues of monuments, archaeological remains, rituals, landscapes and local products. Such inventories are useful, but they do not show whether heritage can help people remain in a territory, support employment or sustain everyday services. Economic geography raises a more difficult question. It asks how dispersed resources are connected, how people reach and understand them, who organises these connections and where the resulting value is retained.

Strandzha makes this question especially visible. On the Bulgarian side, a busy Black Sea coast lies next to a sparsely populated forested interior. The region also contains a state border, several small urban centres, protected landscapes, living traditions and distinctive foods. Cultural and natural resources are abundant, but the ability to convert them into stable local activity varies considerably. Coastal settlements participate in a relatively strong tourism economy, while the inland municipalities face ageing, population loss, limited services and a narrow labour market. These conditions belong to the same regional system and should not be treated as separate problems.

Kosyo Stoychev *is Professor of Economic and Social Geography at the Department of Regional and Political Geography, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". His research focuses on economic geography, regional transformation, spatial planning and place-based development.*

Email: k_stoychev@gea.uni-sofia.bg
ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0626-8772

The central argument of the article is that heritage can contribute to regional transformation only when it is linked to access, services, local enterprise, institutional cooperation and ecological limits. An individual site may be important in cultural terms, yet its regional effect remains small if it is difficult to reach, poorly interpreted or disconnected from local services. Routes can bring separate places into a shared spatial and narrative structure, while accommodation, food, guiding and product sales determine whether the value generated by a visit remains in the region. This does not imply mass tourism or extensive construction. The more appropriate direction is selective revitalisation, supported by knowledge, modest infrastructure and institutions able to adjust decisions when evidence changes.

The discussion therefore considers when Strandzha can function as an economic-geographical region rather than as a collection of attractions. It examines the spatial and service relations through which heritage may create value for local communities, and it asks how lasting regional change can be distinguished from a temporary increase in visitor numbers. The categories of position, function, dependence and transformation provide the analytical basis. They are then translated into a practical research design built around territorial profiling, a standard site passport, route development, local value retention and the monitoring of population, employment and infrastructure.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POSITION, FUNCTION, DEPENDENCE AND TRANSFORMATION

The economic-geographical region is understood here as a set of relations rather than as a territory whose meaning is defined entirely by administrative borders. Classical location theory drew attention to distance, market areas, service hierarchies and central places as forces that organise space (Christaller, 1966 ; Isard, 1956). Place-based approaches later emphasised that development policy must respond to the assets, constraints, institutions and knowledge found in particular territories, instead of relying on spatially neutral solutions (Barca, 2009 ; European Union, 2020). In rural regions, this perspective also moves policy beyond compensation for disadvantage and towards investment, innovation, shared services and stronger links between rural and urban areas (OECD, 2018).

The categories of position, function, dependence and transformation are drawn from a relational interpretation of spatial organisation and regional change (Stoychev, 2026a ; Stoychev, 2026b). Position refers not only to geographical location but also to the opportunities and constraints created by that location. Strandzha lies between the Black Sea, a mountain and forest massif, the Bulgarian-Turkish border and the urban market of Burgas, while remaining connected more broadly to the national territory. Function concerns the roles that the region can perform within wider spatial systems. These may include nature-based and cultural experiences, interpretation, education, specialised tourism, local food production and narratives that connect the coast with the interior. Such functions depend on roads, transport, skills, accommodation, food services, water and sanitation, digital connectivity, property arrangements, conservation regimes and cooperation among institutions. Transformation begins when changes in these conditions alter the relationship between population, work, infrastructure and land use.

This framework is useful because it prevents two common simplifications. Heritage should not be treated as an isolated object that merely needs promotion, and development should not be measured by the amount of investment alone. A culturally important place may have little effect on the surrounding territory when access is unsafe, interpretation is absent and no local service is connected to the visit. Conversely, a large investment can increase turnover while damaging the landscape, displacing local activity or weakening the distinctiveness on which future demand depends.

The concept of cultural landscape helps to connect these concerns. It places natural conditions, land-use practices, built forms, memory and living traditions within the same field of analysis. UNESCO describes cultural

landscapes as expressions of the interaction between people and their environment, including forms of land use adapted to ecological constraints (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). In Strandzha, the landscape is more than the setting around separate attractions. It is the context in which settlements, forests, rivers, sacred places, rituals, food traditions and everyday livelihoods acquire a common regional meaning.

Position, function, dependence and transformation should not be read as a simple one-way sequence. Position influences which functions are possible, but the success of those functions depends on material, social and institutional conditions. The same conditions may create opportunities and vulnerabilities at the same time. Better infrastructure, stronger skills, new networks and a recognised regional reputation can reduce isolation and expand the region's functional reach. Poorly managed pressure can have the opposite effect by degrading resources and producing new forms of dependence.

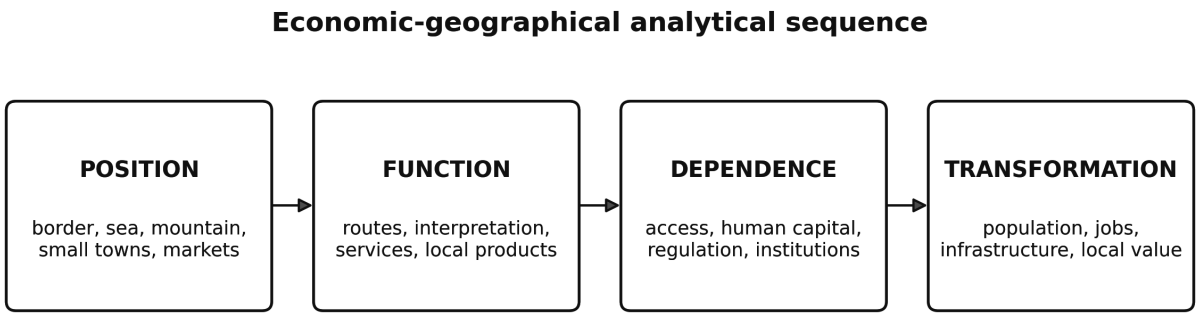


Figure 1. Position, function, dependence and transformation as an analytical sequence in economic geography. Source: author's conceptualisation.

3. STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

For practical purposes, the study focuses on the municipalities of Malko Tarnovo, Tsarevo and Sredets. This boundary does not suggest that the historical, natural or cross-border region of Strandzha fits neatly within three administrative units. It is an operational choice that brings together three different spatial positions: the protected mountain core and its small central place, the coastal interface, and the western approach from Burgas and the interior of South-Eastern Bulgaria. Extending the model into the Turkish part of the mountain would be both logical and valuable, but it would require harmonised data and institutional arrangements that fall outside the scope of the present article.

The study is exploratory and combines conceptual synthesis with secondary data analysis. Its starting ideas were developed in two working presentations prepared within the Heritage BG research framework and were subsequently reworked into a scientific model. They are considered alongside established work on regional development, rural policy, cultural landscapes and the experience economy. The empirical discussion uses official demographic data for 2025, environmental information and records concerning internationally recognised intangible heritage and protected food products. No completed field survey or visitor survey is presented. The site passports, route portfolio, local value sequence and indicator system should therefore be understood as a research design that still requires field testing and pilot implementation.

The research begins with a territorial profile of accessibility, demographic structure, labour resources, available services, planning readiness, conservation regimes and the risk of pressure on sensitive places. Heritage resources are then documented in a common site-passport format. Once the information is comparable, sites can be grouped around entry points and hubs and within microzones defined by actual travel time rather than by geometric distance. This spatial work pro-

vides the basis for routes designed for different seasons, durations and audiences. Each route can then be examined through a local value matrix and monitored for its effects on population, employment and infrastructure.

This method follows an integrated territorial logic. The Joint Research Centre's handbook on territorial and local development strategies argues that place-specific assets and needs should be connected through cross-sectoral action, multi-level governance and stakeholder participation (Pertoldi et al., 2022). Strandzha illustrates why this matters. Conservation, mobility, tourism, local production, education and municipal services meet in the same places, so decisions taken in one field inevitably affect the others.

4. TERRITORIAL PROFILE AND STRUCTURAL CONTRASTS

At the end of 2025, the three municipalities had a combined population of 23,586. This total conceals substantial differences. Malko Tarnovo had 2,479 residents, of whom 41.1% were above working age and only 11.0% were below it. Sredets, with 12,711 inhabitants, had the largest demographic base and a somewhat more balanced structure, although ageing remained evident. Tsarevo had 8,396 residents and the highest share of working-age population, at 58.1% (National Statistical Institute, 2026). The figures do not include seasonal residents, second-home use or daily mobility. Even so, they indicate the human base on which any heritage-led strategy would have to rely.

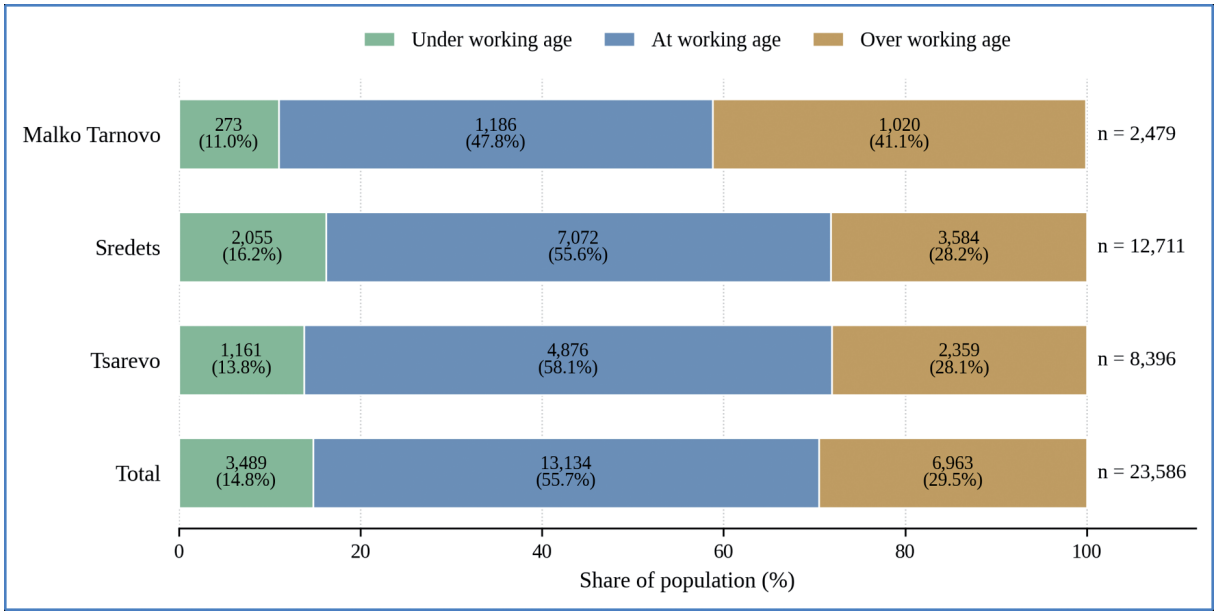


Figure 2. Population structure by working-age status in the operational study area, 2025. Counts and percentages are shown within each segment; labels at right give total population. Source: National Statistical Institute (2026); author's calculations.

The contrast among the municipalities is functional rather than simply a matter of relative strength or weakness. Tsarevo benefits from the visibility and seasonal demand of the Black Sea coast, but this advantage also concentrates economic activity in summer and within a narrow coastal strip. Malko Tarnovo occupies a central position in the mountain interior and carries considerable symbolic importance. Its small and ageing population, however, limits the immediate supply of guides, entrepreneurs and year-round services. Sredets has a larger population and a broader service base and could serve as a western gateway and logistics point linked to Burgas. For that role to become effective, its heritage resources need to be connected more clearly to the wider Strandzha narrative.

Environmental protection is not a restriction that can be added after development de-

cisions have been made. It is one of the main reasons the region has value. Strandzha Nature Park covers 116,054 hectares and is the largest protected area in Bulgaria. Its ecosystems and biodiversity coexist with folklore, cultural practices and historical heritage (Ministry of Environment and Water, 2025). Route planning must therefore begin with carrying capacity, appropriate forms of access and the scale of supporting infrastructure that sensitive places can reasonably sustain.

The region's living heritage requires the same care. Nestinarstvo, associated with the Panagyr of Saints Constantine and Helena in the village of Bulgari, was included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. UNESCO presents it as a living expression of Strandzha identity (UNESCO, 2009). Its continuity depends on the community, the ritual context and local authority over interpretation. It cannot be preserved by turning it into a scheduled performance detached from those conditions. Strandzhanski manov med, or Manov med ot Strandzha, provides a different but complementary example. Its protected designation of origin, registered through Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/537, connects forest ecology and local knowledge with taste, reputation and market income (European Commission, 2019).

These conditions point towards a regional model based on complementarity. The coast can provide visibility and an initial flow of visitors. The interior can offer depth through landscape, interpretation and living traditions. Western entry points can improve access and logistics, while local products can maintain a relationship with visitors after they leave. Strandzha does not suffer from a lack of resources. The more persistent problem is the weak continuity between resources, services and institutions.

5. FROM HERITAGE OBJECTS TO A REGIONAL SYSTEM

A regional system needs a common way of describing its resources. The site passport proposed here records the identity of a place, its location and access conditions, its significance and narrative, its level of readiness, the experience it can offer and its possible economic links. The purpose is not only to state what a site is, but also to show how it can be reached, interpreted and connected to local activity.

Coordinates, road condition, parking, signage, public transport and digital connectivity are recorded alongside historical significance and interpretative themes. Physical condition, legal status and known risks are considered separately from season, difficulty, expected duration and intended audience. The passport also asks where a service can be offered, where a payment may occur, which hub can support the visit and which local partners are able to participate.

Readiness is assessed through five levels, from an initial idea to a resource that is fully prepared for inclusion in a route. This is a functional assessment and should not be confused with cultural importance. A place of exceptional significance may remain unsuitable for visitors because access is unsafe or interpretation is missing. A less prominent resource may already be capable of supporting a small community route. Keeping significance and readiness separate allows sensitive places to remain protected and enables investment to proceed in stages rather than through a single large intervention.

Table 1. Standardised heritage-site passport.
Source: author's conceptualisation.

Dimension	Required information	Operational use
Identity	Type, name, concise description and keywords	Common inventory and search
Location and access	Coordinates, road access, parking, signage, public transport and connectivity	GIS analysis and logistics
Significance and narrative	Distinctive features, historical period, associated practices and interpretative themes	Content design and verification
Readiness	Physical condition, legal status, risks and the first necessary intervention	Prioritisation and investment phasing
Experience	Season, level of difficulty, expected duration and intended audience	Route compatibility
Economy	Potential service, payment point, supporting hub and local partners	Local-value assessment

GIS turns the inventory into a spatial network. A first layer contains sites, practices and narratives. Other layers show roads, parking, trails, water and sanitation, mobile coverage, accommodation, food services, rescue access, protected zones, property constraints and known risks. Entry points are settlements or transport nodes where a visit can begin and where orientation is available. Microzones are more usefully defined by realistic travel times, often between twenty and sixty minutes, than by fixed radii. Hubs are places where several functions can meet, including information, accommodation, food, guiding and transfer services.

Route design must bring together spatial feasibility and narrative coherence. The portfolio may include short weekend visits, three-day programmes based around a hub, slower itineraries and specialised routes concerned with archaeology, ethnography, geology, biodiversity or intangible heritage. Whatever the theme, visitors should receive clear information about duration, difficulty, season, transport, safety, indicative price, expected local benefit and appropriate behaviour. This makes a route understandable and bookable without reducing it to an inflexible package.

Central-place theory remains relevant because a sparsely populated region cannot expect every settlement to maintain the same range of services. Viability depends on a network of centres and supporting points, complemented where necessary by shared or mobile provision. Malko Tarnovo, Tsarevo and Sredets can perform different central functions. Smaller settlements do not need to reproduce these services. They can contribute through particular landscapes, narratives, products or events. The municipal centres should act as service anchors that widen participation across the territory rather than draw all activity into themselves.

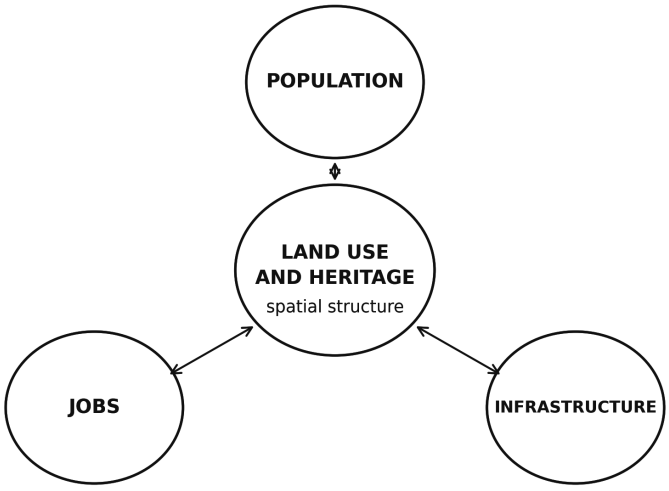


Figure 3. Population, jobs and infrastructure as the main dimensions of regional transformation. Source: author's conceptualisation, based on Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (2001).

6. LOCAL VALUE AND THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

The economic effect of a route is easier to understand when the visit is followed as a sequence of choices and payments rather than reduced to one total expenditure figure. The relationship often begins with visibility and reservation, continues through arrival, accommodation, food and interpretation, and may extend through purchases and later return visits. At each point, the important question is whether the visitor encounters a local partner and whether a meaningful part of the payment remains in the region. Promotion without a reservation mechanism may create interest but little predictable demand. Arrival without orientation can shorten the visit. When food, guiding and interpretation are absent, much of the value is captured by transport providers and outside intermediaries. A purchase followed by an online reorder can extend the economic relationship long after the journey itself.

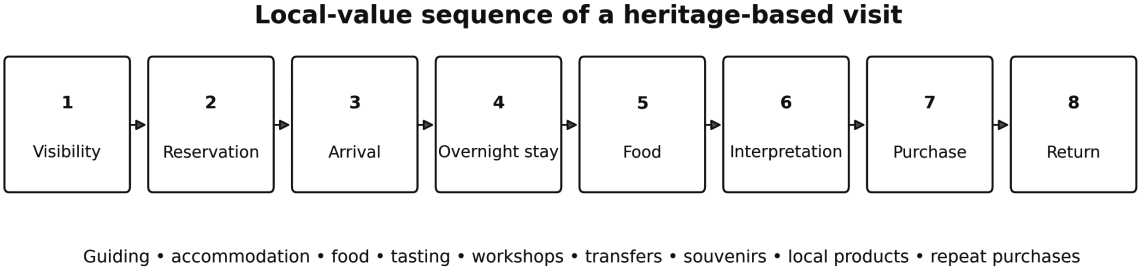


Figure 4. Stages through which a heritage visit can create and retain local value. Source: author's conceptualisation.

This reading is consistent with the experience economy, in which value emerges from organised and memorable participation rather than from the passive viewing of an object (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Cultural tourism requires an additional safeguard. Experiences should not detach stories from the communities that hold them, nor turn living practices into interchangeable entertainment. Any proposed experience should therefore be examined through questions of authority and custodianship. Who has the right to tell the story, who interprets it, who benefits and how much exposure can the place or practice sustain?

A practical assessment can link each site with the service offered, the point of payment and the local partner involved. Guiding, interpretation, tastings, workshops, meals, transfers, souvenirs and locally made products may all generate income, but not every element is appropriate in every place. Municipalities, non-governmental organisations, guesthouses, producers, community cultural centres, guides and educational institutions may participate in different combinations. A ritual place may require small groups and interpretation led by the community, while a food product may support larger tastings, gift packages and online sales.

Strandzha honeydew honey illustrates how a product and a territorial story can strengthen one another. It can be interpreted through forest ecology, beekeeping knowledge, biodiversity, taste and local identity. Producer visits, tastings, restaurant menus, gift packages and online orders create several opportunities for expenditure to remain local. The seasonal dimension is also important. Programmes in September and October could connect the end of the coastal season with the interior, local cuisine and the forest landscape. One product should not be expected to represent the whole region, but a recognisable product can open the way to a broader understanding of Strandzha.

Local value should consequently be assessed by retention and distribution, not by gross visitor spending alone. Relevant measures include the share of route components supplied within the region, the number of participating micro-enterprises, the distribution of revenue among settlements, the amount of year-round work and the frequency of repeat purchases. A route may attract many day visitors and still have little transformative effect if it produces no overnight stays, guiding or local sales.

7. GOVERNANCE, CARRYING CAPACITY AND MONITORING

Heritage-led revitalisation cannot be managed as a single promotional campaign. It requires an enduring capacity to set limits, maintain quality, collect evidence and change course when conditions require it. Group sizes, time windows and seasonal restrictions need to reflect the sensitivity of particular places. Routes also need common standards, trained guides, verified information and agreed service practices. Data collection should cover overnight stays, expenditure, sales, satisfaction, spatial concentration and incidents, not only total visitor numbers. When the evidence shows excessive pressure or weak local benefit, routes, logistics and access rules should be revised. A durable local association could bring municipalities, community organisations, businesses, producers, guides and research institutions into this continuing process.

Implementation can start on a limited scale. The first task is to agree on common templates for sites and routes and to prepare an initial map of entry points. Priority sites can then be documented, followed by the preparation of one-day and three-day routes and an assessment of local benefit. Pilot routes should come before major capital commitments. They can reveal practical problems in logistics, service quality, visitor response and environmental pressure while there is still room to make adjustments.

Monitoring returns the analysis to the relationship between population, employment and infrastructure. Changes in population are reflected not only in resident totals but also in community participation, the retention or return of younger people, the acquisition of new skills and the number of trained guides. Employment indicators should distinguish seasonal from year-round work, record new micro-businesses and local sales, and estimate the share of route expenditure retained in the region. Infrastructure monitoring should cover access, parking, signage, water and sanitation, connectivity, GIS coverage and the capacity to collect reliable data. Each indicator needs a baseline, a pilot result and regular annual observation.

Table 2. Core indicators for regional transformation. Source: author's conceptualisation.

Domain	Core indicators	Measurement logic
Population	Retention or return of younger people, community participation, new skills and trained guides	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up
Jobs	Seasonal and year-round employment, micro-businesses, local sales and locally retained expenditure	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up
Infrastructure	Access, parking, signage, water, sanitation, connectivity, GIS coverage and monitoring capacity	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up

Visitor numbers are an incomplete measure of success. They can rise while stays become shorter, ownership remains external, congestion increases and authenticity is weakened. Regional transformation becomes visible only when visitation improves the viability of local services, broadens the employment base, supports carefully selected infrastructure, strengthens institutional capacity and helps communities continue living in the territory.

8. DISCUSSION: AN ETHICS OF MEASURE

The model also suggests a different understanding of peripherality. Strandzha is not an empty margin waiting for outside capital to activate it. It is a border region whose relational value has only been partly realised. Its more serious weakness is not the absence of assets, but the breaks between settlements, services, information, access and governance. This interpretation is consistent with place-based development, which seeks to connect local potential and remove specific institutional and infrastructural bottlenecks rather than reproduce a standard tourism formula (Barca, 2009; Pertoldi et al., 2022).

A real tension remains. The forests, small settlements, ritual practices and local stories that distinguish Strandzha are also vulnerable to the attention that development tries to attract. They cannot absorb unlimited demand. The appropriate objective is therefore not the largest possible number of visitors, but a sufficient level of local value: enough guiding, accommodation, food services, product sales and new skills to improve local viability without reducing authenticity, ecological integrity or community ownership.

This balance may be described as an ethics of measure. Field evidence, GIS analysis and indicators are needed to understand what a place can reasonably sustain. Small-scale infrastructure can improve orientation, sanitation, access and digital visibility without pushing the territory towards heavy urbanisation. Integrity is better protected when wild nature, material heritage and intangible narratives are treated as parts of the same whole. Local income gives residents a practical reason to maintain knowledge, services and products. Conservation without viable livelihoods may lose local support, while income pursued without limits can destroy the resource on which it depends.

The risks are not abstract. Coastal demand could shape routes so strongly that the interior remains dependent on a short season. Outside tour operators may retain most of the income unless local booking and service capacity develops. Digital promotion may expose fragile places before rules of access are ready. Fragmented institutions can produce competing brands and incompatible data systems, while living traditions may be used symbolically without giving the community real author-

ity. A credible governance arrangement must therefore provide local consent, control over data, transparent sharing of benefits and restrictions on access where they are necessary.

The limits of the study also need to be recognised. Its operational boundary is administrative and confined to Bulgaria, although Strandzha is historically and geographically a wider cross-border region. The demographic data do not capture seasonal residents, second homes, commuting or informal economic activity. The route and monitoring systems have not yet been tested through field surveys, interviews with businesses or observation of visitor behaviour. These gaps are not minor technical details. They define the next stage of research. The contribution of the article is a framework that can be tested, together with a clear account of the information needed for territorial decision-making.

9. CONCLUSION

Strandzha becomes understandable as an economic-geographical region when heritage, settlements, accessibility, services, labour resources and institutions are considered together. The decisive move is from an inventory of separate objects to a network of regional functions. Sites provide material and symbolic resources. Routes connect them in space and give them a coherent narrative. Local services determine whether a visit creates value within the territory, while governance establishes the limits within which that value can be pursued.

The framework based on position, function, dependence and transformation explains why cultural significance alone is not sufficient. Regional functions rely on access, skills, infrastructure, regulation and coordination. Their results should be assessed through observable changes in population, employment and infrastructure. Visitor numbers still matter, but they are an intermediate indication rather than the final measure of transformation.

The practical model brings together a standard site passport, GIS-based hubs and travel-time microzones, routes of different duration, an assessment of local payments and a monitoring system that can be adjusted over time. It is compatible with a deliberately low-intensity path of development. Strandzha does not need investment pressure for its own sake. It needs better ordered relations among people, work, infrastructure, landscape and heritage.

The strategic aim is to create new value without weakening the integrity of the region. Longer stays are more useful than uncontrolled visitor flows. Local transactions matter more than visibility by itself, and durable skills and services matter more than seasonal extraction. Decisions should be based on evidence and coordination rather than fragmented promotion. Revitalisation, understood in this way, is not the commercialisation of heritage. It is the creation of conditions in which heritage can remain alive while supporting the continuity of the territory and the communities that sustain it.

REFERENCES

Barca, F. (2009) *An agenda for a reformed cohesion policy: a place-based approach to meeting European Union challenges and expectations*. Brussels: European Commission.

Christaller, W. (1966) *Central places in Southern Germany*. Translated by C. W. Baskin. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

European Commission (2019) "Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/537 of 28 March 2019 entering a name in the register of protected designations of origin and protected geographical indications ('Strandzhanski manov med' / 'Manov med ot Strandzha' (PDO))", *Official journal of the European Union*, L 93, pp. 1-2.

European Union (2020) *Territorial Agenda 2030: a future for all places*. Available from: https://territorialagenda.eu/wp-content/uploads/TA2030_jun2021_en.pdf [accessed 25.07.2026].

Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (2001) *Spatial development and spatial planning in Germany*. Bonn: Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning.

Ministry of Environment and Water (2025) *Strandzha Nature Park turns 30*. Available from: https://www.moew.government.bg/en/strandzha-nature-park-turns-30/ [accessed 25.07.2026].

National Statistical Institute (2026) *Population by working age status, place of residence, sex, and by districts and municipalities: data for 2025*. Sofia: NSI. Available from: https://www.nsi.bg/en/statistical-data/206/642 [accessed 25.07.2026].

OECD (2018) "Rural 3.0: a framework for rural development", *OECD Regional Development Papers*, No. 93. doi: https://doi.org/10.1787/618f702b-en.

Pertoldi, M., Fioretti, C., Guzzo, F., Testori, G., de Bruijn, M., Ferry, M., Kah, S., Servillo, L. A. and Windisch, S. (2022) *Handbook of territorial and local development strategies*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi: https://doi.org/10.2760/57919.

Pike, A., Rodrнguez-Pose, A. and Tomaney, J. (2017) *Local and regional development*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Pine, B. J. II and Gilmore, J. H. (1999) *The experience economy: work is theatre and every business a stage*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Richards, G. (2018) "Cultural tourism: a review of recent research and trends", *Journal of hospitality and tourism management*, 36, pp. 12-21. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.03.005.

Stoychev, K. (2026a) *Geosintez: regionalna transformatsiya v Balgaria: Tom 1: Vaglishtno zavisimi regioni*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press.

Stoychev, K. (2026b) *Ontologiya: geografiya na svetovnata ikonomika: vektori, transformatsiya, restrukturirane*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press.

UNESCO (2009) *Nestinarstvo, messages from the past: the Panagyr of Saints Constantine and Helena in the village of Bulgari: representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity*. Available from: https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/00191 [accessed 25.07.2026].

UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.) *Cultural landscapes*. Available from: https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/ [accessed 25.07.2026].

Странджа като икономогеографски регион: наследство, ревитализация и регионална трансформация

Косьо Стойчев

Резюме. Странджа е разгледана като икономогеографски регион, формиран от взаимовръзките между население, заетост, инфраструктура, достъпност, услуги и наследство. Анализът използва категориите позиция, функция, зависимост и трансформация, съчетани с териториален профил, паспортизация на обектите, разработване на маршрути и адаптивно управление. Оперативният обхват включва общините Малко Търново, Царево и Средец. Наличните данни показват ясно различие между крайбрежието, подкрепено от туризма, и вътрешността, засегната от демографски спад. Защитените ландшафти и живите традиции са не само ресурс, но и условие, което определя допустимата посока и мащаб на развитие. Наследството придобива регионална икономическа роля, когато посещенията създават търсене за местно настаняване, храна, водачи, интерпретация и продукти. Поради това ревитализацията следва да се оценява чрез отражението ѝ върху населението, заетостта и инфраструктурата, както и чрез дела на стойността, която остава в региона, а не само чрез броя на посетителите.

Ключови думи: периферни територии, местно развитие, икономика на преживяването, достъпност, местни вериги на стойността, устойчив туризъм



Map of Strandzha Sakar
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Strandzha_Sakar_en.svg

The Strandzha Brand: Values, Components, and Promotion

Ivanka Mavrodieva
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.18-29

Abstract: *The Strandzha brand represents a system of values and components encompassing history, cultural heritage, mythoogy, folklore, natural resources, landmarks, and other distinctive regional assets. The aim of this study is to identify the key elements that shape the identity of the Strandzha brand and to explore opportunities for their effective utilization and promotion. The research employs theoretical analysis, comparative analysis, and content analysis of scholarly publications, literary works, media channels, and social media content. The subject of the analysis includes the brand's core components and the communication techniques through which the Strandzha brand is created and promoted. The study is based on the assumption that the Strandzha brand incorporates a rich combination of historical facts, mythology, and cultural-historical events. The assumption is that the Strandzha brand needs to be integrated into a coherent communication programme aimed at strengthening brand equity, developing a distinctive brand personality, and fostering brand advocacy, thereby contributing to the development of the creative industries.*

Key words: *Strandzha*, brand; *brand equity; brand personality; brand advocacy; creative industries.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a brand has been examined across multiple academic disciplines, including business, economics, marketing, advertising, design, psychology, and communication studies. A substantial body of research has focused on the brand as a product, its positioning, consumer engagement strategies, brand typologies, brand elements, and contemporary digital tools for brand promotion, among other aspects. However, a review of the existing literature revealed no comprehensive analysis of Strandzha as a brand, despite the existence of hundreds of publications addressing its history, traditions, crafts, folklore, mythology, tourism, ecology, and related topics. The article focuses on two main dimensions. From a theoretical perspective, it seeks to define the scope and content of the concept of a brand, as well as to identify its characteristics and constituent components. From a methodological perspective, it aims to describe the constructs of the Strandzha brand based on a comprehensive review of the relevant literature.

Ivanka Mavrodieva *is a Full Professor at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, specializing in rhetoric, business communication, communication studies, public relations, and academic writing. She is a researcher, blogger, PR consultant, and trainer in media etiquette and presentation skills.*

Email: mavrodieva@phls.uni-sofia.bg
ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3764-5123

THEORETICAL OBSERVATION

Brand research has a long-standing tradition spanning several decades. One of the seminal contributions in this field was made by Jennifer Aaker, whose study presents the fundamental components of a brand, namely: "…the "Big Five" dimensions, and the author develops a theoretical framework of the brand personality construct by determining the number and nature of the dimensions

of brand personality (Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness). (Aaker, 1997, p. 347).

Ali Raza, Karim, Emadul, and Abbas, Omair and Sultan, Shair and Hasan, Syed Waqarul analyse the brand components using quantitative methods and come to the conclusion that "The research shows that brand components will have a significant impact on consumer perception and consumer will prefer those brands, which have branded components. ". (Raza et al., 2013, p. 14).

Jana Majerova and Tomas Kliestik accepted that "All elements of the brand can be divided into two main groups:

– rational elements – these are focused on the content of brand communication, its proposals and promises, explain to the consumer what this brand can do for him/her and also, they are perceived by logical reasoning.

– emotional elements - this is, so to speak, a "feeling" of the brand, which is its expression directed to satisfy the spiritual needs of the customer without affecting the scope of rational reasoning." (Majerova and Kliestik, 2015, p. 547).

The brief review demonstrates that a brand encompasses multiple components and is commonly associated with products and companies. From a marketing perspective, its primary purpose is to generate consumer interest, establish trust, and foster favourable perceptions among target audiences.

Chenjerai Muchenje, Edwill Mtengwa, Forbes Kabote concludes that the origins of branding are commonly traced back to the sixteenth century (the 1500s). Since then, branding has evolved throughout the Industrial Revolution, progressed through successive periods of technological innovation, and undergone profound transformation during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (Muchenje et al., 2023, p. 241). The authors distinguish between brand image and brand equity, arguing that both are essential to the development, establishment, and long-term strengthening of a brand. (Muchenje et al., 2023, p. 244 – 246). According to the researchers, in the contemporary context a brand should be developed as a value-driven construct that is closely aligned with an organization's mission and vision. It should be grounded in authenticity and transparency, and incorporate storytelling as a modern form of narrative communication, including within virtual environments through the use of technological and software-based tools. The researchers also emphasize the importance of online retail platforms, the creation of events, and the production of memorable content that fosters experiential engagement among audiences and contributes to the establishment and maintenance of an emotional connection with the brand. Furthermore, they highlight the role of influencers, social media platforms, and digital marketing as integral components in brand development. In addition, personalized content can be generated through artificial intelligence, enabling the analysis and continuous updating of content based on research into the expectations of consumers and visitors who are emotionally engaged with the brand.

In agreement with the authors' conclusions, it can be summarized that brand development is shaped by the conceptualization of brand value/quality, brand personality, and its contemporary positioning. At the same time, beyond the experiential aspects, the construction of a strong and sustainable brand is of particular importance, as it is mediated through emotion and the creation of content generated not only by the organization but also by consumers of products, services, and activities associated with the brand.

Suraksha Gupta, David Gallear, John Rudd and Pantea Foroudi investigate the impact of brand value on brand competitiveness and in figure one they present a generalized picture, including features, values, marketing, management, by referring to brand value: emotional, rational, operational. They derive brand competitiveness as encompassing knowledge, infrastructure, support, capabilities, and relationship. The authors describe brand differentiation: brand benefits, brand uniqueness, brand effectiveness, and brand pull. Researchers talk about types of marketing and marketing orientation; customer

management, competitor management, conflict management, and relationship management. The authors summarize that there is a need for strategic orientation: objective management, information management, process management, response management (Gupta et al., 2020, p. 211).

Branding is examined according to various criteria. From a geopolitical and territorial perspective, depending on the object of the brand, it may be classified as regional, national, or state-level branding. The researchers Tijani, Ahmed; Majeed, Mohammed; Ofori, Kwame Simpe; Abubakari, Aidatu conduct a theoretical review of the relevant literature and focus on the term "country branding," noting that it lacks a single, universally accepted interpretation. For some scholars, it refers to state branding, while for others it denotes nation branding. (Tijani et al., 2024, p. 1 – 24)

The topic related to branding and nations, as well as branding and states, has also been examined by other scholars in different contexts. This form of branding serves as a valuable platform for nations to shape and influence their public image and contend with other countries in the global marketplace (Gudjonsson, 2005, p. 283 – 298). The author further argues that this form of branding serves as a valuable platform for states to shape and influence their public image and to compete with other countries in the global marketplace. (Gudjonsson, 2005, p. 283 – 298).

It is evident that branding is a complex and multidimensional process that requires both strategic thinking and a thorough understanding of traditional and contemporary communication techniques related to digital marketing and social media, as well as visualization and virtualization. It is also closely linked to the values of a given country and the policies through which they are implemented.

Min Ji Kim and Annette Bamberger reach their conclusions following a theoretical review and analysis, arguing that the concept of branding is a complex undertaking that requires the examination of publications, data, and analyses related to history, business, culture, and media. They further summarize that this is followed by the development and implementation of a communication strategy and campaign in which key elements include narrative construction and selective storytelling, including narratives oriented toward the maintenance of state discourses or power relations. The analysts conclude that the application of pluralistic approaches to national branding is of particular importance, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of how economic, political, and cultural strategies intersect and converge within national branding. (Kim and Bamberger, 2025, p. 1 – 24).

Klára Margarisová and Lucie Vokáčová conduct a theoretical review of the relevant literature on regional branding through the lens of brand identity, values, and product positioning, and conclude that the development and enhancement of regional brands represents an effective communication strategy for the promotion of rural areas. Researchers conceptualize the regional brand as a mechanism that facilitates the development of socially, culturally, and environmentally oriented economies in areas characterized by various attributes, including rich natural and cultural heritage. The authors further identify the importance of cooperation between municipalities, farmers, and institutions in preserving and developing local traditions, as well as in fostering tourism development in these regions. (Margarisová and Vokáčová, 2016, p. 2059 – 2066).

Based on the theoretical review, there are grounds for the following conclusions. Country/state branding is closely associated with values, the formation of attitudes, and the development of a sense of national identity among the inhabitants of a region or country. This can be achieved through traditional and contemporary communication campaigns that present folkloric heritage, mythology, historical events, crafts and business, as well as cultural characteristics and values. It is important to develop narratives grounded in historical authenticity and in

the contributions of prominent individuals and creators, thereby providing a tangible representation of the country's culture, values, and history.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The specific nature of the research subject, which is multifaceted, requires an interdisciplinary approach and the use of various methods; the choice has fallen on desk research, content analysis, and cyber-ethnographic observation.

Teun A. van Dijk has made significant contributions to the development of discourse analysis, particularly in relation to the interconnections between discourse, context, and cognition (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466–485). The CDA framework has been adapted to the objectives of this study, based on the assumption that brand Strandzha has specific manifestations in the Bulgarian history and current time and are characterized by distinct discursive features.

Elisenda Ardevol and Edgar Gymez-Cruz distinguish between digital, media, and virtual ethnography, and they analyze the evolving linguistic and communicative dimensions of virtual spaces, making an assumption language practices are reshaped in online environments (Ardevol and Gymez-Cruz, 2014, 1 – 35).

HYPOTHESES

H1: The development of the Strandzha brand begins with the recognition of its heterogeneity, multilayered structure, and rich heritage. It should be conceptualized within a common framework without homogenizing or diminishing its constituent elements, as it integrates history, mythology, folklore, culture, crafts, and related dimensions.

H2: The construction of the brand requires the integration of the public and private sectors, as well as collaboration among scholars and communication experts. It necessitates the active involvement of local authorities, cultural institutions, businesses, non-governmental organizations, media, academics, citizens, and other stakeholders.

H3: The development of the Strandzha brand presupposes the creation of a regional brand with both national and supranational significance, which may serve as a foundation for the development of creative industries.

The research design includes the specification of the study period, which spans from 1 December 2025 to 30 June 2026. The study examines the national register of published books in Bulgaria held by the National Library "St. St. Cyril and Methodius," as well as websites of publishing houses, municipalities, libraries, cultural centres, schools, non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and social networks. It is necessary to establish delimitations of the research corpus, which comprises 200 sources of diverse genre characteristics, dating from the beginning of the 20th century to the third decade of the 21st century.

RESULTS

An analysis of the Strandzha brand, based on scientific publications, shows that it comprises various components and cannot be confined to narrow theoretical classifications and criteria. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that Strandzha cannot be defined solely as a regional brand; it has national and supranational dimensions. The reasons for this are that its territorial location; geopolitical parameters; historical, economic, and cultural heritage; and mythological and folkloric richness form multiple layers. The infographic presents a summary that does not claim to be exhaustive or[1] definitive, but rather serves as a starting point for further research.

[1] The figures are generated with AI.



Figure 1. Components of the Strandzha Brand

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the summary infographic shows that, although they exist separately, some of the components of the Strandzha brand are interrelated, and studying them requires a comprehensive approach; for example, folklore, mythology, religion and beliefs, traditions, way of life, crafts, cuisine, history, and others. At the same time, in the present day, the Strandzha brand – as communicated through business, the arts, tourism, and events – is oriented in other directions:

– Interpreting and reinterpreting the characteristics of the Strandzha region, such as its geographic location, territory, history, business, demographics, diaspora, and others;

– analyzing and synthesizing existing publications, archives, and research, and conceptualizing them within a new context of digitization and making them accessible to citizens through virtualization;

– Coordinating activities among government policies, ministries, local authorities, nongovernmental organizations, community centres, educational and cultural institutions, galleries, museums, and others;

– The concept of branding the Strandzha region as part of the country of Bulgaria, the Balkan Peninsula, and the European continent requires a new understanding of reputation and image management in order to promote various aspects of the Strandzha brand identity.

– Creating and implementing innovative, modern, and flexible communication among partners, the media, prosumers, public figures, and institutions; reviving traditional crafts and creating products through experiential activities for tourists: schoolchildren, college students, and citizens;

– Formulating messages for various target audiences, combining traditional and modern communication approaches and techniques;

– Achieving a long-term, sustainable competitive advantage by establishing the Strandzha brand and emphasizing social responsibility – and only then discussing the creative industry.

A review of the 200 selected publications reveals a sustained interest in publishing works related to Strandzha. In terms of genre, there is great diversity. Among the literary genres, the following stand out: novels, novellas, short stories, anthologies, poetry collections, memoirs, and travel guides. From a scholarly perspective, the genres include academic articles and research papers, as well as dictionaries, reference works, and collections. They date back to the 1960s and continue into the third decade of the 21st century. The works include proceedings from scientific conferences organized at the national level, as well as university publications resulting from research projects. Without delving into unnecessary taxonomy and classifications, this group includes publications related to agricultural recommendations, travel guides, cookbooks, and publications on environmental topics.



Figure 2. Genre diversity. Covers of books dedicated to Strandzha

Most of the publications date from the 20th century, and their frequency varies; the earliest were written by scholars and researchers. The eminent Bulgarian scholar Mihail Arnaudov published "New Information on the Nestinari" in the Journal of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, XIV in 1917 (pp. 43 – 102). He expanded his research and, with institutional support, and he wrote the book "Essays on Bulgarian Folklore", published by the Ministry of Public Education in 1934.

During the 20th century, research increased and spanned various fields: folklore, ethnography, ethnology, and others. For example:

Georgi P. Ayanov wrote "Ethnographic, Geographical, and Historical Studies", "Strandzha Library", No. 11, published by the Thracian Scientific Institute in 1938. The same author wrote "The Ethnic Character of Western Thrace". "Historical and Ethnographic Studies", published by the "Thrace" Cultural and Charitable Society in 1942 and it is a part of the "Native Thrace Library", No. 1.

Between 1944 and 1990, publishing houses that were legitimate during the socialist era published books and collections of scholarly articles. Among them were "Partizdat" Publishing House, the Publishing House of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS); "Plamuk" Publishing House; the General Directorate of Compulsory Labor; and the Thracian Scientific Institute.

Atanas Premyanov is the author of the book "The Eagles of Strandzha", which includes biographies, memoirs, and letters and was published by "Partizdat" Publishing House (the Bulgarian Communist Party) in 1968.

Georgi Popstamatov compiled the book "Strandzha Gave Birth to Them" (part of the series of fictionalized documentary "Biographies. Memoirs, Biographies", which was published by "Partizdat" Publishing House in 1975.

Georgi Popstamatov is the author of the book "Delian Ropotamo", published by "Partizdat" Publishing House in 1967.

Konstantin Petkanov's book of prose, "The White Wind of Strandzha", was published by the BZNS Publishing House.

The "Bulgarian Writer" Publishing House was active during the socialist era and published primarily fiction; examples are given below: Doncho Tsonchev is the author of the book "On Strandzha Bair the soul", published

in 1987; Hristo Silyanov is the author of the book "Letters and Confessions of a Chetnik. Memories from Strandzha, from Vitosha to Gramos", published in 1984; Minko Nevolin is the author of the book "On the Hills of Strandzha" published in 1982.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage through collaboration between local authorities and the academic community, which resulted in the 2009 publication of a 440-page "Encyclopedic Dictionary: Malko Tarnovo. Strandzha", published by the State Agency "Archives" and the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo.

At the regional or local level, there is a great deal of activity, and this is not merely a manifestation of local patriotism, but of an awareness of the significance of Strandzha and the promotion of its importance, which can be seen as a component of its heterogeneity, as well as elements of attachment – both on an emotional and rational level – to the values of Strandzha. Results from national conferences involving local authorities and cultural institutions have been published in the following collections:

– "Strandzha: Material and Spiritual Culture. Ethnographic, Folklore, and Linguistic Studies", published by "Prof. Marin Drinov" Academic Publishing House in 1986.It is a part of "Bulgarian History. Folklore and Ethnography". Contributors include Alexander Fol, Tsenka Koseva, Petar Kanev, Nikolay Grigorov, Atanas Atanasov, and others.

– "Strandzha-Sakar Collection". Volume 1. Proceedings of the Second Interdisciplinary Symposium "Strandzha-Sakar" – Malko Tarnovo, September 30–October 2, 1980.

– "Strandzha-Sakar Collection". Volume 2. Book 2. Proceedings of the Second Interdisciplinary Symposium "Strandzha-Sakar" – Malko Tarnovo, September 30–October 2, 1980.

– "Libra Scorp" stand out. Regional publishers also release publications related to the history and archaeology of Strandzha, such as "Strandzha-Sakar: Bibliographic Index 1975 – 1983", published in Yambol in 1983. There is also collaboration with scholars; the editor is Stefan Neykov.

After 1990, interest in book publishing continued, albeit with varying intensity.

UNIBIT Publishing House "On Letters. On Writing" has published the textbook "Nestiriana: A Bibliographic Guide. Historiography and Photography" in 2012, 383 pages, edited by Alexandra Kumanova. The publication is available online and supports student learning; it is illustrated and intended for practice-oriented academic education.

The University Press of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" published "Bibliography on the History of Strandzha"; the authors are Albena Milanova. Angel Nikolov, Ivayla Popova, Mira Markova; they are members of the research team and of the study conducted as part of a project funded by the National Science Fund; the researchers are from the Faculty of History at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". The book was published in 2019 and it can find online as open resources.

The Gutenberg Publishing House published "Traces of a Heroic Era: Sites of Memory Associated with the National Liberation Struggles (1867 – 1878)" in 2024. The study was conducted by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in collaboration with the Ethnographic Museum, and the volume is 730 pages long.

The East-West Publishing House has published a 582-pages volume edited by Panayot Madjarov in 2016. The book, titled "The Folklore Heritage of Kera Madjarova", contains 805 folk songs and other pieces from the Strandzha region, collected by her son, Panayot Madjarov.

The "Standard" Publishing House publishes historical novels and anthology-style books. Regional publishers and municipalities also publish books related to the Strandzha region; among them, the State Agency "Archives" – Malko Tarnovo, the "Burgas – Malko Tarnovo" Publishing House, and

"Standard News" published "Myths and Legends: Burgas and Strandzha" in 2013, indicating that various regionally focused publishers are also interested in Strandzha.

One of the most active authors is *Stoyan Raichevski*; he publishes collections of songs

and conducts analyses. He is the author of the book "Strandzha: Ethnological Studies", published by "Zahari Stoyanov" Publishing House, 400 pages. He compiles a wealth of information on folklore and traditions in the 400-page book "Calendar and Rituals in Strandzha and Eastern Thrace", published by "Zahari Stoyanov" Publishing House in 2016. The same author also researched the nestinari and authored the book "Nestinari: The Sacred World of Thrace", published by "Zahari Stoyanov" Publishing House in 2021.

The topics of the **nestinari** (fire-dancers) and **nestinarstvo** (fire-dancing) is a popular one, and there are both scholarly articles and anthologies and books on the subject.

Ivanichka Georgieva is the author of the paper "Fire-walking in Strandzha. The Cultural and Historical Heritage of Strandzha-Sakar", published in 1987 (pp. 105 – 114).

Ivanichka Georgieva published results of her research in the paper "Nestinarstvo in Bulgaria. Second International Congress on Bulgarian Studies", Proceedings, Vol. 10, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1987 (pp. 37 – 51).

Ruja Neykova is the author of the article "The Last Nestinarka in Kalandzha," published in the journal Bulgarian Folklore, No. 4, 2001 (pp. 76 – 82).

Many publications related to nestinarstvo (fire-dancing) have been organized thematically; their authors are renowned scholars and researchers, such as:

Anna Georgieva and Rumyana Lebedeva included a paper in the book "Nestinarstvo – Reality and Mysticism" and the publisher is Angel Kanchev University of Ruse in 2022.

The second group of publications is devoted to folklore, for example:

Zhelyazko Zhekov is the author of the book "Strandzha: Songs from Strandzha", Vol. 1, "Plamuk" Publishing House. Of particular interest is a group of publications in which researchers present the results of studies related to specific localities; this reflects scientific interest, patriotism, nostalgia, and an awareness of the importance of preserving memory.

Documentary writing is also a field in which a number of authors publish. The General Directorate of Labor Service from 1948 presents popular information about Strandzha. Among the authors in this field is Milena Drencheva, author of "The Lantern of Strandzha", published by "Znatsi" Publishing House in 2024. Kiril Elenchev wrote the book "Strandzha. Malko Tarnovo – The Huts", a work of literary non-fiction published by "Znatsi" Publishing House in 2020.

Fiction

Among the established authors in Bulgarian literature is Diko Fuchidzhiev: books "A Journey of Anger" (1965), "The Sky Over Veleka" (1969), "The River" (1977).

Kiril Elenchev is the author of short stories collected in the anthology "Strandzha. Meria", a collection published by "Znatsi" Publishing House in 2020.

Tatyana Yotova combines poetry, and illustrations of birds and plants in her book "The Living Strandzha", aimed at a young readership and published by "Zahari Stoyanov" Publishing House.

Minko Nevolin published the historical novel "Through the Hills of Strandzha", published by "Bulgarian Writer" Publishing House in 1982. The same author published "On the Strandzha Hills and in the Forest", a collection of short stories, novellas, biographical details, and memoirs, published by "Narodna Mladezh" Publishing House in 1971.

Over the past decades of the 21th century, interest in Strandzha has grown, and one of the books which devotes dozens of pages to fire-dancing, mythology, folklore, and Strandzha is by Miroslav Penkov, titled "The Storks and the Mountain", published by "Ciela" Publishing House in 2016.

Topics related to Strandzha and the Thracians are included in Lyudmila Filipova's book "Where the Sun Is Born", published by "Enthusiast" Publishing House in 2021.

On **historical topics**, there are publications that are both scholarly and popular science in nature, and the authors include renowned scholars, local historians, and professionals working in cultural institutions. Among these publications, those by Kiril Momchilov stand out: "Strandzha Will Remember Him Forever" published in 1981;

Kiril Momchilov stand out: "Strandzha Will Remember Him Forever" published in 1981; "The Brave Sons of Strandzha" published by "Otechestvo" Publishing House in 1984;

Among the historical books is "Thracian Society – Bulgarian Refugees in Burgas and the Region—1878 – 1945" published by "Burgas: Thracian Society "Burgas Strandzha" in 2017.

In recent years, so-called "influencers" or amateur researchers have been publishing books, including works about Strandzha; one such author is Slavi Panayotov (The Clasher), who published "50 Incredible Mysteries" (2018); "50 Incredible Places in Bulgaria" (2021).

Tourism-related publications – such as travel guides, tourist guides, and dictionaries – were already being produced as early as the 20th century, with their publication supported either on a professional basis or as a result of the authors' own initiative. Among these publications, those by Velio Velev stand out; he published "Strandzha: A Travel Guide" published by "Nauka i Izkustvo" Publishing House in 1960, which focused on sports, tourism, and travel guides. It is a part of "Library of the Bulgarian Geographical Society".

Ivan Mihaylov published "Strandzha: A Tourist Dictionary" published by "Adular" Publishing House in 1992, 148 pages.

Dimo Kolev published two volumes of "Strandzha: A Tourist Guide – On Foot and by Bike". Volume Two published by "Guide Publishing House" in 2014/2025.

Activity in the field of tourism and business, particularly in the form of publications, has remained steady; for example, a team working with Stoyan Marinov is the author of the book "Strategy for the Development of Nature-Friendly Tourism in Strandzha Park – 2014 – 2020", the publisher is "Science and Economy" Publishing House.

Agriculture, nature, and **ecology** is another field in which there are publications, though not many. Diko Patronov is the author of "The Great Strandzha Desert", published in 2010.

Although they are separate publications, the study showed that there are also books in the field of regional studies devoted to cuisine and crafts, such as Rumyana Urumova's "Traditional Strandzha Cuisine: 203 Recipes", published by "Libra-Scorp" Publishing House in 2015.

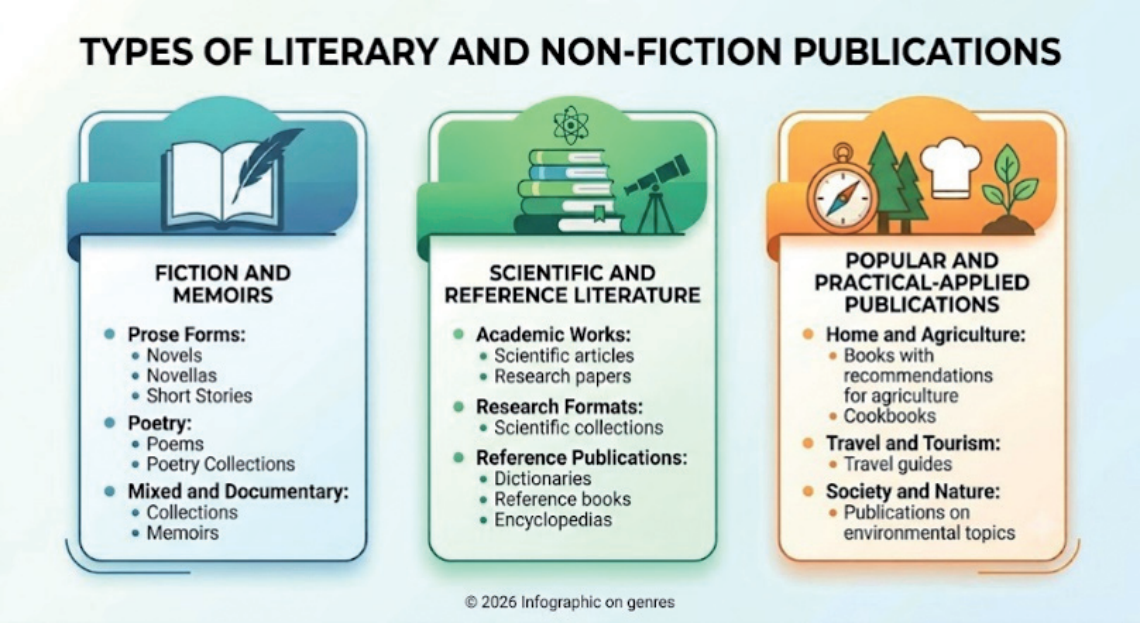


Figure 3. Type of literary and non-fiction publication dedicated to Strandzha

DISCUSSION

The Strandzha brand comprises distinct interconnected components whose interpretation requires an interdisciplinary approach. The contemporary development of the Strandzha brand should emphasize the reinterpretation of the region's territorial, historical, demographic, and economic characteristics; as well as cultural dimensions – including folklore, mythology, religion, traditions, lifestyle, crafts, cuisine, and history. It is obligatory to use digitization, and virtualization of existing knowledge and archival resources. It is necessarily to coordinate collaboration among public institutions, local authorities, cultural and educational organizations, and civil society. The next step could be an adoption of a strategic branding framework that strengthens the region's reputation of Strandzha and identity within Bulgaria, the Balkan Peninsula, and Europa. Furthermore, sustainable brand development depends on stakeholder communication, the revitalization of traditional crafts through experiential tourism. It is necessarily to go to an audience-oriented communication strategy that combines traditional and digital approaches. A modern approach includes an establishment of a socially responsible brand capable of generating a competitive advantage and support the creative industries.

CONCLUSIONS

This study establishes conceptual definitions of the brand and its components, distinguishing among several branding categories, including regional, territorial, national, and product brands. It also identifies their manifestations in both traditional and contemporary contexts and examines key branding characteristics, such as brand identity, brand advocacy, brand equity, and brand value. The study analyzes a selected corpus of more than 200 publications, which were provisionally classified according to genre, thematic focus, and publisher. The findings reveal an exceptionally rich documentary and literary heritage related to the Strandzha region, encompassing history, mythology, folklore, traditional crafts, customs, and cultural traditions. The analysis also identifies periods of intensified scholarly activity and publication, characterized by thematic specialization, alongside periods marked by grassroots regional publishing initiatives. Nostalgia emerges as a significant motivating force, as representatives of the Strandzha region have actively preserved and published songs, customs, and traditions, presenting them through the lens of family and collective memory. Consequently, these publications are valuable both as sources of local historical knowledge and as an integral part of Bulgaria's literary and cultural heritage. The diversity and richness of the publications reflect considerable intellectual capacity, cultural patriotism, social commitment, and thematic heterogeneity. These findings underscore the need for systematic digitization, organization, and accessible presentation of this heritage to wider audiences, particularly Bulgarians interested in the cultural legacy of Strandzha. The research hypotheses were confirmed to a substantial extent, providing a solid foundation for future in-depth interdisciplinary research on the Strandzha brand and its cultural, social, and communication dimensions. The Strandzha brand is distinguished by heterogeneity, a multilayered structure, and rich heritage; it integrates history, mythology, folklore, culture, crafts, and related dimensions. The Strandzha brand requires the integration of the public and private sectors, as well as collaboration among scholars, communication experts, cultural institutions, businesses, non-governmental organizations, media, and others. The development of the Strandzha brand requires the creation of a regional and national brand, and it could be a base for the development of creative industries, including different types of tourism.

REFERENCES

Aaker, J. L. (1997) "Dimensions of brand personality", *Journal of marketing research*, 34(3), pp. 347 – 356. doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/3151897.

Ardévol, E. and Gómez-Cruz, E. (2014) "Digital ethnography and media practices", in Darling-Wolf, F. (ed.) *The international encyclopedia of media studies: volume 7. Research methods in media studies*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp.1 – 35. doi: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444361506.wbiems193.

Arruda, W. (2003) *An introduction to personal branding: a revolution in the way we manage our careers*. Available from: www.reachcc.com (accessed: 22.07.2026).

Gudjonsson, H. (2005) "Nation branding", *Place branding*, 1(3), pp. 283 – 298. doi: https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990029.

Gupta, S., Gallear, D., Rudd, J. and Foroudi, P. (2020) "The impact of brand value on brand competitiveness", *Journal of business research*, 112, pp. 210 – 222. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.02.033.

Majerova, J. and Kliestik, T. (2015) "Brand valuation as an immanent component of brand value building and managing", *Procedia economics and finance*, 26, pp. 546 – 552.

Margarisová, K. and Vokáčová, L. (2016) "Regional branding: building brand value", *Acta Universitatis Agriculturae et Silviculturae Mendelianae Brunensis*, 64(6), pp. 2059 – 2066. doi: http://doi.org/10.11118/actaun201664062059.

Min, J. K. and Bamberger, A. (2025) "Conceptualizing nation branding in the field of higher education: a systematic literature review". *Journal of marketing for higher education*, pp. 1 – 24. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2025.2567835.

Muchenje, C., Mtengwa, E. and Kabote, F. (2023) "Building a strong brand: future strategies and insights", in *Sustainable marketing, branding, and reputation management: strategies for a greener future*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi: https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-0019-0.ch012.

Raza, A., Karim, E., Abbas, O., Sultan, S. and Waqarul, H. (2016) "Effect of branded components on consumer perception of quality and brand preference", *MPRA, Paper No. 75463*, pp. 1 – 14. Available at: https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/75463/ (accessed: 22 July 2026).

Stern, B. B. (2006) "What does brand mean? Historical analysis method and construct definition". *Journal of the academy of marketing science*, 34(2), pp. 216 – 223. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070305284991.

Swystun, J. (ed.) (2007) *The brand glossary*. London: Interbrand/Palgrave Macmillan. Available from: https://www.scribd.com/document/91336861/Brand-Glossary (accessed: 22.09.2026).

Tijani, A., Majeed, M., Ofori, K.S. and Abubakari, A. (2024) "Country branding research: a decade's systematic review". *Cogent business & management*, 11(1), pp. 1 – 24. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2307640.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2015) "Critical discourse analysis", in Tannen, D., Hamilton, H. E. and Schiffrin, D. (eds.) *The handbook of discourse analysis*. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 466 – 485.

Waller, T. (2020) "An introduction to personal branding", in *Personal brand management*. Cham: Springer, pp. 1–16. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43744-2_1.

Wetsch, R. L. (2012) "A personal branding assignment using social media". *Journal of advertising education*, 16(1), pp. 30 – 36. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/109804821201600106.

Брандът „Странджа“: ценности, компоненти и популяризиране

Иванка Мавродиева

Резюме: Брандът „Странджа“ е система от ценности и от компоненти, включващи история, културно наследство, митология, фолклор, природни ресурси и забележителности и др. Целта е да се идентифицират ключовите елементи, които изграждат идентичността на бранда „Странджа“ и да се представят възможностите за тяхното използване и популяризиране. Методите в изследването са теоретичен анализ, сравнителен анализ, контент анализ на научни публикации, художествени произведения, медийни канали и социални мрежи. Предмет на анализа са компоненти на бранда, комуникационни техники, чрез които се формира и популяризира този бранд. Допускането е, че брандът Странджа може да включва богатство от фактология, митология, исторически културни събития, те обаче трябва да се осмислят в компактна комуникационна програма, която да е насочена към изграждане на brand equity, brand personality, brand advocacy и оттам към подпомагане на креативните ивдустрии.

Ключови думи: Странджа; бранд; стойност на бранд; персоналност на бранда; подкрепа/ застъпничество за бранда; творчески индустрии



Figure 4. Covers of books dedicated to Strandzha

Chitalishta and Libraries as Carriers of Cultural Capital and Factors in the Social Sustainability of Local Communities in a Peripheral Region

Zhelyu Vladimirov
Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski

Bilyana Yavrukova
Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.30-51

Abstract: *This study examines the role of 39 chitalishta (community cultural centres) and their libraries as institutions that embody cultural and social capital in four Bulgarian municipalities – Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzidimovo, and Satovcha. Two pilot composite indices are introduced: a Chitalishte Activity Index, incorporating events, artistic ensembles, project activity, membership, and staffing; and a Library Activity Index, weighting usage, cultural activity, capacity, and development/innovation. Results reveal uneven distribution of institutional activity independent of network density: Hadzhidimovo has the highest number of chitalishta per capita but the lowest activity index, while Gotse Delchev and Satovcha demonstrate stronger and more balanced performance across both chitalishta and libraries. A typology of libraries is proposed based on comparative indicators. The study contributes an empirical and methodological basis for further research on cultural infrastructure in peripheral regions.*

Keywords: *chitalishta; public libraries; cultural capital; social capital; composite indices; peripheral regions; Bulgaria*

INTRODUCTION

Chitalishta (singular: chitalishte) and libraries constitute a core component of municipal cultural infrastructure, particularly in peripheral regions. In the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo, and Satovcha, they form a territorially distributed cultural and informational network. Through their library, educational, and cultural activities, this network preserves local memory, creates opportunities for participation, and may contribute to social sustainability in the context of demographic decline and peripheralization.

Folklore ensembles, educational programmes run by chitalishta, museum collections, local history activities, and library collections are major repositories of the cultural capital of local communities. Chitalishta and libraries facilitate participation, interaction, and exchange among different age and social groups, thereby contributing to the development of social capital. Through public celebrations, festivals, library initiatives, work

Zhelyu Vladimirov *is a Full Professor, DSc. in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.*

Email: jeve@feb.uni-sofia.bg

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0435-6827

Bilyana Yavrukova *is Director of the Sofia University Library and Associate Professor in the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.*

Email: b_yavrukova@phls.uni-sofia.bg
ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-3487

with children, and the preservation of local memory, these institutions sustain a sense of belonging and strengthen local identity.

Accordingly, the focus of this analysis is not chitalishta or libraries considered separately, but the chitalishte–library network as a cultural and information system spanning the four municipalities. Libraries are not merely an ancillary activity of chitalishta; in many cases, they represent their most enduring and best-documented function.

This study aims to assess the resources, activity, and territorial coverage of the chitalishte–library network and to determine how the institutional characteristics observed may be interpreted as conditions conducive to social sustainability. The analysis covers 39 chitalishta and 24 libraries in the four municipalities. It employs descriptive statistics, comparative analysis, and two pilot composite indicators. Because the study does not directly measure trust, social ties, or resilience during crises, it does not establish causal effects.

The study addresses three research questions: (1) How do the network's resources and activity differ across the four municipalities? (2) Which characteristics may be interpreted as institutional conditions conducive to social sustainability? (3) How does incomplete reporting constrain comparison?

The study proceeds from the assumption that municipalities with more active chitalishta and library networks will display stronger institutional conditions conducive to social sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural capital as a resource for local development

The concept of cultural capital originated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), where it was used to explain the academic and professional success of children from privileged families. It was subsequently developed within cultural economics and regional development. Contemporary research views cultural capital not only as a body of cultural values and heritage, but also as a strategic resource for building social trust, local identity, and sustainable development (Järvelä, 2023). Cultural heritage assets can inspire creativity, foster cultural diversity, and contribute to social cohesion, civic engagement, health, and well-being. They therefore represent important resources for local development (OECD/ICOM, 2019). In this context, chitalishta may be understood as institutions that accumulate, preserve, and transmit cultural capital across generations.

Throsby (1995) develops the concept of cultural capital as a set of tangible and intangible assets that support sustainable development. "Tangible cultural capital takes the form of works of art and artefacts, such as paintings and sculptures, as well as heritage buildings, sites and objects. Intangible cultural capital encompasses works of art … such as music and literature, and the body of inherited traditions, values, beliefs, etc. that constitute the 'culture' of a group, whether the group is defined in national, regional, religious, ethnic or other terms" (Throsby, 1999, pp. 167 – 168).

Contemporary research treats cultural capital not only as an individual attribute, but also as an important resource for the sustainable development of local communities and territories (Seduikyte et al., 2025). Intangible cultural capital is embodied in the diversity of cultural expressions within communities that contribute to sustainable development. Communities draw upon intangible cultural heritage to strengthen social cohesion, resilience to social and economic crises, and a future-oriented outlook (Throsby, 1999, 2008). The relationship between intangible cultural capital and sustainable development is reflected in several principles: intergenerational equity; cultural diversity; the preservation of resources and traditions so that they remain accessible to future generations; and recognition of the interdependence of economic, social, cultural, and environmental systems that operate jointly to support sustainable cultural development (Throsby, 2011).

Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development

Cultural sustainability is commonly associated with the three established pillars of

sustainable development, but may also be conceptualised as an independent fourth pillar because of its influence on all other spheres of public life (Hawkes, 2001; Turner, 2017). In recent decades, culture has increasingly been recognised as a fourth pillar, alongside the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. According to UNESCO (2019), culture provides the transformative dimension required to make development processes sustainable and effective over the long term (Seduikyte et al., 2025). Heritage conservation and the promotion of cultural diversity can enhance community engagement, reduce social inequalities, strengthen local identity and social participation, and improve communities' capacity to adapt to change (UNESCO, 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant to chitalishta, which preserve and transmit local cultural identities.

Social capital and community resilience

Closely related to cultural capital is the concept of social capital, which encompasses networks of trust, norms of reciprocity, and civic participation that facilitate cooperation within a community (Putnam, 1995). Chitalishta and libraries may therefore be regarded as institutions that enable social capital to be formed and sustained through cultural, educational, and civic activities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies social capital as an important determinant of quality of life, economic development, and territorial sustainability (OECD, 2026). Social sustainability concerns the capacity of communities to adapt to social, demographic, and economic change while retaining their identity, social ties, and viability (Järvelä, 2023; Seduikyte et al., 2025). Communities with high levels of social capital tend to respond more effectively to crises, demographic change, and economic shocks. They are better able to mobilise local resources, establish partnerships, and support vulnerable groups (Carmen et al., 2022; Cubeddu and Martini, 2025). Social capital is therefore a key factor in local development, quality of life, and community sustainability (Fabrizio, 2024).

In Bulgaria, chitalishta have traditionally performed precisely this function by providing spaces for participation, volunteering, and civic activity (Lazarov, 1987; Velev, 2022). Cultural and social capital can thus enhance the resilience of local communities (Seduikyte et al., 2025; OECD/ICOM, 2019).

Cultural institutions as a factor for social sustainability

Cultural institutions and cultural heritage therefore constitute important assets for sustainability (Giliberto, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). Cultural heritage and local cultural practices can significantly strengthen communities' capacity to address social, economic, and environmental challenges (UNDRR, 2026). This is particularly true of small settlements, where the chitalishte often remains the only continuously operating public institution. Available data indicate that 93% of reporting UNESCO Member States recognise culture in their national sustainable-development plans (UNESCO, 2025).

Contemporary research on social sustainability treats libraries, museums, chitalishta, and cultural centres as institutions that contribute to social cohesion, civic engagement, and local development (Fabbricatti et al., 2020). In addition to providing cultural services, they cultivate a sense of belonging, trust, and community identity (Seduikyte et al., 2025). This interpretation is particularly applicable to chitalishta, which combine cultural, educational, and civic functions.

The Chitalishte as a bearer of cultural and social capital

Under Article 2 of the National Chitalishta Act, chitalishta are "(1) traditional self-governing Bulgarian cultural and educational associations in settlements, which also perform state cultural and educational tasks. All individuals may participate in their activities irrespective of age, sex, political or religious views, or ethnic self-identification. (2) Chitalishta are non-profit legal entities."

In Bulgaria, the chitalishte represents a distinctive institutional model that combines the functions of a library, educational centre,

cultural venue, and space for civic participation. Many chitalishta support folklore ensembles, singing groups, dance formations, museum collections, and local-history initiatives. These activities may be interpreted as forms through which cultural capital is accumulated and transmitted across generations (Cubeddu and Martini, 2025; Seduikyte et al., 2025).

The organization of holidays, festivals, exhibitions, cultural events and volunteer initiatives creates conditions for interaction between different groups of the population (Cubeddu & Martini, 2025; OECD/ICOM, 2019). In this way, chitalishta function as local social networks that strengthen trust and a sense of belonging to the community. They are not only cultural institutions, but a mechanism for generating cultural and social capital that supports the social sustainability of local communities.

Through their activities, chitalishta create conditions for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the preservation of local memory, civic participation, volunteering, and the formation of local identity (Ramìrez et al., 2026). Particularly in peripheral regions, they are often among the few public spaces that sustain social ties and local cohesion. Chitalishta may therefore be understood as institutions that preserve and activate the cultural capital of local communities and, in doing so, contribute to their social sustainability (Giliberto, 2021; OECD/ICOM, 2019).

In the context of the four municipalities studied, this statement is confirmed by the extensive chitalishte and library network, which continues to perform cultural and educational functions despite the demographic decline. This indicates the presence of local capacity to adapt and preserve public functions despite adverse demographic trends (Cubeddu & Martini, 2025; Järvelä, 2023). Therefore, strengthening the chitalishte system should be seen as an investment not only in culture, but also in the long-term sustainability and viability of local communities (Järvelä, 2023; (Ramìrez et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2024).

Despite the substantial literature on cultural capital, social capital, and the contribution of cultural institutions to local development, little research has examined chitalishta and libraries as an integrated institutional system in Bulgaria's peripheral regions. The present study seeks to address this gap.

METHODOLOGY

The study covers 39 people's chitalishta in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha. The list of active chitalishta was compiled on the basis of the interactive map of the People's Chitalishta Foundation (2025). The empirical base is formed by the information cards in the Register of People's Chiatalishta (Registar na narodnite chitalishta, 2026) and the Register of Public Libraries (Registar na obshtestvenite biblioteki, 2026) as well as by the annual reports attached to some of the cards. The data are submitted by the institutions themselves and are not independently audited. Quantitative comparisons include only institutions with sufficiently complete data for the respective indicator. Due to the different coverage, absolute municipal values should be interpreted with caution: better reporting may create the impression of higher activity.

For the purposes of this study, all information cards available in the registers for chitalishta and public libraries in the four municipalities studied were reviewed in May and June 2026. Quantitative data were systematized by chitalishta, municipalities and years in order to perform a comparative analysis between the individual municipalities.

The principal limitations are the incompleteness and self-reported nature of the data, the combination of quantitative indicators with expert assessments, and the small number of municipalities included in the comparison. The indices are therefore pilot, descriptive instruments rather than validated measures of social sustainability, and they do not support causal inference. The results indicate institutional capacity and activity that may be interpreted as enabling conditions, but not as direct evidence of social impact.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Analysis of the chitalishte network

Descriptive statistics[1]

As of 2023, 39 registered chitalishta operate in the four municipalities. The municipality of Hadzhidimovo has the largest number of chitalishta (12), followed by Garmen (10), Gotse Delchev (9), and Satovcha (8) (**Tab. 1**).

Table 1. Chitalishte network by municipality (2023)

Domain	Core indicators	Measurement logic
Population	Retention or return of younger people, community participation, new skills and trained guides	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up
Jobs	Seasonal and year-round employment, micro-businesses, local sales and locally retained expenditure	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up
Infrastructure	Access, parking, signage, water, sanitation, connectivity, GIS coverage and monitoring capacity	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up

Table 2. Population and chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants (by population as of 2023)

Municipality	Population	Chitalishta	Chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants
Gotse Delchev	28,739	9	0.31
Garmen	14,772	10	0.68
Hadzhidimovo	8,490	12	1.41
Satovcha	12,946	8	0.62

Hadzhidimovo Municipality has the highest chitalishte coverage (1.41 chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants), while Gotse Delchev Municipality has the lowest concentration of chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants, mainly due to the larger number of inhabitants in the municipal centre.

[1] The calculations and data processing were assisted by generative AI tools.

Table 3. Membership (based on available data for 2023)

Municipality	Estimated number of members	Average number of chitalishte members
Gotse Delchev	730	81
Garmen	790	79
Hadzhidimovo	790	66
Satovcha	460	58
Total	**2770**	

The average number of chitalishte members is highest in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev and Garmen, while in Satovcha, chitalishta with smaller memberships predominate.

Table 4. Organized events in 2023

Municipality	Approximate number of events	Average events at a chitalishte
Gotse Delchev	165	18.3
Garmen	110	11.0
Hadzhidimovo	95	7.9
Satovcha	120	15.0

In terms of intensity of cultural activity in chitalishta, the municipalities of Gotse Delchev and Satovcha appear to be leading, followed by Garmen and, lastly, Hadzhidimovo.

Table 5. Personnel (based on available data on subsidised posts)

Municipality	Approximate number of staff members
Gotse Delchev	28
Garmen	17
Hadzhidimovo	13
Satovcha	15

Gotse Delchev Municipality concentrates the largest human resource, mainly because of the "Prosveta – 1865" chitalishte, which has alone accounted of 23 subsidized positions.

Table 6. Artistic ensembles and forms of amateur cultural activity

Municipality	Development level	Most active chitalishta
Gotse Delchev	High	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865"
Garmen	Medium to high	Chitalishte "Iskra – 1924"
Hadzhidimovo	High	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1928"; Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1927"
Satovcha	High	Chitalishte "St. St. Cyril and Methodius - 1926"

Despite the good territorial coverage, significant differences are observed in the activity of individual chitalishta. Some of them develop diverse cultural, educational and library activities, while others operate with limited staff and a minimal number of events. The most active in terms of organized events and artistic forms seem to be the chitalishta in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev and Satovcha, while in Hadzhidimovo there is a large discrepancy between the number of registered chitalishta and the actual cultural activity.

The reported data show that, along with differences in organizational and staffing capacity, a significant part of the chitalishta is also faced with problems related to the material and technical base. The most frequently cited difficulties are depreciated buildings, the need for repairs, insufficient heating, outdated stage and sound equipment and limited opportunities for renovation of the interior and technical furnishings. These problems are more typical of smaller settlements and limit the opportunities for more cultural and educational activities. Nevertheless, some of the chitalishta manage to maintain relatively high activity thanks to local support, the voluntary participation of amateurs and the commitment of the management. These data suggest that the material base is an important, but not the only factor for the development of chitalishte activities.

Activity index of the surveyed chitalishta

The pilot index of chitalishte activity (ICA) combines five components with a maximum score of 100 points: organized events (up to 40 points), active artistic groups (up to 25), project activity (up to 15), membership (up to 10), and staff and organizational capacity (up to 10). To allow it to be reproduced for subsequent use, a scoring rubric with the thresholds for each component and the intermediate scores of each chitalishte is attached to the database. In this analysis, the results are indicative, as some of the input values are approximate or missing. A score is presented only for institutions with sufficient data; the lack of a report does not automatically equate to a lack of activity. The categories are: very high activity (80 – 100 points), high (60 – 79), medium (40 – 59) and low (below 40 points). Due to the limitations, the ranking should be used as a diagnostic profile, not as a final ranking.

Table 7. Ranking of chitalishta by activity level

Activity level	Chitalishta	Features
Very high (80 points and above)	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865", Gotse Delchev	These chitalishta are characterized by a stable membership; diverse artistic compositions; project activities; library activities; human resources
	Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1927", Koprivlen	
	Chitalishte "St. St. Cyril and Methodius - 1926", Satovcha	
	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1928", Hadzhidimovo	
	"Iskra - 1924" Chitalishte, Garmen	
High activity (60 – 79 points)	"Izgrev - 1930", Banichan	These are chitalishta that remain active cultural centres despite limited financial and human resources.
	"N. Y. Vaptsarov – 1927", Musomishta	
	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1938", Kochan	
	Chitalishte "Otets Paisii - 1928", Debren	
	Chitalishte "Zora - 1929", Dabnitsa	
Medium activity (40-59 points)	"Vazrazhdane" Chitalishte, Banichan	These chitalishta mainly perform functions of preserving traditions and organizing local holidays.
	Chitalishte "May Day - 1956", Vaklinovo	
	Chitalishte "Consciousness - 1953", Sadovo	
	Chitalishte "Otets Paisii - 1931", Kornitsa	
	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1978", Lazhnitsa	
	Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1929", Gorno Dryanovo	
	"Izgrev" Chitalishte, Ribnovo	
	"Prosveta - 1940" Chitalishte, Ablanitsa	
	"Pletena" Chitalishte	
	"Probuda - 1928" Chitalishte, Slashten	
	Chitalishte "Granichar - 1952", Tuhovishta	
	"Buditel - 2019" Chitalishte, Borovo	
	Chitalishte "Asen Zlatarov - 1924", Ognyanovo	
Low activity (below 40 points)	Chitalishte "N. Y. Vaptsarov - 1958", Dolno Dryanovo	The main reasons for the low activity are lack of staff; lack of permanent artistic ensembles; limited project activity; demographic decline; poor material base.
	"Svetlina - 1865" Chitalishte, Kovachevitsa	
	Pencho Slaveykov Chitalishte, Breznitsa	
	Some of the chitalishta in Hadzhidimovo municipality have no reported activity	

Typology of municipalities by activity of their chitalishta

Averaging the available scores by municipality provides a conditional municipal profile of chitalishte activity. It should not be interpreted as a representative score for all registered chitalishta, because institutions without sufficient data do not participate equally in the calculation. Among the available scores, Gotse Delchev reaches 58 points, Satovcha – 57, Garmen – 53, and Hadzhidimovo – 49 points (**Tab. 8**). The small differences between the municipalities do not provide grounds for a categorical ranking.

Table 8. Map of chitalishte activity by municipality (2023)

Municipality	Average index	Activity level	Leading chitalishta	Main features
Gotse Delchev	**58**	Medium to high	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865", Chitalishte "Izgrev - 1930", Chitalishte "N. Y. Vaptsarov - 1927"	A strong municipal center, good project activity, the largest human resource, active libraries.
Satovcha	**57**	Medium to high	Chitalishte "St. Cyril and Methodius - 1926", Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1938"	The most evenly developed chitalishta, strong folklore profile, active participation in local cultural life.
Garmen	**53**	Average	Chitalishte "Iskra - 1924", Chitalishte "Otets Paisii - 1928"	Good cultural centres, but significant differences between individual settlements.
Hadzhidimovo	**49**	Medium to low	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1928", Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1927"	The largest number of chitalishta, but the greatest internal differentiation and presence of inactive structures.

Gotse Delchev Municipality records the highest average index, largely because of the strong performance of the "Prosveta – 1865" Chitalishte, the "Izgrev – 1930" Chitalishte in Banichan, and the "N. Y. Vaptsarov" Chitalishte in Musomishta. Satovcha Municipality is distinguished by the most evenly distributed activity across its chitalishta. Garmen Municipality has several strong cultural institutions, but also chitalishta with declining functions. Hadzhidimovo Municipality displays the greatest internal differentiation between highly active and practically inactive chitalishta.

Gotse Delchev thus emerges as the municipality with the most active chitalishte sector, characterised by a strong central chitalishte, the largest number of specialists, substantial project activity, and a well-developed library network. Satovcha demonstrates a more balanced model, in which activity is distributed relatively evenly among chitalishta and folklore and local traditions are strongly represented. Garmen combines active and declining chitalishta, with the municipal centre and several larger villages displaying the highest levels of activity. Hadzhidimovo includes several highly active chitalishta, but also a large number of institutions reporting minimal activity.

The data show that the chitalishte network in the four municipalities studied is widely represented territorially, but the activity is unevenly distributed. It can be seen that the larger number of chitalishta does not automatically lead to higher activity. The orga-

nizational capacity, human resources, project activity and the degree of commitment of the local community are of decisive importance. Hadzhidimovo Municipality has the widest chitalishte network, but has the lowest average activity index. In contrast, Gotse Delchev Municipality achieves the highest results thanks to strong cultural centres, greater human resources and more developed project activity.

Analysis of the library network

The library analysis aims to show which libraries in which municipalities have the largest capacity, which are used most intensively and which are most active as cultural centres of the local community. It is prepared on the basis of libraries for which complete or relatively complete statistical data on the collection, readers, borrowed documents and library events are available. Due to incomplete data, some libraries are not included in the quantitative comparisons and in the calculation of indicators by municipality. Also, some of the indicators (such as "visit"), which consider the degree of user engagement (IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022), were not used due to lack of sufficient data.

Descriptive statistics of libraries

The municipality of Gotse Delchev has the highest library capacity, mainly thanks to the library at the Public Library "Prosveta – 1865", which has a collection of over 126,000 library items and a developed library infrastructure (**Tab. 9**).

Table 9. Capacity of the library network by municipality

Indicator	Gotse Delchev	Garmen	Hadzhidimovo	Satovcha
Number of libraries	6	7	5	6
General library collection	181,000	38,000	46,000	45,000
Average library collection	30,000	5,400	9,200	7,500
Library staff	12	8	6	9
Computerized places	high	average	average	high

Gotse Delchev records the largest absolute number of readers. Across all four municipalities, children and school students account for a substantial share of library users. Their presence is particularly pronounced in Satovcha and Hadzhidimovo, where more than half of registered readers are under the age of 14. This finding highlights the important role of these libraries in early literacy and educational support (**Tab. 10**).

Table 10. Using libraries

Indicator	Gotse Delchev	Garmen	Hadzhidimovo	Satovcha
Total number of readers (reach)	2,064	1,079	1,077	1,208
Readers up to 14 years old (working with children)	820	527	574	989
Share of children (%) (working with children)	39.7	48.8	**53.3**	**81.9**
Readers per 1,000 inhabitants (community penetration)	71.87	72.56	126.86	90.15
Borrowed documents (use of the collection)	77,700	13,600	8,600	9,300
Reading intensity (documents read per reader, reading intensity)	37.7	12.6	8.0	7.7

Readership is an indicator of the intensity of use of the library collection. It measures the average number of library documents borrowed by one registered reader during the year. Libraries in the municipality of Gotse Delchev are distinguished by the highest intensity of use of the library collection. In these libraries, the share of borrowed documents is 71.2% of all borrowed library documents, and one reader borrows an average of about 38 library documents per year, which is also significantly higher than the values in the other municipalities. Libraries in Satovcha emerge as leaders in working with children (82% share of child readers), while libraries in Hadzhidimovo have the highest relative readership (126.86 per 1,000 inhabitants). The high share of child readers in Satovcha suggests a strong connection between libraries and local educational institutions.

Table 11. Development and innovation

Indicator	Gotse Delchev	Garmen	Hadzhidimovo	Satovcha
Project activity	Very high	Medium	High	Medium
Fund renewal	Regularly	Regularly	Regularly	Regularly
Participation in programs and projects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital services	High	Medium	Medium	Good
Working with vulnerable groups	Yes	Limited	Limited	Limited

The indicator "*Participation in programs and projects*" assesses the library's ability to attract external funding and develop its activities through participation in national, regional and international initiatives. Particular importance is given to participation in the programs of the Ministry of Culture (MC) for the renewal of library collections, as well as projects related to digitization, training and the development of library services. However, the indicator measures not only the application for MC programs, but also the overall ability of the library to develop through external funding and partnerships. This indicator includes participation in the program "Bulgarian Libraries – Modern Centres for Reading and Awareness"; projects under the Regional libraries in Bulgaria; digital clubs; projects of the Bulgarian Library and Information Association; projects of the Global Libraries – Bulgaria Foundation; local and international partnerships; other projects for the modernization of library services (Table 11).

All these characteristics show that the library network in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha has significant resource and organizational capacity. This supports the thesis that libraries perform important educational, cultural and social functions and represent an essential element of the cultural infrastructure of local communities.

Library Activity Index

The Library Activity Index (LAI) is a pilot comparative tool for assessing the use, cultural activity, resource capacity and development of the library network. It combines quantitative indicators and expertly coded qualitative characteristics. Qualitative characteristics are assessed according to a previously published rubric: 0 = absent; 25 = initial stage; 50 = partially developed; 75 = sustainable; 100 = fully developed. In future validation, the assessment should be carried out independently by two assessors and the agreement between them should be considered. The results presented here are indicative, as a complete matrix of intermediate assessments is not available.

Since the indicators are in different units (readers are people; the collection consists of books; events are the number of activities, reading intensity is a coefficient), the data is normalized as follows. For an indicator where a higher value means a better result:

$$z_{ij} = (x_{ij} - \min_j) / (\max_j - \min_j) \times 100$$

For a metric where a lower value means a better result:

$$z_{ij} = (\max_j - x_{ij}) / (\max_j - \min_j) \times 100$$

where x_{ij} is the value of library i by indicator j, and $\min_j$ and $\max_j$ are the minimum and maximum for the same reference group and year. If $\max_j = \min_j$, the indicator does not distinguish between libraries and is excluded for the corresponding period; its weight is redistributed proportionally within the sub-index.

Each sub-index is calculated as a weighted average of the available and eligible normalized indicators:

$$S_i d = \Sigma(v_j \times z_{ij}) / \Sigma v_j$$

The final index is:

$$IBA_i = 0.35S_{i1} + 0.25S_{i2} + 0.20S_{i3} + 0.20S_{i4}$$

A value is not calculated if an entire sub-index is missing or if coverage of the predefined indicators falls below 70%. Where data are partially missing, weights are renormalized only within the relevant sub-index, and this adjustment is reported. Following normalisation, each indicator receives a score from 0 to 100. This approach follows general principles for constructing composite indices (Nardo et al., 2005; OECD, 2008; Decancq and Lugo, 2013), but the specific Library Activity Index is not part of ISO 11620 or ISO 2789. These standards and the IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto were used solely as conceptual points of reference in selecting the indicators.

ISO 11620 (2023) is the main international standard for library performance indicators, which includes visits, loans, readers, events and resource use. ISO 2789 (2022) is the main standard for library statistics by number of readers, visits, library stock, borrowed documents, events, electronic services. In turn, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) considers libraries as information and cultural centres and spaces for lifelong learning.

The final index is formed as a weighted sum of four sub-indices: library use (35%), cultural activity (25%), capacity (20%) and development and innovation (20%). Higher values of the index indicate a higher degree of use of library capacity and a more significant contribution of the library to the cultural and social life of the local community. This logic is also compatible with the broader concept of cultural capital, social capital and social sustainability. The weights are determined through expert assessment and are consistent with international approaches to building composite indices (OECD, 2008), with the highest weight given to the actual use of library services as the most direct indicator of the library's social impact.

The *Use* sub-index (35%) considers the scope and intensity of use of library services through indicators of readers, reading intensity and work with children and young people. The *Cultural Activity* sub-index (25%) reflects the role of libraries as local cultural centres through the number of events and initiatives organized. The *Capacity* sub-index (20%) assesses resource provision through library collections, staff and technological infrastructure. The *Development and Innovation* sub-index (20%) measures the ability of libraries to develop through projects, fund renewal and digital services.

The *Use* sub-index accounts for 35% of the overall index because it represents its most important component. The principal indicators in international library statistics include the number of registered readers, use of the collection, and visits (ISO 11620 and IFLA standards). The *Use* sub-index, with a maximum of 35 points, is calculated as follows: (Readers per 1,000 inhabitants × 0.25) + (Reading intensity × 0.45) + (Share of readers aged under 14 × 0.30). The formula assigns the greatest weight to actual reading activity (45%), followed by work with children (30%), while limiting the influence of demographic differences among municipalities (25%).

Table 12. Sub-index "Use" (weight 35% in the overall index)

Municipality	Readers per 1,000 inhabitants	Reading intensity	Share of readers under 14 (%)	Rating
Hadzhidimovo	126.86	8.0	53.3	35.5
Satovcha	90.15	7.7	81.9	35.0
Gotse Delchev	71.87	37.7	39.7	32.5
Garmen	72.56	12.6	48.8	26.6

The results of the sub-index "*Use*" reveal different patterns of library consumption in the individual municipalities (**Tab. 12**). The libraries in the Hadzhidimovo municipality take first place due to the highest number of readers relative to the population. The libraries Satovcha municipality are immediately behind them due to strong engagement of children and students. The highest reading intensity is observed in the Gotse Delchev municipality, which indicates active use of the library collection by registered readers. The Garmen municipality also demonstrates a good level of use of library services, although with lower values of some sub-indices.

These results lead to the conclusion that the modern library is no longer just a place to borrow books. It functions as an educational and cultural centre and as a place for community interaction. The modern library organizes events, exhibitions, meetings, activities with children, educational initiatives, which is in line with the views of IFLA and UNESCO for modern public libraries. This is the second most important dimension, which is why the sub-index "*Cultural activity*" has a share of 25%. The sub-index "*Cultural activity*" is calculated using the formula: (Number of events per library × 0.40) + (Events per library × 0.25) + (Work with children × 0.35).

Table 13. Sub-index "Cultural activity" (weight 25% of the total index)

Municipality	Library events	Events at a library	Working with children	Rating
Garmen	90	12.9	active	25
Satovcha	75	12.5	very active	25
Gotse Delchev	40	6.7	very active	17.7
Hadzhidimovo	35	7.0	active	15.7

The sub-index "*Cultural Activity*" shows the extent to which libraries function as local cultural and educational centres. Libraries in the municipalities of Garmen and Satovcha achieve the highest scores on this sub-index thanks to the combination of high intensity of event activity and active work with children. Therefore, they function as important cultural and educational centres in the local communities. Libraries in Gotse Delchev and Hadzhidimovo also develop cultural activity, but on a smaller scale compared to the leading municipalities on this indicator (**Table 13**).

The *Capacity* sub-index measures the resources available to a library – its collection, staff, and technological infrastructure – but does not in itself indicate efficiency. A library may possess a large collection that is not actively used. The sub-index therefore carries a lower weight of 20%. It is calculated as follows: (Library collection × 0.50) + (Staff × 0.25) + (Technological infrastructure × 0.25) (**Tab. 14**).

Table 14. Sub-index "Capacity" (weight 20% of the total index)

Municipality	Library collection	Staff	Digital base	Rating
Gotse Delchev	181,000	12	high	20
Garmen	38,000	8	average	11
Hadzhidimovo	46,000	6	average	12
Satovcha	45,000	9	good	13

The sub-index "Development and Innovation" is particularly important for small municipal libraries, as it reflects adaptability, participation in projects and digital transformation. Its share in the total IBA is also 20%. The formula for this sub-index is: (Participation in programs and projects × 0.50) + (Fund renew × 0.25) + (Digital services × 0.25) (**Tab. 15**).

Table 15. Sub-index "Development and Innovation" (weight 20% of the total index)

Municipality	Participation in programs and projects	Fund renewal	Digital services	Rating
Gotse Delchev	very high activity	regularly	high	20
Satovcha	average	regularly	good	14
Garmen	average	regularly	medium	13
Hadzhidimovo	high	regularly	medium	15

The indicative composite index is presented as the sum of four sub-indices: *Use* (up to 35 points), *Cultural activity* (up to 25), *Capacity* (up to 20) and *Development and Innovation* (up to 20). Due to the incomplete intermediate matrix, the values in Tables 12–16 should be considered as pilot estimates. The libraries of the municipalities of Gotse Delchev (90.2) and Satovcha (87) show very high activity, while the libraries in the municipalities of Hadzhidimovo (77.5) and Garmen (75.6) report high library activity (**Tab. 16**).

Table 16. IBA by sub-indices and municipalities

Municipality	Usage (35 points)	Cultural activity (25 points)	Capacity (20 pcs.)	Development and Innovation (20 points)	IBA
Gotse Delchev	32.5	17.7	20	20	**90.2**
Satovcha	35.0	25.0	13	14	**87.0**
Hadzhidimovo	35.5	15.7	12	15	**78.2**
Garmen	26.6	25.0	11	13	**75.6**

The results obtained demonstrate that high library activity can be achieved through different models. While Gotse Delchev is an example of a library system based on strong resource capacity and intensive reading, Satovcha and Garmen have good results through active cultural and community activities and work with children and youth. The libraries in Hadzhidimovo occupy an intermediate position. It is evident that the reported library activity is not only associated with the size of the collection or the number of readers. Active work with children, cultural events, digital services and project participation also shapes the profile of the libraries.

The results indicate that the municipalities follow different models of library development, allowing libraries to be classified according to how they employ their resource capacity. The first category comprises "reading-oriented libraries", characterised by large numbers of readers, high reading intensity, and extensive use of library collections; the libraries in Gotse Delchev and Musomishta are typical examples. The second category comprises "community-oriented libraries", which combine traditional library services with active cultural and educational programmes, organise numerous events, and maintain sustained links with local communities. The libraries in Satovcha and Garmen exemplify this model. Between these two categories are mixed-model libraries that combine intensive reading with diverse cultural activities (**Tab. 17**).

Table 17. Typology of libraries

Library type	Main features	Examples
Reading library	Large number of readers, high reading intensity, active use of the collection, strong library resource	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865" - Gotse Delchev; Chitalishte "N. Y. Vaptsarov" - Musomishta
Community library	High attendance, many events, active work with children, schools and the local community	The libraries in the municipalities of Satovcha and Garmen, the library in the village of Kochan
Mixed type	Combines active reading with diverse cultural activities	Hadzhidimovo, Koprivlen
Supporting library	Limited resource, but important function for access to information and culture in small settlements	Some of the smaller village libraries

The analysis of the chitalishte network showed the capacity of chitalishta to create cultural life and conditions for participation of local communities. The analysis of the library network reveals the role of libraries in access to knowledge, reading, education and cultural activity. Considered together, chitalishta and libraries form a single cultural and information system, the impact of which goes beyond the provision of cultural services and is manifested in the maintenance of cultural capital, social ties and local identity.

The chitalishte–library network and social sustainability

1. *The chitalishte and library network as a cultural infrastructure*

The 39 chitalishta and 24 libraries studied form a dense cultural and information network with wide territorial coverage. A particularly high saturation of cultural infrastructure is observed in the municipality of Hadzhidimovo, and similar networks operate in the other three municipalities. Regardless

of the differences in the activity of individual institutions, their presence provides access to cultural, educational and information services even in small settlements.

2. *The chitalishte and library network as a carrier of cultural capital*

Chitalishta and libraries are the main institutional bearers of cultural capital in the studied municipalities. Through artistic ensembles, local festivals, local history initiatives and library collections, they preserve and transmit knowledge, traditions and cultural memory between generations. At the same time, they create conditions for participation, volunteering and interaction between different age and social groups, thus contributing to the formation of social capital and local identity (Throsby, 1999).

3. *The chitalishte and library network as a generator of social capital*

Chitalishta and libraries serve as spaces for social interaction. Through amateur groups, reading groups, holidays, festivals and library initiatives, sustainable social ties are created between different age and social groups. The role of these institutions is particularly significant in small settlements, where alternative public spaces for communication and civic participation are often lacking. The chitalishte–library network creates conditions for building trust between people, intergenerational contacts, volunteering, participation in public initiatives and the formation of local networks for mutual assistance and cooperation (Putnam, 1995).

The chitalishte–library network and social sustainability

The results obtained indicate institutional characteristics that can support social resilience: working with children and youth, access to information, heritage preservation and organizing community initiatives. Since trust, participation, social networks or crisis response were not measured, the analysis does not prove a direct impact. The differences between municipalities rather suggest that what matters is the activity, human resources and the ability to engage the local community, and not just the number of registered institutions.

Table 18. Contribution of the chitalishte and library network

Dimension	Main contribution
Cultural capital	Traditions, folklore, local memory, library collections
Social capital	Participation, volunteering, events, community relations
Educational capital	Reading, access to information, working with children
Social sustainability	Belonging, identity, local viability

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that chitalishta and libraries in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha form an integrated cultural and information system of major importance for local communities. They preserve cultural capital by maintaining traditions, local memory and library collections, and through various cultural and educational activities create conditions for interaction, participation and building social ties.

The results reveal different development models. Gotse Delchev is distinguished by significant resource capacity, high reading intensity and active project activity. Satovcha demonstrates the most balanced model of chitalishte and library development and strong work with children and youth. Hadzhidimovo is characterized by a broad cultural infrastructure and a high relative scope of library services, while Garmen stands out with active library and community activity.

The data do not allow for direct measurement of social sustainability and do not establish causal impact. They outline institutional prerequisites for its support by preserving cultural capital, encouraging participation, and maintaining local identity. Incomplete and uneven reporting by chitalishta and libraries remains the main limitation and requires that the results be interpreted as indicative.

Nevertheless, this study is pilot in nature and the proposed indices can be used and tested in other municipalities and regions of the country. This would allow for their further validation and improvement as a tool for evaluating chitalishte and library activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis outlines several main directions for the development of the chitalishte and library network. First of all, it is necessary to continue investments in the material and technical base through repairs, modernization of equipment and improvement of conditions for cultural and educational activities.

Secondly, human resources should be strengthened by creating municipal programs for training librarians and chitalishte specialists, improving their qualifications and attracting young staff.

The third direction is the acceleration of digital transformation through technology renewal, expansion of electronic services, and development of digital skills among users.

Particular attention should be paid to working with children and youth through educational initiatives, interest clubs and volunteer programs. Data shows that young people are among the most active users of library services and a key factor for the long-term sustainability of the system.

The sustainable development of the chitalishte and library network depends on the combination of modern facilities, well-trained specialists, digital services and active participation of young generations in the cultural life of local communities.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, P. (1986) "Forms of Capital", in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. Greenwood: New York.

Carmen, E., Fazey, I., Ross, H. et al. (2022) "Building community resilience in a context of climate change: the role of social capital", *Ambio,* 51, pp. 1371–1387. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-021-01678-9.

Cubeddu, F. and Martini, E. (2025) "Resilience and adaptive capacities of societies: social and cultural strategies", *Frontiers in sociology*, 10:1581631. doi: https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.158163.

Decancq, K. and Lugo, M. A. (2013) "Weights in multidimensional indices of well-being", *Econometric reviews*, 32(1). doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/07474938.2012.690641.

Fabbricatti, K., Boissenin, L. and Citoni, M. (2020) "Heritage community resilience: towards new approaches for urban resilience and sustainability", *City territory and architecture*, 7, 17. doi: https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-020-00126-7.

Fabrizio, A. (2024) *The resilience of cultural landscapes: perspectives from UNESCO World Heritage sites*. Cham: Springer.

Giliberto, F. (2021) "Heritage, disaster response and resilience: brief report from the UK National Commission for UNESCO and PRAXIS at the University of Leeds. Session held on Tuesday 23rd February 2021", *Heritage and our sustainable future,* 8. Available from: https://unesco.org.uk/site/assets/files/2777/4_heritage-disaster-response-and-resilience-report.pdf (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Hawkes, J. (2001) *The fourth pillar of sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning*. Melbourn: Cultural Development Network. Available from: https://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/community/Downloads/HawkesJon(2001)TheFourthPillarOfSustainability.pdf (accessed: 19.07.2026).

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2026). *Guidelines.* Available from: https://www.ifla.org/g/mlas/guidelines/ (accessed: 19.07.2026).

International standardization organization (2022) ISO 2789:2022. *Information and*

documentation - International library statistics. Available from: https://www.iso.org/standard/78525.html (accessed: 19.07.2026).

International standardization organization (2023) *ISO 11620:2023. Information and documentation – Library performance indicators*. Available from: https://www.iso.org/standard/83126.html (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Järvelä, M. (2023) "Dimensions of cultural sustainability - local adaptation, adaptive capacity and social resilience", *Frontiers in political science,* 5:1285602. doi: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1285602.

Lazarov, St. (1987) "Istoria na chitalishtnite deinosti", in *Osnovi na chitalishtnoto delo: eksperimentalen uchebnik za XI klas na Natsionalnoto sredno uchilishte po kultura*. Sofia: Komitet za kultura.

Loach K., Rowley J. and Griffiths J. (2015) "Cultural sustainability as a strategy for the survival of museums and libraries", *International journal of cultural policy,* 23(2), pp. 186 – 198. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2016.1184657.

Nardo, M., Saisana, M., Saltelli, A., and Tarantola, S. (2005) *Tools for composite indicators building*. Brussels: European Commission.

The "Narodni Chitalishta" Foundation (2025) *Research and mapping of the chitalishte network in Bulgaria*. Available from: https://narodnichitalishta.bg/d0%b8%d0%b7%d1%81%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b5-%d0%b8-%d0%ba%d0%b0%d1%80%d1%82%d0%be%d0%b3%d1%80%d0%b0%d1%84%d0%b8%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b5-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%87%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b0%d0%bb/ (accessed: 19.07.2026).

National Chitalishta Act (2026). Available from: https://lex.bg/index.php/laws/ldoc/2133897729 (accessed: 19.07.2026).

OECD (2008) *Handbook on constructing composite indicators: methodology and user guide*. OECD Publishing. Available from: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2008/08/handbook-on-constructing-composite-indicators-methodology-and-user-guide_g1gh9301/9789264043466-en.pdf (accessed: 19.07.2026).

OECD/ICOM (2019) *Culture and local development: maximizing the impact a guide for local governments, communities and museums.* OECD Publishing. Available from: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/09/culture-and-local-development-maximising-the-impact_4d5fd9ca/9a855be5-en.pdf (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Putnam, R. (1995) "Turning in, tuning out: the strange disappearance of social capital in America", *Political science and politics,* 28(4), pp. 664 – 683. Available from: http://www.jstor.org/stable/420517?origin=JSTOR-pdf (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Ramìrez, M. D., Moreno-Monroy, A. I., Nöbauer, B., Özgüzel, C. (2026) *Towards measuring social capital for place transformation ideas and considerations for an OECD localized indicator framework*. OECD Publishing. Available from: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2026/04/towards-measuring-social-capital-for-place-transformation_7f10e416/d5f18ab6-en.pdf (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Registar na narodnite chitalishta (2026). Available from: http://chitalishta.com/ (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Registar na obshtestvenite biblioteki (2026). Available from: https://bibliobg.com/ (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Seduikyte, L., Grazuleviciute-Vileniske, I., Mlinkauskienë, A., and Januđkienë, E. (2025) "Fostering resilient communities through the interaction of heritage, policy, and participation: insights from a Lithuanian: case study", *Sustainability*, *17*(9), 3883. doi: https://doi.org/10.3390/su17093883.

Seekamp, E. and Jo, E. (2020) "Resilience and transformation of heritage sites to accommodate for loss and learning in a changing climate", *Climatic change* ,162, pp. 41 – 55. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02812-4.

Soini K. and Birkland I. (2014) "Exploring the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability", *Geoforum,* 51, pp. 213 – 223. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.12.001.

The IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (2022) Available from: https://www.ifla.org/public-library-manifesto (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Throsby, D. (1995) "Culture, economics and sustainability", *Journal of cultural economics*, *19*(3), pp. 199 – 206. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01074049.

Throsby, D. (1999) "Cultural capital", *Journal of cultural economics*, 23, pp. 3 – 12. doi: https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007543313370.

Throsby, D. (2008) *Culture in sustainable development: insights for the future implementation of Art. 13: UNESCO. convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions*. Available from: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000157287 (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Throsby, D. (2011) "Cultural capital", in Towse, R (ed.) *A handbook of cultural economics: chapter 20.* 2nd ed. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Turner, M. (2017) "Culture as an enabler for sustainable development: challenges for the world heritage convention in adopting the UN Sustainable development goals", in Albert, M. T., Bandarin, F., Pereira Roders, A. (eds) *Going beyond: perceptions of sustainability: chapter 2*, pp. 19-31. Cham: Springer. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57165-2_2.

UNDRR (2021) *Disaster resilience scorecard for cities: cultural heritage addendum*. Geneve: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. Available from: https://mcr2030.undrr.org/media/116157/download?startDownload=20260705 (accessed: 19.07.2026).

UNESCO (2019) *Culture and sustainable development, powering culture across public policies*. Available from: https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/culture (accessed: 19.07.2026).

UNESCO (2023) *Re|Shaping policies for creativity – addressing culture as a global public good.* Available from: https://www.unesco.org/reports/reshaping-creativity/2022/en (accessed: 19.07.2026).

UNESCO (2024) *Integrate culture in sustainable development frameworks*. Available from: https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/policy-monitoring-platform/integrate-culture-sustainable-development-frameworks-0 (accessed: 19.07.2026).

UNESCO (2025) *UNESCO global report on cultural policies, culture: the missing SDGs*. Available from: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-global-report-cultural-policies-culture-missing-sdg (accessed: 19.07.2026).

Velev, V. (2022) *Historical overview, development, and modernity of the community centres / chitalishta in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Za bukvite – O pismeneh Academic Press.

Zabulis, X., Partarakis, N., Zidianakis, E., and Kaplanidi, D. (2025) "A critical review of the function of intangible cultural heritage as a driver for social resilience and cohesion", *Encyclopedia*, 5(4), 189. doi: https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia5040189.



Chitalishte in Hadzhidimovo

APPENDIX A

Table A1. Key Indicators for Chitalishta (2023)

Chitalishte	Municipality	Members	Events	Subsidized staff numbers	Project activity	Preliminary assessment
Enlightenment – 865, Gotse Delchev	Gotse Delchev	187	n.d.	23	Very active	High
Sunrise – 1930, Banichan	Gotse Delchev	55	70	2	Active	High
Vazrajdane, Banichan	Gotse Delchev	125	7	0	Very active	Medium
Awakening – 2019, Borovo	Gotse Delchev	80	n.d.	0	No data	Medium
Petko R. Slaveykov –1938, Breznitsa	Gotse Delchev	52	12	1	Participation in LAG	Medium
Pencho Slaveykov, Breznitsa	Gotse Delchev	n.d.	minimal	0	No data	Low
Otets Paisii – 1931, Kornitsa	Gotse Delchev	54	6	1	Limited	Medium
Yane Sandanski – 1978, Lazhnitsa	Gotse Delchev	≈ 50	6 – 8	1	Limited	Medium
N. Y. Vaptsarov – 1927, Musomishta	Gotse Delchev	64	40	0	Active	High
Renaissance – 929, Gorno Dryanovo	Garmen	55	6-9	1	Limited	Medium
Iskra – 1924, Garmen	Garmen	54	~30	5	Active	High
Father Paisios – 1928, Debren	Garmen	300	4 – 6	2	Limited	Medium
N. Y. Vaptsarov – 1958, Dolno Dryanovo	Garmen	61	2	1	Limited	Low
Zora – 1929, Dabnitsa	Garmen	53	14 –18	2	Limited	Medium
Light – 1865, Kovachevitsa	Garmen	53	2 – 3	0.5	No data	Low
Assen Zlatarov – 1924, Ognyanovo	Garmen	54	7	1.5	Limited	Medium
Development – 2013, Ognyanovo	Garmen	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Sunrise, Ribnovo	Garmen	61	12 –14	n.d.	Limited	Medium
Hristo Botev – 1919, Skrebatno	Garmen	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Medium
Yane Sandanski-1928, Hadzhidimovo	Hadzhidimovo	≈ 150	7	3	Active	High
Prosveta – 1940, Ablanica	Hadzhidimovo	60	5	3	Limited	Medium
Renaissance – 1927, Koprivlen	Hadzhidimovo	73	32	3	Active	High
Progress – 1928, Novo Leski	Hadzhidimovo	51	limited	1	Limited	Medium
Consciousness – 1953, Sadovo	Hadzhidimovo	50	10 –13	0	No data	Medium
Beslen	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Blatska	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Ilinden	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Lucky	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Nova Lovcha	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Warm	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Teshovo	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
St. St. Cyril and Methodius-1926, Satovcha	Satovcha	59	12	3	Active	High

Читалищата и библиотеките като носители на културен капитал и фактор за социалната устойчивост на местните общности в периферен район

Желю Владимиров
Бияна Яврукова

Резюме: Изследването разглежда ролята на 39 читалища и техните библиотеки като институции, олицетворяващи културния и социалния капитал в четири български общини – Гоце Делчев, Гърмен, Хаджидимово и Сатовча. Въвеждат се два пилотни композитни индекса: Индекс на активността на читалищата, включващ събития, художествени състави, проектна дейност, членство и персонал; и Индекс на библиотечната активност, който отчита използването, културната дейност, капацитета и развитието/иновациите. Резултатите разкриват неравномерно разпределение на институционалната дейност, независимо от гъстотата на мрежата: Хаджидимово има най-голям брой читалища на глава от населението, но най-ниския индекс на активност, докато Гоце Делчев и Сатовча демонстрират по-силни и по-балансирани резултати както при читалищата, така и при библиотеките. Въз основа на сравнителни показатели се предлага типология на библиотеките. Изследването допринася с емпирична и методологична основа за по-нататъшни проучвания на културната инфраструктура в периферните региони.

Ключови думи: читалища, обществени библиотеки, културен капитал, социален капитал, композитни индекси, периферни региони, България



Chitalishte library in Gotse Delchev
Source: Facebook



Saint George Church, Garmen (1864)
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Ideological Narrative of the "Golden Rose" Film Festival (1956 – 1989)

Deyan Statulov
Institute of Art Studies,
Bulgarian Academy of Science

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.52-57

Abstract: *This study analyzes the ideological, institutional, and representational functions of the "Golden Rose" Film Festival (1956 – 1989) in socialist Bulgaria. Conceptualized as a state mechanism for control and legitimation, it enforced socialist realism and the BCP's ideological priorities. The research traces the evolution from rigid Stalinist control and self-censorship in the 1950s to refined cultural conformism, national mythology, and international outreach in the 1970s. By the 1980s, the festival became a site of crisis and tension, where critical cinema openly challenged the totalitarian regime.*

Keywords: *"Golden Rose"; film festival; Bulgarian cinema; socialist realism; ideology; cultural policy; People's Republic of Bulgaria; censorship; BCP*

The study of film festivals in the People's Republic of Bulgaria constitutes an essential part of the broader question regarding the relationship between culture, ideology, and institutional power under state socialism. As a phenomenon, the festival belongs to the culture of celebration and play. Through intensive collective experiences, it synthesizes the possibilities for assimilating, transferring, and creating valuable experience that guarantees the integrity of the community.

***Deyan Statulov, PhD**, is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. His PhD thesis was on the 'Ideological Censorship in Bulgarian Feature Films (1946 – 1989)'. Since 2013, he has been a part-time lecturer at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Sofia, and Luben Groys Theatre College. In 2022, his book '(Not) Possible Freedom' was published, followed in 2023 by the book '(RE)COMMISSIONED FILMS/ Propaganda Practices in Bulgarian Feature Cinema (1944 – 1989).*

Email: dstatulov@abv.bg

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9507-4332

Within the socialist cultural model, cinema occupied a privileged position due to its mass character and potential for symbolic impact, while festivals became a mechanism for public selection and the legitimation of film production. The emergence and development of film festivals in socialist Bulgaria were directly tied to the ideological line of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). They served as an instrument of control, propaganda, and cultural representation for the regime.

After seizing power at all levels of state administration between 1944 and 1948, the Communist Party launched a course of accelerated implementation of the Soviet model, which was incompatible with a tolerant attitude toward pluralism in the spiritual sphere. The BCP's monopoly on state governance also dictated a monopoly over cultural processes. This was established through a "cultural revolution" designed to align cultural life on the foundation of Marxist-Leninist ideology—strengthening the role of the state within it and placing it under the control and in the service of the BCP. All artists were required to create works according to the canons of socialist realism, which demanded that reality be presented not as it was, but as the party

wished it to be, so that creative works could educate in the spirit of the communist ideal. This led to simplified depictions and a impoverishment of creative work. The BCP asserted this method through political coercion and the artists' heightened material dependence on the state. Creative unions were placed under direct party control, and private initiative in the cultural sphere was liquidated. The state (party) monopoly was maintained by the Committee for Science, Art, and Culture (KNIK), established in 1948. Any attempt to challenge the leading role of the party in the name of artistic freedom was ruthlessly punished. The intelligentsia reacted to this pressure in various ways: rare attempts to uphold artistic freedom were penalized; some artists openly placed themselves at the service of the party; while the majority resigned themselves and attempted to create within the imposed restrictive boundaries.

Following September 9, 1944, and the nationalization of the sector, festivals and pan-cinematic showcases were established as a centralized state mechanism for accountability, stimulation, and ideological direction of national film production. In this context, they did not emerge as spontaneous artistic initiatives, but rather as an administrative tool imposed by the state. Historiographically, the issue of socialist cultural policy in Bulgaria is primarily analyzed through the relationships between the intelligentsia and power, the regimes of institutional management of culture, and censorial practices across various arts. In the realm of cinema, research emphasizes the role of state institutions, control structures, and the propaganda functions of film production. The history of film festivals, and specifically the "Golden Rose" festival, allows these questions to be analyzed through the lens of public display, cultural representation, and the symbolic sanctioning of artistic practices.

Film festivals – among them the "Golden Rose" Bulgarian Feature Film Festival in Varna, as well as later thematic festivals – did not function solely as spaces for artistic exchange or public entertainment. They were organized as representative forums through which the state demonstrated the presumed rise of socialist culture both to the domestic audience and to foreign delegations. In this context, the role of the Committee for Culture (especially during the tenure of Lyudmila Zhivkova), the Union of Bulgarian Filmmakers, and the State Enterprise "Bulgarian Cinematography" was decisive; through these institutions, festivals became places where legitimacy, prestige, awards, and symbolic capital were distributed. Within this model, the normative horizon of festival presentation was defined by the canon of socialist realism, according to which films and surrounding discussions were expected to reinforce the party line through themes such as the anti-fascist struggle, the heroic depiction of labor, and the construction of the new society.

At the same time, festival discourse itself took on a ritualized character through opening speeches, jury reports, and critical publications in official outlets such as *Kinoizkustvo* magazine and the *Kultura* newspaper, which utilized a strictly coded language framing aesthetic evaluations through the lens of Marxist-Leninist ideology. After 1956, within the context of the so-called "April Thaw," a gradual retreat from the most dogmatic forms of Stalinist propaganda occurred. This opened up space for films that placed the individual and their psychological and moral dilemmas at the center. In parallel, a segment of Bulgarian directors and screenwriters developed allegorical and metaphorical strategies—including historical plots and Aesopian language – to articulate indirect criticism of contemporary deformities within the system. In this zone of tension, festivals began functioning as a stage for conflict between the aesthetic value of works and doubts regarding their ideological reliability. Illustrative cases include censored or restricted films like *Monday Morning* (*Ponedelnik sutrin*) and *The Tied-Up Balloon* (*Privartzaniyat balon*), whose problematic presence testifies to the regime's uncertain reaction to artistic forms departing from the normative model. Chronologically, the late 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a search for a new cinematic language, influenced by Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave, as well as the emergence of trends

described as "poetic cinema." These processes penetrated the Bulgarian cultural environment through festival channels, as noted in contemporary coverage:

"...Unfortunately, this line of development in our cinematography, so successfully outlined by its first feature films, has not always been followed in the practice and creative work of filmmakers. Its brief history has also registered retreats. In their desire to overcome schematicism, some film artists created a number of works in which militant, communist ideology was blunted, and the party principle was muted. [...] With justified concern, the party criticized these theories and the films inspired by them, showing filmmakers the right path..." (Santov, 1964).

During the 1970s, under the cultural policy of Lyudmila Zhivkova, an international opening occurred alongside the encouragement of large-scale historical productions and the establishment of a more refined cultural conformism. Within it, national mythology partially displaced strict party doctrine. In the 1980s, this dynamic devolved into a more overt crisis. Socially critical films and the so-called "cinema of moral anxiety" emerged, focusing on urban problems, alienation, youth disorientation, and corruption. The festival platform found it increasingly difficult to contain the tension between official discourse and growing criticism of the system.

Festivals were designed as showcases for the socialist system. Through them, the state sought to demonstrate not only industrial and societal progress, but also its capacity to create cultural products of high symbolic value. The festival was established in the summer of 1961 (running from July 31 to August 9). A committee composed of prominent public and cultural figures, as well as responsible administrative officials, was formed for the purpose. The committee included representatives from the management of "Bulgarian Cinematography," the Varna City Municipal Council, the Union of Filmmakers, and the Trade Union of Educational and Cultural Workers. The first edition covered feature, documentary, popular science, and animated films. A special jury awarded prizes for Best Film on a Contemporary Theme, Best Screenplay, Directing, Cinematography, Best Female and Male Performances, among others. The main motto was "Native Cinematic Art for Peace and Socialism." Interest in the festival was high, with official figures reporting 17,300 viewers daily (Shosolov, 1961).

Screenings took place at the newly constructed open-air cinema "Republika" (located on the site of today's Festival and Congress Centre). It featured 1,100 seats and a 12-meter widescreen designed for the then-new CinemaScope system. Other portions of the festival program were presented at the partially completed open-air cinema "Lenin," as well as open-air venues in "Golden Sands," "Dimitar Blagoev," "Kultura," "Balkantourist" (in the resort then known as "Druzhba"—today "St. St. Constantine and Helena"), and "Parvi May" (in the Asparuhovo neighborhood). Remaining indoor winter cinemas ("Republika," "Dimitar Blagoev," "Georgi Dimitrov," "Makedoniya," "Asen Zlatarov," and "Parvi May") also dedicated most of their schedules to a panorama of Bulgarian films. The competition of the first festival selected films such as *Be Happy, Ani!* (*Badi shtastliva, Ani!*), *The Windmill* (*Vyatarnata melnitza*), *The Night Against the 13th* (*Noshtta sreshtu 13-ti*), *We Were Young* (*A byahme mladi*), and *The Steep Path* (*Stramnata pateka*). The Grand Prix was awarded to Binka Zhelyazkova's *We Were Young*.

The awarding of specific films functioned as a mechanism for publicly sanctioning "correct" artistic models and steering the cinematic process toward ideologically acceptable thematic and aesthetic solutions. Behind the polished facade of the festivals lay their function as an internal regulatory mechanism. They gathered directors, screenwriters, critics, and party functionaries into a shared institutional space where permissible and sanctioned aesthetic and thematic pursuits were clearly demarcated. In this way, the festival environment encouraged self-censorship as a lasting instrument for disciplining creative behavior.

The foreign policy function of the festivals was also particularly significant, especially for events with international participation. Through them, the People's Republic of Bulgaria sought to construct the image of a

modern and culturally active state open to dialogue within strictly controlled international contacts. By broadly distributing films that received festival legitimacy, the authorities aimed to influence the public's values and assist in shaping the officially sanctioned model of the "new socialist person."

The festival space was structured through a combination of formal and informal tools of control, transforming it into a means of political regulation over cultural production and reception. The official opening and closing ceremonies – featuring political reports, greetings, and keynote statements –established the ideological framework for the proceedings. In this context, films were not evaluated as fully autonomous works of art, but primarily by their degree of alignment with current party positions and the dominant cultural line. Control over festival presentation began at the pre-selection stage. Selection committees and juries systematically included figures of proven political loyalty, mitigating the possibility of unpredictable decisions regarding film selection and awards.

The conferral of awards, including the Grand Prix "Golden Rose," constituted an act of state sanction through which the regime indicated its current thematic and aesthetic priorities.

"Instead of shining, most of Bulgarian cinema's 'Golden Roses' are dimmed with the patina of steel that was tempered and then discarded after use. The list of 'Golden Rose' winners up to 1988 is eloquent proof that the Grand Prix was awarded for Great Loyalty, and the laureates were selected almost directly within the Central Committee of the BCP, often even before the film had been screened..." (Dimitrova, 2022).

When the regime required patriotic mobilization – as was particularly the case in the 1970s and 1980s – large-scale historical epics occupied a privileged position, whereas periods focused on reinforcing party mythology favored films dedicated to the anti-fascist struggle. When a film proved overly critical, aesthetically unconventional, or suspicious due to Western artistic influences, the authorities resorted to forms of internal isolation. Such works might be formally admitted to the festival but relegated to peripheral side programs, inconvenient screening times, or limited audiences of "specialists." Directed criticism during festival discussions was frequently organized around them. In other instances, a film was shown on a single occasion for accounting purposes without receiving subsequent distribution in theaters – effectively removing it from public cultural circulation. It is essential to emphasize that this system did not function as an entirely monolithic structure. The constant need for negotiation, adjustment, and recalibration of festival mechanisms points to internal tensions, as well as the film community's capacity to test the boundaries of the permissible through allegorical, metaphorical, and indirect artistic strategies.

Lyudmila Zhivkova's assumption of leadership over the Committee for Culture in the 1970s marked a significant transformation in the state cultural policy of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. The period was characterized by a transition from a predominantly dogmatic ideological model toward more refined forms of cultural representation that combined international visibility, national-historical symbolism, and institutional prestige. In this context, film festivals underwent a major functional shift: from forums for internal reporting on cultural production, they turned into representative platforms for international cultural presence, national-historical symbolism, and the construction of a favorable image for the state.

One mark of this shift was the invitation of Western delegations, critics, festival directors, and journalists from countries such as France, Italy, and the Federal Republic of Germany. Thus, the festival space began to function as a controlled contact zone through which the state sought to simultaneously expand the international visibility of Bulgarian cinema, facilitate its presence in Western markets, and soften Bulgaria's image as an unconditionally subservient Soviet satellite.

In the 1980s, the festival also became a platform for legitimizing large-scale, state-subsidized historical productions such as *Khan Asparuh*, *Boris I*, *Day of the Rulers* (*Denyat na vladetelite*), and others. Through such works, the re-

gime directed attention away from proletarian internationalism and toward a state-organized national narrative designed to reinforce the internal legitimacy of Todor Zhivkov's regime, particularly in the context of preparations for the "1300 Years of Bulgaria" celebrations.

The aestheticization of cultural life during this era gave the "Golden Rose" festivals a new exterior appearance. Moving away from the model of a drab party meeting, they transformed into prestigious events featuring official receptions, catalogs, and symbols of cultural prestige. Through this form of influence, the authorities sought to integrate the intelligentsia by allowing limited experimentation with visual language and artistic form, provided key political taboos remained untouched. Awarding more complex aesthetic works functioned as a carefully managed sign of liberalization that stayed within the bounds of controlled cultural policy. Nevertheless, the trend persisted for the "Golden Rose" Grand Prix to be awarded to films that were recommended and ideologically compatible with the regime's political narrative.

"However, as often happens at film festivals worldwide, the Special Jury Prize gradually established itself in our country as the most undisputed recognition for a film. In this sense, the more film production expanded, the more clearly a trend emerged toward encouraging aesthetics over ideology in the secondary awards" (Dimitrova, 2002).

For example, in 1964, when *The Chain* (*Verigata*) won the "Golden Rose," the Special Jury Prize went to Vulo Radev's debut, *The Peach Thief* (*Kradetzat na praskovi*). This trend continued for a long time: in 1978, when *In the Track of the Missing* (*Po diryata na bezsledno izcheznalite*) took the "Golden Rose," the Special Jury Prize was awarded to Lyudmil Kirkov's *Matriarchy* (*Matriarhat*) and Georgi Djulgerov's *Advantage* (*Avantazh*); when *Anvil or Hammer* (*Nakovanya ili chuk*) won the "Golden Rose," Methodi Andonov's *The Goat Horn* (*Koziyat rog*) received First Prize and the Audience Award; in 1980, when *The Barrier* (*Barierata*) took the "Golden Rose," the Special Jury Prize went to Borislav Sharaliev's *All is Love* (*Vsichko e lyubov*), while the Best Director award went to Rangel Vulchanov for *The Patent Leather Shoes of the Unknown Soldier* (*Lachenite obuvki na neznayniya voyn*).

Starting in the mid-1970s, more specialized international festival formats emerged to serve the new vision of Bulgaria as a culturally recognizable hub. The International Festival of Red Cross and Health Films in Varna was utilized to maintain humanitarian and seemingly depoliticized communication between East and West, while the World Festival of Animated Films in Varna allowed the state to showcase the high level of the Bulgarian animation school and convey an image of cultural openness toward avant-garde and grotesque forms of expression.

Following the death of Lyudmila Zhivkova in 1981 and as the decade progressed, this model of cultural representation gradually lost its stability. The 1980s were marked by a growing economic, moral, and ideological crisis that directly impacted the structure of festival life. During this period, film festivals increasingly turned into spaces of heightened tension between party institutions and a critically minded creative intelligentsia, turning them into a sensitive indicator of the late-socialist cultural system's crisis.

After Zhivkova's death and under the stewardship of her successor, Georgi Yordanov, the authorities attempted to return festivals to a stricter regime of ideological accountability. Films were once again required to present the "positive hero" and treat negative social phenomena strictly within controlled boundaries. However, this line collided with a creative community that had already experienced a relative expansion of artistic possibilities during the 1970s and increasingly refused to return to overt poster-style propaganda.

Illustrative of this situation was the case of the film *A Woman of Thirty-Three* (*Edna zhena na trisdet i tri*, 1982, dir. Hristo Hristov), which exposed careerism, patronage, and moral cynicism in socialist society. The reaction following its screening – including a critical campaign in the party press and subsequent institutional sanctions—demonstrates how the festival space could become a venue for publicly discrediting inconvenient

titles. Similar sensitivity was shown toward films touching upon ecological and social issues, such as Yuri Zhirov's *Breathe* (*Dishay*), as their presence threatened to give visibility to nascent forms of public dissent.

In the mid-1980s, the forced assimilation policy directed against Bulgarian Turks reflected heavily on the regime's festival strategy. The state promoted the creation and launch of films intended to legitimize this policy in historical and national terms, as was the case with *Time of Violence* (*Vreme razdelno*, 1988, dir. Lyudmil Staykov). Its festival presentation and massive public promotion were used as tools for internal consolidation around official doctrine amid growing international isolation.

Following Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power and the rollout of *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies, the Bulgarian party leadership found itself in a contradictory position. Unwilling to enact genuine liberalization, it struggled to contain processes emanating from the Soviet center. By the late 1980s, festival censorship gradually lost its effectiveness, and artists began to articulate the crisis of the state more openly. The appearance of films like Nikolai Volev's *Margarit and Margarita* (*Margarit i Margarita*) testified that festival screens and the professional community had become arenas for openly challenging the totalitarian model.

The analysis shows that during the period 1956 – 1989, the "Golden Rose" Film Festival simultaneously fulfilled ideological, institutional, and representational functions within the socialist cultural system. It served to enforce official cultural norms and regulate the symbolic prestige of film production, while also registering the tensions between authoritative discourse and artistic practice. The historical dynamics traced here outline a transition from rigid forms of control to more complex mechanisms of cultural management, ultimately leading in the late 1980s to a visible crisis of institutional regulation. In this sense, the festivals can be viewed as an analytical key to understanding the relationships between cinema, power, and cultural legitimacy in late-socialist Bulgaria.

REFERENCES

Dimitrova, G. (2002) "Zlatni rozi i belezi ot bodli", *Kultura*, 11 October, 36, 2509. Available from: https://newspaper.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/7362 (accessed 31.07.2026)

Santov, H. (1964) "Kino festivalat vav Varna", *Narodna kultura*, 31, 1964, p. 1.

Shosolov, R. (1961) "Parvi festival na balgarskiya film", *Kinoizkustvo*, 11, p. 15.

Идеологическият наратив на филмовия фестивал „Златна роза" (1956 – 1989)

Деян Статулов

Резюме: Изследването анализира идеологическите, институционалните и репрезентативните функции на фестивала „Златна роза" (1956–1989) в социалистическа България. Разглеждан като държавен инструмент за контрол и легитимация, той налага канона на социалистическия реализъм и идеологическите приоритети на БКП. Проследява се еволюцията от твърд сталинистки контрол и автоцензура през 50-те години към по-рафиниран културен конформизъм, национален наратив и международно отваряне през 70-те години. През 80-те години фестивалът се превръща в арена на напрежение и криза, където критичното кино оспорва тоталитарния модел.

Ключови думи: „Златна роза"; филмов фестивал; българско кино; социалистически реализъм; идеология; културна политика; Народна република България (НРБ); цензура; БКП

Traditional Bulgarian Folk Dances in the Contemporary Cultural Environment: Public Awareness, Cultural Identity, and Perspectives for Their Promotion

Irina Petkova-Nesheva
National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski"

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.58-69

Abstract: *This study examines Bulgarian folk dances and traditional horo as a significant component of Bulgaria's intangible cultural heritage and an important factor in preserving national identity and social memory. It explores public awareness, attitudes, and participation in folk dance activities, as well as opportunities for their promotion in the contemporary cultural environment. Based on a questionnaire survey, the study analyses the role of education, media, and digital platforms in raising awareness of Bulgarian folklore traditions and supporting their preservation and transmission.*

Keywords: *Bulgarian folk dances and horo; intangible cultural heritage; national identity; public awareness; promotion*

Irina Nesheva *is a full time associate professor, PhD, lecturer in the Department of Gymnastics at NSA "V. Levski". She is a holder in basic gymnastics and teaching methodology, as well as in the gymnastic and recreational modules of the master's programs in "SPA culture". She is the leader and coach of the Cheerleading Team, a two-time winner of international tournaments in Rome, Italy (2012 and 2014). She is a member of the editorial board of the scientific journal "Smart Innovations in the Recreational Wellness Industry and Niche Tourism" (https://scjournal.globalwaterhealth.org/; eISSN: 2603-4921). Nesheva is an active researcher at the Balkan Cluster for Health, Wellness and Spa Tourism.*

Email: nesheva.irina@nsa.bg

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0436-6398

BULGARIAN FOLK DANCES AND HORO AS PART OF BULGARIA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

Bulgarian folk dances and *horo* constitute one of the most distinctive expressions of the country's traditional culture and represent an essential component of Bulgaria's intangible cultural heritage. They embody historical memory, social values, customs, and artistic forms that are transmitted from generation to generation, contributing to the preservation of national identity.

The book by Georg Kraev (2007) seeks to engage readers who are interested in acquiring a deeper understanding of Bulgarian cultural heritage. Folklore can be regarded as an important carrier of the collective experience, spirituality, and cultural memory of the Bulgarian people. In this context, folkloric practices, including folk dances and *horo*, play a significant role in preserving and transmitting cultural identity.

Bulgarian folk dances and *horo* perform not only a cultural but also a social function. They create opportunities for social interaction, strengthen community cohesion, and foster a sense of belonging. Dzhenev (1968) presents stage adaptations of Bulgarian folk dances performed by the State Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances, which have achieved considerable success both in Bulgaria and abroad. This demonstrates the important role of stage interpretation as a means of preserving, promoting, and presenting Bulgarian folk dance heritage to international audiences.

In the context of globalization and the rapid development of digital technologies, the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural heritage have become increasingly important (Simeonova-Kozhuharova, 2025). According to the **UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage** (UNIESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2024), intangible cultural heritage encompasses practices, knowledge, skills, and forms of cultural expression that communities recognize as part of their cultural identity. Bulgarian folk dances and *horo* fall within this category and represent a valuable resource for cultural development and intercultural dialogue (**Foto. 1**).



Photo 1. Bulgarian Folk Culture in Front of Prague's Gothic Towers. Photo: Irina Petkova-Nesheva

The contemporary cultural environment provides new opportunities for promoting Bulgarian folk dances and *horo* through educational initiatives, festivals, mass media, and digital platforms. At the same time, the declining interest in traditional forms of culture among some younger generations poses significant challenges to their preservation and transmission. For this reason, it is essential to examine public attitudes, the level of public awareness, and people's willingness to participate in activities related to Bulgarian folklore.

In the context of contemporary socio-economic challenges, preserving national identity has become increasingly important. According to Dimitrova (2023), the phenomenon

of *brain drain* has a negative impact on the development of key sectors of society, including the wellness and spa tourism industry. This underscores the need for policies aimed at preserving the country's human capital and cultural potential.

In the scientific literature, folk dances are recognized as an important mechanism for the preservation and transmission of cultural memory. According to Stanoeva (2025), the documentation and presentation of traditional folk costumes contribute to the safeguarding of cultural heritage, which is closely linked to ongoing efforts to preserve and promote Bulgarian folk dances and *horo* in the contemporary cultural environment.

Stoin (1956) identifies folk music as a fundamental bearer of the folkloric memory and cultural identity of the Bulgarian people. Closely associated with this musical tradition, Bulgarian folk dances and *horo* have developed as an inseparable component of folklore, contributing to the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage and national identity in the contemporary cultural environment (**Foto. 2**).



Photo 2. Folk Dance Festival in Kostinbrod, 2025. Photo: Irina Petkova-Nesheva

Bulgarian folkloric tradition has been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation by numerous researchers. Georgieva (1993) conceptualizes traditional culture as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting values, the "cultural code," worldview representations, and the historical memory of the community, thereby establishing it as a significant factor in the formation of cultural identity.

Ganeva-Raycheva (2011) emphasizes the role of folklore in the construction of national identity, which positions Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances as a meaningful element in the preservation, transmission, and popularization of cultural heritage. Contemporary studies on intangible cultural heritage further highlight the role of traditional dances as a medium for strengthening social cohesion

and fostering a sense of belonging to the community.

The expansion of mass tourism in the twentieth century, together with the advancement of air transport, significantly democratized access to cultural tourism and extended its geographical reach (Richards, 2021). Richards offers a critical reinterpretation of cultural tourism, demonstrating how traditional high-cultural landmarks have progressively been enriched by events and experiences rooted in popular culture, contemporary creativity, and everyday life through innovative tourism practices.

The study by Kazashka et al. (2024) examines digitalization as a contemporary instrument for documenting, structuring, and preserving Bulgarian dance folklore. This process contributes to the more effective promotion of Bulgarian folk dances and horo traditions and supports their sustainable presence within the contemporary cultural environment. Through the development of digital databases and specialized information resources, access to knowledge about diverse folklore regions, dance forms, and traditions is significantly facilitated. In this context, Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances are affirmed not only as elements of cultural heritage, but also as a dynamic resource for education, scholarly research, and cultural exchange in contemporary society, while Bulgarian folklore ensembles emerge as socio-cultural spaces for intergenerational communication and continuity.

Folk dances and horo dances as carriers of cultural memory and national identity

Bulgarian folk dances represent one of the most valuable elements of Bulgaria's intangible cultural heritage. They preserve the historical memory, traditions, and value system of the Bulgarian people, while transmitting cultural knowledge and social models across generations. Through their distinctive movements, rhythms, and musical accompaniment, folk dances reflect the specific characteristics of the different ethnographic regions and safeguard the richness of Bulgarian folkloric tradition.

According to Kraev (2007), traditional culture embodies the collective experience and spirituality of the Bulgarian people, while folkloric practices function as an essential mechanism for preserving cultural memory. Within the same context, Georgieva (1993) emphasizes that traditions play a fundamental role in the formation and maintenance of society's cultural identity. Folk dances foster a sense of belonging to the community and contribute to the preservation of national consciousness.

The collective nature of Bulgarian horo dances is of particular significance, as they symbolize unity, mutual support, and the connection between the individual and the community. Dzhenev (1968) notes that the diversity of folk dances reflects Bulgaria's rich regional traditions and cultural plurality. In the context of globalization, folk dances continue to perform an important function in preserving national identity and transmitting cultural values to younger generations.

Contemporary interest in folklore festivals, dance clubs, and cultural events demonstrates that Bulgarian dance folklore remains a living cultural heritage that integrates tradition and modernity. In this sense, folk dances continue to serve as a significant factor in preserving cultural memory and strengthening national identity in contemporary society.

Contemporary trends in the preservation and promotion of Bulgarian dance folklore

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Bulgarian folk dances both in Bulgaria and among Bulgarian communities abroad. In the context of globalization, folk dance continues to serve as an important factor in preserving national identity and promoting Bulgarian cultural heritage. The activities of dance clubs, folklore ensembles, and festivals have expanded significantly, attracting participants from different age groups.

The practice of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances has a beneficial effect not only on the musculoskeletal system, but also contributes to the preservation and promotion of national traditions (Dimitrova, 2017).

Contemporary digital technologies and social media play a substantial role in popularizing Bulgarian dance folklore. Online

platforms create opportunities for education, information exchange, and access to broader audiences. At the same time, international folklore festivals provide conditions for presenting Bulgarian culture (**Foto. 3**) to the global public and contribute to the recognition of folk dances as a significant element of Bulgaria's intangible cultural heritage.



Photo 3. Bulgarian participation in Prague, April 2025. Photo: Irina Petkova-Nesheva

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS BULGARIAN FOLK DANCES

This section presents the initial stage of a broader research initiative aimed at examining the role, perception, and contemporary significance of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances in Bulgaria, as well as the impact of traditional costumes and accessories and the influence of different spatial dimensions. In this context, the conducted survey should be regarded as a preliminary empirical basis for the development of a more extensive and representative study in the field of Bulgarian dance folklore.

Methodology and organization of the study

In order to achieve the aim of the study, a survey was conducted to examine public awareness, attitudes, and participation in activities related to Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances as part of Bulgaria's cultural heritage. The study was carried out in 2026 using a standardized online questionnaire distributed among individuals from different age and social groups.

A total of 120 respondents participated in the survey (Mean ± SD: 43.9 ± 15.7 years). The questionnaire included items related to the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, their level of knowledge of Bulgarian folk dances, the frequency of participation in or observation of folklore events, and their attitudes towards the role of folk dances in preserving cultural heritage. It also examined the motivation for involvement in such activities, the factors limiting active participation, and the opportunities for promoting Bulgarian dance folklore.

The collected data were processed using descriptive statistical methods and are presented as absolute values and percentages. The analysis aims to identify the main trends in public attitudes towards Bulgarian folk dances and to outline their place within the contemporary cultural environment.

Analysis of the survey results

The results obtained from the conducted study provide information related to the social status and demographic characteristics of the respondents, as well as their level of

awareness, attitudes, and participation in activities associated with Bulgarian folk dances. The analysis of the data makes it possible to outline the main trends in public attitudes towards folk dances as a significant element of Bulgaria's cultural heritage.

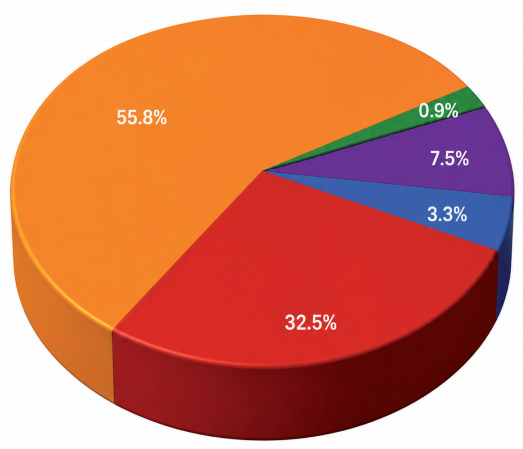


Figure 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents according to social status

The data presented in Fig. 4 reveal a clearly expressed predominance of socially active groups among the surveyed respondents. The largest relative share is represented by employed participants – 55.8%, followed by students – 32.5%. Considerably lower proportions are observed among retirees — 7.5%, school students – 3.3%, and unemployed individuals – 0.9%. This distribution indicates that the majority of the sample consists of groups characterized by active social and educational engagement, which suggests a higher level of involvement, broader access to cultural initiatives, and greater potential for participation in activities related to Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the surveyed respondents by age group, allowing the age profile of the sample to be outlined and the participation of different generations in the study to be examined.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by age group

Age group	n	%
Up to 18 years	3	2.5
18–25 years	31	25.8
26–40 years	10	8.3
41–60 years	60	50.0
Over 60 years	16	13.3
Total	**12**	**100.00**

The age distribution of the respondents reveals a pronounced predominance of participants aged 41 – 60 years, who constitute 50.0% of the total sample. They are followed by respondents in the 18 – 25 age group, representing 25.8%, whereas the lowest proportion is observed among participants up to 18 years of age – 2.5%. The mean age of the surveyed individuals is 43.9 ± 15.7 years, indicating a prevailing representation of persons in active working age. This age structure provides a solid empirical basis for analysing public attitudes towards Bulgarian folk dances as a significant component of Bulgaria's cultural heritage and as a medium for cultural continuity across generations.

The results presented in Figure 2 indicate a high level of awareness of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances among the surveyed respondents. Half of the participants – 50.0% – define themselves as partially familiar with Bulgarian dance folklore, while 38.3% report being fully familiar with it. This distribution demonstrates a substantial degree of cultural awareness within the studied sample and confirms the continuing relevance of Bulgarian dance folklore as a recognizable component of national cultural heritage.

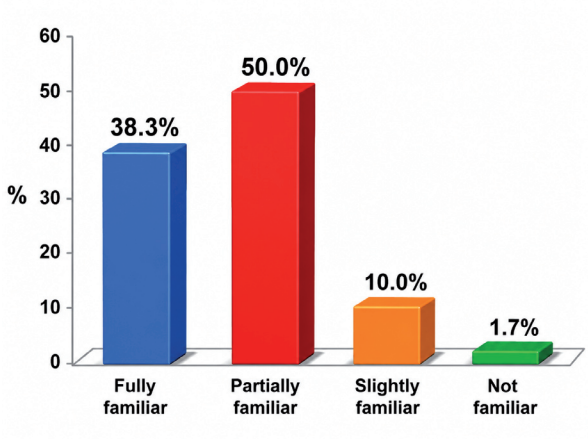


Figure 2. Level of awareness of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances (n = 120)

A considerably lower proportion (**Fig. 3**) of respondents identify themselves as slightly familiar with the topic – 10.0%, while only 1.7% report having no knowledge of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances. These findings indicate a high level of public awareness and a generally positive attitude towards Bulgarian folk dances as a significant component of Bulgaria's cultural heritage.

The data presented in Figure 3 indicate a high level of engagement with activities related to Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances. The largest share of respondents — 50.8% — report regular participation in or observation of folk dance performances, while 30.0% engage occasionally and 15.8% rarely. Only 3.4% state that they never participate in or attend such events. These findings confirm the sustained social relevance of Bulgarian dance folklore as a meaningful form of cultural participation.

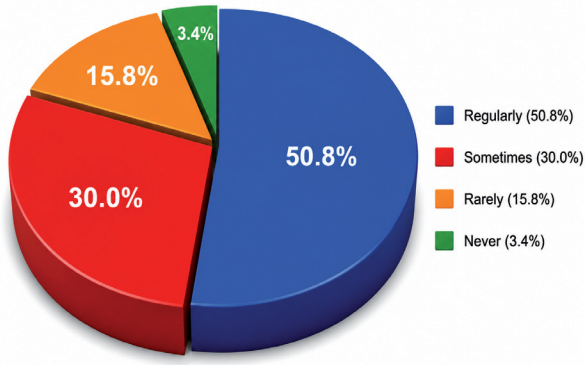


Figure 3. Frequency of participation in/observation of folk dances and horo dances

The results presented in Figure 3 indicate a substantial public interest in Bulgarian dance folklore and its active presence within contemporary cultural life. The fact that more than half of the respondents regularly participate in or attend folklore events demonstrates a preserved connection with traditional culture and a positive attitude towards folk dances as part of Bulgaria's cultural heritage. The low proportion of individuals who never engage in such activities further confirms the broad social dissemination and popularity of Bulgarian folklore.

Respondents' opinions regarding the significance of folk dances and horo dances for Bulgaria's cultural heritage are presented in **Fig. 4**.

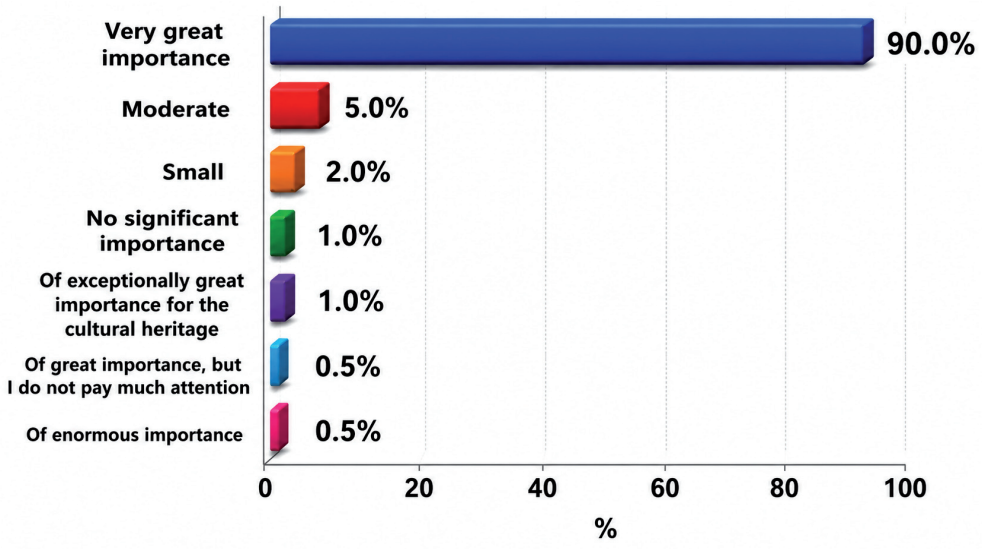
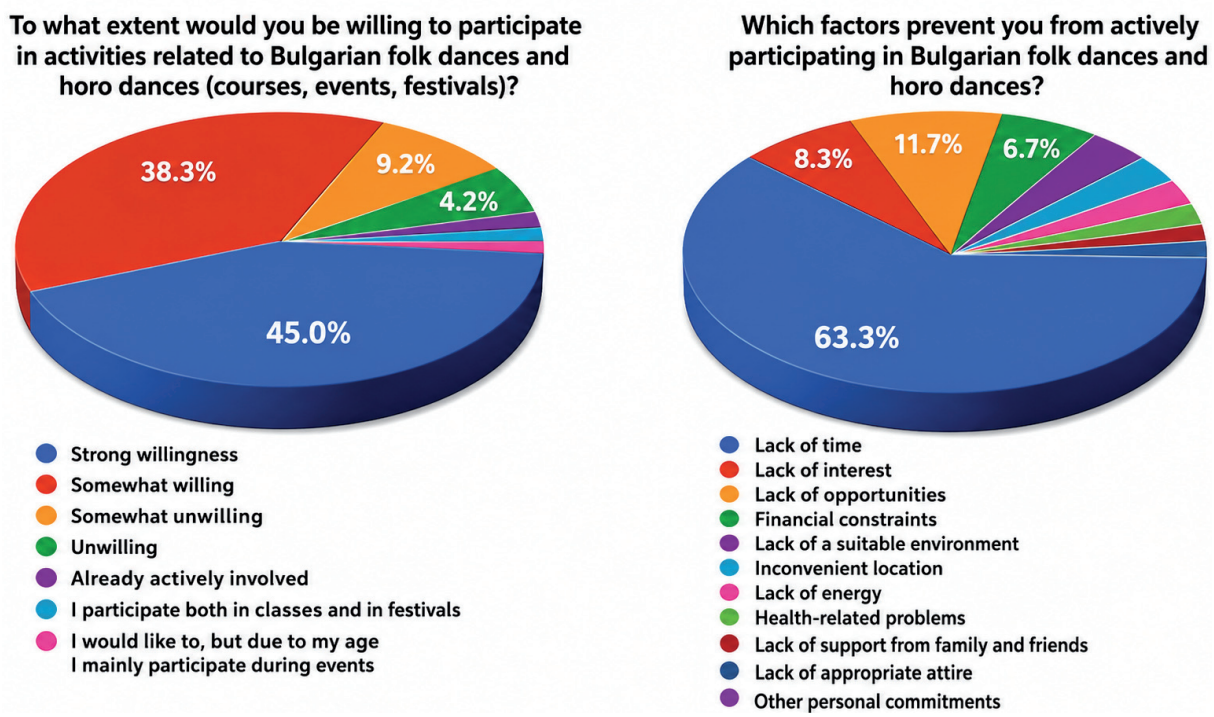


Figure 4. Public assessments of the significance of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances

The results of the conducted survey, presented in **Fig. 4**, should be interpreted in the context of public attitudes as a key factor for the sustainable preservation and transmission of cultural values. Bulgarian folk dances occupy a distinctive place among traditional forms of cultural expression, as they integrate historical memory, social practices, and national identity. Therefore, examining public assessments of their significance for the preservation of cultural heritage provides valuable insight into the level of societal engagement with the safeguarding of traditional Bulgarian culture.

A significant aspect of public attitudes towards Bulgarian folk dances is people's willingness to actively participate in activities related to their practice, promotion, and dissemination. At the same time, it is important to identify the factors that limit participation in such initiatives. The analysis of these indicators provides information both on the potential for the further development of folklore-related activities and on the existing barriers to broader public involvement. The obtained results are presented in block **Fig. 5**.



Block Figure 5. Preconditions and barriers to participation in activities related to folk dances

The data presented in Figure 5 reveal a high level of willingness to participate in activities related to Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances. The largest relative share of respondents – 45.0% – express a strong willingness to engage in courses, events, and festivals, while 38.3% respond "rather yes." This indicates that more than four-fifths of the surveyed participants – 83.3% – demonstrate a positive attitude towards active involvement in activities associated with folk dances. A considerably lower proportion of respondents report a negative response or lack of interest.

With regard to the factors limiting participation, lack of time emerges as the leading barrier, indicated by 63.3% of respondents. It is followed by lack of opportunities – 10.8%, while financial constraints and lack of interest are represented to a much lower extent. These results suggest that limited participation is not primarily related to a negative attitude towards folk dances, but rather to objective organizational constraints associated with the dynamics of contemporary lifestyles.

The obtained data indicate the existence of substantial potential for expanding activities related to Bulgarian folk dances. The high motivation for participation, combined with the relatively low proportion of individuals who do not express interest, demonstrates

a favourable social environment for the development of initiatives aimed at promoting and preserving Bulgaria's intangible cultural heritage. Expanding access to training programmes, festivals, and cultural events could contribute to more active involvement of different age and social groups in the practice of folk dances.

The promotion of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances is a key factor in preserving and transmitting traditional culture across generations. In this context, respondents were surveyed regarding the approaches they consider most effective for the broader popularization of Bulgarian dance folklore. The results are presented in **Fig. 6**.

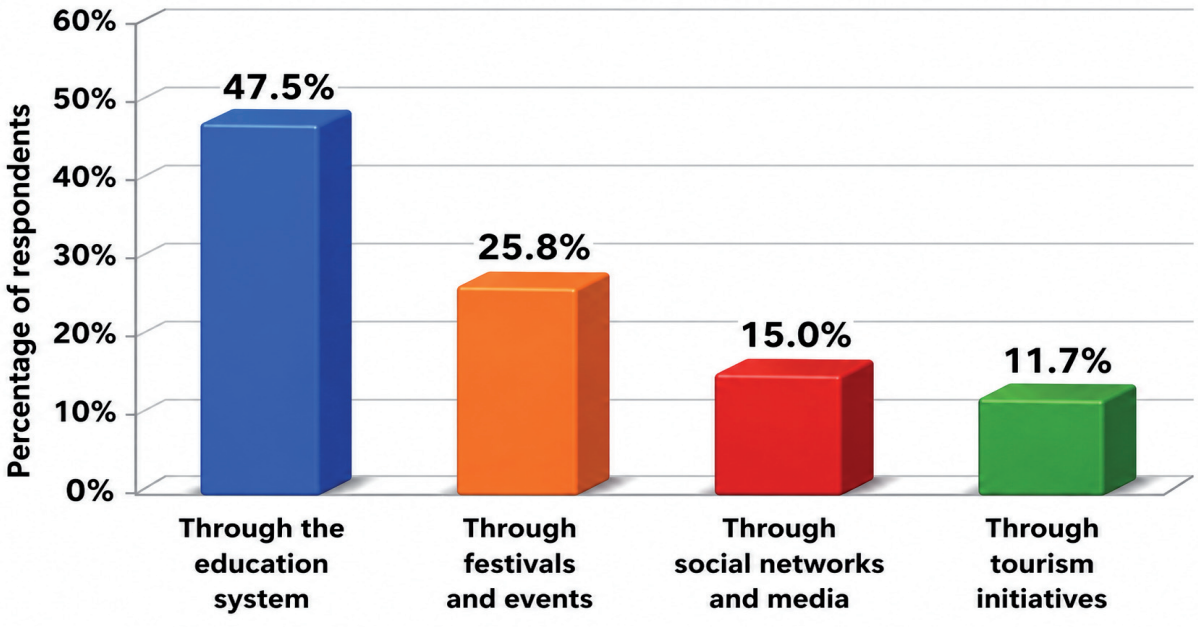


Figure 6. Preferred approaches to promoting Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances

The data presented in Figure 6 indicate that, according to the respondents, the most effective approach to promoting Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances is through the education system, as indicated by 47.5% of the surveyed participants. Festivals and cultural events rank second, with 25.8%, highlighting the importance of direct participation, cultural interaction, and experiential engagement. Social networks and the media are identified by 15.0% of respondents, which reflects the growing role of digital communication channels in the dissemination and visibility of folklore heritage. The lowest proportion of respondents assign priority to tourism initiatives – 11.7% – despite their potential to present Bulgarian culture to broader national and international audiences. These findings suggest that the sustainable promotion of folk dances should be grounded primarily in educational and cultural policies, supported by contemporary communication tools and active public engagement.

In the context of digitalization, contemporary media and online platforms (**Fig. 7**) occupy an increasingly important place in the preservation and promotion of cultural values. Therefore, respondents were surveyed regarding their assessment of the role of media and digital technologies in the popularization of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances.

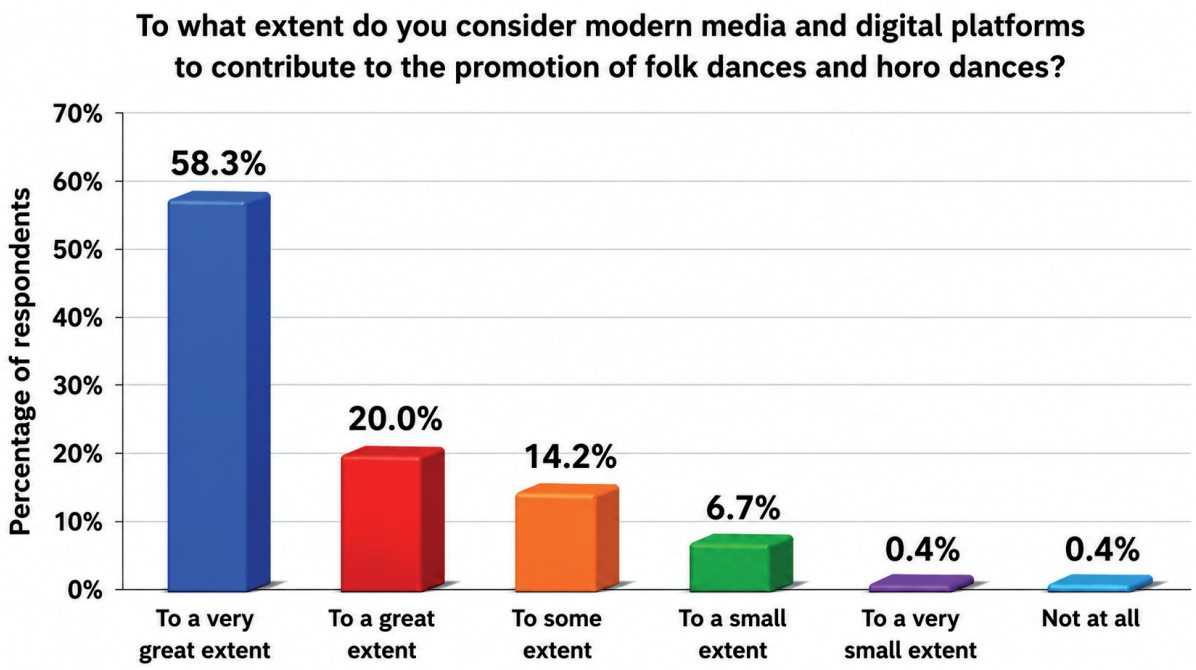


Figure 7. Assessment of the impact of media on the promotion of folk dances

The data from the conducted survey, presented in **Figure 7**, indicate a predominantly positive attitude towards the role of contemporary media and digital platforms in promoting Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances. The largest proportion of respondents – 58.3% – consider that media and digital platforms contribute to a great extent to the popularization of folklore heritage. An additional 20.0% of respondents state that their contribution is partial.

Conversely, 14.2% of participants assess the impact of contemporary media as limited, while 6.7% believe that they do not contribute to the promotion of folk dances. A negligible proportion of respondents – 0.4% – indicate uncertainty in their assessment, while another 0.4% report having no opinion on the matter.

Overall, the results show that 78.3% of the surveyed respondents perceive media and digital platforms as factors exerting a positive influence on the promotion of Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances. This confirms the significance of the digital environment as an effective instrument for disseminating knowledge about Bulgarian folklore heritage, stimulating interest among younger generations, and expanding public awareness of traditional culture. The obtained data support the need for more active use of social networks, online platforms, and digital media in initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting Bulgarian folk dances.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE PROMOTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF BULGARIAN FOLK DANCES

In the context of globalization and the dynamic development of information technologies, the promotion of Bulgarian folk dances requires the application of contemporary approaches that combine traditional forms of cultural activity with the new opportunities provided by the digital environment. The results of the conducted survey indicate that a significant proportion of respondents identify the education system, festivals, cultural events, social networks, and digital platforms as key instruments for the dissemination and preservation of folklore heritage.

The inclusion of Bulgarian folk dances in the educational process through extracurricular activities, school initiatives, and cultural-educational programmes is of particular importance. In this way, young people are provided with opportunities to become familiar with traditions from an early age and

to develop a lasting connection with national culture. At the same time, the organization of festivals, gatherings, and folklore events creates conditions for the active participation of different age groups and for the preservation of living tradition.

Contemporary media also play an essential role in the sustainable development of Bulgarian folk dances. Social networks, online platforms, and digital content provide opportunities to reach broad audiences both within the country and among Bulgarian communities abroad. This contributes to increasing public awareness and to promoting folklore heritage among younger generations.

The sustainable development of Bulgarian folk dances requires cooperation between educational institutions, cultural organizations, local communities, and state structures. Only through targeted policies and active public support can the preservation, development, and transmission of this valuable cultural heritage to future generations be ensured.

The promotion and sustainable development of Bulgarian folk dances require the integration of traditional and contemporary educational approaches. According to Dimitrova (2019a), the development of specialized knowledge and practical skills is an important prerequisite for the effective preservation and presentation of cultural heritage. The author emphasizes the significance of new educational programmes and competencies for the training of specialists who can contribute to the more effective promotion of cultural values, as well as to quality assessment in relation to standards for wellness services (Dimitrova, 2019b). Such an approach would support the preservation of Bulgarian folk dances and their affirmation as a significant element of national identity within the contemporary cultural environment.

CONCLUSION

Bulgarian folk dances and horo dances continue to occupy an important place in the contemporary cultural environment as carriers of national identity, historical memory, and cultural values. The results of the conducted survey indicate a high level of public awareness and a positive attitude towards the significance of folk dances for the preservation of Bulgaria's cultural heritage.

The findings reveal a willingness to participate in wellness-related activities associated with folklore, while the main barriers are linked primarily to lack of time and limited opportunities for involvement. The data confirm the significant role of the education system, festivals, media, and digital platforms in promoting Bulgarian folk traditions.

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that the preservation and development of folklore heritage require targeted efforts by educational (Nesheva, 2021), cultural, and public institutions aimed at increasing interest and encouraging the active participation of different generations in safeguarding Bulgarian traditional culture. It is recommended that folk dances and horo dances be included in school curricula and extracurricular activities in order to foster a lasting connection with national culture from an early age.

REFERENCES

Dimitrova, N. (2017) "The factor motivation for judo training with children", *International journal of kinesiology and other related sciences*, 45(2), pp. 161 – 163.

Dimitrova, B. (2019a) "Quality assessment about standards for wellness services and certified skills of specialized staff", *Trakia journal of sciences*, 17(2), pp. 143 – 149. doi: https://doi.org/10.15547/tjs.2019.02.007.

Dimitrova, B. (2019b) *Inteligentni kompetentsii za nishov turizam: spetsializirani znania, intelektualni i prakticheski umenia.* Sofia: Avangard.

Dimitrova, B. (2023) "Brain drain's economic impact on the development of wellness and SPA tourism in Bulgaria", *Trakia journal of sciences*, 21(Suppl. 3), pp. 21 – 25. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379847710 (accessed: 30.02.2026).

Dzhenev, K. (1968) *Balgarski stsenichni tantsi.* Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo.

Ganeva-Raycheva, V. (2011) "Bulgarian Folklore studies and the formation of national identity and culture: the contribution of Georgi Sava Rakovski", *Traditiones*, 40(2), pp. 111 – 118. doi: https://doi.org/10.3986/Traditio2011400207.

Georgieva, I. (1993) *Balgarska narodna mitologia.* 2nd ed. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo.

Kazashka, T., Madanska, S., Tabakova-Komsalova, V., Djeneva, D. and Nedelchev, I. (2024) "Development of an ontology of Bulgarian dance folklore", *Digital presentation and preservation of cultural and scientific heritage*, 14, pp. 265 – 272. doi: https://doi.org/10.55630/dipp.2024.14.25

Kraev, G. (2007) *Pazelat folklor – nasam i natam.* Sofia: NBU. Available from: https://bookshop.nbu.bg/bg/books/view/pyzelyt-folklor-nasam-i-natam (accessed: 2.04.2026).

Neseva (2021) "Balgarskite narodni tantsi v chasovete po gimnastika v Natsionalna sportna akademia „V. Levski", *Smart Innovations in Recreative & Wellness Industry and Niche Tourism*, 3(1), pp. 62 – 69. Available from: https://scjournalbg.globalwaterhealth.org/parvi-broi-2021 (accessed: 2.04.2026).

Richards, G. (2021) *Rethinking cultural tourism.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. doi: https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789905441.

Simeonova-Korudzieva, D. (2025) "Kak se otkri disonantnoto kulturno nasledstvo", *Research announcements "Heritage BG"*, 8, pp. 120 – 129. doi: https://doi.org/10.58894/ARHBg.2025.8.120-129.

Stanoeva, I. (2025) "Izdanie sas snimki na „narodni kostyumi" ot 1888 – 1889 g. kato most kam opazvane na nasledstvoto", *Research announcements "Heritage BG"*, 8, pp. 72 – 79. doi: https://doi.org/10.58894/ARHBg.2025.8.72 – 79.

Stoin, V. (1956) *Balgarskata narodna muzika.* Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo.

UNESCO (2003) *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage.* Paris: UNESCO. Available from: https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/15164-EN.pdf (accessed: 28.01.2026).

UNESCO (2024) *Intangible cultural heritage.* Available from: https://ich.unesco.org (accessed: 28.01.2026).

Българските народни танци в съвременната културна среда: обществена информираност, културна идентичност и перспективи за популяризиране

Ирина Петкова–Нешева

Резюме: Настоящият доклад разглежда българските народни хора и танци като значим компонент на нематериалното културно наследство и като съществен фактор за съхраняването на националната идентичност, социалната памет и културната устойчивост на българското общество. Изследването анализира обществената информираност, нагласите и участието в дейности, свързани с народните танци, както и възможностите за тяхното популяризиране в съвременната културна среда. Чрез анкетно проучване се изследва ролята на образованието, медиите и дигиталните платформи за информираност относно българските фолклорни традиции.

Ключови думи: БГ народни танци и хора; културно наследство; национална идентичност; обществена нагласа; популяризиране

Methodological Issues of the Complex Study of the Natural and Cultural-Historical Heritage in the Yantra River Basin

Galin Petrov
"St. Cyril and St. Methodius" University of Veliko Tarnovo

Rumen Yankov
Institute for population and human studies, BAS

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.70-85

Abstract: *The paper examines methodological issues of the complex study of natural and cultural heritage, specifically with regard to sites in rural areas in the districts of Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo. The emphasis is on the information sources and the type of data used, the methods of field research and the planned practical activities. Some results and guidelines in digital documentation, valorization, and the involvement of heritage as a resource for socio-economic development are presented. Particular attention is paid to the problems of preserving cultural and historical monuments in rural settlements and the opportunities for the development of specialized types of tourism in rural areas.*

Keywords: *immovable cultural heritage; rural municipalities; information sources*

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Galin Petrov *is a lecturer at the Department of Geography at the Faculty of History of the University of Veliko Tarnovo; scientific interests – geoarchaeology, protected natural areas, natural tourist resources.*

Email: g.petrov@ts.uni-vt.bg

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3560-5201

Prof. Dr. Rumen Yankov *is researcher at the Department of Demography of the Institute for Population and Human Studies - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; scientific interests – settlements and settlement systems, geodemography, geography of tourism.*

Email: rumen.yankov@iphs.bas.bg

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7573-109X

SUBJECT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH ACTIVITY

The leading motive for the intensification of research work on the natural and cultural heritage in the Yantra River valley is the increasingly obvious discrepancy between the wealth of natural and cultural monuments in the rural areas of two administrative districts of the Yantra River Basin – Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo, on the one hand, and on the other – the deprived level of their promotion, presentation, and economic utilization against the background of the prioritization of cultural and historical heritage in the regional and municipal centers. The observed inconsistency is partly the result of thematic and institutional gaps, but probably, to no less extent, the lack of administrative capacity and initiative at the local level. Neglecting the potential of natural and cultural and historical landmarks in

rural areas is not only an obstacle in several aspects of regional development and that of individual settlements but also poses serious risks to the very preservation of heritage sites in them.

The narrow spatial and functional connectivity of the archaeological monuments, the architectural and economic complexes from the period of the Bulgarian Revival, the sacred and cult places, historical sites, etc. with the diverse natural environment of the Yantra River Basin requires the application of a research approach that combines historical with geographical expertise. Thus, the cultural-historical and natural heritage of the territory is perceived as a single, complex object, considered bilaterally. On one hand, the places have their own history and, on the other, the historical events take place in certain, significant places. The topic of the current research reflects a commitment to the regional development of rural territories in Central Northern Bulgaria by revealing the challenges, solutions and good practices in the preservation, presentation and valorization of the natural and cultural heritage.

The work of experts in the field of tangible cultural heritage has a similar structure and design but is focused on different types of sites – sacred and cult places, roads, settlements and livelihoods. The goal is to develop a model for documenting and information upgrading with digital means of cultural and historical monuments on the example of Central Northern Bulgaria (within the administrative scope of the Gabrovo and Veliko Tarnovo districts), supporting the preservation of the memory of the regional historical sites of and their input as a resource for cultural tourism.

During the initial identification of the sites of research interest and for all planned subsequent impacts in a practical trend, several groups were distinguished: churches, monasteries, holy springs, sanctuaries, etc., including existing, abandoned and disappeared, erased or depopulated settlements, economic facilities from the past, directly related to roads and waters – mills, fulling mills, old bridges, old road sections, roadside stations, inns, distinctive agricultural landscapes, etc. In almost all cases, it is necessary to specify the functions, dating and establish the actual condition and location, in which the study is based on documents, historical sources, local history materials, maps and field research.

In the natural heritage area, attention is focused on the protected zones and protected territories in the region in the context of preserving the local environment, bioresources and the attractiveness of the landscapes. The goal is to valorize the natural heritage of the Yantra River Basin through interaction between the academic circles and local communities in its discovery, protection and inclusion in tourism, education and other areas of economic and cultural life. It is expected that the engagement of natural resources in tourist consumption will contribute to the sustainable development and welfare of rural areas.

INFORMATION SOURCES AND DATA TYPE

An important task is to identify and effectively employ all possible data sources. Considering the comprehensive nature of the study and the complexity of the goal, they are quite wide in scope. From the national electronic registers with open access, these are the following:

1) National Register of Immovable Cultural Heritage – data are provided by municipality and are presented in Excel tables. Orthodox churches and historic houses that have artistic, architectural and building value predominate for the districts of Gabrovo and Veliko Tarnovo.

2) National Tourism Register, from which data on accommodation facilities are mainly used.

3) Register of Tourist Attractions – the data is presented in tables and can be filtered by name, type and location (municipality, territory, settlement). Transport accessibility, visibility, orientation, attendance, and more issues of individual attractions are indicated. Hyperlinks refer to information about the respective attractions in Wikipedia and to their location in Google Maps.

4) Register of Protected Areas and Protected Zones in Bulgaria – in addition to tex-

tual information and regulatory documents, GIS layers and metadata for each officially declared protected territory or protected zone, as well as summarized spreadsheets for protected territories by category, are available for free download. In the districts of Gabrovo and Veliko Tarnovo, 60 protected territories have been declared, among which protected sites (41) and natural landmarks (12) predominate. A total of 32 protected zones fall partially or entirely within the territories of the two districts.

5) Register of Centenary Trees in Bulgaria – provides the opportunity to search by various criteria and visualize information about the centenary trees declared under the Biological Diversity Act.

6) Register of Geographical Names – currently the data is available on the CAIS web portal (Cadastral Administrative Information System) of the Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre Agency in the form of WMS and WFS services.

Statistical materials, both in a historical-demographic aspect and regarding the current state of municipalities and settlements, such as data from the National Register of Populated Places (NRPP) are also useful for the study area.

Important sources of data are various municipal planning documents:

1) General Spatial Plans (Master Plans) with the attached zoning maps;

2) Integrated Development Plans of the Municipalities (IDPs) for the period 2021-2027;

3) Strategies, plans and programs for tourism development in individual municipalities.

In some cases, older IDPs and Integrated Plans for Urban Regeneration and Development (IPURD**)** that were in effect for the period 2014-2020 may also be useful.

Very valuable sources of data are local history studies, especially when they are focused on individual settlements. For example, for the villages of Elena municipality, such studies have been published for Bebrovo (Vekilov, 1996), Maryan (Avramov, 2009), Ruhovtsi (Chernaev, 2005), etc.

Important information is provided by specialized historical, economic, ethnographic and geographical studies – monographs, articles, conference proceedings. The importance of historical sources, especially Turkish sources for Bulgarian history, published by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, should not be underestimated.

A special place is occupied by archaeological research in the Yantra River Basin, which is reflected in various publications. If necessary, more detailed data can be found in the series "Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations", where reports on the fieldwork of archaeologists for each individual year are presented. The Geographic Information System "Archaeological Map of Bulgaria" (GIS AKB), an archaeological GIS containing various types of geospatial data, is of crucial importance. Access to the database is limited (Kecheva, 2024).

Cartographic materials of various content and origin were used, including old maps such as the three-verst map from 1877-1879 (M 1:126,000), Felix Kanitz's map of Danube Bulgaria and the Balkans, etc. The data from the Cadastral Map of Bulgaria and the Digital Orthophoto Map of the Republic of Bulgaria, based on satellite and aircraft imagery (WGS84 geographic coordinate system, UTM projection, Zone 35N), should also be noted.

Interesting information can be gleaned from tourist sites – amateur and supported by municipal tourist information centers.

Crucial to the applicability of research results is the information obtained from field studies, which aim to establish:

1) the current state of well-known sites of the cultural, historical and natural heritage of the region – historical houses, archaeological sites, churches and chapels, holy springs and other holy places, bridges, centenary trees, etc.

2) the location of new potential tourist sites in the area;

3) transport accessibility to the sites and testing new tourist routes.

Considering the significant territorial scope of the region, the site density and the complex functional and territorial linking of resources of a natural and anthropogenic na-

ture, the field surveys were primarily focused on selected reference areas. The approach to their determination is explained below.

The accumulation of a large volume of heterogeneous information with specific quantitative and qualitative settings requires the formation of thematic databases – of religious sites, monuments of immovable cultural heritage (ICH), archaeological sites, tourist infrastructure (with an emphasis on accommodation), natural landmarks, etc. In the datasets (most often spreadsheets) on the topics, a uniform model for entering information is applied (site-settlement-land-municipality-characteristics). The structure and format of the data allow for filtering by selected criteria, classification and categorization of the sites based on their importance in the model.

This is followed by integration of the data into a GIS environment and compilation of GIS working projects for different parts of the territory of the region, including municipalities and groups of settlement areas. It is GIS that allows the successful organization and integration of thematically diverse spatial and non-spatial data, their interpretation and subsequent implementation of spatial analyses, modeling and territorial planning. Modern GIS are a powerful tool in the decision-making process in territorial management. Working in a GIS environment can also contribute to modern visual presentation of cultural, historical and natural heritage sites for tourism purposes, for example, through 3D models of individual sites or parts of the territory or using augmented (AR) and virtual reality (VR).

By building a GIS-based dynamic information system, it is possible to update and upgrade over time with new evidence regarding the relationship between a historical or natural site and a place, i.e. exact or approximate geographical location, newly established sites, connections with settlements, modern natural and anthropogenic environment, land use during different historical periods, events related to the localities, attendance and usability, etc. that researchers in specific fields consider essential, in the shape of text, numerical data, graphics, photography, and other type of images.

No chronological or functional, i.e. category-specific constraints are placed on the selection of sites in the model. Only the possibility of identifying the sites on the terrain and their structural and functional relationship with the environment are important. Geoarchaeological, and largely cultural-historical sites are inseparable from their spatial natural and anthropogenic context – urban and non-urban. The aim is to analyze and assess the possibilities for the preservation and valorization of the sites, from the point of view of their potential for incorporating in educational, nature-based, ecological and cultural tourism routes. It is precisely tourism that plays a remarkable role in reconsidering culture, heritage and tradition. It is not just a set of economic activities, but the ideological framework of history, nature and tradition, and a framework that has the power to pattern culture and nature for its own needs (Atanasova, 2003). The experience of the study so far gives confidence that tourism is an effective tool, a kind of "lifeline" for the promotion, preservation and maintenance of the poorly researched and underscored heritage of peripheral, rural and depopulated territories.

CONCEPTUAL GROUNDS FOR APPLICABILITY

The main steps to achieve the set goals are research - development - application. As mentioned, the research is spatially limited to two administrative regions – Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo. The development process includes digital documentation and digital upgrading of natural and cultural heritage sites for the establishment of specialized tourist routes, educational and presentation products. The application of results, as the final phase in the project cycle, is aimed at testing, practical implementation and maintenance of the products within the framework of established contacts and interactions, including joint projects with municipal authorities, business entities and local cultural communities – community centers (*chitalishta*), tourist associations, etc.

The guiding principles in the implementation of the scientific and applied objectives in the work programs are:

– synergy – expected effect from the implementation of the synchronous goals of preserving and utilizing the natural and cultural heritage as an indivisible public resource;

– interaction with local authorities – municipalities and mayoralties, and informal local groups;

– applicability of research results;

– sustainability of results – long-lasting positive effect on local development;

– focusing efforts on small settlements subjected to the immediate depopulation and with endangered cultural and historical monuments;

– digital documentation and upgrading with new technologies as a means of preserving and utilizing natural and cultural heritage.

The territorial scope of the study in the definition "Yantra River Basin" has only indicative significance, but the emphasis on this naturally, historically, economically and culturally distinctive part of the country is not accidental. Of practical importance for the work is the administrative-territorial scope of the above-mentioned areas, which to a very large extent overlaps with the watershed basin of the Yantra River. The need for interaction with regional state authorities and local authorities requires consideration of administrative-territorial borders. The lower working level – the municipal level – includes the 10 municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo District and the 4 municipalities of Gabrovo District. They cover 693 settlements. At this stage, the developments on the valorization of cultural heritage have excluded the sites-immovable cultural heritage (ICH) in the district and municipal centers. The main argument is the achieved relatively higher degree of their preservation and display, and their presence in significant cultural and tourist projects. The focus is exclusively on the resources of rural areas. Except for the ethnographic complexes in Arbanasi and Bozhentsi, most of the monuments of cultural and historical heritage in the villages of the region are unknown, unvisited and often threatened with destruction. With this limitation, the number of sites-ICH is significantly reduced, which narrows the work on additional research and systematization to feasible volumes. In summary, the studied territory includes a total of 679 settlements – 674 villages and 5 small towns that are not municipal centers, located in 240 cadastral territories (lands of the particular settlements).

The settlement environment is of essential importance for the thematic scope, limitations and spatial scaling of the study. The first censuses in the country after the Liberation show that the population density was highest in the middle parts of Northern Bulgaria and specifically the Yantra River basin. During demographic and urban processes, especially intense in the second half of the 20th century, the situation changed radically. As of the last census, for example, 139 of the villages were completely depopulated, and a further 195 villages had 1 to 10 inhabitants. Both groups are located entirely in the southern, Stara Planina part of the region, on the territory of the municipalities of Sevlievo, Gabrovo, Dryanovo, Tryavna, Veliko Tarnovo, Elena, Zlataritsa and Strazhitsa. The settlement network here is distinguished by its high density due to the many small settlements of a scattered type (hamlets and dwellings). In the municipality of Elena, for example, 86 villages (out of 123) are either completely depopulated or have a population of up to 10 residents.

The largest number and density of ICH is also in the Stara Planina part. The National Register of Immovable Cultural Heritage for the municipality of Elena, for example, lists 329 sites in the town of Elena itself (including the annexed neighborhoods – former hamlets) and 284 in the other settlements of the municipality. In the municipality of Tryavna, the concentration in the municipal center is even higher – 138 out of a total of 155 sites.

The Fore-Balkan and the Balkan Mountains also contain a predominant part of the protected zones under Natura 2000 and most of the protected areas in the region. Fourteen protected zones under the Habitats and Birds Directives fall entirely within the territory of the two administrative districts. Another 22 protected zones partially cover parts of the region. They cover the cadastral territories of dozens of villages. There are 60 protected ar-

eas, including 1 national park, 2 nature parks, 2 reserves, 2 maintained reserves, 41 protected sites and 12 natural landmarks.

The above circumstances provide a "crossing point" that determines the focus of the present research – the natural and immovable cultural heritage of the depopulated rural territories, as a resource for their demographic, economic and settlement development. Again, we will use the example of the Elena municipality – in 19 settlements with a population of up to 10 residents there are 82 sites-ICH – historic houses, churches, military memorials, church cell schools (*kiliyno schools*). In another 8 villages with a population of 11-20 residents there are another 32 sites. Undoubtedly, the lists must be updated by dropping already virtually lost sites, as well as adding new ones, e.g. archaeological sites, preserved farm buildings, etc.

STAGES AND METHODS OF RESEARCH. SPATIAL HIERARCHIZATION

Any scientific research with a practical and applied focus must have a clear structure of activities. In this case, the research-development-application work cycle is carried out in the following subsequent stages:

– identification and systematization of natural and cultural-historical heritage sites;

– field studies in a reference territory and key areas to establish the current condition of the sites, the degree of accessibility, and the opportunities for their socialization;

– digital documentation of selected sites – UAV (drone) photography and photogrammetry, ground photography, mapping, etc.;

– preparation of digital presentation tools, including augmented and virtual reality products, intended for tourism advertising, promotion, media presentation and training – information texts, videos, films, ground and aerial photographs, 3D models, tourist maps, tourist brochures, etc.;

– conceptual project developments for valorization opportunities (promotion, access, restoration) and recommendations for necessary measures for the preservation of cultural and historical sites (expert reports, etc.);

– joint projects with municipalities on the enhancement and tourist valorization of natural and cultural-historical heritage sites;

– conceptual design developments for new tourist routes or upgrading traditional routes.

Forms of cultural tourism in the modern information society, more than anything else, need scientific support and new technological approaches for a modern reconsideration and perception of history, culture and traditions. For the successful determination of new tourist routes, not only the identified natural and anthropogenic resources must be considered, but also the specifics of the terrain and the needs of tourists. In this case, the following steps must be taken:

– identification of resources and determination of the type of route (pedestrian, bicycle, etc.);

– planning the route with selection of starting, intermediate and end points, places for information boards, markings, recreation areas, performing a risk assessment, calculating costs and coordinating with the relevant municipality;

– development of terrain through cleaning the route, placing trail markings and trails sign, arranging a permanent tourist infrastructure;

– test passing and quality control;

– promoting the route, ensuring presence on popular web platforms, etc.

We proceed from the idea that the collected information can be objectively and effectively interpreted within clearly defined spatial parameters. Taking into account the relatively large area and heterogeneity of the territory, the following three-level hierarchy of the spatial scope of the study was adopted: model territory (study area) - reference territory – key areas.

The model territory plays the role of an experimental field for the applicability and effectiveness of digital technologies in the study, preservation, and valorization of natural and cultural-historical heritage, primarily through tourism. The total area of the two administrative regions of Gabrovo and Veliko Tarnovo is 6681 sq. km. In the economic

and geographical zoning of the country, the territory of the two districts forms the Yantra region, i.e. the eastern part of Central Northern Bulgaria (Donchev, 1989). The Yantra basin is a historically and naturally distinct part of the country. The natural diversity is largely determined by the large hypsometric range – from 20 m above sea level in the Svishtovsko-Belenska lowland through the Danube hilly plain, through the plateaus and parallel hills of the Fore-Balkan to the Main Stara Planina chain with heights in the Shipchenska and Eleno-Tvardishka mountains up to about 1500 m. This, in turn, leads to mutual economic complementarity and administrative binding of the territory for long periods of historical and cultural development.

For the model territory, initial information was collected and systematized on the registered ICH, protected zones and protected areas, the tourist infrastructure and tourist attractions in the rural territories of the Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo districts. This information is essential in view of the expected applicability in the field of tourism and, more precisely, on the role of tourism in the valorization of the natural and cultural heritage of rural territories. (**Fig. 1**).

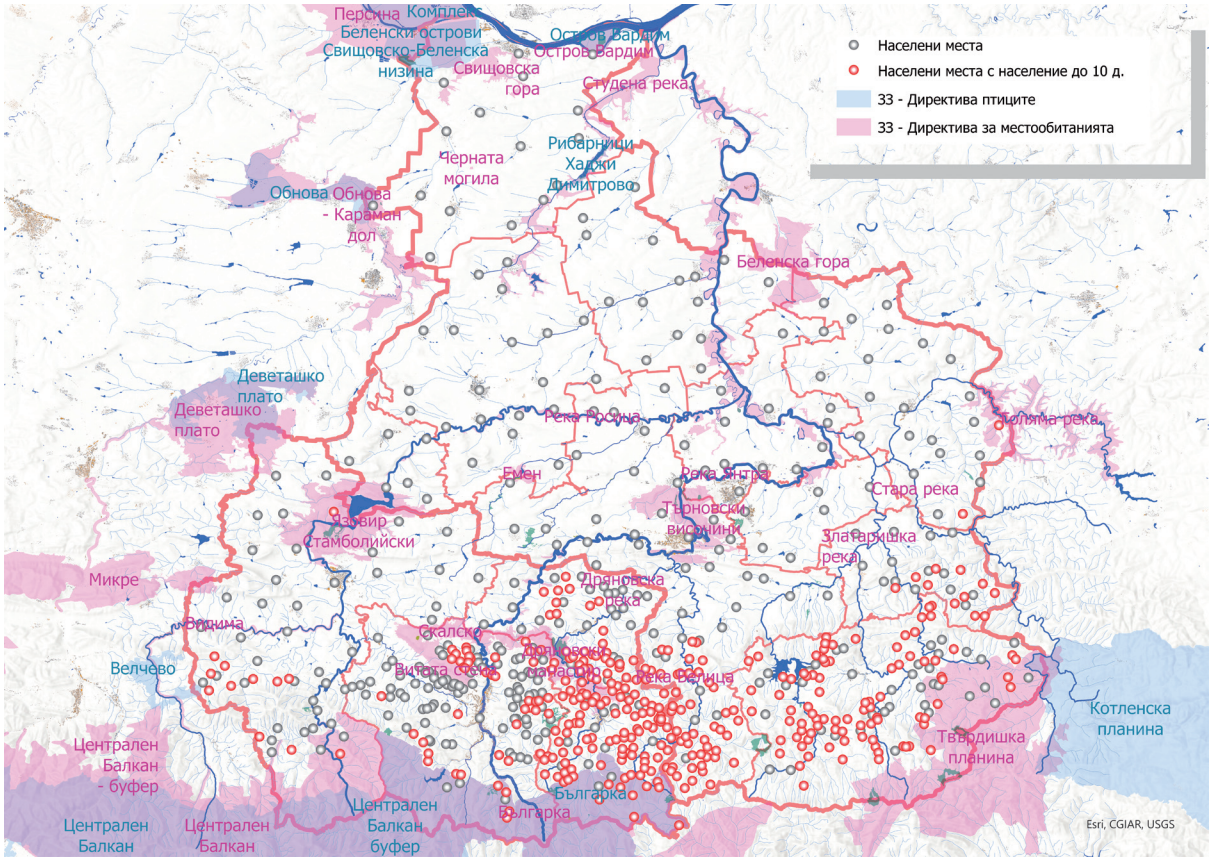


Figure 1. Protected zones and settlements in the Yantra River Basin

There are some well-marked contrasts. The study for the municipality of Veliko Tarnovo, for example, showed that in 25 villages out of the total of 86 in the municipality there are 100 registered tourist accommodation facilities with over 1,600 beds. Of these, 87% are in established destinations such as Arbanassi and Voneshta Voda. On the other hand, in the municipality of Elena the tourist infrastructure includes 190 facilities, spread across 47 villages. In the remaining rural areas of the Veliko Tarnovo district, almost no accommodation is available. The situation is different in the Gabrovo district where almost a hundred villages have guest houses and guest rooms.

Based on the collected information, basic GIS projects were developed for the model territory as collectors of diverse data and generators of thematic working maps (**Fig. 2**).

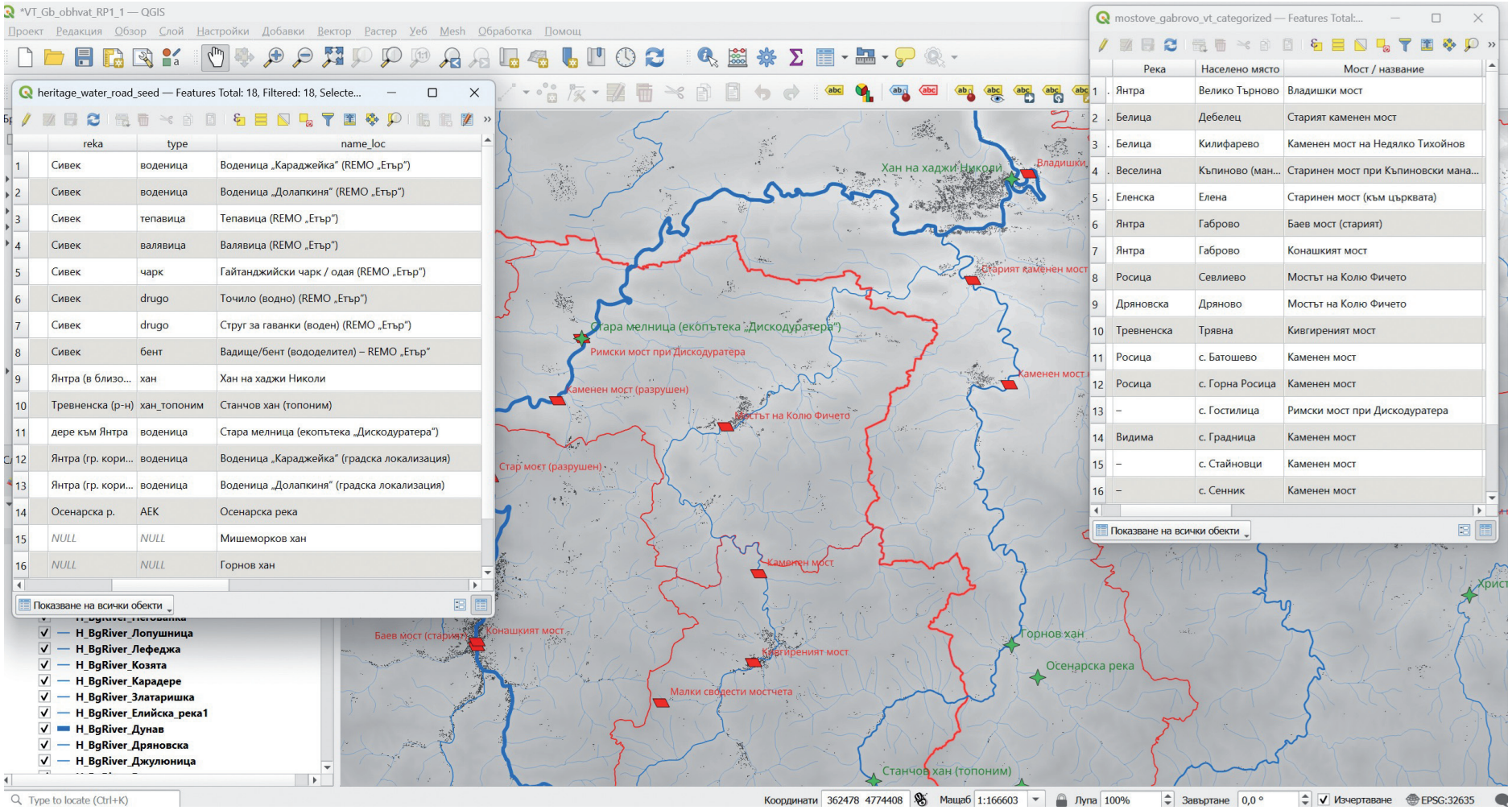


Figure 2.. Thematic dataset in a GIS environment

The reference territory has a more limited scope up to the municipality level. This is the territory of the municipality of Elena (671 sq. km). Narrowing the research perimeter is necessary for implementing, testing and refining the approaches for employing the full scope of the tasks set in a shorter period. The choice of the municipality of Elena as a reference territory is well justified. As part of the Stara Planina zone of the model territory, it has a very large number (over 600) and density of ICH. The same applies to the areas and diversity of protected natural territories. There can be added numerous cultural events at the local level, votive shrines, historical sites, and other sites of the recent and more distant past, which do not have an official status. The main target natural territories are represented in the territory of the municipality – 3 protected zones, as well as 5 protected sites and 1 natural landmark. (**Fig. 3**).



Figure 3. Elena Municipality – reference territory

The villages in the Elena municipality have a relatively well-developed tourist accommodation infrastructure for rural, eco- and cultural tourism – mostly guest houses, family hotels and boarding houses with a total of about 2000 beds. On the other hand, the negative trends in economic and demographic development make the issue of involving the natural and cultural resources of the rural territory for economic, demographic and cultural strengthening particularly relevant. The settlement network of the Elena municipality exhibits remarkable stability over time in the conditions of a continuous overall decreasing population and a minimal number of registered residents in the villages. In this context, the problem of preserving cultural heritage in depopulated settlements acquires particular importance.

The third territorial level includes the key areas: – a small group of neighboring settlements that combine cultural, historical and natural tourist resources, and have tourist accommodation facilities, while their proximity allows for the development of complex routes and digital products that enrich and diversify

tourist attractions in an appropriate way. The conditions for the selection of the key sections are as follows:

– several neighboring cadastral territories, each of which has at least one settlement with ICH and accommodation facilities – proximity between the settlements and a connection with the tourist facilities for rural/eco-tourism are sought, which will allow the development of suitable walking routes;

– cadastral territories which territory at least partially overlaps with protected zones and/or protected areas – synergy is sought in the utilization of anthropogenic and natural tourist resources;

– the selection is based only on settlements that have a registered or a nearby tourist attraction in the same area (Register of Tourist Attractions; in this case – only Maryanski Monastery and Hristovski Waterfall);

On this basis, three key areas were identified (**Fig. 4**):

- the group of settlements Maryan-Bebrovo-Kostel;
- the Ruhovtsi-Buinovtsi-Miykovtsi section (along the Miykovska River tributary);
- the villages along the upper reaches of the Vesselina River – Bagalevtsi, Todyuvtsi and Drenta.

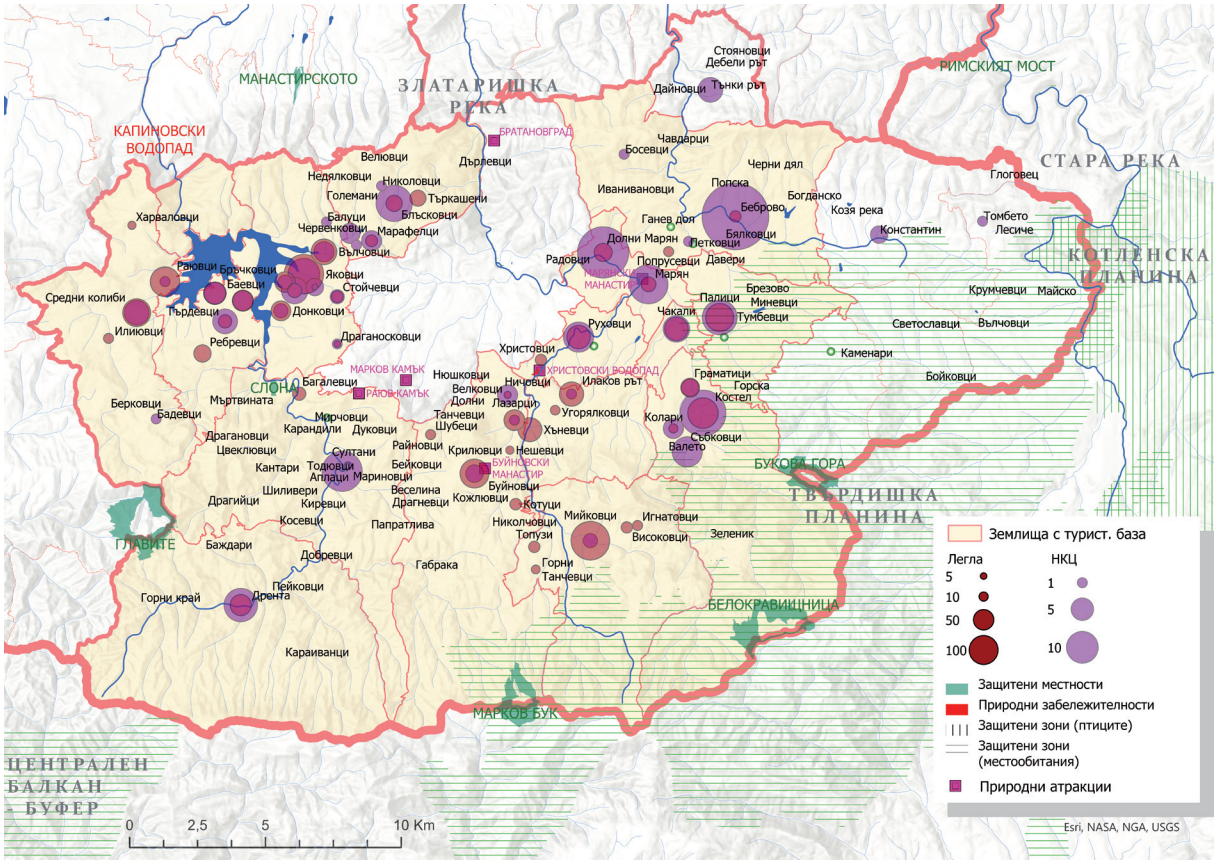


Figure 4. Tourist infrastructure and Immovable Cultural Heritage (ICH) – argumentation of the key sections

The Bebrovo section, located in the eastern part of the Elena municipality, covers 5 cadastral territories with 10 villages, in which there are 136 registered ICH sites, as well as places for tourist accommodation – guest houses, family hotels, bungalows, etc. (**Table 1**). The first field studies were carried out in this section at the beginning of this year.

Table 1. Immovable cultural heritage and accommodation capacity in the villages of Bebrovo key section

Village	Number of inhabitants	Tourist beds	ICH (numbers)			
			Historic houses	Religious sites	Monuments, etc.	Total
Bebrovo	228	15	36	4	4	44
Bosevtsi	0	0	0	1	0	1
Valeto	2	0	9	0	0	9
Gramatitsi	13	42	3	0	0	3
Dolni Maryan	7	39	25	0	1	26
Kolartsi	3	10	4	0	0	4
Kostel	46	112	16	1	4	21
Maryan	82	26	10	2	3	15
Palitsi	135	95	10	1	1	12
Petkovtsi	8	0	0	0	1	1

In methodological terms, a model for digital documentation of the natural, geoarchaeological and cultural-historical heritage based on sites in the Yantra River Basin must be developed and tested. It must contain:

– information about the past of the settlements, which are absent from the circulation of scientific information at current stage;

– data on housing construction and architectural examples from the Revival period (**Fig. 5**);



Figure 5. The house of the *chorbadziyata* ('the wealthy man') Stoykov, visited by F. Kanitz (1872)

– monasteries, churches, chapels, votive shrines, holy springs and other sacred places – functioning, destroyed or remaining as such only in the historical memory of the population (**Fig. 6**);



Figure 6. The old school and St. George church – village of Bebrovo

– old roads and bridges, inns and important crossroads;

– economic facilities from the past – mills, fulling mills, water-powered sawmills, etc.;

– archaeological sites;

– local festivals, customs and holidays;

– notable individuals from the region;

– historical localities;

– war monuments and memorial plaques;

– de-registered (extinct) and relocated settlements;

– closed schools;

– natural sites with ecological significance and tourist attractiveness (**Fig.7**);



Figure 7. Hristovski waterfall

– other sites of natural, archaeological, historical, cultural and economic nature, the external appearance and structure of which directly depends on natural and geographical factors.

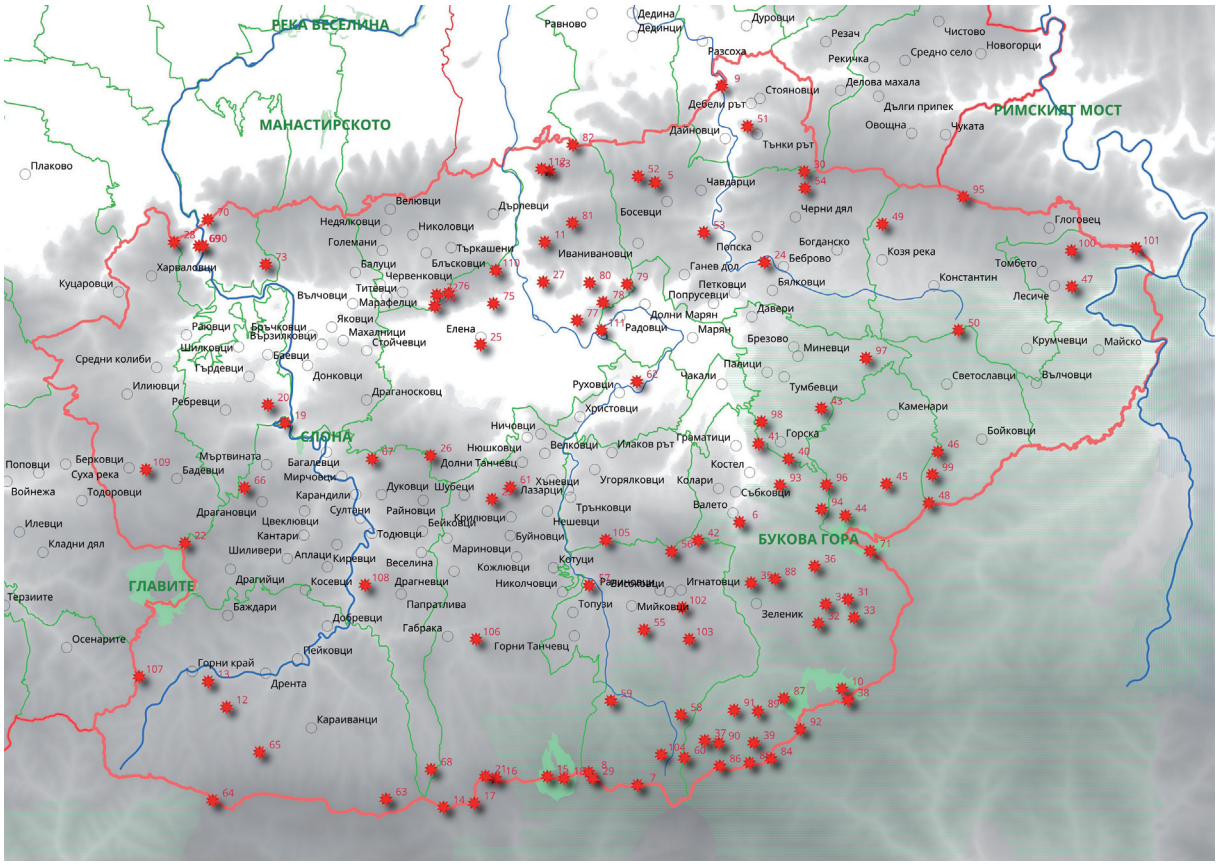
We consider the proposed model as a methodological platform that can be further developed and enriched, responding to the tasks of presenting, promoting, preserving and valuing the natural and cultural-historical heritage.

FIRST RESULTS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES FROM THE RESEARCH IN THE REFERENCE TERRITORY

In the course of the work so far, a large volume of data on the reference territory has been systematized, clarified and supplemented. The main study of cultural-historical and protected nature sites is accompanied by studies of demographic, settlement, economic and ecological situation and the tourist infrastructure. The primary information is supplemented and analyzed in stages by specialists in the relevant scientific fields of the humanities and natural sciences.

Measurements, descriptions, filming, tracking and mapping were carried out during field surveys to collect data for digital documentation of the selected sites. The main tools are standard GPS localization, initial archaeological documentation, historical and/or complex geographical description, low-altitude (drone) and field filming. The collected primary data will serve to build and supplement a GIS-integrated database, orthophotogrammetric processing and modeling, and digital mapping. Attention is paid to the landmarks provided by the toponymy of the region. The names of geographical sites on a given territory are a kind of depot for storing historical and geographical information. The typical complexity of the topos provides the opportunity to use different approaches in analysis, including spatial analyses. The toponymic system encodes information about the state of the natural, economic and cultural environment in the past. As Boyadzhiev points out, the interaction between toponymy and geography is currently unjustifiably weak, and it holds potential from the point of view of complex research (Boyadzhiev, 2016).

At this stage, several problematic areas can be outlined. For example, in the electronic system GIS-Archaeological Map of Bulgaria, not a single site on the territory of the Elena municipality has been registered. At the same time, based on published information (Tsonchev, 1948 ; Dimitrov and Handzhiyski, 1988 ; Stanev, 2005), material from local informants who know the area well, information from personal web sites and data from our own field surveys, it can be assumed that there are dozens of sites with distinguishable traces and remains, which require archaeological research (**Fig. 8**).


РЕКА ВЕСЕЛИНА
МАНАСТИРСКОТО
РИМСКИЯТ МОСТ
ЕЛЕНА
ГЛАВИТЕ
БУКОВА ГОРА
Равново
Дедина
Дединци
Дуровци
Резач
Чистово
Новогорци
Средно село
Разсоха
Рекичка
Делова махала
Стояновци
Дебели рът
Дълги припек
Овощна
Чуката
Дайновци
Тънки рът
Плаково
Чавдарци
Черни дял
Глоговец
Босевци
Попска
Богданско
Беброво
Коза река
Ганев дол
Томбето
Константин
Лесиче
Иванивановци
Петковци
Бялковци
Попрусевци
Давери
Долни Марян
Марян
Радовци
Брезово
Миневци
Крумчевци
Майско
Светославци
Вълчовци
Павици
Чакали
Тумбевци
Каменари
Руховци
Христовци
Горска
Бойковци
Граматици
Костел
Събковци
Валето
Ничовци
Велковци
Илаков рът
Нюшковци
Долни Танчевц
Хъневци
Лазарци
Угорялковци
Кълари
Трънковци
Нешевци
Буйновци
Кошутци
Николчовци
Топузи
Мийковци
Игнатовци
Зеленик
Горни Танчевц
Габрака
Папратлива
Добревци
Баждари
Терзиите
Осенарите
Горни край
Дрента
Нейковци
Караиванци
Драгийци
Косевци
Драгневци
Кожлювци
Мариновци
Веселина
Киревци
Аплаци
Шиливери
Кладни дял
Илевци
Драгановци
Цвеклювци
Кантари
Султени
Карандили
Райновци
Тодювци
Бейковци
Дуковци
Шубеци
Мирчовци
Багалевци
Мъртвината
Бадевци
Поповци
Берковци
Суха река
Войнежа
Тодоровци
Ребревци
Илиювци
Средни колиби
Гърдевци
Шияковци
Баевци
Донковци
Драганосковц
Разовци
Бъчковци
Вързиляковци
Яковци
Махалници
Стойчевци
Елена
Маранци
Титевци
Червенковци
Балуци
Блъсковци
Туркашени
Големани
Недялковци
Николовци
Дърлевци
Веловци
Харвалювци
Куцаровци
Вълчовци
Ивановци
Ивановци
Иванов

It is surprising that in the Register of Tourist Attractions, maintained by the Ministry of Tourism, the municipality of Elena is currently represented with a very limited set of attractions – 23 in total. Outside the town, which is the municipal center, there are 10 of them, distributed by type, as follows: 2 reserves, 2 monasteries, 1 equestrian center, 1 park, 1 historical site, 1 protected area and 2 natural landmarks. Excluding the reserves, which have limited access, the equestrian center, the Kaleto suburban park and the historical site of Bratanovgrad, defined in the register itself as "inaccessible", one can make the wrong conclusion that the rural territory of the municipality offers only five tourist attractions, representing natural or cultural-historical heritage. Even with this degree of exploration (or more precisely, lack of exploration), only the sites in the explored key areas offer sufficiently attractive points for developing routes for cultural and adventure tourism, especially if they are presented with remarkable facts of historical memory, derived from literary and local sources (**Fig. 10**).

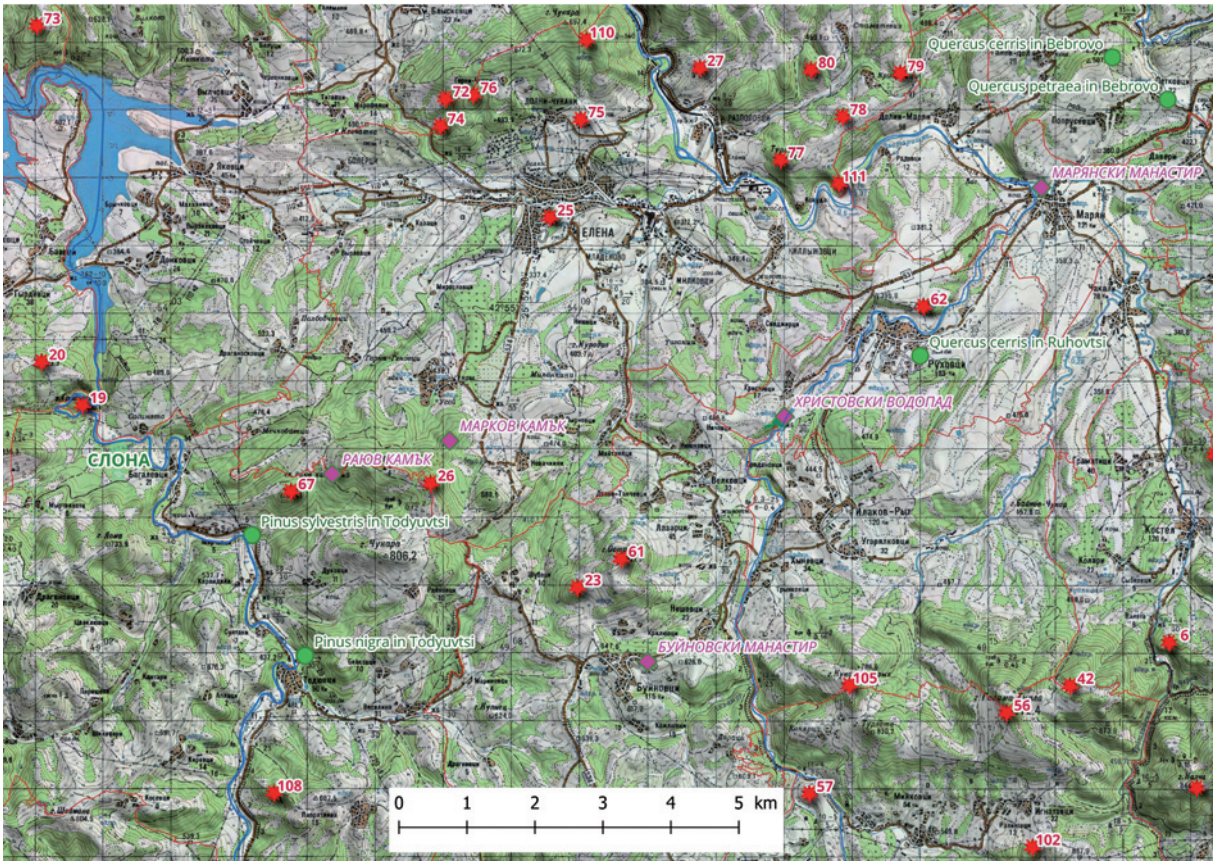


Figure 10. Natural and anthropogenic sites in the basins of the Veselina and Miykovska rivers

At present stay of our research, activities are underway to specify the location and condition of historical sites both within and outside the reference territory of archaeological, economic and religious value, as well as to supplement them in the layers of the basic GIS project. The study of information relating to the territory of the two administrative regions from the archaeological map of Bulgaria, historical sources, scientific publications, local history materials, the cadastral map, municipal planning documents (strategies, programs, development plans), accessible GIS databases and other sources is in progress. The analysis of this diverse and huge volume of information will allow in the next stages to concentrate efforts on settlements and sites in the remaining municipalities to achieve the goal of the project.

REFERENCES:

Atanasova, Lina (2003) *Sotsiologiya na turizma*. Plovdiv: Letera.

Avramov, Nikola (2009) *Maryan: ocherk za razvitie na seloto ot osnovavaneto mu do nashi dni*. Varna: Slavena.

Boyadzhiev, Veselin (2016) *Uvod v istoricheskata geografiya*. Sofia: Paradigma.

Chernaev, Pencho (2005) *Ruhovski sbornik: materiali za istoriyata na s. Ruhovtsi*. Veliko Tarnovo: Abagar.

Dimitrov, B. and Handzhiyski, A. (1988) *Kamennite shtitove na Bulgaria*. Sofia: Meditsina i fizkultura.

Donchev, Doncho (1989) "Yantrenski rayon", in *Geografia na Bulgaria. Tom 3. Fiziko-geografsko i sotsialno-ikonomichesko rayonirane na Bulgaria*. Sofia: BAN, pp. 481 – 504.

Kecheva, Nadezhda (2024) *Arheologicheska karta na Bulgaria: nedestruktivni metodi za terenni arheologicheski prouchvania i prilozhenie na geografski informatsionni sistemi*. Sofia: BAN. doi: https://doi.org/10.53250/diss18.

Stanev, Hristo (2005) *Kniga za Elenskia kray: istoriko-demografski ocherk za naselenieto i selishtata*. Veliko Tarnovo: Astarta.

Tsonchev, Dimitar (1948) "Starinite po severnite sklonove na Elenskiya i Slivenskiya balkan", *Annual of the Regional Archaeological Museum – Plovdiv*, 1, pp. 113 – 152.

Vekilov, Petar (1996) *Bebrovo: selo „hubav gradets"*. Sofia: Pelikan Alfa.

Някои методологически въпроси на комплексното изследване на природното и културно-историческото наследство в Янтренското поречие

Галин Петров, Румен Янков

Резюме: Статията разглежда някои методологически въпроси на комплексното изследване на природното и културното наследство на примера на обекти в селски райони в областите Велико Търново и Габрово. Акцентира се на информационните източници и характера на използваните данни, методите на теренни проучвания и планираните приложни дейности. Представени са част от резултатите и насоките в работата по дигитално документиране, социализация и въвличането на наследството като ресурс за социално-икономическо развитие. Обърнато е по-специално внимание на проблемите пред опазването на културно-историческите паметници в селските населени места и на възможностите за развитието на специализирани видове туризъм в селските територии.

Ключови думи: недвижими културни ценности; селски общини; информационни източници

Therapeutic Effects of Adapted Aquatic Practices in Students with Overweight and Obesity

Velichka Aleksandrova
National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski"

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.86-95

Abstract: *Overweight and obesity among school students represent a growing public health concern and require effective approaches to increasing physical activity. This study aimed to evaluate the therapeutic effects of an adapted aquatic programme in students with overweight and obesity. Twenty students aged 14–15 years were assigned to an experimental group and a control group.*

The experimental group participated in a specialised aquatic programme three times per week throughout one school year. Anthropometric, functional, and motor indicators were assessed before and after the intervention.

The results demonstrated greater improvements in the experimental group, including reductions in body mass, body mass index, and waist circumference, together with increases in vital capacity, muscular strength, and balance. These findings support the use of adapted aquatic practices as a safe and effective approach to improving physical fitness and functional status in students with overweight and obesity.

Keywords: *physical activity; aquatic environment; physical fitness; functional status; health promotion; muscular strength; quality of life.*

INTRODUCTION[1]

Overweight and obesity among children and adolescents have become one of the most serious health, social, and economic challenges facing contemporary society. Over the past decades, the prevalence of these conditions has increased worldwide and across Europe, becoming a major risk factor for the development of numerous chronic non-communicable diseases from an early age.

According to the World Health Organization, childhood obesity is among the leading public health challenges, and its prevention and control are recognised as key priorities of international health policies (World Health Organization, 2025).

The aetiology of overweight and obesity is multifactorial, involving the interaction of genetic, biological, behavioural, and social factors. Contemporary scientific evidence increasingly indicates that modern lifestyles, characterised by reduced physical activity, prolonged sedentary behaviour, and unhealthy dietary habits, are among the principal contributors to the growing prevalence of obesity during childhood and adolescence (Jebeile, Kelly, O'Malley and Baur, 2022)

Dr Velichka Aleksandrova *is an Associate Professor in Adapted Physical Activity and Sport at the Department of Water Sports, National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski", Sofia, Bulgaria. She is Head of the Adapted Physical Activity and Sport Sector and founder and chairperson of Sports Club "Adapted Sports". Her research and professional interests include adapted swimming, aquatic rehabilitation, inclusive physical activity, wellness aquatic programmes and sport for persons with disabilities.*

Email: velichka.aleksandrova@nsa.bg

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3969-4092

[1] ChatGPT was used solely for English-language translation and grammatical editing of the manuscript.

Furthermore, numerous authors emphasise that limited participation in organised physical activities has a detrimental effect on the physical development, functional status, and psychosocial well-being of young people (Men et al., 2025).

The consequences of overweight and obesity extend far beyond changes in body composition. Students with excessive body weight frequently demonstrate impairments in cardiovascular and respiratory function, reduced physical fitness, lower levels of physical activity, and increased mechanical stress on the musculoskeletal system. In addition, obesity is often associated with reduced self-esteem, social isolation, anxiety, and limited participation in sports and recreational activities, further aggravating the problem and hindering the adoption of a healthy lifestyle (Denova-Gutiérrez et al., 2023).

In this context, evidence-based physical activity programmes aimed at improving the physical and functional status of students with overweight and obesity are becoming increasingly important. Among the wide range of intervention strategies, aquatic exercise occupies a particularly significant place. Owing to the unique physical properties of water, including buoyancy, hydrostatic pressure, viscosity, and temperature, aquatic exercise provides a safe and effective environment for physical activity while substantially reducing mechanical loading on the musculoskeletal system. At the same time, the natural resistance of water facilitates the development of muscular strength, aerobic endurance, coordination, and motor skills (Aleksandrova, 2021 ; Ivanova, 2019).

Adapted aquatic practices comprise a set of systematically organised physical activities that utilise the therapeutic properties of the aquatic environment and are tailored to the individual characteristics and functional capacities of participants. In addition to their positive effects on physical performance, numerous studies have highlighted their contribution to improving psychological well-being, enhancing motivation to engage in physical activity, and fostering positive attitudes towards an active lifestyle. Consequently, adapted aquatic practices represent a promising approach not only for the prevention of overweight and obesity but also as a supportive therapeutic intervention for students affected by these conditions (Dimitrova et al, 2021 ; Aleksandrova, 2021).

Despite the substantial body of research devoted to physical activity and the prevention of childhood obesity, studies investigating the comprehensive application of adapted aquatic practices in school-aged students remain limited. Furthermore, there is a lack of scientific publications that systematically synthesise current evidence regarding the therapeutic effects of the aquatic environment while proposing a methodological framework for its implementation in school practice. These gaps underline the relevance and scientific significance of the present study.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of adapted aquatic practices as a therapeutic intervention for improving physical activity, reducing body weight, and optimising the physical and psychological well-being of students with overweight and obesity.

THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS OF THE AQUATIC ENVIRONMENT

Physical activity is recognised as one of the primary strategies for the prevention and comprehensive management of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents. In recent years, an increasing number of scientific studies have demonstrated that physical activities performed in an aquatic environment exert beneficial effects on physical development, functional status, and the psychological well-being of young people (World Health Organization, 2025).

The aquatic environment provides a safe and effective setting for the performance of physical exercises while simultaneously reducing mechanical stress on the musculoskeletal system and creating favourable conditions for the gradual increase of physical activity among students with overweight and obesity (Aleksandrova, 2019).

The therapeutic effects of the aquatic environment are determined by the combined

action of its physical properties, namely buoyancy, hydrostatic pressure, viscosity, and water temperature. The interaction between these factors and the performed exercises creates favourable conditions for improving motor function, functional status, and overall physical fitness (Popov, Izov and Andonov, 2018).

Buoyancy is one of the most important physical properties of water and plays a fundamental role in exercise programmes for students with overweight and obesity. According to Archimedes' principle, the apparent body weight is substantially reduced, thereby decreasing the mechanical load on the spine and the joints of the lower extremities. This enables the performance of exercises with a greater range of motion, facilitates movement, and reduces the risk of pain and injury. The reduced mechanical loading also promotes longer participation in physical activities and allows for the gradual progression of exercise intensity.

Hydrostatic pressure acts uniformly over the entire body surface, promoting venous return, lymphatic drainage, and peripheral circulation. At the same time, it increases respiratory resistance, thereby activating the respiratory muscles and contributing to improvements in pulmonary ventilation and vital capacity. Its beneficial effects on the cardiovascular and respiratory systems enhance functional capacity and cardiorespiratory endurance in students (Tumanova, 2019).

The viscosity of water provides natural resistance to movement in all directions. Consequently, exercise intensity can be regulated by modifying the speed and range of movement without the need for additional external resistance. This creates favourable conditions for the simultaneous development of muscular strength, endurance, coordination, and balance while maintaining a high level of exercise safety (Ivanova, 2019).

Water temperature also plays an important role in the therapeutic effectiveness of aquatic interventions. Appropriate water temperature promotes muscular relaxation, improves peripheral circulation, reduces muscle tension, and enhances comfort during physical activity. As a result, participants are able to engage in longer exercise sessions, contributing positively to their overall functional status (Dimitrova, 2024).

In addition to its beneficial effects on the musculoskeletal system and physiological functions, exercise performed in an aquatic environment positively influences metabolic processes. The combination of the natural resistance of water and the involvement of large muscle groups increases energy expenditure during exercise and stimulates fat metabolism. Regular participation in adapted aquatic practices contributes to reductions in body fat, improvements in lipid profile, and enhanced insulin sensitivity, thereby reducing the risk of metabolic syndrome and type 2 diabetes mellitus in students with overweight and obesity (Ding, Zhang, Li and Park, 2025).

Compared with land-based exercise, physical activity in an aquatic environment is characterised by greater exercise tolerance and substantially lower mechanical stress on the joints and spine, allowing participants to exercise for longer periods and progressively increase exercise intensity. This is particularly important for students with obesity, who often experience difficulties performing higher-intensity activities in land-based settings. Owing to these characteristics, adapted aquatic practices provide an optimal balance between safety, effectiveness, and motivation for regular participation in physical activity (World Health Organization, 2025 ; Jebeile, Kelly, O'Malley and Baur, 2022).

Beyond their beneficial effects on the musculoskeletal and physiological systems, adapted aquatic practices also have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of students. Successfully completing movement tasks in the aquatic environment enhances self-confidence, improves self-esteem, and increases motivation for regular participation in physical activity. Group-based aquatic programmes also promote social interaction, communication skills, and the development of positive attitudes towards physical activity as an integral component of a healthy lifestyle (Aleksandrova, 2019).

Recent scientific evidence confirms that structured adapted aquatic programmes improve physical fitness, functional status, and body composition in individuals with overweight and obesity. Reported outcomes include reductions in body mass index and waist circumference, improvements in cardiorespiratory endurance, increased muscular strength, and enhanced quality of life (Ding, Zhang, Li and Park, 2025).

These findings confirm that the aquatic environment represents an effective therapeutic setting for improving the physical, functional, and psychological status of students. The analysis of the available scientific literature demonstrates that combining the therapeutic properties of water with carefully selected physical exercises creates favourable conditions for improving physical activity, physical fitness, and functional status in students with overweight and obesity.

This scientific evidence provided the foundation for the development and implementation of the specialised adapted aquatic programme whose effectiveness is examined in the present study.

The assessment protocol included anthropometric, functional, and physical fitness variables. The anthropometric assessment comprised height, body mass, body mass index (BMI), and waist circumference. Functional status was evaluated by measuring vital capacity. Physical fitness was assessed through tests of abdominal muscle strength, back muscle strength, upper limb strength, lower limb strength, and balance.

Anthropometric, functional, and physical fitness variables were assessed at the beginning and at the end of the experimental period, allowing the changes resulting from the implementation of the adapted aquatic programme to be monitored.

The collected data were analysed using methods of descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. To evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, comparative analyses were performed between the baseline and post-intervention measurements, as well as between the experimental and control groups. Statistical analysis enabled an objective evaluation of the changes observed in the investigated variables and the determination of the effects of the adapted aquatic programme on physical activity, physical fitness, and the functional status of the participating students.

ADAPTED AQUATIC PROGRAMME

The adapted aquatic programme was specifically designed to meet the characteristics and needs of students with overweight and obesity. Its development considered the participants' age, level of physical fitness, functional status, and the need for the gradual progression of exercise intensity.

The programme was developed in accordance with contemporary methodological approaches to organising physical activities in an aquatic environment, making use of the therapeutic properties of water to improve physical activity, physical fitness, and the overall health status of the participants.

The primary objective of the programme was to improve physical activity, physical fitness, functional status, and psychological well-being in students with overweight and obesity through the systematic implementation of adapted aquatic exercises. The programme was designed and implemented according to the following fundamental principles: an individualised approach; accessibility and adaptation of exercises; systematic progression and continuity; gradual increase in exercise intensity; safety during exercise performance; and the maintenance of a positive, motivating, and supportive learning environment.

The programme was implemented over one academic year. Sessions were conducted three times per week in an indoor swimming pool, with each session lasting 60 minutes. Exercise intensity was individually adjusted according to each participant's functional capacity, physical fitness level, and degree of adaptation to the aquatic environment.

Each training session followed a structured format consisting of three consecutive phases. The preparatory phaselasted 7 – 10 minutesand included adaptation to the aquatic environment, general warm-up exercises, and breathing exercises.

Themain phase , with a duration of35–40 minutes, comprised aquatic fitness exercises together with activities aimed at developing muscular strength, endurance, coordination, and balance, as well as elements of adapted swimming and aquatic games.

The session concluded with a 5 – 10-minute cool-down phase, including relaxation, stretching, recovery, and breathing exercises.

A variety of exercises with and without auxiliary equipment were used during the implementation of the programme, including individual and group tasks, game-based activities, and elements of adapted swimming. Exercise intensity was increased gradually, taking into account the individual progress of each participant and ensuring safe and effective participation in the physical activities.

The programme was designed not only to improve physical and functional indicators but also to foster a positive attitude towards physical activity, enhance self-confidence, and develop lasting motivation for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This comprehensive approach creates favourable conditions for sustainable improvements in the physical and psychological well-being of students with overweight and obesity (**Fig. 1**).

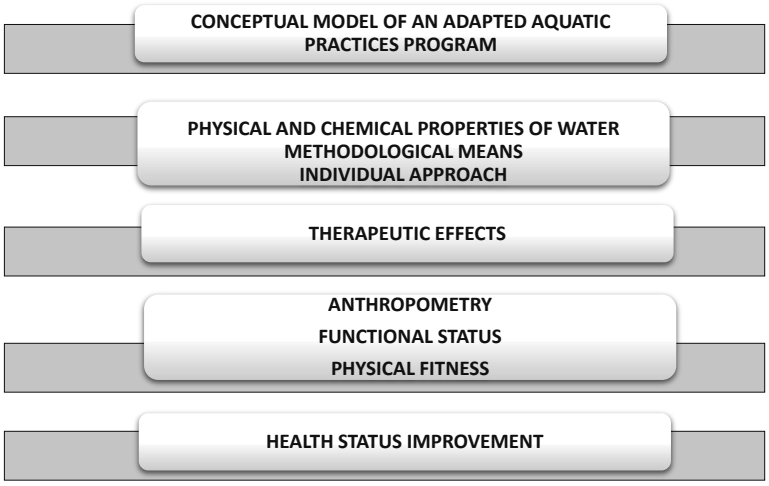


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the adapted aquatic practices program

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS[2]

The effectiveness of the adapted aquatic programme was evaluated through a comparative analysis of the anthropometric, functional, and physical fitness variables assessed at the beginning and at the end of the pedagogical experiment. The obtained results made it possible to monitor the changes that occurred in both the experimental and the control groups and to evaluate the effects of the implemented programme on physical fitness, functional status, and body composition in students with overweight and obesity.

The study results are presented in Table 1, which includes the mean values ($\bar{X}$), standard deviation (SD), coefficient of variation (CV), the difference between the baseline and post-intervention measurements (Δ), as well as the values of Student's t-test and the corresponding levels of statistical significance (p) for all investigated variables.

[2] Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and/or their legal representatives for participation in the study and for the publication of the research data.

Table 1. Results of the anthropometric, functional, and physical fitness variables in the experimental and control groups

Variables	Group	$\bar{X}_1$	SD 1	CV 1%	$\bar{X}_2$	SD 2	CV 2%	Δ	t	P
Body mass (kg)	EG	82.40	8.50	10.32	77.60	7.90	10.18	-4.80	3.42	<0.01
	CG	81.80	7.80	9.54	81.10	7.60	9.37	-0.70	0.68	>0.05
Body mass index (BMI) (kg/m²)	EG	29.10	2.30	7.90	27.30	2.10	7.69	-1.80	3.18	<0.01
	CG	28.90	2.50	8.65	28.70	2.40	8.36	-0.20	0.39	>0.05
Waist circumference (cm)	EG	93.20	5.80	6.22	88.10	5.30	6.02	-5.10	3.54	<0.01
	CG	92.60	6.10	6.59	91.80	6.00	6.54	-0.80	0.47	>0.05
Vital capacity (mL)	EG	2850	245	8.60	3235	260	8.04	+385	3.96	<0.001
	CG	2870	238	8.29	2955	240	8.12	+85	0.71	>0.05
Abdominal muscle strength (sit-ups, repetitions)	EG	18.40	2.80	15.22	26.10	2.90	11.11	+7.70	5.14	<0.001
	CG	18.20	2.60	14.29	20.00	2.70	13.50	+1.80	1.32	>0.05
Back muscle strength (Sorensen test, s)	EG	42.30	5.40	12.77	57.80	5.90	10.21	+15.50	4.82	<0.001
	CG	42.80	5.20	12.15	45.10	5.30	11.75	+2.30	0.98	>0.05
Upper limb strength (medicine ball throw, m)	EG	3.62	0.34	9.39	4.28	0.37	8.64	+0.66	3.84	<0.01
	CG	3.58	0.35	9.78	3.74	0.33	8.82	+0.16	0.74	>0.05
Lower limb explosive strength (standing long jump, cm)	EG	132.40	10.60	8.01	148.80	11.20	7.53	+16.40	3.97	<0.01
	CG	133.10	10.80	8.11	137.20	10.50	7.65	+4.10	0.91	>0.05
Balance (one-leg stance test, s)	EG	18.60	3.40	18.28	28.70	3.80	13.24	+10.10	5.28	<0.001
	CG	18.90	3.20	16.93	21.40	3.30	15.42	+2.50	1.14	>0.05

Legend: Δ – difference between baseline and post-intervention measurements; t – Student's t-test; p – level of statistical significance; $\bar{X}$ – mean value; SD – standard deviation; CV – coefficient of variation (%).

The results of the study demonstrated positive changes in all analysed variables in the experimental group following the implementation of the adapted aquatic programme. The most pronounced improvements were observed in the anthropometric variables, with mean body mass decreasing by 4.80 kg, body mass index by 1.80 kg/mI, and waist circumference by 5.10 cm. In contrast, only minimal changes were observed in the control group, and these did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$).

Improvements were also found in the functional variables. Mean vital capacity in the experimental group increased by 385 mL, indicating a beneficial effect of regular aquatic exercise on respiratory function. In the control group, the increase was considerably smaller (85 mL) and was not statistically significant.

Positive changes were also observed in all physical fitness variables. The greatest improvements were recorded for back muscle strength (+15.50 s), lower limb explosive strength (+16.40 cm), and balance (+10.10 s). Significant improvements were also found in abdominal muscle strength (+7.70 repetitions) and upper limb strength (+0.66 m). All changes observed in the experimental group were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$; $p < 0.001$), whereas the differences recorded in the control group were small and did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$).

The obtained results demonstrate that the systematic implementation of adapted aquatic practices exerts a comprehensive positive effect on the anthropometric variables, func-

tional status, and physical fitness of students with overweight and obesity. These findings confirm the effectiveness of the developed programme and support its applicability as an effective intervention for improving health status and promoting physical activity in this target population.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study revealed positive changes in the anthropometric, functional, and physical fitness variables of the students in the experimental group following the systematic implementation of the adapted aquatic programme. The more pronounced improvements observed in comparison with the control group suggest that the combination of aquatic fitness exercises, adapted swimming activities, aquatic games, and exercises targeting muscular strength, endurance, coordination, and balance provides favourable conditions for comprehensive improvements in students with overweight and obesity.

The observed reductions in body mass, body mass index, and waist circumference indicate the beneficial effects of the programme on the anthropometric status of the participants. These improvements may be attributed to the increased energy expenditure associated with overcoming the natural resistance of water, the involvement of large muscle groups, and the systematic implementation of exercise sessions three times per week.

A similar trend has been reported in a review of exercise interventions for children and adolescents with overweight and obesity, which concluded that the greatest improvements in anthropometric outcomes were achieved in programmes performed at least three times per week, with session durations exceeding 50 minutes and intervention periods of at least 12 weeks (Liao, Zheng, Xue and Wang, 2024).

The present findings are further supported by the study of Liao, Zheng, Xue and Wang (2024), who compared high-intensity interval training performed in water and on land in adolescents with obesity. The aquatic intervention, conducted three times per week with 60-minute sessions, resulted in significant improvements in body composition, waist circumference, vital capacity, and several cardiovascular indicators. The authors highlighted the advantages of the aquatic environment in reducing mechanical loading while allowing effective physical exercise in individuals with increased body mass (Ding, Zhang, Li and Park, 2025).

Similarly, the systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Ding et al. concluded that aquatic aerobic exercise contributes to reductions in body mass and waist circumference among individuals with overweight and obesity, with more pronounced effects observed in programmes lasting longer than ten weeks. These findings should, however, be interpreted with caution when compared with the present study, as the participants included in the meta-analysis were predominantly adults. Nevertheless, these findings confirm the overall beneficial effects of regular aquatic exercise on body mass reduction and the decrease in central adiposity.

The improvement in vital capacity observed among students in the experimental group may be explained by the combined effects of physical exercise and hydrostatic pressure.

The resistance exerted by water on the thoracic cavity increases the workload of the respiratory muscles, while controlled breathing exercises promote the development of respiratory function and improve ventilatory capacity.

The findings of the systematic review by Ferreira et al.indicate that regular swimming participation among adolescents is associated with improvements in cardiorespiratory fitness, haemodynamic parameters, motor performance, and body composition (Freira, Santos, Palmeira, Fernandes and Costa, 2024).

The observed improvements in abdominal and back muscle strength are likely attributable to the continuous need to stabilise the body during movement in the aquatic environment. Throughout the exercises, the trunk muscles are actively engaged both in maintaining body posture and in overcoming the natural resistance of water. The improve-

ments in upper and lower limb strength may be associated with the use of combined movement patterns, adapted swimming exercises, aquatic jogging, and aquatic equipment, all of which allow exercise intensity to be increased without exposing the joints to substantial impact forces.

A particularly pronounced improvement was observed in balance performance. The instability of the aquatic environment requires continuous activation of the postural and stabilising musculature, constant adjustments of body position, and coordinated limb movements. Consequently, aquatic exercises simultaneously promote improvements in balance, coordination, and spatial orientation.

The systematic review by Ferreira et al. also reported beneficial effects of swimming programmes on motor performance in adolescents, while emphasising the need for further research focusing on specific motor abilities (Men et al., 2025).

The minimal changes observed in the control group may be explained by the fact that these students participated only in the standard physical education curriculum. Although such classes provide a certain level of physical activity, their content and frequency are unlikely to be sufficiently specific to address the needs of students with overweight and obesity.

Evidence from recent meta-analyses indicates that substantial improvements in body composition and cardiorespiratory function require long-term, structured, and supervised exercise programmes.

In addition to the physical and functional outcomes, the motivational benefits of the aquatic environment should also be considered. Reduced mechanical stress on the joints, greater freedom of movement, and the enjoyable, game-based nature of aquatic activities may reduce fear of failure and enhance students' self-confidence. These factors are particularly important for long-term adherence to exercise programmes, as sustainable improvements in overweight and obesity depend not only on exercise intensity but also on regular participation and the development of positive attitudes towards physical activity.

The present findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the results to larger populations. Furthermore, dietary habits, habitual physical activity outside the organised programme, sex-related differences, and biochemical markers were not monitored, although these factors may also influence body composition and functional status.

Future studies should therefore include larger samples, standardised monitoring of dietary intake and habitual physical activity, as well as long-term follow-up assessments after completion of the intervention programme.

In summary, the comparison of the present findings with current scientific evidence supports the application of adapted aquatic practices as an effective intervention for increasing physical activity and improving the physical and functional status of students with overweight and obesity. The comprehensive structure of the programme, together with the unique therapeutic properties of the aquatic environment, provides favourable conditions for simultaneously improving body composition, cardiorespiratory function, muscular strength, balance, and motivation for regular participation in physical activity.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirmed the effectiveness of the developed adapted aquatic programme as an intervention for increasing physical activity and improving the physical fitness and functional status of students with overweight and obesity. The findings demonstrated favourable changes in body mass, body mass index, and waist circumference, together with improvements in vital capacity, muscular strength, and balance among participants in the experimental group.

The analysis of the results indicates that the systematic implementation of adapted aquatic practices, tailored to the age and individual characteristics of the participants, provides favourable conditions for comprehensive health-related improvements. The unique physical properties of the aquatic environment allow physical exercise to be safely

prescribed and progressively adjusted, reduce mechanical stress on the musculoskeletal system, and enhance motivation for active participation in physical activities.

Comparison of the present findings with current scientific evidence further confirms that adapted aquatic practices represent an effective intervention for both the prevention and supportive management of overweight and obesity in school-aged students.

Future research should include larger sample sizes, longer follow-up periods, and additional physiological, biochemical, and psychosocial outcome measures. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the long-term therapeutic effects of adapted aquatic practices and further expand their potential applications in clinical and educational settings.

The scientific and practical value of the present study lies in the development and validation of a specialised adapted aquatic programme for students with overweight and obesity. The programme has the potential to be implemented in school-based physical education, extracurricular sports activities, and health promotion and disease prevention programmes.

REFERENCES

Aleksandrova, V. (2019) "Zdravna prevencia pri deca sas sindrom na Asperger chrez dvigatelna aktivnost vav vodna sreda", *Smart innovations in recreative & wellness industry and niche tourism*, 2, pp. 43 – 57.

Aleksandrova, V. (2021) *Adaptirano pluvane za deca s uvrezhdania.* Sofia: IPRESS. ISBN 978-954-718-659-0.

Denova-Gutiérrez, E., González-Rocha, A., Méndez-Sánchez, L., Araiza-Nava, B., Balderas, N., Lypez, G., Tolentino-Mayo, L., Jauregui, A., Hernández, L., Unikel, C., Bonvecchio, A., Shamah, T., Barquera, S. and Rivera, J. A. (2023) "Overview of systematic reviews of health interventions for the prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity in children", *Nutrients*, 15(3):773. doi: https://doi.org/10.3390/nu15030773.

Dimitrova, B., Izov, N., Alexandrova, V., Iosifov, R., Ignatova, D., Trendafilov, D., Petrov, V. and Vasileva, G. (2021) *Smart kognitiven instrumentarium: vanshna otsenka na profesionalni kompetentsii za kadri v nishov turizam.* Sofia: NSA Press. ISBN 978-954-718-675-0.

Ding, Y., Zhang, X., Li, H. and Park, J. (2025) "Effects of aquatic exercise on obesity-related outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis", *BMJ Open*, 15:e091743. doi: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2024-091743.

Donev, J., Andonov, S., Djobova, S., Donev, J., Hristov, O., Kirilova, I., Bahchevanski, S., Iossifov, R., Aleksandrova, V., Angelov, B. and Stoyanova, N. (2019) "Comparative study of measuring physical activity among sport students", in *International scientific congress "Applied sports sciences", Balkan scientific congress "Physical education, sports, health", 15-16 November 2019 Sofia, Bulgaria: proceeding book*. Sofia: NSA Press, pp. 369 – 374. ISBN 978-954-718-602-6.

Freira, F. A., Santos, C. C., Palmeira, A. L., Fernandes, R. J., and Costa, M. J. (2024) "Effects of swimming exercise on early adolescents' physical conditioning and physical health: a systematic review", *Journal of functional morphology and kinesiology*, 9(3), 158. doi: https://doi.org/10.3390/jfmk9030158.

Ignatova, D. and Iliev, A. (2020) "Motor qualities and their influence on children's development", *Smart innovations in recreative & wellness industry and niche tourism*, 2(1-2), pp. 16 – 20.

Ivanova, V. (2019) "Influence of gymnastic exercises in the water environment", *Smart innovations in recreative & wellness industry and niche tourism*, 1, pp. 53 – 56.

Jebeile, H., Kelly, A. S., O'Malley, G. and Baur, L. A. (2022) "Obesity in children and adolescents: epidemiology, causes, assessment, and management", *The Lancet diabetes & endocrinology*, 10, pp. 351 – 365. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(22)00047-X.

Liao, T., Zheng, C., Xue, J., and Wang, Y. T. (2024) "Effects of aquatic and land high-intensity interval trainings on selected bio- and physiological variables among obese adolescents", *Frontiers in endocrinology*, 15, 1381925. doi: https://doi.org/10.3389/fendo.2024.1381925.

Men, J. et al. (2025) "Impact of exercise on anthropometric outcomes in children and adolescents with overweight or obesity: a systematic review and meta-analysis based on 113 randomized controlled trials worldwide", *BMC public health*, 25, 2400.

Nesheva, I. (2019) "Study of results between initial and final specific tests in women with normal pregnancy", *Trakia journal of sciences*, 17(2), pp. 135 – 142.

Nesheva, I. (2020) "Information system for inclusion of women with normal pregnancy in gymnastics program", *Smart innovations in recreative & wellness industry and niche tourism*, 2(1), pp. 33 – 39.

Popov, I., Izov, N. and Andonov, S. (2018) *Pluvane: uchebnik za studenti ot NSA "Vasil Levski"*. Sofia: NSA Press.

Tumanova, B. (2019) "Pluvaneto – sistema na zdravosloven nachin na zhivot", *Smart innovations in recreative & wellness industry and niche tourism*, 1, pp. 11 – 14. Sofia.

World Health Organization (2025) *Obesity and overweight.* Geneva: World Health Organization.

Терапевтични ефекти на адаптираните аквапрактики при ученици с наднормено тегло и затлъстяване

Величка Александрова

Резюме: Наднорменото тегло и затлъстяването сред учениците изискват прилагането на ефективни подходи за повишаване на двигателната активност. Целта на настоящото изследване е да се оцени терапевтичният ефект на адаптирана програма от аквапрактики. В изследването са включени 20 ученици на възраст 14–15 години, разпределени в експериментална и контролна група.

Учениците от експерименталната група участваха в специализирана програма от адаптирани аквапрактики, провеждана три пъти седмично в продължение на една учебна година. Проследени бяха антропометрични, функционални и двигателни показатели. Получените резултати показаха по-значими подобрения при учениците от експерименталната група, изразяващи се в намаляване на телесната маса, индекса на телесната маса и обиколката на талията, както и в подобряване на жизнения капацитет на белите дробове, мускулната сила и равновесието, което потвърждава, че адаптираните аквапрактики представляват безопасен и ефективен подход за подобряване на физическата дееспособност и функционалното състояние на ученици с наднормено тегло и затлъстяване.

Ключови думи: двигателна активност; водна среда; физическа дееспособност; функционално състояние; промоция на здравето; мускулна сила; качество на живот

Hot Stone Massage – A Traditional and Innovative Medical-Wellness Practice

Mariana Angelcheva
National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski
Faculty of Public Health, Healthcare, and Tourism

Tatyana Tomova
National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski"
Faculty of Public Health, Healthcare, and Tourism

DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.96-103

Abstract: *The natural power of volcanic stones has been known for centuries. Passed down through various cultural traditions, Hot Stone Massage has been preserved to this day thanks to its effectiveness as a means of recreation, prevention, and treatment. Its positive effects have been confirmed by numerous scientific studies. It is no coincidence that volcanic stone massage is one of the most sought-after relaxation and recovery procedures in the practice of the most modern Medical Spa, Spa, and Wellness centres. An analysis has been conducted of the Wellness innovations in the offering of the traditional Hot Stone Massage technique, as presented in the digital platforms of 50 Medical Spa, 121 Spa, and 40 Wellness centres currently listed in the Bulgaria' National Tourist Register. A trend toward development and enrichment of the traditional technique with elements of aromatherapy and reflexology massage has been identified.*

Keywords: *thermotherapy; manual therapies; certified SPA and Wellness centers*

***Assoc. Prof. Mariana Angelcheva, PhD**, is an associate professor at the Department of "Health Care" within the Faculty of Public Health, Health Care and Tourism at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski". She is a medical doctor specializing in physical therapy and rehabilitation. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angelcheva teaches core modules in the Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral programs in SPA Culture and Kinesitherapy. She is an active member of the Bulgarian Physiotherapy Association and a member of the Expert Board on Health Tourism at the Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism.*

Email: drangelcheva67@gmail.com

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9697-6088

***Chief Assistant Tatyana Tomova, PhD**, is a chief assistant at the Department of "Sports Medicine – Sports Massage Division" at the Faculty of Sports, National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski". She is a specialist in Manual Therapies, Reflex Therapy, and Rehabilitation. She is an active member of the Bulgarian Chiropractic Association and the Wellness Institute Bulgaria.*

Email: tomova.tatyana@abv.bg

ORCID:
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2394-2979

INTEGRATIVE WELLNESS CONCEPT BASED ON GEO-THERMAL THERAPY[1]

(geo=stone, thermal=heat and less heat/ cold) and natural heritage

Throughout the process of society's historical development, a number of rituals, natural healing practices, forms of knowledge and lifestyles have been preserved, forming the natural heritage of material and immaterial values. A holistic approach to human health in all its dimensions (physical, mental and social) forms the basis of modern wellness (Dimitrova and Tomova, 2025 ; Dimitrova, 2024 ; Dimitrova and Nesheva, 2021 ; Nesheva 2022). A significant proportion of today's wellness practices originate from traditional healing and restorative methods used in the past, which demonstrates the con-

[1] ChatGPT is used for English grammar revision and translation.



Picture 1. Stone Park

nection and continuity between historically established practices and modern models of healthy lifestyle. The use of thermotherapeutic factors (exogenous heat/cold via heated environments) has deep historical roots and is one of the earliest forms of natural healing known to humankind. As far back as ancient times, people discovered the healing properties of hot stone therapy, which was used for prevention, recovery, relaxation and the treatment of various diseases. This makes **Geo-thermal therapy** an essential part of the cultural and health heritage of many civilisations. Volcanic stone massage, also known as stone therapy, has ancient roots, dating back thousands of years and spreading across numerous cultures around the world: Ancient Mesopotamia, Japan, India and China. Native Americans believed that stones are an interaction of the four elements: born of the earth, they absorb the energy of the sun, water and wind. Native Americans have used heated stones to relieve menstrual pain in women. Passed down through various cultural traditions, Hot Stone Massage has been preserved to this day thanks to its effectiveness.

FROM „LA STONE THERAPY" TO „STONE DANCING™"

In 1993, the American massage therapist Mary Nelson (Tucson, Arizona) revives this ancient method by developing her own style of massage, also known as La Stone Therapy, which requires specialized training and certification. Over the next 18 years, Mary and a team of 63 key instructors, based in 11 different countries, trained over 30,000 students in the art of La Stone Therapy. She and seven key instructors continued to refine the La Stone Therapy process into 27 different modalities, which evolved into various body therapies such as: deep-tissue massage, sports massage, reflexology, shiatsu, prenatal massage, SPA treatments, facial techniques and others. In 2014, Mary developed seven new courses based on her personal stone dance, which is her passion and forms the basis of the energy work and sound therapy in her stone sessions. In 2016, Stone Dancing™ was certified as a service by the NCBTMB (National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork). The American woman patented this unique massage, but subsequently every SPA center has come to offer its own version of the treatment. Clients should bear in mind, however, that volcanic stone massage requires special skills and therapist certification.

In the territory of today's Bulgaria, Master Petar Danov in his lectures speaks about the healing power of stones warmed by the sun, as he recommends spending 1 – 2 hours on such stones to recharge with solar energy for health and beauty (Danov, 2004).

Types of stones suitable for therapy Basalt stones (Basalt Stones): the most commonly used type for hot stone massage; of volcanic origin, with a smooth surface and a high iron content, enabling them to retain heat for a long period, achieving deep muscle relaxation, pain relief and stress reduction.

Marble stones (Marble stones): used for cold therapy (contrast therapy), to reduce inflammation and swelling and to soothe the

skin; they are often applied on the face or used after hot stones to tighten blood vessels.

Jade stones (Jade stones): for balancing energy, detoxification and relaxation, although they retain heat for a shorter time than basalt.

Himalayan Salt Stones (Himalayan Salt Stones): handcrafted from natural salt sources, naturally antimicrobial and rich in minerals, they nourish the skin and are excellent for exfoliation, reducing inflammation and promoting relaxation (due to their composition, they may feel rougher on sensitive skin).

River stones (River stones): sourced from riverbeds and naturally smoothed by the water over time, they retain heat well and are used in traditional hot stone massage techniques for their grounding effect (their varying porosity can make them difficult to clean and lead to uneven absorption of massage oils).



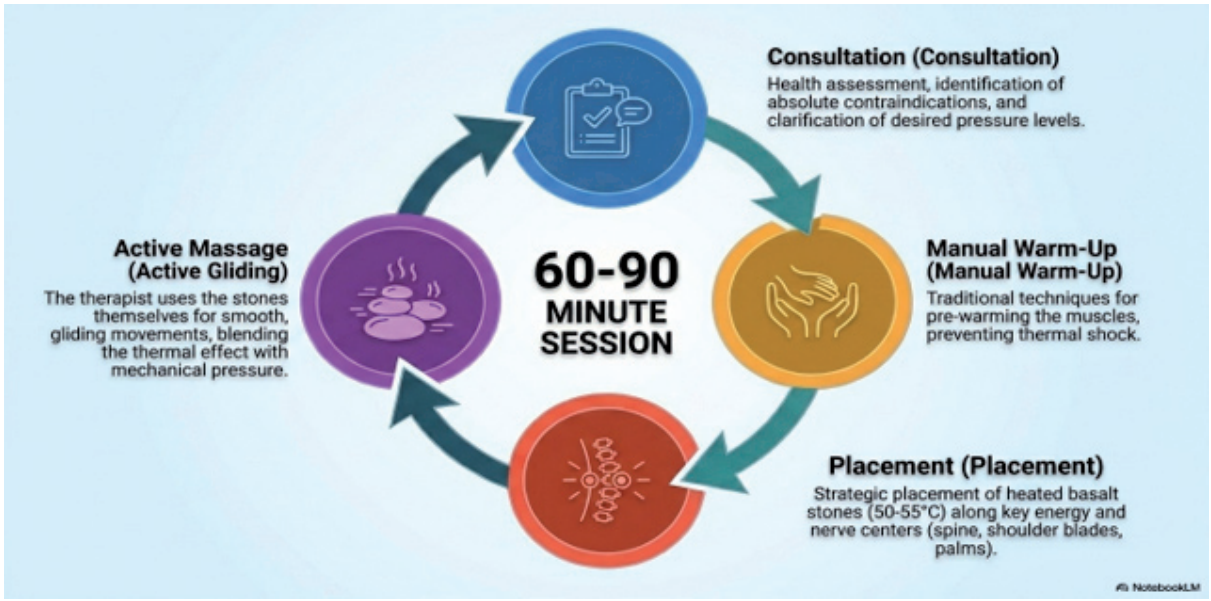
Picture 2. Volcanic massage stones



Picture 3. Professional heater for volcanic stones

HOT STONE MASSAGE TECHNIQUE

To achieve the best results and ensure safety, it is recommended that the stones are selected according to the client's specific needs and the type of treatment. It is essential that they are smooth, free from defects and professionally disinfected after each use in order to avoid the risk of infection or injury.



Picture 4. Hot Stone Massage treatment

PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPACT

The physiological effects of Hot Stone Massage are defined by the combined action of two main factors: ***thermal and mechanical.***

Thermal factor: It has been scientifically proven that the application of heat (usually between 50 and 55 degrees Celsius) causes the blood vessels to expand ***(vasodilation).*** This increases local blood flow, delivers more oxygen and nutrients to the tissues, and accelerates the elimination of metabolic waste products. Furthermore, the heats help to soften the connective tissue and ***reduces muscle spasms and stiffness at a tissue level***. In addition, heat stimulates receptors in the skin that can block pain signals travelling to the brain ***(pain modulation)***, which is particularly beneficial in conditions such as arthritis and fibromyalgia. Cold caused vasoconstriction, reduces swelling in cases of acute inflammation, slows the rate of nerve conductivity (analgesic effect), and reduces muscle contractility (reduces spasms). The sequential alternation of heat and cold treatments provides an opportunity for vascular exercise, improves muscle tone and thermoregulation, and has a hardening and immune-stimulating effect

Mechanical factor: It is well known that massage lowers cortisol level and raises endorphin levels, which explains its physiological action and its effects on pain and stress; in cases of depression, it has a therapeutic effects by raising serotonin levels. Massage stimulates a series of local biochemical reactions in the body which increase neuronal activity in the spinal cord and subcortical nucleus, which in turn affects the perception of pain and fatigue (Weerapong, Hume and Kolt, 2005).

ADVANTAGES OF HOT STONE MASSAGE OVER DEEP TISSUE MASSAGE

Deep-tissue massage focuses on relieving chronic muscle tension and pain, and on recovery from injuries. It involves applying firm, slow pressure, which feels more intense and slightly uncomfortable.

Hot stone massage focuses primarily on improving blood circulation and achieving deep relaxation, with the aim of reducing stress and anxiety and improving sleep. The gentle pressure from the heated stones creates a pleasant, soothing sensation, making it a popular choice as an anti-stress and relaxation treatment.

After both types of massage, it is advisable to rest and drink plenty of water to aid detoxification and cellular hydration.

Stone massage, as a relaxing treatment, combines the benefits of a relaxing massage, aromatherapy, thermotherapy and acupressure. Modern Hot Stone Massage is a treatment that perfectly complements physiotherapy, which aims to restore damaged organs. It is also used in wellness clinics, where it accelerates the body's recovery processed and therefore increases the body's abilities to cope with physical activities. It is important to note that there are several types of hot stone massage: ***dynamic massage, contrasting static and dynamic massage*** (several variations) and ***static (energy) massage***. More often, clients are also enjoying foot and facial massages (Radziejowski, 2018).



Picture 5. Stone massage



Picture 6. Deep-tissue massage

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES PROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOT STONE MASSAGE

Scientific studies, specifically focusing on hot stone massage, are still relatively limited, but the existing data confirm its therapeutic benefits, both through direct studies and through studies on the effects of thermotherapy and massage in general.

A retrospective analysis of published articles on the effects of heat and massage on pain, stress, depression and muscle tension shows that **Hot Stone Massage** has a positive effect on musculoskeletal pain, fibromyalgia pain and degenerative rheumatism. Side effects may occur if the heat is too high and causes burns, a drop in blood pressure and dehydration (Ramova, 2021).

A randomised controlled study proves that hot stone therapy significantly ***improves sleep quality*** (*Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index*) in patients undergoing maintenance haemodialysis (Ghavami, Shamsi, Abdollahpoor, Radfar and Khalkhali, 2019). Studies show that heat stimulates the thermoreceptors in the skin, which in turn activate the parasympathetic nervous system. This leads to the release of endorphins (known as 'happiness hormones'), which reduce levels of stress and anxiety. Another randomised controlled study on at least 99 patients who had undergone orthopaedic surgery and were hospitalised in hospitals in Mashhad, Iran, from 2023 to 2024, showed a statistically significant ***reduction in anxiety*** in the pre- and post-operative periods following the application of slow back massage and hot stone massage therapy (*Spielberger Anxiety Inventory*) (Hojat, Aemmi and Esmaily, 2025). This leads the authors to conclude that these massage therapies may be incorporated as an effective complementary and alternative care for reducing postoperative anxiety. Evidence shows that high levels of anxiety can activate the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, activate the sympathetic nervous system and influence the regulation of inflammatory factors, along with circulating glucocorticoid hormones. These changes in the nervous and immune systems may lead to tachycardia and hypertension.

Alternative treatment methods, as a non-pharmacological means of relieving the symptoms of certain conditions and improving quality of life, are supported by the World Health Organisation. However, in order to be accepted by conventional medicine, a method must prove its effectiveness through measurable parameters. The WHO recognises the growing role of traditional medicine worldwide and the need to integrate it into health systems on the basis of scientific evidence. At the 78th session of the World Health Assembly (19–27 May 2025 in Geneva), the Global Strategy on Traditional Medicine 2025–2034 was adopted, setting out guiding principles and four objectives: strengthening evidence-based data, ensuring safety and regulation, integrating traditional, complementary and integrative medicine (TCIM) into health systems, and optimising its cross-sectoral value.

Passed down through various cultural traditions, the Hot Stone Massage has been preserved to this day thanks to its effectiveness. Its positive effects on health and wellbeing make it a favored treatment in the most modern SPAs and Wellness centers around the world.

What role does this geothermal therapy technique – however untraditional it may be for the country – play in Bulgarian medical SPA and Wellness programs focused on recovery and relaxation?

DIGITAL PRESENTATION OF HOT STONE MASSAGE[2]

1. Purpose

To examine and analyze the offering of Hot Stone Massage as a traditional and innovative Medical-Wellness practice, as presented in the digital applications of Medical SPAs, SPAs and Wellness centers listed in the National Tourist Register, as an opportunity to improve health and quality of lifestyle.

Subject: The digital applications of the 50 Medical-Spa, 121 Spa and 40 Wellness Centers listed in the National Tourist Register.

[2] Declarations of informed consent have been signed regarding the publication of survey data.

2 Results and analysis

From the information provided in the digital applications of the certified and currently operating (2026) Medical SPAs, SPAs and Wellness centers in the country regarding the offering of hot stone massage, it has been concluded that:

1. A leading role in integrating this service into the complex therapeutic program is reported in the digitally presented Medical SPA centers – 54%.

2. In 37.19% of SPA centers, this therapy is widely implemented as a standard procedure for relaxation and recovery.

3. Among wellness centers, the offering is the weakest — 27.5%, indicating clear potential for growth in the offering of geothermal treatments

4. The average duration of the procedure ranges from 57 – 58 minutes in Wellness and SPA centers to 53 minutes in Medical SPA centers

The analysis of the survey results shows that, despite its ancient origins, the Hot Stone Massage practice is increasingly applied as a method for treatment and recovery within the complex programs of Medical SPA centers (54%), and is widely offered as a relaxation procedure in SPA centers (37.19%). In Wellness centers, the offering is the weakest (27.5%), indicating potential for growth in the offering of this service. (**Fig. 1**).



Figure 1. Offering of hot stone massage in medical spa, spa, and wellness centers in Bulgaria.

The longer average duration of the geothermal Hot Stone Massage procedure offered in SPA and Wellness centers is likely associated with its positioning as a deeply relaxing and anti-stress treatment aimed at prevention and restoring the balance between mind and body in healthy individuals of active age. (**Fig. 2**).

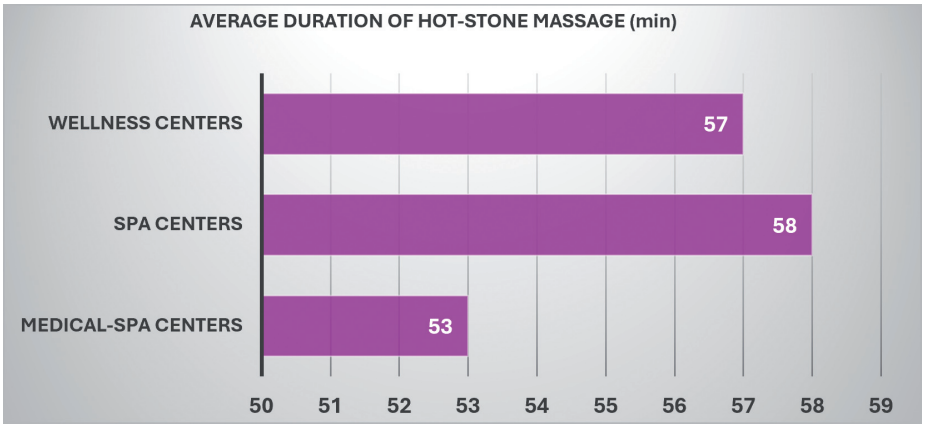


Figure 2. Average duration of hot stone massage in medical spa, spa, and wellness centers in Bulgaria.

In Medical SPA centers, this procedure is more frequently incorporated as part of a complex therapeutic program and is applied not only as a restorative treatment, but also as a therapeutic treatment aimed at reducing pain and fatigue in musculoskeletal disorders, improving joint mobility, relaxing the nervous system in cases of chronic anxiety and insomnia, providing nonspecific stimulation of the immune system, and enhancing the adaptive abilities of the human organism.

It is prescribed following an examination by a specialist in physical and rehabilitation medicine, with strict adherence to the contraindications for thermo-/cryotherapy, such as: blood clotting disorder or use of anticoagulants, skin burns, open wounds, reduced sensory perception, surgery within the past six weeks, fracture or severe osteoporosis, low platelet count (thrombocytopenia), diabetes, pregnancy, infections, and others.

In contrast to Medical SPA centers, where Hot Stone Massage is offered in its traditional form, SPA centers show a tendency toward development and enrichment of this ancient therapy, successfully offering it in combination with aromatherapy and reflexology massage.

3. Discussion

The analysis of the information presented in the digital applications of the certified centers indicates that, despite its ancient origins, the geothermal Hot Stone Massage procedure occupies a significant place in Bulgarian Medical SPA and SPA centers, while it is less frequently offered in Wellness centers.

4. Outcomes

Hot Stone Massage, offered either independently in its classical form or in combination with aromatherapeutic oils, elements of reflexology, and acupressure, represents an effective alternative for recovering from the effects of everyday stress and a valuable opportunity of developing a healthy lifestyle as part of the prevention of socially significant diseases.

5. Recommendations

1. The application of geothermal procedures requires a careful and individualized approach for each client. To rule out contraindications, a preliminary consultation with a specialist in physical and rehabilitation medicine is recommended, particularly in cases where health complaints are already present.

2. For the proper, effective, individualized, and safe application of the Hot Stone Massage procedure, a high level of professional qualification among SPA and Wellness therapy specialists is required, along with strict adherence to hygiene standards.

3. Participation in international educational programs and courses aimed at continuing professional development and specialized scientific training of these professionals is an important component for strengthening the method and integrating it as a significant element of the holistic approach in health care.

4. The existing data of scientific research on the effects of geothermal therapy on clients' physical and emotional well-being requires further expansion and updating through new studies and appropriately selected instruments for objectification and statistical processing of the obtained results.

CONCLUSION

Geothermal therapies are being successfully integrated into medical SPAs, SPAs and Wellness centres in Bulgaria. They are successfully combined with the implementation of other natural products and therapies. An individualised approach, combined with the therapist's high level of qualification, would make spa and wellness therapies incorporating Hot Stone Massage a safe and preferred alternative in the prevention of socially significant diseases.

REFERENCES

Danov, P. (2004) *Malka kniga za zdraveto*. Sofia: Marcos.

Dimitrova, B. (2024) "Innovations in the concept of wellness practices stabilizing mental health", *Journal of smart innovations on the recreative & wellness industries and niche tourism*, 6(2), pp. 15 – 23.

Dimitrova, B. & Nesheva, I. (2021) "Research on improving health care for women with normal pregnancies implementing rec-

reational wellness activities", *Trakia journal of sciences*, 19(Suppl. 1. Series Social Sciences), pp. 684 – 690.

Dimitrova, B. and Tomova, T. (2025) "A wellness lifestyle, emotional intelligence, workplace and leadership success", *Journal of smart innovations on the recreative & wellness industries and niche tourism*, 6(2), pp. 51 – 56.

Ghavami, H., Shamsi, S., Abdollahpoor, B., Radfar, M. and Khalkhali, H. (2019) "Impact of hot stone massage therapy on sleep quality in patients on maintenance hemodialysis: a randomized controlled trial", *Journal of research in medical sciences*, 24, p. 71. doi: http://doi.org/10.4103/jrms.JRMS_734_18.

Hojat, A., Aemmi, Z. and Esmaily, H. (2025) "Effectiveness of slow-stroke back and hot stone massage therapy on postoperative anxiety management in orthopedic patients: a randomized clinical trial study", *Journal of perianesthesia nursing*, 40(5), pp. 1295 – 1299. doi: http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jopan.2025.01.025.

Nesheva, I. (2022) "Social benefits of wellness motor activities for women with normal pregnancy", *Journal of smart innovations on the recreative & wellness industries and niche tourism*, 4(1 – 2), pp. 22 – 27.

Radziejowski, P. (2018) "Hot stone massage therapy – mechanisms of the influence on the human organism of selected methods of use", *Journal of education, health and sport*, 8(5), pp. 335 – 348. doi: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.

Ramova, E. (2021) "Volcanic stone massage and its benefits", *South Asian research journal of applied medical sciences*, 3(4), pp. 34 – 36. Available from: https://sarpublication.com/articles/751/ (accessed 28.07.2026).

Weerapong, P., Hume, P. & Kolt, G. (2005) "The mechanisms of massage and effects on performance, muscle recovery and injury prevention", *Sports medicine*, 35(3), pp. 235 – 256. doi: http://doi.org/10.2165/00007256-200535030-00004.

World Health Organization (2025) *Global traditional medicine strategy 2025 – 2034*. Geneva: WHO. Available from: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240113176 (accessed 28.07.2026).

Hot stone massage – традиционна и иновативна медикъл-уелнес практика

Мариана Ангелчева, Татяна Томова

Резюме: Естествената сила на вулканичните камъни е известна от векове. Предаван чрез различни културни традиции, масажът с горещи камъни се е запазил и до днес благодарение на своята ефективност като средство за релаксация, профилактика и лечение. Положителните му ефекти са потвърдени от многобройни научни изследвания. Не е случайно, че масажът с вулканични камъни е една от най-търсените процедури за релаксация и възстановяване в практиката на най-модерните медицински спа, спа и уелнес центрове. Извършен е анализ на уелнес иновациите в предлагането на традиционната техника „масаж с горещи камъни", както е представена в дигиталните платформи на 50 медицински спа центъра, 121 спа центъра и 40 уелнес центъра, които понастоящем са вписани в Националния туристически регистър на България. Установена е тенденция към развитие и обогатяване на традиционната техника с елементи от ароматерапия и рефлексологичен масаж.

Ключови думи*:* термотерапия ; мануални въздействия, сертифицирани СПА и Уелнес центрове



Villa "Armira" – top view

Брой 10 / 2026 е резултат от изпълнението на проект BG16RFPR002-1.014-0011 „Устойчиво развитие на Център за върхови постижения „Наследство БГ", финансиран по процедура за предоставяне на безвъзмездна финансова помощ № BG16RFPR002-1.014 „Устойчиво развитие на Центрове за върхови постижения и Центрове за компетентност, в т.ч. и на конкретни инфраструктури или техни обединения от Национална пътна карта за научна инфраструктура.

Issue 10 / 2026 is a result of the implementation of project BG16RFPR002-1.014-0011 Sustainable Development of the Center of Excellence "Heritage BG," funded under the grant aid procedure BG16RFPR002-1.014 "Sustainable Development of Centers of Excellence and Centers of Competence, Including Specific Infrastructures or Their Associations from the National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure".