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JOINT TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY (2026–2036) FOR THE NORTH-EAST PLANNING REGION AND THE MUNICIPALITIES OF KYUSTENDIL AND NEVESTINO

Kustendil

Kriva Palanka

Nevestino

Center for Development of the Northeast Planning

КТПП

МУЗЕЈ КУМАНОВО

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1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale for preparing the strategy

The preparation of a Tourism Infrastructure Strategy for the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino stems from the need for systematic, planned and sustainable development of the tourism potential of the areas covered. The North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino possess significant natural, cultural, historical, rural, recreational and spa resources, but some of these resources lack sufficient infrastructure, promotion and connectivity and are not fully used for local and cross-border development.

The strategy should provide a clear framework for tourism infrastructure development, focusing on tourism sites, information facilities, recreational spaces, trails, viewpoints, picnic sites, tourist signage, digital infrastructure, interpretation facilities, public visitor amenities, accessibility and improvements in the quality of the tourism offering.

1.2. Subject of the strategy

The subject of the Tourism Infrastructure Strategy is to establish guidelines, priorities and measures for planned, coordinated and sustainable development of tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino. The strategy aims to improve the development, equipping, use and promotion of existing tourism resources and to create conditions for developing new tourism facilities and products.

The strategy focuses on infrastructure that directly improves the visitor experience and increases the destination's attractiveness. In this context, its subject encompasses tourism sites, natural, cultural and historical assets, rural and recreational areas, spa and wellness potential, public visitor amenities, tourist signage, information and visitor facilities, digital tourism infrastructure, and systems for interpreting natural and cultural heritage.

Particular attention is given to developing picnic sites, viewpoints, walking, cycling, educational and thematic trails, rest and recreation areas, tourist information points, public toilets, benches, shelters, waste bins, lighting, QR codes, digital maps, mobile applications and other facilities that enhance the functionality and accessibility of the tourism offering.

The strategy also addresses improving conditions for developing different forms of tourism, including cultural, nature-based, rural, gastronomic, spa, health, wellness, active, sports and recreational, mountain, educational, event and weekend tourism. This enables better integration of tourism resources in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino and the creation of joint cross-border tourism products.

The strategy also covers the management, maintenance and monitoring of tourism infrastructure. This entails defining responsibility models, standards for installing and maintaining equipment, mechanisms for regular site condition checks, and guidelines for involving local institutions, tourism organisations, the private sector, civil society organisations and local residents.

The strategy also considers the need to improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of tourism facilities, particularly for children, older people, persons with disabilities and families. Tourism infrastructure should thus become more accessible, safer and more useful not only for visitors but also for local residents.

Transport infrastructure is excluded from the subject of this strategy. This means that the strategy does not address the construction, reconstruction or modernisation of roads, railway infrastructure, bridges, border crossings, public transport or other transport solutions.

Transport connectivity may only be considered as a contextual factor and is not a subject of planning under this strategy.

The strategy therefore provides a basis for systematic tourism infrastructure planning, preparation of priority projects, securing funding, improving the tourism offering and increasing the competitiveness of the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino as a joint cross-border tourism destination.

The joint strategy extends the existing regional approach to the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino in the Republic of Bulgaria. Specific pilot areas are the Hisarlaka forest park and fortress in Kyustendil and the area around St Anna's Church near Smolichano village in Nevestino Municipality. Their inclusion enables links between cultural, natural, spa and rural heritage while recognising the differing levels of infrastructure provision.

The strategy was prepared under project BGMK0200028 'Cross-border attractiveness – smart tourism in the region of Kyustendil – Kriva Palanka – Nevestino', subsidy contract RD-02-29-254/07.03.2025.

1.3. Geographical scope

The geographical scope of the strategy includes the North-East Planning Region in the Republic of North Macedonia and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino in the Republic of Bulgaria. Particular attention is given to the Hisarlaka area in Kyustendil and the area around St Anna's Church near Smolichano in Nevestino Municipality. The joint framework links the areas in tourism and programme terms while respecting their administrative and management differences.

Within the North-East Planning Region, the strategy covers the municipalities of Kumanovo, Lipkovo, Staro Nagorichane, Rankovce, Kriva Palanka and Kratovo. This area has diverse natural, cultural, historical, rural and recreational assets, including the Osogovo Mountains, Skopska Crna Gora, Kozjak, German, the river valleys of the Pchinja, Kriva Reka and Kumanovska Reka, Lake Lipkovo, Glazhnja, Bislim Gorge, Kratovo, Kokino, Staro Nagorichane and other significant sites.

Within Kyustendil Municipality, the strategy covers the city of Kyustendil and the municipality's rural settlements, as well as natural, cultural, spa, recreational and rural areas with tourism potential. Particularly significant are the Kyustendil Basin, Osogovo Mountain, the Struma River valley, mineral springs, spa and wellness facilities, orchard landscapes, the city's cultural and historical heritage, monastery complexes, suburban green areas, artificial lakes and picnic areas.

Nevestino Municipality is included as a distinct administrative and tourism area. The scope includes Nevestino with Kadin Bridge over the Struma River, the municipality's rural settlements and natural landscapes, with a particular local focus around Smolichano: the church and former Monastery of Sts Joachim and Anna, the chapel with its holy spring, the stone drinking fountain, the old cemetery, adjacent unused buildings, the memorial and the new rest area. Smolichano Waterfall is considered a connected but spatially separate point.

Hisarlaka (Bulgarian: Хисарлъка) is the name used for the forest park and fortress area in Kyustendil. 'St Anna' denotes the wider tourism area near Smolichano, not the whole of Nevestino Municipality. The precise operational boundaries of the two pilot sites are subject to agreement with the owners and responsible managers.

The strategy's geographical scope is not limited to existing tourism sites but also includes areas with potential for new tourism facilities. These include natural landscapes, river corridors, mountain and upland zones, rural settlements, agricultural and orchard landscapes, cultural sites, spa areas, picnic sites, viewpoints, recreational spaces and other areas that can support sustainable tourism.

The strategy considers the area as a joint, integrated cross-border tourism area, with opportunities to develop thematic routes, joint tourism products and a complementary offer. Particular attention is paid to linking natural and cultural assets, spa and health tourism, rural and gastronomic tourism, active and recreational tourism, and creating a recognisable tourism identity for the wider cross-border area.

The geographical scope does not include planning, constructing or reconstructing transport infrastructure. Roads, railway infrastructure, border crossings, bridges and public transport may be considered only as context for access to tourism sites and are not the subject of this strategy. The strategy focuses on tourism, recreational, information, interpretation, digital, spa, cultural, natural and public infrastructure that directly improves the visitor experience.

Through this geographical scope, the strategy provides a basis for identifying priority tourism zones, sites and infrastructure interventions, as well as preparing joint projects for tourism development in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino.

The joint area comprises six municipalities in the North-East Planning Region and two municipalities in Bulgaria. Osogovo is considered a natural link between the two sides of the border, while integration of the tourism offering is based on complementary services and coordinated information, rather than the creation of a single administrative regime.

1.4. Time frame

The Tourism Infrastructure Strategy covers the period 2026–2036 as a long-term development horizon for ensuring planned, gradual and sustainable development of tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino.

The 2026–2036 period gives the strategy a long-term character while keeping it sufficiently operational for preparing and implementing specific projects. During this period, tourism infrastructure will be identified, planned, designed, financed, implemented, maintained and monitored to improve the tourism offering, increase the region’s attractiveness and create conditions for sustainable tourism development.

The strategy should be implemented in phases through short-, medium- and long-term activities. The short-term period should focus on preparatory activities, an inventory of tourism infrastructure, preparation of project documentation, installation of basic tourist signage, upgrading priority sites and preparing projects for funding.

The medium-term period should cover implementation of most priority infrastructure interventions, development of thematic tourism routes, improvement of picnic sites, viewpoints, educational and recreational trails, digitalisation of the tourism offering, and improvement of the management and maintenance system.

The long-term period should focus on expanding and upgrading tourism infrastructure, developing new tourism products, improving the region’s competitiveness, continuous promotion, monitoring impacts and adapting the strategy to new development, climate, economic and tourism trends.

The same 2026–2036 time frame applies throughout the cross-border area. At Hisarlaka, early activities focus on identifying and signposting the complex, safety and information; at St Anna, they focus on organising visitor reception and basic sanitary and information support. Larger tourist centres are considered in the next phase, following assessment of feasibility, demand, property conditions and operating funds.

Phased implementation

Period	Phase	Main focus
2026–2028	Short-term phase	Inventory, priorities, project documentation, basic signage, quick interventions
2029–2032	Medium-term phase	Implementation of priority projects, thematic routes, picnic sites, viewpoints, digitalisation
2033–2036	Long-term phase	Upgrading, expansion, new tourism products, monitoring, review and long-term sustainability

Implementation of the strategy should be monitored regularly throughout 2026–2036. Monitoring should cover the number of completed projects, improved tourism sites, installed tourist signs, developed digital resources, visitor numbers, tourist satisfaction, involvement of local stakeholders and economic effects on the local community.

The strategy should also allow for a mid-term review, no later than 2031, to assess implementation, update priorities and align measures with new conditions, available funding programmes and the region's needs.

With this time frame, the strategy provides a long-term development framework as well as a practical instrument for preparing annual programmes, project applications, budget plans and partnerships for tourism infrastructure development in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino.

1.5. Preparation methodology

The methodology for preparing the Tourism Infrastructure Strategy 2026–2036 is based on an integrated, participatory and development-oriented approach, intended to provide a realistic assessment of the current situation, identify tourism potential, determine infrastructure needs and define priority measures and projects for tourism development in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino.

The strategy is based on an analysis of the region's natural, cultural, historical, rural, recreational and tourism resources and an assessment of existing tourism infrastructure. The methodology does not include transport infrastructure planning, but focuses on tourism sites, information and interpretation facilities, tourist signage, recreational areas, picnic sites, viewpoints, digital infrastructure, public visitor amenities and other facilities that directly improve the visitor experience.

Main methodological steps

The first step is an analysis of relevant national, regional and local documents, strategies, programmes, urban and spatial planning documentation, the legal framework and available statistics. This analysis ensures alignment with existing policies on tourism, regional development, culture, the environment, rural development and local economic development.

The second step is an inventory of tourism resources and infrastructure. This phase records natural sites, cultural and historical assets, archaeological sites, monasteries and churches, traditional settlements, rural landscapes, picnic sites, existing trails, viewpoints, tourist

signage, information points, accommodation and catering facilities, events and other tourism facilities.

The third step is a field and spatial analysis to verify the actual condition of sites, their level of development, accessibility, safety, equipment, visibility, maintenance and opportunities for further development. This phase also identifies shortcomings such as inadequate signage, a lack of public amenities, unimproved spaces, poor heritage interpretation, a lack of digital content and insufficient integration of tourism products.

The fourth step is an analysis of tourism supply and demand, assessing existing and potential tourism products. Opportunities for cultural, nature-based, rural, gastronomic, active, sports and recreational, eco-, event, educational and weekend tourism are considered. Particular attention is given to tourism offeringings that can have a regional character and attract domestic, regional and international visitors.

The fifth step is a SWOT analysis, identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with tourism infrastructure development. This analysis provides a clear understanding of the region's competitive advantages and the constraints to be overcome through planned interventions.

The sixth step is to define the vision, objectives and priorities. Based on the preceding analyses, the long-term vision for tourism infrastructure development, the overall objective, specific objectives and priority intervention areas are established. Objectives are formulated to be realistic, measurable and applicable during 2026–2036.

The seventh step is to prioritise measures and projects. Priorities are determined using several criteria: tourism potential, importance for local economic development, number and type of potential visitors, condition of existing infrastructure, prospects for rapid implementation, environmental impact, inclusiveness, sustainability, funding opportunities and contribution to regional development.

Methodological principles

The strategy is based on several fundamental principles: sustainability, local relevance, regional connectivity, inclusiveness, protection of natural and cultural heritage, economic justification, realistic feasibility and long-term maintenance. Particular attention is paid to ensuring that tourism infrastructure serves both visitors and local residents.

The methodology treats tourism infrastructure development not merely as physical site improvement but as part of a wider system linking tourism, culture, nature, rural development, the local economy, digitalisation and sustainable spatial management.

1.6. Definition of tourism infrastructure

Within this strategy, tourism infrastructure encompasses the facilities, equipment, services and systems that directly support visitors' stay, information, recreation and safety. Transport infrastructure and general utility and technical networks are considered as context and prerequisites, rather than investment subjects under this strategy. Basic sanitary, hygiene and technical equipment at tourism sites remains part of tourism infrastructure.

In a broader sense, tourism infrastructure encompasses all the conditions enabling tourists to travel to a destination, find accommodation, eat, obtain information, move around, enjoy recreation and stay safely.

Main elements of tourism infrastructure

Transport infrastructure (not covered by the strategy)

Roads, railway lines, airports, stations, public transport, cableways and standalone transport parking areas are outside the investment scope. Existing arrival points are considered when organising visits. Recreational walking and cycling trails within tourism spaces are included as tourism infrastructure, rather than general transport infrastructure.

Accommodation infrastructure

This includes hotels, motels, apartments, villas, hostels, campsites, holiday villages and private accommodation. Accommodation is one of the basic conditions for longer tourist stays.

Catering infrastructure

This includes restaurants, cafés, confectioneries, bars, traditional inns and other food and beverage establishments. It is highly important to the visitor experience, particularly when linked to local cuisine and traditions.

Utility and technical infrastructure (not covered by the strategy)

This category includes water supply, sewerage, electricity, internet, telecommunications, waste systems, street lighting and public hygiene. Although not always directly visible to tourists, this infrastructure is essential for a safe, high-quality stay.

Information and service infrastructure

This includes tourist information centres, tourist signage, maps, guides, travel agencies, websites, mobile applications, ticket offices and tourist assistance services. It helps visitors find their way and obtain information more easily.

Recreational and entertainment infrastructure

This includes sports grounds, walking trails, ski centres, beaches, swimming pools, parks, museums, cultural centres, theatres, festival venues, water parks and other facilities that enrich tourists' stays.

Safety and health infrastructure

This category covers emergency assistance information, safety equipment, evacuation procedures and coordination with health, fire and rescue services. Construction of healthcare, police or other general public facilities is not the subject of the strategy.

This strategy distinguishes between general networks and infrastructure at tourism sites themselves. Public toilets, waste bins, local lighting, walking and recreational trails and digital interpretation are included as tourism support. Construction of roads, public transport and general water supply, sewerage and telecommunications networks remains outside the scope. Existing car parks are analysed as arrival points; any new transport interventions are referred to separate planning.

2. Strategic and legal framework

The strategic and legal framework provides the basis for targeted, lawful and sustainable tourism infrastructure development. Strategic documents establish development objectives, priorities, measures and guidelines for improving the tourism offering, while the legal framework defines the rules, competences and procedures for planning, constructing, using and managing infrastructure.

In this context, tourism infrastructure is developed in accordance with national and local strategies, spatial and urban plans, and regulations concerning tourism, hospitality, environmental protection, cultural heritage, construction and local development. This framework aligns tourism needs with the public interest, resource protection and the long-term development of destinations.

Institutional coordination between state authorities, local government units, the private sector and other stakeholders is particularly important. Clearly defined responsibilities and rules create conditions for planned investment, improved service quality, rational use of space and increased competitiveness of tourism destinations.

The strategic and legal framework is therefore a key prerequisite for systematic tourism infrastructure development, ensuring alignment between development policies, legal obligations and sustainable tourism principles.

2.1. National tourism strategies and policies

National tourism strategies and policies set the overall direction for tourism sector development at national level. They define the priorities, measures, institutional responsibilities and financial instruments used to encourage development of the tourism offering, tourism infrastructure, promotion, investment, service quality and sustainable use of natural and cultural resources.

In the context of tourism infrastructure, these documents are significant because they link infrastructure with broader development objectives: economic growth, regional development, improved competitiveness, development of alternative forms of tourism, heritage protection and a better visitor experience.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the National Tourism Strategy 2016–2021 provides an earlier strategic basis. More recent policy directions are reflected in the annual programmes and strategic plans of the responsible institutions. Each policy instrument is considered within its stated period, while successor instruments and current policies should be reviewed during implementation of the joint strategy.

National Tourism Strategy 2016–2021

A key strategic framework for tourism is the National Tourism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia 2016–2021, prepared under the project ‘Preparation of the National Tourism Development Strategy 2016–2021’, implemented by the Ministry of Economy. It follows the earlier Tourism Strategy 2009–2013 and contains a situation analysis and strategic directions for tourism development.

The strategy treats tourism as an important economic sector and focuses on improving the tourism offering, developing tourism products, improving quality, promoting destinations and strengthening institutions. It identifies numerous tourism infrastructure activities, including improving tourist signs, developing walking and hiking trails, upgrading tourism sites, improving accommodation facilities, and developing national parks, wine tourism, rural tourism, spa tourism and cultural heritage.

Importantly, the strategy views tourism not merely as a promotional activity but as a system requiring coordinated development of products, services, infrastructure, human resources, institutions and standards.

Table: Main characteristics of the National Tourism Strategy 2016–2021

Element	Description
Document title	National Tourism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia 2016–2021
Responsible institution	Ministry of Economy
Period of validity	2016–2021
Main objective	Guiding tourism development by improving the offer, competitiveness and management
Key areas	Tourism products, marketing, infrastructure, institutions, human resources, service quality
Link to tourism infrastructure	Provides activities to improve sites, tourist signage, accommodation, information centres, national parks, trails, spas, and cultural and natural attractions
Significance	The principal national strategic document for the sector during 2016–2021

Sub-strategies and thematic policies for specific forms of tourism

Alongside the overall national strategy, thematic documents or sub-strategies for specific forms of tourism have also been prepared. The thematic framework includes a sports tourism sub-strategy, a traditions and events sub-strategy, a national rural tourism strategy, a MICE/conference tourism sub-strategy and a health tourism strategy.

These documents are important because they enable targeted tourism infrastructure development according to the needs of different tourism products. For example, rural tourism requires development of rural tourism zones, rural accommodation, local gastronomic offerings, walking trails and information boards. Sports and active tourism require sports grounds, trails, recreation areas, mountain huts and safety measures. Cultural tourism requires well-maintained sites, museums, tourist centres, signage and cultural heritage interpretation.

Table: Sub-strategies and their links to tourism infrastructure

Document/policy type	Main focus	Infrastructure link
Rural tourism	Tourism development in rural areas	Rural accommodation, traditional houses, local markets, trails, information boards, improved public spaces
Sports tourism	Tourism associated with sport and recreation	Sports grounds, recreation areas, hiking and cycling trails, sports centres
Traditions and events	Tourism through cultural events and local traditions	Festival venues, cultural centres, public spaces, exhibition spaces

Document/policy type	Main focus	Infrastructure link
Conference/MICE tourism	Business events, conferences and meetings	Conference rooms, hotels with business facilities, technical and digital equipment
Health tourism	Balneological, spa and health services	Spas, wellness centres, healthcare facilities, accommodation and recreational infrastructure
Cultural tourism	Cultural heritage, museums, sites	Museums, galleries, tourist centres, signage, interpretation facilities

Annual programmes for tourism development, promotion and support

Alongside long-term strategies, annual programmes play an important role by providing specific activities and financial resources for tourism. A Tourism Promotion and Support Programme was adopted for 2025, with MKD 91,975,000 allocated in the Budget of the Republic of North Macedonia. The programme supports promotional activities, marketing, international cooperation and tourism support activities.

The 2025 programme provides for participation in international tourism fairs, maintenance of official tourism websites, organisation of familiarisation trips for bloggers, tour operators, media and influencers, and projects for tourist information signage, cultural assets and motorhome campsites.

These programmes are an operational instrument through which strategies are translated into concrete measures. They are not merely promotional documents but also have an infrastructure component, particularly where they include information signage, signposting cultural assets, supporting motorhome campsites and improving the tourism offering.

Table: Tourism Promotion and Support Programme for 2025

Element	Description
Title	Tourism Promotion and Support Programme for 2025
Adopting authority	Government of the Republic of North Macedonia
Implementing body	Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism
Budget	MKD 91,975,000
Main activities	Promotion, marketing, international cooperation, support for tourism activities
Infrastructure elements	Tourist information signs, signposting cultural assets, support for motorhome campsites
Significance	Operational instrument for annual implementation of tourism policies

Strategic Plan of the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism

The Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism plays an important role in implementing tourism policies, particularly in promotion, branding, international cooperation and support for tourism products. The Agency’s Strategic Plan for 2025 identifies priorities related to branding

and marketing, development of tourism segments of interest, rural and cultural tourism, and cooperation with UNWTO through tourism village programmes and exchanges of good practice.

The absence of a valid National Tourism Development Strategy for three years highlights the need for an updated national strategic framework for tourism.

This has direct implications for tourism infrastructure, since without an up-to-date national strategy it is more difficult to establish long-term priorities for investment, regional distribution, tourism zone development, quality standards and interinstitutional coordination.

Table: Role of the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism in national tourism policies

Area	Role of the Agency	Link to tourism infrastructure
Promotion	Promoting the country as a tourism destination	Greater visibility of tourism sites and products
Branding	Development of a tourism image and marketing	Need to align infrastructure with the destination brand
International cooperation	Cooperation with UNWTO and other organisations	Transfer of good practice in tourism villages, rural and cultural tourism
Support for tourism products	Development of segments such as rural, cultural and active tourism	Need for trails, information centres, signage and tourism facilities
Coordination	Connecting institutions and tourism stakeholders	Better planning and implementation of infrastructure activities

Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2025–2027

With the establishment and operation of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, tourism is linked more closely with culture, cultural heritage, creative industries and international promotion. The Strategic Plan 2025–2027 recognises tourism as one of the most important economic sectors, with potential for growth, job creation, the attraction of foreign investment and the sustainable management of natural and cultural resources. The plan emphasises modernising and improving the tourism offering, particularly cultural tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism.

This approach is particularly important for tourism infrastructure, since cultural and rural tourism require specific infrastructure types: well-maintained cultural sites, tourist centres, museums, galleries, interpretation boards, visitor accessibility, digital information, public toilets, safety systems and facilities that enrich the visitor’s stay.

Table: Tourism in the Strategic Plan 2025–2027

Priority	Description	Connection to tourism infrastructure
Cultural tourism	Linking cultural heritage with the tourism offering	Museums, galleries, sites, tourist centres, interpretation

Priority	Description	Connection to tourism infrastructure
Ecotourism	Developing tourism that respects natural resources	Eco-trails, information boards, protected areas, controlled tourism zones
Rural tourism	Revitalising rural areas through tourism	Rural accommodation, local products, traditional attractions, public spaces
Modernisation of the offer	Improving quality and competitiveness	Digitalisation, improved services, standardisation and site development
Investment and jobs	Tourism as an economic driver	Incentive for private and public investment in tourism facilities

National policies related to tourism infrastructure development

National tourism policies are not limited to a single document. They comprise several interconnected policies: economic development, regional development, culture, the environment, rural development, investment, education, digitalisation and private-sector support.

For tourism infrastructure, this means that development should not be viewed solely as building facilities but as establishing an entire tourism system. This system includes accommodation and catering facilities, tourist signage, information centres, cultural and recreational facilities, public spaces, digital services, safety measures and utility provision in tourism spaces.

Table: National policies and their significance for tourism infrastructure

National policy	Main objective	Impact on tourism infrastructure
Tourism policy	Developing a competitive tourism offering	Directs investment towards tourism products, services and sites
Cultural policy	Protection and promotion of cultural heritage	Development of museums, sites, galleries and cultural routes
Rural development policy	Development of rural areas and the local economy	Support for rural tourism, traditional accommodation and local products
Environmental policy	Protection of natural resources	Sustainable use of natural attractions and protected areas
Regional development policy	Reducing regional disparities	Encourages tourism investment outside the main centres
Digitalisation policy	Modernisation of public and private services	Tourism applications, digital maps, online promotion
Education and human resources policy	Improving knowledge and skills	Training for tourism workers, guides, information centres and hospitality staff

Link to tourism infrastructure excluding transport infrastructure

As transport infrastructure is excluded from the scope, national tourism strategies and policies remain relevant to the following components:

Component	Examples
Accommodation infrastructure	Hotels, apartments, campsites, mountain huts, rural accommodation
Catering infrastructure	Restaurants, traditional inns, wine and gastronomic facilities
Information infrastructure	Tourist information centres, maps, boards, digital guides, web portals
Cultural infrastructure	Museums, galleries, archaeological sites, tourist centres
Recreational infrastructure	Walking trails, cycling trails, sports grounds, skiing and adventure facilities
Rural and eco-infrastructure	Eco-trails, improved villages, local markets, traditional buildings
Utility and service support	Toilets, lighting, public hygiene, waste management, accessibility
Safety and health support	Rescue services, outpatient clinics, tourist police, emergency assistance systems

Tourism infrastructure is thus treated as infrastructure supporting tourists' stay, experience, information, recreation and safety within the destination itself, while roads, airports, railways, ports and public transport are considered separate transport infrastructure.

National framework in the Republic of Bulgaria

The national framework for tourism development in the Republic of Bulgaria includes the long-term tourism strategy, its implementation plans, the tourism zoning concept, annual national tourism promotion programmes and tourism information instruments. These documents and mechanisms form the basis for linking national tourism priorities with local destination development.

For the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino, the national framework is considered in terms of tourism infrastructure quality and functionality, use of cultural and natural heritage, diversification of the offer and management of tourism spaces. Within the joint strategy, its significance is expressed through tourism sites, accommodation and catering establishments, tourism services, recreational spaces and digital content, with particular reference to Hisarlaka and the area around St Anna's Church.

Updated National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2014–2030

The principal national strategic document is the Updated National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014–2030, approved by Council of Ministers Decision No. 65 of 2 February 2018. The strategy establishes the long-term direction for developing Bulgaria as a competitive and sustainable tourism destination.

The strategy links tourism development with preservation of the natural environment, cultural authenticity and benefits for local residents. Particular importance is attached to improving tourism products and services, adapting to visitor needs and developing a year-round offer. Sustainability is considered a condition for long-term competitiveness, and implementation requires cooperation between institutions, the tourism sector and local communities.

For this strategy, these commitments translate into an approach linking infrastructure investment with a genuine tourism function. Site improvements are considered together with

information, interpretation, accessibility, sanitary facilities and services and maintenance. At Hisarlaka, this entails functionally connecting cultural heritage with park facilities; at St Anna, it entails aligning tourism services with the sacred character and natural setting.

Main characteristics of the national strategy

Element	Description
Title	Updated National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014–2030
National institution	Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria
Period	2014–2030
Strategic orientation	Sustainable and competitive tourism, a high-quality offer and year-round use of tourism resources
Significance for the joint strategy	Basis for aligning tourism infrastructure with service quality, heritage preservation and local development

The national strategy's time horizon ends before the joint strategy's 2026–2036 period expires. Future reviews will therefore take account of national documents adopted for the period after 2030.

Concept for Tourism Zoning of Bulgaria

The Tourism Zoning Concept organises Bulgaria's territory into nine tourism regions. Municipalities are the basic territorial units used to define their boundaries. Each region has a designated centre and tourism specialisation, intended to improve tourism market positioning and destination management. Tourism zoning is not identical to administrative districts or planning regions.

In the Concept's final proposed territorial scope, Kyustendil and Nevestino are included in the Sofia Tourism Region. Their tourism orientation should therefore not be presented as formal membership of the Rila–Pirin Tourism Region.

The joint strategy distinguishes regional affiliation from local specialisation. Kyustendil's tourism profile is developed through connections between spa services, cultural heritage, urban and park spaces and the mountain surroundings. Nevestino is considered through its cultural and historical sites, rural setting and natural attractions. These local characteristics provide the basis for linking them with the North-East Planning Region's offer.

Annual national tourism promotion programmes

Annual national tourism promotion programmes define the operational approach to presenting Bulgaria in domestic and international markets. The 2026 programme focuses on recognition of the national tourism brand, the country's positive image, strategic partnerships and promotional campaigns in domestic, neighbouring and priority international markets. Digitalisation and an effective combination of marketing instruments have a prominent place.

For Kyustendil and Nevestino, this programme framework is relevant to site visibility and the presentation of interconnected tourism products. In infrastructure terms, promotion builds on verified information about facilities, their accessibility, opening hours and tourism services. Promotional activities do not replace the need for functional facilities, clear signage and regular maintenance.

National instruments for tourism information and digitalisation

The national tourism system includes the National Tourism Register, the Register of Tourism Attractions and the Unified Tourism Information System – ESTI. The Ministry of Tourism provides access to these instruments and guidance on their use and data submission.

The existence of national registers and systems does not mean that every site has a comprehensive digital tourism service. The joint strategy distinguishes between administrative records and visitor-oriented content: digital maps, site descriptions, accessibility information, thematic routes, opening hours and contact with site managers.

For Hisarlaka and St Anna, digital infrastructure is considered complementary to physical signage and interpretation. Its functionality depends on data accuracy, language accessibility and designated responsibility for updates.

Links between national commitments and tourism infrastructure

Within the joint strategy, national commitments are linked to specific infrastructure categories. The following table shows their application in Kyustendil and Nevestino; it is not a list of national projects already approved or funded.

National commitment/instrument	Infrastructure link	Application in Kyustendil and Nevestino
Sustainability and quality of the tourism offering	Functional facilities, tourism amenities, sanitary facilities and services and maintenance	Linking site improvements with long-term use and management
Diverse year-round offer	Cultural, spa, recreational and educational facilities	Combining urban, spa, natural and rural offerings
Preservation of natural and cultural heritage	Controlled movement, interpretation and appropriate tourism equipment	Protection of the Hisarlaka fortress and forest park and the sacred and natural space around St Anna
Tourism zoning and positioning	Connected sites, thematic routes and coordinated information	Presenting the two municipalities as complementary destinations within the cross-border offer
National tourism promotion	High-quality digital and printed content	Promotion based on verified and genuinely available services
National information systems	Recording and exchanging tourism data	Linking local information with relevant national instruments
Operational planning and monitoring	Inventory, indicators, project documentation and maintenance plans	Defining lead bodies, deadlines and measurable results for infrastructure measures

Significance for the joint strategy

The national framework of the Republic of Bulgaria provides a strategic basis for tourism development in Kyustendil and Nevestino, while specific infrastructure priorities are determined by local conditions, tourism needs and available resources.

The joint strategy considers Hisarlaka as a space connecting cultural heritage, park recreation and tourism interpretation. The area around St Anna's Church is considered a sacred and natural whole, where tourism infrastructure must respect the character of the place. Links with the North-East Planning Region are based on a complementary offer, coordinated information and joint development of tourism products, while retaining separate national competences and local responsibilities.

2.2. Regional and local development documents

The North-East Planning Region Development Programme 2021–2026 is the principal medium-term planning document for the region's development. It was prepared by the Centre for Development of the North-East Planning Region with support from the Ministry of Local Self-Government and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Prepared between October and December 2020, it is aligned with the policy for balanced regional development in the Republic of North Macedonia. The programme defines medium-term development objectives, priorities and measures and that its preparation considered national, regional and local strategic documents, as well as experience from the previous North-East Planning Region Development Programme 2015–2019. In agriculture, rural development and tourism, the programme recognises the region's potential for rural, cultural, nature-based, monastery, gastronomic, active and alternative tourism. As most settlements in the region are rural, tourism is considered an opportunity to revitalise villages, improve the local economy, promote local products and preserve natural and cultural heritage. Many cultural and historical landmarks and natural attractions are located in rural areas, closely linking tourism development to improvements in rural infrastructure.

The most important part of the programme for tourism infrastructure is Measure 4.2.1: Improving rural and tourism infrastructure. This measure provides for infrastructure improvements at monasteries in the region, particularly in Staro Nagorichane, Lipkovo, Kriva Palanka and Kumanovo, and at significant tourism sites such as Kokino and Kuklica. It also envisages laying out and marking mountain and cycling trails in Kriva Palanka and Staro Nagorichane; developing trekking, cycling and motorcycle trails in Bislim Gorge; installing angling platforms and solar lamp posts; landscaping Kumanovo Spa; mapping and marking rock art; constructing information centres and points; and installing information boards.

In the context of tourism infrastructure excluding transport infrastructure, the elements of this measure that directly improve the visitor experience within the destination are particularly relevant: information centres, information points, information boards, improved trails within tourism zones, landscaping, platforms, lighting, signposting cultural and natural sites, and developing monastery, natural, cultural and historical spaces. These activities concern not only physical improvements but also better visibility, orientation, safety and interpretation of tourism attractions.

Measure 4.2.2, concerning investment attraction and support for constructing and categorising accommodation facilities, is also important. The programme emphasises that increasing visits to the region can be achieved by expanding accommodation capacity and improving quality. Indicative activities include extending hunting lodges, supporting private investment in new accommodation, training in accessing funds, consistent application of categorisation, and building accommodation facilities and campsites.

The programme also provides for mapping and evaluating natural, cultural and historical heritage to identify which resources have genuine tourism value and how they can be used sustainably. This approach is significant because not every site automatically constitutes a tourism product. Research, conservation, interpretation, promotion and integration of sites into thematic groupings are required. Accordingly, the programme envisages interactive maps, promotional materials, a GIS system locating the main attractions, and research and conservation at significant sites.

Another significant component is improved visibility through signage and visual presentation of attractive tourism locations. Tourism attractions remain insufficiently known when they are not signposted and visitors lack clear information. The programme therefore provides for multilingual signage, information boards, electronic content, visual presentation of Kokino and digital presentation of cultural attractions. This is particularly important for the North-East Region, which has valuable sites, some of which still lack sufficient tourism recognition.

The programme is not limited to improving individual sites but also envisages creating and promoting regional tourism offeringings. These include promoting a monastery tour linked to monasteries in the East Planning Region, a cultural landscapes tour covering Kokino, Kuklica and Cocev Kamen, a rock art tour, gastronomic offerings, an events calendar, support for cultural and sports events, and revitalisation of rural areas with rich ethnographic characteristics. This approach is significant because it treats the region as an integrated tourism destination rather than a collection of disconnected sites.

The programme also envisages establishing a tourism cluster in the North-East Planning Region. The aim is to connect all direct and indirect tourism stakeholders: municipalities, travel agencies, caterers, accommodation providers, cultural institutions, local producers, civil society and other service providers. Such a cluster would improve coordination, specialise tourism products and strengthen regional promotion.

The programme additionally envisages an information system for tourist registration and analytics. The region lacks an advanced electronic registration system and in-depth tourism analytics. Such a system would enable better monitoring of tourist numbers and profiles, needs, motivations for visiting, satisfaction and likelihood of repeat visits. This is important for more effective tourism planning, since development should be based on data rather than assumptions alone.

The programme also emphasises the need to develop tourism workers' capacity. Tourism depends not only on natural and cultural resources but also on service quality, knowledge, professionalism and local stakeholders' ability to create attractive tourism products. Training, education, capacity building for local residents and opportunities to employ qualified tourism professionals within municipalities are therefore envisaged.

In culture, the programme provides for enriching the cultural offer and improving cultural infrastructure. This includes improving local cultural programmes, intermunicipal coordination, renovating and upgrading cultural buildings, cultural centres, concert venues, cinemas and other facilities that may contribute to cultural tourism. Given the North-East Region's archaeological sites, monasteries, ethnographic heritage and traditional events, cultural infrastructure plays an important role in developing its tourism offering.

Overall, the North-East Planning Region Development Programme 2021–2026 treats tourism as part of broader regional development rather than an isolated activity. Tourism is linked with rural development, infrastructure, culture, the environment, human capital, investment and the local economy. The region has considerable potential but also serious weaknesses: underdeveloped infrastructure, insufficient accommodation, poor tourist signage, limited promotion, insufficient stakeholder coordination and inadequate tourism analytics.

Within the North-East Planning Region, local development documents play an important role because they elaborate regional priorities at individual municipal level. While the North-East Planning Region Development Programme 2021–2026 establishes the broader development framework, local documents define specific measures, projects and activities for Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Lipkovo, Rankovce and Staro Nagorichane.

Kumanovo Municipality

A relevant document for Kumanovo Municipality is the Local Economic Development Strategy of Kumanovo Municipality 2019–2024. It establishes the municipality's local economic framework and defines development priorities in several areas, including tourism. This is particularly important because Kumanovo's tourism potential extends beyond the urban area to rural, natural, cultural and recreational spaces.

For tourism infrastructure, this document is significant because it provides a basis for developing facilities linked to Bislim Gorge, Kumanovo Spa, cultural and historical sites,

events, rural settlements and recreational spaces. As the region's largest municipality, Kumanovo acts as an urban and service centre, but its local strategy also recognises tourism development potential outside the urban core.

Kriva Palanka Municipality

Kriva Palanka Municipality has several current and relevant local documents. The municipality's development framework includes an Integrated Local Development Plan 2024–2027, Local Economic Development Plan 2024–2027, Social Plan 2025–2031 and Gender-Responsive Sustainable Development Strategy 2022–2027. Together, these instruments establish a broader local development framework in which tourism can be linked to economic development, the environment, cultural heritage and sustainability.

Particularly important is the Local Economic Development Plan of Kriva Palanka Municipality 2024–2027, which identifies eco- and gastronomic tourism and food produced using environmentally sustainable practices as local development priorities. This is significant because Kriva Palanka can link tourism with local products, natural assets, rural areas, gastronomy and cultural and monastery heritage.

The Local Economic Development Programme of Kriva Palanka Municipality for 2025 is important for annual implementation of development priorities. It is an operational budget programme implemented through local economic development services. It provides activities supporting SMEs, entrepreneurship, investment and local economic development.

The work programme of the Kriva Palanka Municipal Council for 2025 also provides for the preparation of a Development Programmes Plan covering cultural heritage, natural heritage and alternative tourism. This is highly important for tourism infrastructure because it confirms that the municipality treats cultural and natural heritage as the basis for future tourism programmes.

Kratovo Municipality

Kratovo Municipality is particularly significant within the North-East Region because of its strong tourism identity, linked to historic urban architecture, towers, bridges, volcanic landforms, cultural heritage and natural sites. A particularly relevant framework is the Tourism Development Strategy of Kratovo Municipality 2020–2024. The strategy was prepared as a tourism development measure, addressing tourism assets, development opportunities and necessary activities.

The Local Economic Development Strategy of Kratovo Municipality 2022–2026 is also significant. It treats tourism as a secondary sector influencing the municipality's economic performance and links tourism potential with the local economy, cultural heritage and hospitality services.

Kratovo exemplifies a municipality where a local tourism strategy directly matters for tourism infrastructure. It can underpin cultural site improvements, restoration and interpretation of historic urban architecture, tourist signage, guide services, digital maps, an information centre, souvenir offerings, cultural routes and thematic tourism products.

Rankovce Municipality

A relevant document for Rankovce Municipality is its Local Economic Development Plan 2023–2028. It sets out an action programme incorporating existing resources and a SWOT analysis to provide a coherent approach to municipal economic development. The plan provides a basis for using natural, rural and cultural resources in development projects.

In tourism infrastructure terms, Rankovce can be associated with rural tourism offeringings, local products, picnic sites, monastery and natural sites, and regional tourism routes connecting Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Staro Nagorichane and Kumanovo.

Staro Nagorichane Municipality

A relevant document for Staro Nagorichane Municipality is the Local Economic Development Strategy 2019–2023. It was prepared under the project 'The Local Community and Municipality Jointly Create the Local Economic Development Strategy', indicating a participatory community-based approach.

As this is a rural municipality, the local strategy is significant for developing thematic rather than mass tourism: monastery, cultural, rural, recreational and excursion tourism. Required facilities include information boards, improved spaces around cultural sites, toilets, rest areas, small-scale catering services, promotional materials and connections with regional tourism routes.

Lipkovo Municipality

In Lipkovo Municipality, environmental quality, public hygiene, water management and green spaces are relevant to tourism infrastructure. They provide an essential basis for rural, nature-based, excursion and recreational tourism and connect environmental protection with utility provision and local economic development.

Table: Local documents and their significance for tourism infrastructure

Municipality	Relevant local documents	Main link to tourism and tourism infrastructure
Kumanovo	Local Economic Development Strategy 2019–2024	Rural tourism, Bislim Gorge, Kumanovo Spa, cultural and recreational facilities
Kriva Palanka	Integrated Local Development Plan 2024–2027; Local Economic Development Plan 2024–2027; Local Economic Development Programme 2025	Eco-, gastronomic, cultural, nature-based, monastery and alternative tourism
Kratovo	Tourism Development Strategy 2020–2024; Local Economic Development Strategy 2022–2026	Cultural tourism, historic architecture, sites, tourist signage, information facilities
Rankovce	Local Economic Development Plan 2023–2028	Rural development, local resources, small businesses, regional connections
Staro Nagorichane	Local Economic Development Strategy 2019–2023	Monastery, cultural, rural and recreational tourism
Lipkovo	Local development and environmental documents	Nature-based, rural, excursion and recreational tourism
Kyustendil	Integrated Development Plan 2021–2027	Integrated tourism; Hisarlaka, fortress, park, information and tourism facilities. Planning proposals do not mean completed facilities.
Nevestino	Integrated Development Plan 2021–2027	Cultural and natural assets, eco- and cultural trails; local proposals for St Anna developed within this strategy.

Local development documents in Kyustendil and Nevestino

The local development framework for Kyustendil and Nevestino municipalities is based on their integrated development plans for 2021–2027. These documents define medium-term municipal priorities and provide the basis for connecting economic development, spatial improvement, heritage protection and better public services. Within the joint strategy, their commitments are considered in terms of tourism sites, supporting infrastructure, tourism services and integration of the local offer.

Kyustendil Municipality

The principal local development document is the Integrated Development Plan of Kyustendil Municipality 2021–2027. The plan covers the city of Kyustendil and 71 villages, combining municipal development priorities with the specific needs of the urban centre. It is a medium-term municipal management instrument for aligning local interventions with national and regional development commitments. It is valid from 31 March 2021 to 31 December 2027.

The plan identifies integrated tourism development as an important direction for local development. Tourism is linked with the use of cultural and historical heritage, spa resources, natural surroundings and public spaces. From an infrastructure perspective, this orientation emphasises connections between tourism facilities, their immediate surroundings and the services enabling visitors' stays.

The **Hisarlaka** area has a special place, as cultural heritage and park functions overlap within a single tourism and recreational space. Planning intentions include improving park amenities, lighting and signage, protecting and presenting the fortress, an information centre, museum facilities and upgrading the zoo. These commitments position Hisarlaka as a space where infrastructure development is linked to cultural, recreational and educational functions.

These planning directions are significant for tourism infrastructure because they consider Hisarlaka as an integrated tourism area. Park amenities and rest areas support recreation; lighting and signage support orientation and safety; museum and information facilities support heritage interpretation. Infrastructure thus extends beyond individual facilities to include the connections between them, visitor movement and the organisation of visits.

The Integrated Development Plan provides the basis for aligning the joint strategy's measures with municipal priorities. Nevertheless, the stated planning intentions are distinguished from facilities actually built and operational. Inclusion in a development document does not itself confirm that funds have been secured, construction completed or facilities put into use.

Nevestino Municipality

The principal local strategic document is the Integrated Development Plan of Nevestino Municipality 2021–2027. It is valid from 22 April 2021 to 31 December 2027. It forms the medium-term planning basis for aligning local development initiatives, including tourism-related interventions.

Tourism development is linked to entrepreneurship and the use of cultural and natural heritage. This framework mentions eco- and cultural trails and conservation and improvement of historical and religious buildings. Tourism is considered an activity linking local resources with services and economic activities in settlements.

For tourism infrastructure, these commitments concern site improvement and presentation, connecting attractions through trails and providing conditions for visits. Cultural and natural assets form the resource base, while tourism infrastructure enables their organised and safe use. The joint strategy develops this connection through signage, interpretation, rest areas and basic tourism support.

For the area around St Anna's Church near Smolichano village, the municipal plan contains no separate, explicitly named measure. General commitments to cultural trails and religious heritage are therefore not presented as an already approved detailed programme for this location. The joint strategy specifies site needs, but implementation depends on appropriate municipal decisions, property conditions, project documentation and approvals from responsible stakeholders.

In this area, the infrastructure approach is shaped by the connection between the church space, the spring and drinking fountain, rest areas and surrounding natural attractions. Interventions are therefore considered as improvements to a sacred and natural whole, respecting the religious function and character of the space. Information, orientation, sanitary facilities and services and maintenance form part of the tourism function rather than replacing the site's primary purpose.

Project framework for implementing local tourism priorities

An additional, concrete basis for linking local commitments with tourism infrastructure is project BGMK0200028 'Cross-border attractiveness – smart tourism in the region of Kyustendil – Kriva Palanka – Nevestino', funded under a contract dated 7 March 2025 within the Interreg VI-A IPA Bulgaria–North Macedonia Programme 2021–2027.

Overview of local documents and their infrastructure significance

Municipality/area	Document or project framework	Main connection to tourism	Significance for tourism infrastructure
Kyustendil	Integrated Development Plan 2021–2027	Integrated tourism development and use of cultural, natural and spa resources	Basis for aligning tourism investment with municipal development priorities
Kyustendil – Hisarlaka	Planning directions for tourism infrastructure	Linking heritage, park recreation and tourism facilities	Park amenities, lighting, signage, fortress presentation, information and museum facilities and zoo
Nevestino	Integrated Development Plan 2021–2027	Entrepreneurship and tourism use of cultural and natural heritage	Eco- and cultural trails, conservation and improvement of historical and religious buildings
Nevestino – St Anna	Site-specific elaboration within the joint strategy	Linking religious visits with the natural and rural setting	Specifying needs for reception, orientation, interpretation, sanitary facilities and services and maintenance

2.3. Spatial and urban planning

Spatial and urban planning provides the basis for appropriate location, arrangement and development of tourism infrastructure. Planning documents establish land use, building conditions, protection regimes, public spaces, green zones, recreational spaces and

opportunities for tourism facilities. Within the legal framework, urban planning is regulated by the Law on Urban Planning, which defines the systematic and hierarchical organisation of urban planning, the types and contents of urban plans and principles for spatial development.

In tourism infrastructure, spatial and urban planning matters because it enables planned rather than uncontrolled development. Accommodation, catering establishments, information centres, recreation areas, cultural facilities, public spaces, toilets, viewpoints and tourist signage must therefore align with spatial and urban plans. This is particularly important in rural and environmentally sensitive areas, where tourism can contribute to development but may also put pressure on nature, land and local communities.

For the North-East Planning Region, spatial planning is particularly significant because of its many rural settlements, natural sites, cultural and historical assets and alternative tourism potential. Sites such as Kokino, Kuklica, Cocev Kamen, Bislim Gorge, Kumanovo Spa, monasteries and rural areas should be treated not merely as individual tourism points but as parts of a wider spatial system. Their development must therefore align with planning documents, protection regimes, utility provision and the area's capacity.

For Hisarlaka, spatial planning must distinguish the archaeological core, forest park, recreational facilities and entry points. At St Anna, distinctions are made between the churchyard, the rest area across the access road and the separate waterfall access. Conversion of existing unused buildings into tourism facilities is conditional on checking ownership, structural condition, permitted use and required approvals. Assumed spatial connectivity does not establish a right of use.

Issue	Significance for tourism infrastructure
Land use	Determines where tourism, catering, recreational and cultural facilities may be built
Urban planning conditions	Establish rules for construction, reconstruction and improvement of buildings
Protected areas	Introduce restrictions and special conditions for use of space
Public spaces	Enable development of squares, parks, pedestrian zones, viewpoints and rest areas
Utility infrastructure	Important for toilets, waste management, lighting, water supply and public hygiene
Tourism sites	Require planned development, signage, information boards and controlled use

2.4. Legal framework for tourism, hospitality and local development

The legal framework for tourism, hospitality and local development establishes the legal basis for planning, organising, performing and supervising activities that create the tourism offering. For tourism infrastructure, this framework matters because it regulates tourism services, accommodation, catering establishments, tourist guides, categorisation, local competences, regional planning and financing of development projects.

North-East Planning Region

Law on Tourism Activity

The principal tourism law is the Law on Tourism Activity. It governs the tourism and hospitality sector and includes amendments published in the Official Gazette Nos. 192/15, 53/16 and 31/20.

This law regulates tourism activity, including the conditions for providing tourism services, the operation of travel agencies, tourist guides, tour escorts, tourism entertainers, tourism promotion and other services associated with organised travel and tourist stays. It is important for tourism infrastructure because it provides the legal basis for organising tourism products, routes, guide services, tourism information and services that improve the visitor experience.

In the North-East Region, application of this law is linked to products such as monastery tours, cultural routes, and visits to Kokino, Kuklica, Cocev Kamen, Kratovo, Bislim Gorge, Kumanovo Spa and rural settlements. The mere existence of a site is insufficient: these products require legally organised tourism services, guides, information, promotional materials, local service providers and clear coordination with municipalities and responsible institutions.

Aspect of the Law on Tourism Activity	Significance for tourism infrastructure
Tourism services	Enables organisation of visits, tours, guide services and tourism programmes
Travel agencies	Can create and sell regional tourism products
Tourist guides and tour escorts	Important for interpreting cultural, natural and historical sites
Tourism promotion	Linked to maps, brochures, web platforms, applications and information centres
Tourism products	Enable several sites to be combined into one offer

Law on Hospitality Activity

The second key law is the Law on Hospitality Activity. The law has a consolidated text and several amendments, including Nos. 71/16, 31/20 and 16/25.

The Law on Hospitality Activity regulates the conditions and manner of conducting hospitality activities. The legal text defines hospitality activity as providing accommodation and food services, namely preparing and serving food and beverages.

This law is directly linked to tourism infrastructure because accommodation and catering facilities are fundamental elements of the tourism offering. They include hotels, motels, apartments, rental rooms, campsites, restaurants, cafés, traditional inns, traditional-style restaurants, local gastronomy establishments and other facilities supporting tourists' stays.

Aspect of the Law on Hospitality Activity	Significance for tourism infrastructure
Accommodation services	Legal basis for hotels, apartments, campsites, rooms and rural households

Aspect of the Law on Hospitality Activity	Significance for tourism infrastructure
Food and beverage services	Legal basis for restaurants, taverns, traditional inns and gastronomic offerings
Categorisation	Important for quality, standards and tourist confidence
Operating conditions	Ensures minimum technical, sanitary and service standards
Inspection oversight	Enables monitoring of legality and service quality

Law on Local Self-Government

The Law on Local Self-Government is significant because it defines municipal competences, direct citizen participation in decision-making, the organisation and operation of municipal bodies, municipal administration, municipal property and cooperation between municipalities and the Government.

For tourism, this law matters because municipalities have a direct role in local economic development, urban planning, utility services, culture, sport, environmental protection, public spaces and local development programmes. These areas form the basis for tourism infrastructure development excluding transport infrastructure.

In the North-East Region, Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Lipkovo, Rankovce and Staro Nagorichane municipalities can plan and implement tourism facilities through local strategies, local economic development programmes, cultural programmes, environmental programmes and utility programmes. This includes site improvements, tourist signage, information points, public toilets, lighting, green spaces, events, support for local products and promotion of municipal tourism potential.

Municipal competence	Link to tourism infrastructure
Local economic development	Support for tourism, small businesses, local products and services
Urban planning	Determining locations and conditions for tourism and catering facilities
Utility services	Hygiene, waste, lighting, public spaces, sanitary conditions
Culture	Museums, events, local heritage, cultural routes
Sport and recreation	Trails, picnic sites, sports facilities, recreation areas
Environment	Protection of natural sites and sustainable use of space

Law on Balanced Regional Development

The Law on Balanced Regional Development regulates the policy promoting balanced regional development, its objectives, principles and responsible bodies, regional development planning, financing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of planning documents and projects.

The Law on Balanced Regional Development was published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia Nos. 24/21, 174/21 and 241/24, indicating a current legal framework for regional planning and development policy implementation.

This law is particularly important for the North-East Planning Region because regional development programmes are prepared and implemented under the balanced regional development system. The North-East Planning Region Development Programme 2021–2026 derives from this framework and defines regional priorities, measures and projects.

For tourism infrastructure, the Law on Balanced Regional Development matters because it enables intermunicipal coordination and financing of projects extending beyond a single municipality. Tourism routes, cultural landscapes, monastery tours, gastronomic offerings, regional promotion and tourist signage often have a regional character and require joint planning.

Regional development element	Significance for tourism
Planning regions	Enable tourism planning at a broader regional level
Development programmes	Define measures for tourism, rural development, infrastructure and the local economy
Financing regional projects	Can support information centres, sites, signage, trails and promotion
Intermunicipal cooperation	Important for tourism routes and joint tourism products
Monitoring and evaluation	Enables verification of completed project results

Municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino

Legal framework for tourism, hospitality and local development

The legal framework for tourism infrastructure development in Kyustendil and Nevestino consists of several interconnected laws and secondary regulations. The Tourism Act is central, while planning and implementation of infrastructure interventions also involve regulations on regional development, local government, spatial planning, construction, cultural heritage, nature protection, food safety, local taxes and accessibility.

In the Republic of Bulgaria, hospitality is not governed by a separate hospitality activity law but mainly by the Tourism Act and secondary regulations for categorising accommodation and food and entertainment establishments. Food regulations, health and hygiene requirements, consumer protection, spatial planning and building safety rules also apply.

Tourism Act

The Tourism Act is the principal sectoral legislation regulating the management, regulation and control of tourism activities, services and facilities, tourism zoning, categorisation and registration of tourism facilities, tourism information and distribution of responsibilities between state and municipal institutions. It also regulates participation by tourism associations, legal entities and other stakeholders in tourism development.

The Act assigns direct responsibilities to municipalities. The municipal council adopts a tourism development programme for the municipality, aligned with higher-level strategic and planning documents. The mayor organises and coordinates local tourism policy implementation, participates in municipal promotion, conducts certain administrative procedures and provides conditions for tourism information and development of the local offer.

For Kyustendil and Nevestino, this means tourism infrastructure development must be linked to municipal tourism development programmes, integrated development plans and annual budgets. Infrastructure measures at Hisarlaka and St Anna are not implemented solely on the basis of the joint strategy but are developed through appropriate municipal, spatial, project and budget procedures.

The Act also provides a basis for tourist information centres, whose functions include informing tourists, promoting the local offer and connecting attractions, accommodation, catering services, events and local products. For planned tourism facilities at Hisarlaka and St Anna, it must be determined whether they will operate as formal tourist information centres, tourist centres, museum and interpretation spaces or combined facilities. Their legal status, operator, services, staffing requirements and operating arrangements depend on this designation.

Categorisation of accommodation and catering establishments

The Tourism Act and accompanying ordinance regulate the types, categories and minimum requirements for accommodation and food and entertainment establishments. Categorisation covers hotels, motels, family hotels, guesthouses and guest rooms, guest apartments, campsites, holiday villages and other legally defined accommodation types, as well as restaurants, inns, taverns, bars and other food and entertainment establishments.

The Minister of Tourism determines categories for certain types of accommodation and catering establishments, while the municipal mayor is responsible for other categories. Establishments under the mayor's responsibility are categorised through a municipal procedure and an appropriate expert commission. Categorised establishments receive a certificate and category sign and are entered in the National Tourism Register.

Detailed conditions are established **by the Ordinance on Requirements for Categorised Accommodation and Food and Entertainment Establishments, the Procedure for Determining Categories and the Conditions for Registering Guest Rooms** and Apartments. It regulates facility characteristics, equipment, services and administrative categorisation and registration procedures.

For tourism infrastructure in Kyustendil and Nevestino, every establishment offering accommodation, food or beverages must have an appropriate designated use, legal status and required categorisation or registration. Including a café, tasting space or local product sales area in a future tourist centre does not automatically authorise hospitality activities. Before operations begin, the service type, operator, categorisation, food registration and conditions for using the space must be established.

At Hisarlaka, existing and future catering facilities must be considered separately from park, museum and information functions. At St Anna, where no developed catering offer exists immediately on site, any provision of beverages, packaged food or local products should be organised at a scale appropriate to visitor numbers, sanitary conditions and the sacred character of the site.

Food Act

Establishments producing, preparing, storing or serving food are also subject to the Food Act. It regulates food safety and quality, registration and approval of establishments, operator responsibilities and official oversight.

Restaurants, inns, tasting spaces and other food-handling establishments must be registered or approved by the competent food safety authorities, depending on the activity.

Categorisation under the Tourism Act and registration under the Food Act are separate procedures, and completing one does not replace the other.

This is also relevant to promoting local gastronomy and agricultural products from Kyustendil and Nevestino. Tastings, sales and serving local products must be organised through registered operators and premises meeting hygiene and technical requirements. The strategy may envisage such facilities but does not replace registration and control requirements.

Regional Development Act

The Regional Development Act regulates the system of strategic planning, programming, financing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of regional and local development. It defines the role and content of municipal integrated development plans.

The Integrated Development Plan defines medium-term objectives and priorities for sustainable municipal development and links with other municipalities. It should ensure spatial, temporal and practical coordination of different sectoral policies and resources. It contains an implementation programme and monitoring and evaluation indicators. The municipal council adopts the plan on the mayor's proposal, and it is valid for seven years.

The mayor organises preparation and implementation of the plan and submits annual implementation reports, while the municipal council adopts the plan, approves reports and oversees alignment with the general spatial development plan.

Tourism infrastructure measures in Kyustendil and Nevestino must therefore be included in or aligned with integrated development plan implementation programmes. This is particularly important for measures requiring municipal funding, spatial plan amendments, resolution of property issues or multiannual maintenance.

The Act provides several sources of regional development financing: state and municipal budgets, European Union funds, contributions from individuals and legal entities, international financial institutions and other lawful sources. However, listing a measure in a strategy or plan does not automatically secure funding. Each investment requires identification of its funding source, lead body, ownership, project readiness and future operating and maintenance costs.

Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act

The Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act defines the competences of the municipal council, mayor and municipal administration. Municipalities manage matters of local importance, including municipal property, local economic development, spatial and urban planning, utility services, culture, sport, recreation, the environment and certain tourism activities.

The municipal council adopts strategies, programmes, plans, budgets and local regulations, decides on municipal property use and supervises municipal enterprises and institutions. The mayor organises implementation of decisions, manages the municipal administration and represents the municipality.

In implementing this strategy, Kyustendil and Nevestino municipalities must establish ownership and management of every infrastructure element. At Hisarlaka, responsibilities for the forest park, fortress, trails, stage, zoo, parking areas and any tourist centre must be distinguished. At St Anna, ownership and usage rights must be established for the church, ancillary buildings, fountain and spring area, rest area and waterfall access.

Local Taxes and Fees Act

The Local Taxes and Fees Act regulates the tourist tax charged on overnight stays. The municipal council sets its amount by decision and ordinance within legally established limits, and revenues are paid into the municipal budget.

Accommodation providers must calculate, declare and pay tourist tax. Overnight-stay data are also linked with the tourism information system and oversight of registered accommodation establishments.

For Kyustendil and Nevestino, tourist tax is local revenue linked to the volume of registered accommodation. Its existence is not a sufficient financial basis for major infrastructure investment, but revenue may be connected to local tourism, promotion, information, maintenance and tourism space improvement programmes, in accordance with applicable budgetary and municipal decisions.

Spatial Development Act

The Spatial Development Act regulates land designation and use, spatial plans, investment design, building permits, construction and use of buildings. Every new tourism, visitor, sanitary, catering or recreational facility must comply with land designation, applicable spatial plans and building conditions.

Installation of prefabricated structures, kiosks, information points, toilets, shelters and other tourism equipment is also subject to appropriate spatial and administrative procedures. Calling a facility ‘prefabricated’ or ‘temporary’ does not automatically exempt it from required approvals.

At Hisarlaka, spatial and construction procedures must respect the park and archaeological character of the location. At St Anna, plot boundaries and designation, access rights, the status of existing unused buildings and prospects for reconstruction or conversion must be checked.

Cultural Heritage Act

The Cultural Heritage Act is directly relevant to Hisarlaka Fortress, St Anna’s Church and other immovable cultural assets. It regulates their identification, protection, conservation, restoration, management and presentation.

Investment projects and requests for interventions in immovable cultural assets and their protected territories require specific expert approval in cases established by law. This also applies to interventions that initially appear purely tourism- or utility-related, such as lighting, boards, fences, paths, ramps, installations or equipment.

Measures for Hisarlaka Fortress must therefore not be reduced to general park improvements. Every intervention in the archaeological core and its protected surroundings must be based on an established protection regime and conservation conditions. The same principle applies to St Anna’s Church and its immediate surroundings, especially where the building or area has formal cultural heritage status or lies within a protected territory.

Accessibility and universal design regulations

The Spatial Development Act and **Ordinance No. RD-02-20-2 of 26 January 2021 establish** accessibility and universal design requirements for public spaces, buildings and facilities. The ordinance sets minimum standards for pedestrian spaces, access paths, entrances, ramps, stairs, lifts, parking spaces, sanitary facilities, signs and other elements.

These requirements should be applied when designing new tourist centres, toilets, information points and accessible routes. At protected cultural and natural sites, solutions must simultaneously respect accessibility, protection and technical feasibility requirements.

Existing inaccessible trails or buildings are not made accessible simply by installing an entrance ramp. A continuous accessibility chain is required, covering arrival, movement, entry, information, service use and an adapted toilet. Where full physical accessibility is infeasible because of terrain or protection restrictions, verified information on limitations and appropriate alternative interpretation methods must be provided.

Overview of the relevant legal framework

Law or secondary regulation	Area regulated	Significance for tourism infrastructure in Kyustendil and Nevestino
Tourism Act	Tourism activities, services, facilities, local responsibilities, information and registers	Basis for municipal tourism programmes, categorisation and tourism service management
Ordinance on categorised accommodation and food and entertainment establishments	Establishment types, categories, equipment, services and procedures	Applicable to hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, inns and other tourism establishments
Food Act	Food safety and registration of operators and establishments	Applicable to restaurants, tasting spaces, cafés and local food product sales
Regional Development Act	Integrated development plans, financing, monitoring and evaluation	Basis for incorporating infrastructure priorities into municipal plans and programmes
Local Self-Government and Local Administration Act	Competences of the council, mayor and administration	Determining ownership, management, budgeting and maintenance of municipal tourism spaces
Local Taxes and Fees Act	Tourist tax and local revenue	Revenue linked to registered overnight stays and local tourism policy
Spatial Development Act	Land use, design, construction and use	Mandatory basis for tourist centres, toilets, trails, equipment and building conversions

Law or secondary regulation	Area regulated	Significance for tourism infrastructure in Kyustendil and Nevestino
Cultural Heritage Act	Protection, conservation and interventions affecting cultural assets	Directly relevant to Hisarlaka Fortress, St Anna's Church and their surroundings
Ordinance No. RD-02-20-2 of 2021	Accessibility and universal design	Standards for accessible paths, entrances, toilets, parking spaces and information

2.5. Legal framework for nature and cultural heritage protection

Nature and cultural heritage protection is a fundamental condition for planning and using tourism infrastructure. In both countries, infrastructure interventions must align with site status, protection regimes and approval procedures of the responsible institutions.

Republic of North Macedonia

The principal **regulation is the Law on** Nature Protection, governing biological and landscape diversity, natural heritage and management of protected areas. Its significance for tourism infrastructure concerns permitted activities, use of space and preservation of natural assets. Trails, viewpoints, picnic sites and tourism equipment in protected areas must comply with designation acts, protection zones and relevant management plans.

The Law on the Environment regulates procedures for assessing the environmental effects of plans and projects. Depending on the type, scale and location of an intervention, the need for strategic assessment, project environmental impact assessment or another applicable procedure is determined.

The Law on Cultural Heritage Protection regulates identification, valuation, conservation, restoration and use of cultural heritage. Interventions affecting protected buildings and their protected surroundings are subject to appropriate conditions and approvals from the responsible authorities. This also covers tourism boards, lighting, trails, fences and other supporting infrastructure where they affect heritage.

In the North-East Planning Region, these regulations apply to natural and cultural sites including Kokino, Kuklica, Kratovo's historic urban core, St George's Church in Staro Nagorichane and the St Joachim of Osogovo monastery complex. Applicable conditions are determined individually according to each site's established status and protection boundaries.

Republic of Bulgaria

The basic framework comprises **the Protected Areas Act, Biological Diversity Act** and **Environmental Protection Act. They** regulate protection of natural areas, species and habitats, management of protected zones and assessment of plans and projects. Interventions potentially affecting Natura 2000 sites are also subject to assessment of compatibility with conservation objectives where required by law.

The Cultural Heritage Act regulates protection, conservation, restoration and presentation of cultural assets. Investment projects and interventions within protected territories of immovable

cultural heritage require expert approval in legally specified cases. This includes supporting tourism facilities where they affect the protected asset or its surroundings.

In Kyustendil and Nevestino municipalities, these regulations are particularly important for developing Hisarlaka and the area around St Anna's Church. At Hisarlaka, tourism infrastructure must align with protection of the fortress and natural setting. At St Anna, the sacred character, spring, waterfall and surrounding space are considered, with specific legal obligations determined by the formal status of buildings and land.

In both countries, including an intervention in the strategy does not replace the environmental, conservation and other approvals required for implementation.

2.6. Alignment with sustainable tourism principles

Tourism infrastructure development in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino is based on a balance between economic development, protection of natural and cultural heritage and local residents' interests. The cross-border area is considered as a whole with interconnected cultural, natural, rural, spa and recreational offerings, while respecting each site's specific characteristics and national legal frameworks.

Sustainability is assessed not only through increasing visitor numbers but also through visit quality, resource preservation, accessibility, infrastructure functionality and long-term benefits for local communities. These principles apply to planning, designing, using and maintaining tourism spaces.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability means that tourism infrastructure and activities must not degrade natural habitats, cause pollution, damage landscapes or overuse resources. Spatially appropriate solutions are prioritised: marked walking and educational trails, developed viewpoints, rest areas, appropriate toilets and organised waste collection and removal.

In Bislim Gorge, Osogovo landscapes and river corridors, this principle is applied by directing visitors along designated routes and avoiding unnecessary expansion of built-up areas. In Hisarlaka forest park, trail, recreation point and lighting improvements must preserve vegetation and limit disturbance of the natural setting. At St Anna and Smolichano Waterfall, protecting water, preventing erosion and managing picnic waste are especially important.

Throughout the area, solutions promote efficient use of water and energy, durable materials and easily maintained equipment. Construction scale is adapted to environmental sensitivity and actual tourism needs.

Cultural heritage protection

Sustainable tourism links tourism use of heritage with preservation of its authenticity, integrity and significance for the local community. Archaeological sites, historic urban centres, bridges, towers, monasteries and churches are treated as assets requiring continuous protection, maintenance and professionally grounded interpretation.

In Kratovo, this approach means preserving historic urban architecture, towers, bridges and the cultural landscape. At Kokino and Cocev Kamen, trails, information boards and other equipment are installed with care for cultural and natural characteristics. At Hisarlaka, tourism

facilities must respect protection of the fortress and archaeological remains, while in Nevestino the historical value of Kadin Bridge and the sacred character of St Anna are respected.

Interpretation should be understandable and based on verified information. Historical facts are distinguished from local traditions, and contemporary tourism facilities must not create a misleading impression of heritage. Digital displays and educational materials enrich the experience without requiring unnecessary physical interventions.

Economic sustainability and local benefits

Economic sustainability means tourism development should benefit local residents and businesses and provide conditions for long-term infrastructure operation. Local accommodation providers, restaurants, guides, craftspeople, farmers and food and souvenir producers are important participants in the tourism offering.

In rural settlements of the North-East Region, Kyustendil and Nevestino, tourist visits are linked with local gastronomy, agricultural products, traditional crafts and small accommodation facilities. Visits to Kratovo, Kokino and Osogovo sites can be complemented by local services, just as visits to Hisarlaka and St Anna can be linked with offerings in Kyustendil, Nevestino and surrounding settlements.

Cross-border integration is based on programmes incorporating genuinely available services and local providers on both sides of the border. Investment sustainability requires assessment not only of construction but also staffing, cleaning, energy, repair and equipment renewal costs. New facilities are planned at a scale corresponding to expected use and available operating funds.

Social and cultural sustainability

Tourism activities should be acceptable to local residents and respect their customs, religious values and everyday needs. Development of public tourism spaces should also benefit residents without unjustifiably restricting their access or harming their quality of life.

In Kratovo's historic urban core and Kyustendil's urban spaces, tourism use is coordinated with residential, commercial and public functions. In rural settlements, household privacy and ongoing agricultural activities are respected. At the Monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo, St George's Church and St Anna, visits are organised with respect for worship, quiet, religious rules and cemetery spaces.

Accessibility and inclusion of different visitor groups are integral to sustainability. Infrastructure and information should account for persons with disabilities, older visitors and families with children. Where terrain or heritage protection limits certain solutions, accurate information on barriers and suitable alternative ways of experiencing the site are provided.

Visitor management

Visitor management includes organised reception, clear information, marked routes, codes of conduct and regular maintenance. The scale and manner of visits are adapted to site sensitivity, infrastructure provision and the manager's capacity.

At Kokino, Kuklica and Bislim Gorge, directing visitor movement is important for reducing damage and risks. At Hisarlaka, entry points, the fortress, recreational facilities and stage

need clear connections. At St Anna, movement through the sacred space, picnic use and waterfall access are distinguished.

At more sensitive locations, visiting restrictions are established through impact assessment and safety conditions rather than arbitrary capacity figures. Throughout the area, trail and equipment condition, waste, damage, seasonal pressures and feedback from visitors and local residents are monitored.

Investment planning follows a common sequence: identify actual needs, safely use and maintain existing infrastructure, consider renovation or conversion, and only then undertake justified new construction. Tourism development in the North-East Planning Region, Kyustendil and Nevestino is thereby directed towards preserved sites, high-quality visits and lasting local benefits.

3. Analysis of the current situation

3.1. General characteristics of the area

The North-East Planning Region lies in the north-eastern part of the Republic of North Macedonia and has significant natural, cultural, rural and development potential. It comprises the municipalities of Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Lipkovo, Rankovce and Staro Nagorichane, and its location is particularly important because it borders Serbia and Bulgaria. This geography offers opportunities for cross-border cooperation, regional connections and tourism networking with neighbouring areas.

The area has varied terrain comprising basins, river valleys, mountain landscapes, gorges and rural settlements. Notable natural areas include the Osogovo Mountains, Bislim Gorge, the Pchinja and Kriva Reka valleys and other upland and rural spaces suitable for recreation, walking, cycling, excursions and ecotourism.

In population and spatial structure, the region has a pronounced rural character. Many settlements are villages, creating potential for rural tourism, local gastronomy, traditional products, ethnographic attractions and small family businesses. However, this rural character also indicates a need to improve local infrastructure, public services, utility provision and economic opportunities for residents.

Economically, the North-East Region faces development challenges but has potential in agriculture, small businesses, services, tourism, culture and cross-border cooperation. Kumanovo is the largest urban and economic centre, while Kriva Palanka and Kratovo play significant roles in cultural, rural, nature-based and alternative tourism development.

From a tourism perspective, the area has several significant sites and resources. Among the best known are Kokino, Kuklica, Cocev Kamen, Kratovo, Bislim Gorge, Kumanovo Spa, monasteries and numerous rural landscapes. These resources create opportunities for cultural, archaeological, monastery, nature-based, rural, gastronomic, active and alternative tourism.

Main characteristics of the area

Characteristic	Description
Geographical location	North-eastern part of the country, with opportunities for cross-border cooperation

Characteristic	Description
Municipalities	Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Lipkovo, Rankovce and Staro Nagorichane
Relief	Basins, river valleys, gorges, upland and rural spaces
Natural assets	Osogovo Mountains, Bislim Gorge, Pchinja, Kriva Reka, natural landscapes
Settlements	Predominantly rural structure with numerous villages
Tourism potential	Kokino, Kuklica, Cocev Kamen, Kratovo, monasteries, spa, rural areas
Development opportunities	Rural tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, gastronomy, active tourism
Main challenges	Insufficient tourism infrastructure, weak promotion, limited accommodation capacity, need for better coordination
Bulgarian area	Kyustendil Municipality and Nevestino Municipality; specific pilot areas of Hisarlaka and St Anna near Smolichano.
Complementarity	Spa and museum services in Kyustendil, Hisarlaka forest park, Kadin Bridge, rural hosts and sacred-natural heritage in Nevestino.
Differences in readiness	Hisarlaka: extensive amenities with organisational and interpretation gaps. St Anna: basic rest area, but insufficient information and sanitary facilities and services.

The area's general characteristics show that the North-East Planning Region has significant development potential, especially in tourism, rural development and use of natural and cultural heritage. The region has authentic sites, varied landscapes, rich heritage and rural areas that can become a recognisable tourism offering. This requires planned site improvements, better tourism infrastructure, stronger promotion and alignment with sustainable development principles.

Kyustendil and Nevestino within the joint area

Kyustendil is an urban, cultural and spa centre on the Bulgarian side of the area. The city links ancient Pautalia and medieval Velbazhd with mineral waters, museums, the gallery and the suburban Hisarlaka forest park. Rural parts of the municipality are associated with fruit growing, local crafts and mountain landscapes.

Nevestino has a more pronounced rural and dispersed character. Kadin Bridge and the Struma shape its distinctive local setting, while St Anna near Smolichano is a smaller sacred and natural site. The significant difference in services between Kyustendil city and the rural areas means that a single infrastructure model cannot be applied to every location.

Municipal records for June 2026 indicate 97,480 overnight stays in Kyustendil Municipality in 2025 compared with 45,300 in 2022, and 1,700 in Nevestino Municipality in 2025 compared with 790 in 2022. These figures have not been independently verified. They do not represent visitor numbers for Hisarlaka or St Anna and do not include day-trippers.

3.2. Tourism resources and attractions

The North-East Planning Region has rich cultural, historical, archaeological, religious and natural heritage, forming a significant part of its tourism offering. Tourism resources are distributed across all municipalities and include sites from different historical periods, natural phenomena, religious buildings, traditional settlements and mountain areas.

Kokino Megalithic Observatory

Kokino lies within Staro Nagorichane Municipality at approximately 1,000 metres above sea level. It is a Bronze Age archaeological complex on a volcanic hill with distinctive rock formations. Archaeological research indicates that the site was used to observe the movements of the Sun and Moon and to perform rituals.

The complex comprises several rocky platforms, stone seats and natural openings in the rocks that served as reference points for astronomical observations. The site offers broad panoramic views over surrounding mountain landscapes and valleys.

Stone Dolls – Kuklica

The Stone Dolls are located near Kuklica village in Kratovo Municipality. This natural phenomenon consists of more than one hundred stone pillars of various shapes and heights, formed through long-term geological and erosional processes.

Local traditions associate the stone pillars with several legends passed down through generations. The site is known for its distinctive landscape and is one of North Macedonia’s best-known natural attractions.

Cocev Kamen

Cocev Kamen is located in the area of the village of Shopsko Rudare, in Kratovo Municipality. The site consists of massive rock formations with recorded traces of prehistoric use, cave spaces, hollows and rock art.

Archaeological investigations have uncovered remains indicating use of the area in various historical periods. The site has distinctive terrain and panoramic views of the surrounding landscape.

Town of Kratovo

Kratovo is one of Macedonia's oldest towns, situated in the crater of an extinct volcano. It is known for its traditional architecture, stone bridges and medieval towers.

Kratovo was historically an important mining centre, with urban development closely linked to mining and trade. Several historic structures survive, including the Clock Tower, Simkjeva Tower, Radin Bridge, Grofchanski Bridge and other architectural monuments.

The historic urban core forms a distinctive setting of narrow cobbled streets, traditional houses and public spaces bearing witness to the town's centuries-long development.

Monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo

The Monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo is located near Kriva Palanka on the slopes of the Osogovo Mountains. Dedicated to the hermit saint Joachim of Osogovo, it is one of the country's most important Orthodox monasteries.

The complex includes several church buildings, residential quarters and landscaped courtyards. Built in the nineteenth century, the main church features monumental architecture and rich interior decoration. The monastery hosts religious gatherings, celebrations and pilgrimage visits throughout the year.

St George's Church – Staro Nagorichane

St George's Church in Staro Nagorichane is an important monument of medieval religious architecture. Restored in the early fourteenth century by Serbian King Milutin, it contains extensive frescoes ranked among the region's most significant achievements of Byzantine art.

Built of stone and brick, the church is a characteristic example of late-medieval Byzantine architecture.

ASNOM Memorial Centre – Pelince

The ASNOM Memorial Centre is located in Pelince village near the border with the Republic of Serbia. Built to commemorate the First Session of ASNOM, the complex contains museum displays, exhibition spaces and memorials associated with modern Macedonian history.

Cultural and commemorative events are organised within the complex throughout the year.

Osogovo Mountains

The Osogovo Mountains extend along eastern North Macedonia and form one of the country's largest mountain massifs. They feature dense forests, pastures, mountain streams and diverse plant and animal life.

Osogovo contains several mountain settlements, picnic sites, viewpoints and natural landscapes. Its scenery varies throughout the year, from spring and summer woodland settings to snowy winter landscapes.

Rural settlements and traditional heritage

Rural areas of Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, Staro Nagorichane and Lipkovo retain traditional lifestyles, architecture, crafts and local customs. Many villages have authentic stone and wooden houses, traditional farming practices and local gastronomy.

The rural area forms an important part of the North-East Planning Region's cultural landscape and reflects the historical development of settlements and local ways of life.

Tourism resources in Kyustendil and Nevestino municipalities include archaeological sites, historic structures, religious buildings, museum and gallery collections, mineral springs, mountain landscapes and river valleys. Kyustendil is distinguished by its urban cultural heritage, mineral waters and Hisarlaka forest park, while Nevestino's notable assets include Kadin Bridge, rural and natural landscapes and the St Anna religious-natural complex near Smolichano.

Kyustendil Municipality

Hisarlaka Fortress and Forest Park

Hisarlaka lies on the hill of the same name, approximately two kilometres south-east of central Kyustendil. Its principal cultural and historical attraction is the late-antique and medieval fortress, built in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Preserved and partly reconstructed fortress walls, towers and entrances present defensive architecture and the site's centuries of use.

The fortress and surrounding woodland form a shared cultural-natural whole. Archaeological features are complemented by the park setting, walking opportunities and panoramic views of the city and Kyustendil Basin. Hisarlaka is simultaneously a place for exploring cultural heritage, walking and recreational stays close to the city.

Hisarlaka Fortress.

Ancient heritage and Roman Baths

The Roman Baths lie in the central urban area and are significant physical remains of ancient Pautalia. Dating from the second–third centuries, the complex contains remains of rooms and structural elements of a Roman public bath. The baths attest to the long tradition of mineral water use and the city's urban development in the Roman period.

Their location within the urban core allows spatial connections with other historic buildings, including Ahmed Bey Mosque and Pirkova Tower. These structures represent different historical layers of Kyustendil and form part of its distinctive cultural setting.

Museums, galleries and religious heritage

The Academician Yordan Ivanov Regional History Museum presents the archaeological, historical and ethnographic heritage of Kyustendil and its surroundings. The museum offer also includes the Dimitar Peshev and Ilyo Voyvoda house museums, devoted to particular individuals and periods in local and national history.

The medieval Church of St George is an important religious heritage attraction with preserved historical architecture and wall paintings. The museum also offers a virtual tour of its interior.

The Vladimir Dimitrov – The Master Art Gallery is a distinct cultural attraction. It exhibits works by the artist, known for intense colour, portraits and rural-life motifs. The gallery complements the city's historical offer with fine-art content.

Mineral waters and Osogovo landscapes

Mineral waters are one of Kyustendil's fundamental natural resources and are linked to its spa tradition. Their use is evident in the city's historical heritage and its contemporary balneological, spa and wellness offer.

Osogovo's mountain landscapes complement the urban tourism offering with forests, open mountain spaces and places to spend time in nature. The Bulgarian side of the mountain has marked tourism routes, rest areas and ski slopes. These facilities support walking, hiking, picnics and seasonal winter activities.

Nevestino Municipality

Kadin Bridge

Kadin Bridge, built in 1470 over the Struma River in Nevestino, is one of the municipality's main cultural and historical attractions. Approximately 100 metres long, the stone bridge has five arches and a raised central section. An inscription associated with its construction survives on the bridge.

In addition to its architectural value, the bridge is associated with local legends and traditions forming part of the area's intangible heritage. The river and riverside setting enhance its significance as a recognisable sightseeing and photography location.

Kadin Bridge

St Anna Religious Complex near Smolichano

Within the territory of Smolichano village is the religious complex known as St Anna, or St Yana, associated with the Church of Sts Joachim and Anna. The complex was built on the foundations of a medieval church and lies above a rocky area with a waterfall and holy spring.

The religious heritage, springs and surrounding natural setting form a single site ensemble. The place is linked to local beliefs and traditions and is significant for religious visits and spending time in nature.

St Anna

Waterfall and natural setting of Smolichano

St Anna Waterfall, also called St Yana locally, lies in the lower eastern parts of Osogovo Mountain on the right bank of the Eleshnitsa River. It is associated with karst springs and tufa rocks surrounded by vegetation.

Near the springs is a drinking fountain with twelve spouts. Old walnut and oak trees around the church complement the natural ensemble. The waterfall and religious buildings are neighbouring but distinct features of the site.

The waterfall near Smolichano.

Lilyach and rural-natural sites

Near Lilyach village are the Church of St George the Victorious and adjacent rock formations, including the narrow passage known as the ‘proviralkata’ or squeeze-through rock passage. The site combines natural forms, a religious building and folk traditions.

The municipality’s natural resources are complemented by the Struma and Eleshnitsa valleys, rural landscapes near Pastuh and karst features around Smolichano. The relevant rural landscapes also include the villages of Iliya and Vetren. Cave sites are natural resources, but their existence does not imply that they are equipped for independent tourist visits.

3.3. Natural tourism assets

In addition to the attractions presented in the preceding section, the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino possess further geological, forest and landscape assets. These complement the area’s natural heritage, although not all constitute developed tourism sites with organised access and visitor facilities.

Basalt formations near Mlado Nagorichane

The basalt formations near Mlado Nagorichane village in Staro Nagorichane Municipality are distinctive remnants of former volcanic activity. The site comprises eight hilly elevations, mainly conical with flattened summits. They are remnants of a larger volcanic structure formed by lava flows and further shaped by prolonged erosion.

Their natural value derives from their recognisable landforms and the opportunity to understand the area’s volcanic origins. The site also has educational significance and is used for geology and geography field teaching.

River and valley landscapes in the North-East Region

Additional natural assets include the courses and valley landscapes of the Kriva Reka, Pchinja and Kumanovska Reka, outside the individual sites covered in the previous section. Their landscape comprises riverbeds, riparian vegetation, cultivated land and adjacent hillsides.

In Kriva Palanka and Rankovce, narrow valley sections alternate with the open landscape of Slavishko Pole. In the Kumanovo and Staro Nagorichane areas, river landscapes connect with farmland and low hills. These spaces form part of the region's natural and rural landscape structure, with varying degrees of human influence and development.

Orchard and rural landscapes in Kyustendil Municipality

The basin area of Kyustendil Municipality contains orchards, cultivated land, villages and green belts. Their spatial alternation creates a characteristic agricultural landscape linked to the area's long fruit-growing tradition.

These areas constitute a cultural landscape shaped by interaction between natural conditions and agricultural land use. Their visual character changes throughout the year, particularly during flowering and fruit ripening. Orchards are recorded as a landscape asset, not as confirmation of organised agritourism visits.

Elenin Kamak rock site in Nevestino Municipality

Elenin Kamak is a rock site near Chekanski Bridge with a sheer cliff approximately 15 metres high. A watercourse surrounds the rock on three sides and forms a small pool at its base. Individual black pine trees grow on the upper section.

The combination of rocky terrain, water and surrounding vegetation creates a distinctive natural setting. Folk traditions concerning the origin of its name are also associated with the site.

Old trees in rural Nevestino

Old oak trees are recorded around Dolno Tishanovo and Gorno Tishanovo villages, including the tree known as Margitina Dabitsa. These individual trees stand out for the size of their trunks and crowns and are recognisable local landscape features.

Their value is both natural and cultural, as they are linked to local names, traditions and memories. They add to rural landscape diversity without being equated with infrastructure-equipped tourism attractions.

3.4. Cultural and historical tourism assets

In addition to the sites covered in preceding chapters, the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino have further memorials, archaeological sites, historic buildings and ethnological features. These resources reflect different settlement periods, building traditions and cultural life. Their preservation, research coverage and inclusion in organised tourism vary.

Zebrnjak Memorial Complex

Zebrnjak Monument stands on the hill of the same name near Mlado Nagorichane in Staro Nagorichane Municipality. It was built in 1937 to a design by architect Momir Korunovich as a memorial ossuary dedicated to Serbian soldiers killed in the Battle of Kumanovo in 1912.

The original structure had a monumental tower, destroyed during the Second World War. The surviving lower section and ossuary provide material evidence of interwar memorial architecture. The site has a historical and commemorative function and forms part of the Kumanovo area's military-historical heritage.

Gradishte Archaeological Site near Gradec

The Gradishte archaeological site is located near Gradec village, approximately eight kilometres north-west of Kriva Palanka. Research indicates several settlement phases, from prehistory through late antiquity and the Middle Ages, with particularly prominent late-antique and early Byzantine remains.

The site has been identified as a fortification strategically positioned in relation to routes in use at the time. Architectural remains and movable archaeological finds document its settlement and defensive functions. The strategy's inventory uses the full name 'Gradishte near Gradec' to distinguish it from other sites bearing the same name.

Emfiedzhieva House in Kyustendil

Emfiedzhieva House lies in Kyustendil's old Lozenets neighbourhood, also known as Baglak. An example of Bulgarian National Revival architecture, it houses the museum exhibition 'Urban Life and Culture of Kyustendil's Population in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries'.

The exhibition contains furniture, household goods and objects belonging to prominent and wealthy urban families. Its interior arrangement presents the domestic culture and daily lives of part of the urban population. The building combines architectural and ethnological heritage.

Medieval and religious heritage in rural Nevestino

Several historic churches and fortress remains are recorded in rural Nevestino Municipality. These include the churches of St Ivan and the Holy Mother of God near Pastuh and the fortress at Skaleto. The Church of the Holy Mother of God is associated with the medieval fortress area, where sections of fortress walls also survive.

This cultural and historical heritage is complemented by the cemetery church near Marvodol, the church in the Selishte locality near Vaksevo and Holy Trinity in Rakovo. These buildings represent the religious and settlement heritage of smaller communities. Available municipal information does not provide a unified, updated overview of their physical condition, opening hours or visiting conditions.

Traditional architecture and ethnological heritage

Traditional residential and farm buildings in the joint area's rural settlements form another layer of cultural heritage. The use of stone, wood and other local materials, courtyard layouts and connections between houses and farmland reflect traditional ways of living and working.

Intangible heritage includes local customs, oral traditions, folk songs and dances, craft knowledge and food preparation practices. These form part of local communities' cultural identity. Their presence does not imply that every settlement has active craft workshops, ethnological collections or organised visitor programmes.

3.5. Rural and traditional tourism assets

Rural and traditional tourism assets in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino are linked to villages, agricultural landscapes, local food, architecture and customs. The existing offer includes individual catering and accommodation complexes, guesthouses, tastings and demonstrations of traditional knowledge, with varying levels of organisation between settlements.

In the North-East Planning Region, the rural spatial base comprises village areas of Kumanovo, Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Rankovce, Staro Nagorichane and Lipkovo. Etno Selo Timchevski in Staro Nagorichane Municipality and Etno Restaurant Ranch in Radibush, Rankovce Municipality, combine restaurant services, accommodation and outdoor stays. These are organised rural complexes rather than accommodation in working farm households.

Kratovo offers presentations of its traditional k'cana sol seasoning through preparation demonstrations and tastings with homemade bread. Historic houses, craft traditions and historical settings in Kratovo and Kriva Palanka complement traditional heritage, although located in urban settlements.

In Kyustendil Municipality, rural assets are associated with fruit growing, local gastronomy and crafts. The 'Living Places of Kyustendil' network includes individual services for bread baking and tasting, tea preparation, craft workshops and introductions to agricultural practices. Offerings vary by host and do not constitute a single package available in every village.

In Nevestino Municipality, rural stays are supported by guesthouses and rooms in villages. At St Anna in Smolichano, religious and picnic functions predominate. Unused buildings within the complex are not recorded as active accommodation facilities. No unified network of rural households with coordinated services and visiting conditions is documented across the joint area.

3.6. Spa, health and wellness potential

The joint area's spa and wellness offer is based on thermal mineral springs and facilities using them for balneological, spa and recreational services. A distinction exists between the natural resource, an organised wellness offer and specialised healthcare services.

In the North-East Planning Region, notable springs are found in Proevce near Kumanovo and Strnovac in Staro Nagorichane Municipality. In Proevce, Kumanovo Spa combines hotel accommodation, a restaurant and wellness facilities. In Strnovac, outdoor mineral-water pools and supporting gastronomic services are available. The organised spa and wellness offer is concentrated in a small number of establishments, and there is no evidence of a broader network of specialised medical tourism services.

Kyustendil has a more developed balneological and spa segment, with hotel packages combining accommodation and spa services. Urban mineral springs have temperatures of approximately 73 °C. Nevestino has a mineral spring temperature of approximately 29 °C, but no comparable volume of organised spa services is documented.

The Health Alley at Hisarlaka is a recreational facility complementing stays in Kyustendil. The holy spring at St Anna forms part of religious and cultural heritage. These are not medical establishments, and no verified therapeutic properties are attributed to the holy spring.

3.7. Sports and recreation potential

The joint area's sports and recreational base comprises mountain and river landscapes, walking routes, picnic sites and built sports facilities. Activities are geographically dispersed and depend on the season, terrain conditions and individual operators' availability.

In the Kriva Palanka section of the Osogovo Mountains, Kalin Kamen, Carev Vrv and hiking trails are notable. Kalin Kamen has a lake, woodland and open mountain landscapes used for picnics and walking. Bislim Gorge offers walking, exploration of rocky landscapes and visits to panoramic points. The area includes the marked Orashac–Bislim Gorge trail, approximately 10 km long.

The Lipkovo and Glazhnja reservoirs have considerable landscape value, but their primary function is water supply. Their existence does not imply an organised swimming or water sports offer. Kumanovo's built sports base includes municipal swimming pools, a sports hall and local sports club activities.

Kyustendil Municipality offers mountain walks, trekking and seasonal winter activities at Osogovo Fun Park. Hisarlaka combines walking paths, the Health Alley, children's and adventure facilities. The wider area also offers kayaking, canoeing and paragliding services in the wider area, but without sufficiently detailed location and operational information to present all as regular offerings within the strategy's administrative scope.

In Nevestino Municipality, recreation at St Anna is associated with the courtyard, covered rest area and visits to the natural setting. No organised sports service is documented at the site itself.

3.8. Events, festivals and local products

The events offer in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino includes music and theatre festivals, folklore gatherings, art colonies, gastronomic events, bazaars and religious gatherings. Events take place in cultural institutions, squares, religious complexes and open spaces.

Kumanovo's notable events include the Days of Comedy International Theatre Festival and the International Tamburitza Festival. Kriva Palanka hosts Kriva Palanka Cultural Summer, the folklore festival, art colony and St Joachim of Osogovo theatre festival, the Palanechka Trojka children's folklore festival, Osogovo Old Town Evening and the New Year Bazaar. Kratovo hosts Golden Days, while the Kratovo Potato Festival is also recorded in tourism documentation.

Local gastronomy is represented by Kratovo's k'cana sol seasoning, potato specialities and traditional dishes in traditional-style restaurants. Visitors engage through tastings, demonstrations, sales and restaurant services. These activities do not imply an established joint quality label or protected geographical origin.

Kyustendil and surrounding settlements host the Cherry Festival, Fertility Festival, Balkanska Cherga in Shishkovtsi and Hisarlaka Experience. Their programmes combine fruit growing,

folklore, crafts and local food. Organisers' attendance estimates differ from official tourism statistics.

The St Anna area hosts visits and gatherings linked to religious holidays and the local community. No regular tourism festival at the site itself is documented in the analysed materials. No single updated calendar combining events, locations and visiting conditions is presented for the whole area.

3.9. Existing tourism infrastructure

Existing tourism infrastructure in the joint area includes accommodation and catering establishments, museums, exhibition spaces, monastery guest quarters, information facilities, trails, spa complexes and public spaces. Provision is uneven: some sites have several interconnected services, while others have isolated infrastructure elements.

In the North-East Planning Region, the St Joachim of Osogovo monastery complex has guest accommodation, a restaurant and parking. An information centre has been built at Kuklica, and walking and information facilities are recorded in Bislim Gorge. Kumanovo Spa and individual rural complexes combine accommodation, food and recreation.

In Kyustendil, tourism infrastructure is linked to the urban cultural and hotel-spa offer. Hisarlaka has alleys, stairs, lighting, benches, tables, waste bins, children's facilities, a stage and toilets. Catering and souvenir services are reported near the older car park. Shortcomings concern entrance signs, orientation and connecting individual facilities into a clear integrated tourism area.

At St Anna in Nevestino, there are a church complex, drinking fountain, basic outdoor amenities and a covered rest area. Fully organised reception, parking, information and sanitary facilities and services are not confirmed. Unused buildings form part of the physical stock but are not functional tourism facilities.

3.10. State of tourist signage and interpretation

Tourist signage across the joint area comprises direction signs, information boards, tourist maps and walking route markings. Interpretation is provided through museum displays, guides, educational content and digital presentations. Systems were developed separately, and no unified cross-border network with coordinated content and design is documented.

The North-East Planning Region has recorded tourist information maps and signs in Bislim Gorge, information and educational facilities at Kuklica and digital presentations for individual sites. Coverage by information boards and directional signs is insufficient. No complete updated overview exists of their physical condition, legibility, language coverage or maintenance regularity.

Hisarlaka has direction signs, a marked Health Alley and fortress information boards. Recorded shortcomings include the absence of a complete site map, insufficient entrance signs and inconsistent information about other facilities. At St Anna, individual signs are reported along the approach, but an entrance board, interpretation panels and clear waterfall directions are missing.

Tactile elements, audio interpretation and information adapted to visitors with different needs are only sparsely documented. An installed board or digital presentation does not itself provide complete orientation and understandable presentation of all attractions.

3.11. State of accommodation facilities

Accommodation in the joint area includes hotels, family hotels, guesthouses, rooms, apartments, mountain huts, monastery accommodation and facilities within rural complexes. The structure and scale of the offer differ between urban, spa and village areas.

Facilities listed in the North-East Planning Region include Kumanovo Spa in Kumanovo, Hotel Kratis in Kratovo, guest quarters at the Monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo, Etno Selo Timchevski and Etno Ranch in Radibush. There is no single updated list with comparable data on operational status, categorisation, rooms and beds, seasonal operation and accessible accommodation units.

National Tourism Register data for June 2026 indicate that Kyustendil Municipality has 4 hotels, 10 family hotels, 1 hostel, 41 guesthouses, 1 bungalow complex, 2 mountain huts and 40 establishments offering rooms or apartments. Nevestino Municipality has 8 guesthouses, 1 boarding house and 2 establishments offering rooms in rural settlements. These figures represent the register at the stated time, not daily accommodation availability.

Data for the entire Kyustendil District are not equated with capacity in the two municipalities. No combined total capacity is calculated from datasets compiled using different methodologies. At St Anna, there is no confirmation that unused buildings provide overnight accommodation.

3.12. State of catering facilities

Catering infrastructure includes hotel restaurants, traditional and traditional-style restaurants, café-bars and venues for celebrations and group visits. In the North-East Planning Region, facilities are present in Kumanovo, Kratovo and Kriva Palanka and in individual rural complexes in Staro Nagorichane and Rankovce.

The registered offering comprises 204 registered catering establishments in Kyustendil Municipality and 5 in Nevestino Municipality. This difference indicates the scale of the registered offer, but establishment numbers do not establish seat numbers, daily operation or capacity to host organised groups.

At Hisarlaka, catering services are recorded near the older car park. For St Anna, there is no confirmed immediately available restaurant service. The covered area and self-service barbecue spots are picnic amenities, not catering establishments.

Establishment information is published through their websites, social media and commercial platforms. Multilingual menus, special dietary arrangements, entrance and toilet accessibility and group capacity are not consistently specified. The lack of comparable data prevents a reliable assessment of restaurant seating shortages by municipality.

3.13. State of tourist information and visitor centres

Information services across the joint area are provided through individual tourist information centres, cultural institutions, municipal services and websites. A physical tourist centre, an urban information service and an online presentation are distinct forms of information provision.

Kuklica has an information centre intended for information, education and presentation of souvenirs and promotional materials. It has no fixed opening hours. Kratovo has a tourist

information centre. Updated information on staffing, languages, seasonal availability and visitor numbers is not consolidated for these services.

In Kyustendil, tourism information is available through the destination portal and local institutions. A separate integrated tourist centre at Hisarlaka is not confirmed as operational in the analysed situation. At St Anna, a tourist centre is likewise listed as a proposal rather than an existing service.

No functionally connected cross-border network of centres with coordinated information, opening hours and services is documented. The absence of clear operational data limits visitors' ability to plan on-site information support in advance.

3.14. State of public tourism spaces

Public spaces used for tourist visits include squares, riverfront promenades, pedestrian areas, parks and the surroundings of cultural and religious buildings. Their tourism function complements everyday use by local residents.

In Kriva Palanka, the town square and Kriva Reka riverfront host events, bazaars and public gatherings. Kumanovo's town square hosts music and other events. Kratovo's notable spaces include Pavel Shatev Square, the area outside Lazar Sofiyanov Cultural Centre, historic-core streets and spaces around towers and bridges.

The ASNOM Memorial Complex in Pelince, Staro Nagorichane Municipality, combines a museum, park areas, playgrounds and an amphitheatre. Open spaces serve commemorative, picnic and recreational functions. In Rankovce, Lipkovo and other Staro Nagorichane settlements, visits are associated with central village spaces and areas around religious and cultural buildings, without a single tourism-focused urban core.

In Kyustendil, Hisarlaka is a public park and cultural-recreational space with several entrances, alleys, rest facilities and an amphitheatre stage. Observed shortcomings include movement outside marked alleys and hazardous sections, particularly near the stage.

At St Anna, visitors use both the churchyard and the covered space across the road. The waterfall path is separate, with no unified reception and orientation system. Tourist use of the courtyard does not mean the entire complex has municipal public-space status.

Accessibility varies across the joint area. Level sections allow easier movement, while stairs, slopes, uneven surfaces and discontinuous pedestrian connections limit independent visits.

3.15. State of recreational, picnic and sports facilities

Built recreational and picnic facilities include walking trails, rest areas, playgrounds, swimming pools, sports facilities and outdoor amenities. Their condition is distinct from sites' natural potential and depends on maintenance and use.

In the North-East Planning Region, Kalin Kamen and the Kriva Palanka mountain area have trails and picnic spaces. Bislim Gorge has recorded marked trails, sport-climbing routes and kayaking and cycling activities. There is no full schedule or confirmation of continuous availability of all activities. Kumanovo has indoor and outdoor municipal swimming pools and a sports hall.

At Hisarlaka, walking, children's and picnic facilities are combined with cultural visits. The adventure park is listed as built, but complete operational information is not provided. The zoo is presented as undergoing modernisation and is not considered a completed new attraction.

At St Anna, the main organised picnic feature is the new covered area with seating and two barbecue spots. Benches, tables and waste bins are recorded in the courtyard. No additional specialised sports or adventure installation is documented.

For natural and picnic sites, there are no fully consolidated data on equipment condition, sanitary facilities and services, rescue services and accessibility. Individual investments do not ensure equal functionality at every location.

3.16. Digital tourism infrastructure

Digital tourism infrastructure comprises municipal and project websites, tourism portals, virtual tours and establishment profiles on social media and booking platforms. Information is distributed across several independent channels with varying detail and update frequency.

The North-East Planning Region has digital site presentations and a tourism website for Kriva Palanka. Municipal websites publish information on events, landmarks and projects, while private establishments use their own promotion and booking channels.

Information for Kyustendil and Nevestino is available through visit-kyustendil.eu, municipal websites and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Hotel spa packages are also presented on sales platforms. A complete site map is recorded as missing at Hisarlaka, while tourist information for St Anna is insufficiently systematised.

No unified cross-border system with verified locations, opening hours, contacts, service connections and clear update responsibilities is documented. QR signs, audio guides and multilingual interactive content are not systematically provided. Proposed digital kiosks and new interactive solutions are not presented as existing infrastructure.

Verified information on step-free entrances, ramps, lifts, accessible paths, adapted toilets and parking spaces is particularly lacking. Existing digital presentations often do not enable visitors with disabilities to determine beforehand which services they can use independently.

3.17. Management, maintenance and institutional capacity

Tourism infrastructure management is distributed among municipalities, public and cultural institutions, religious communities, private operators and civil society organisations. Responsibilities vary according to each facility's ownership, purpose and status.

In the North-East Planning Region, the Development Centre plays a role in preparing and implementing regional projects. Municipalities and local institutions carry out cultural, tourism and public-space activities. There is no consolidated information on site staffing, operating costs or maintenance schedules. Visible project activity alone does not allow assessment of day-to-day management capacity.

In Kyustendil and Nevestino, participating bodies include municipal administrations, the district administration within its competences, the museum, community cultural centres, tourism and craft organisations, forestry bodies and educational institutions. There are 14 registered travel agents in Kyustendil Municipality, none in Nevestino, and 5 registered tourist and mountain

guides across the destination. These figures do not represent the workforce maintaining public sites.

At Hisarlaka, park management, cultural heritage, recreational installations and commercial services overlap. At St Anna, the division is not fully clarified between the division between church, municipal and potentially other property. Neither site has a complete operating budget or confirmed staffing structure presented.

No unified cross-border mechanism for day-to-day management and maintenance is documented. Responsibility remains with the competent owners and operators, and available information does not allow comparable assessment of their operational resources.

3.18. Main shortcomings and constraints

The principal characteristic of the current situation is uneven infrastructure provision. Hotels, spas and certain monastery and rural complexes have several interconnected services, while some natural and cultural sites have only individual paths, boards or rest areas.

There is no single updated overview of active tourism establishments, their capacity, opening hours, sanitary provision, accessibility and responsible operators. For some infrastructure, completed investments are known, but current condition and maintenance regularity are not. Missing information does not automatically mean a service is absent, but it reduces certainty when planning a visit.

Signage and interpretation are inconsistent, information services are spatially and organisationally separated, and digital content is distributed across independent platforms. No fully connected cross-border tourism product with coordinated operational information is documented.

At Hisarlaka, the main shortcoming is insufficient integration and presentation of existing facilities, alongside limitations in orientation and safe movement. At St Anna, shortcomings also concern basic reception, parking, signage and sanitary facilities and services. Differences between sites prevent their infrastructure conditions from being assessed as identical.

Accessibility for persons with disabilities is partial and inadequately documented. The very limited provision of adapted toilets is a particularly pronounced problem in the North-East Planning Region. Facilities in Kyustendil and Nevestino lack a complete individual overview, so an identical general assessment cannot be applied to all establishments.

Additional constraints include incompletely clarified property relations, insufficient operating-budget and staffing data, high investment costs and complex documentation for interventions affecting natural and cultural heritage. These circumstances affect management, maintenance and functional use of existing assets.

3.19. Accessibility of hotels, restaurants and heritage sites

Accessibility of tourism establishments across the joint area is uneven and cannot be determined solely by the possibility of reaching a site. It encompasses the access route, entrance, movement within the building, use of principal services and sanitary facilities.

Accessibility adaptations are very limited in the North-East Planning Region. At some hotels, restaurants and heritage buildings, physical access results from their position at surrounding

ground level. A step-free entrance to one room does not mean the entire establishment is adapted for persons with disabilities.

In some hotels, reception, restaurants or other ground-floor rooms are directly accessible from outside. Access to upper floors is limited where a suitable lift is absent. Adapted rooms and bathrooms for wheelchair users are very scarce within the analysed region.

In restaurants, some dining rooms and summer terraces are at ground level. Elsewhere, stairs, thresholds and changes in level restrict access. Interior movement also depends on door and passage widths and furniture arrangement. Access ramps and other adaptations are rare.

At monuments, religious buildings and historic structures, limitations relate to construction, terrain and surrounding landscaping. Stairs, uneven stone surfaces, narrow entrances and high thresholds often restrict interior access even where courtyards or outdoor areas are partly accessible.

A particularly pronounced shortcoming in the North-East Planning Region is the almost complete absence of adapted toilets in the analysed area. Toilets with suitable entrance width, manoeuvring space, grab rails and accessible sanitary equipment are very rare. This limits longer and independent stays even at establishments with accessible entrances.

Some hotels, restaurants and heritage buildings in Kyustendil and Nevestino have suitable access infrastructure, particularly higher-category hotels.

The current tourism infrastructure situation is characterised by partial physical access and insufficient infrastructure for fully independent use. Accessibility varies by individual establishment, route and service.

4. Existing tourism offering and tourism products

Site/establishment	Tourism offering	Description of the offer
Historic urban core of Kratovo	Cultural tourism, town walks and day visits	Exploring medieval towers, stone bridges, traditional architecture and historic streets. Kratovo features in organised tours connecting it with Kuklica and Kokino.
Shancheva Traditional House, Kratovo	Traditional accommodation, gastronomic and educational experiences	Overnight stays in a traditional house, introduction to local heritage and presentation of Kratovo's k'cana sol seasoning and its preparation.
Hotel Kratis, Kratovo	Accommodation, gastronomic offer and short stays	Hotel accommodation and a restaurant serving traditional dishes. The establishment serves visitors staying in Kratovo and exploring the surroundings.
Kuklica, Kratovo Municipality	Visits to natural landmarks and thematic excursions	Viewing stone pillars and distinctive natural formations, photography and learning local legends. The site features in tourism programmes alongside Kratovo and Kokino.
Kokino, Staro Nagorichane Municipality	Archaeological, cultural and educational tourism	Visiting the archaeological site, exploring rocky positions and learning about its significance and interpretations associated with ancient sky observations. A virtual tour is also available.
St George's Church, Staro Nagorichane	Cultural and religious tourism	Viewing medieval religious architecture and frescoes. The church is included in some organised cultural and historical tours through the region.
ASNOM Memorial Complex, Pelince	Memorial, educational, family and event tourism	Visiting the museum exhibition and learning about ASNOM, spending time in the park and using picnic and children's facilities. The complex has an amphitheatre and hosts commemorative events.
NI Museum Kumanovo	Cultural and educational tourism	Viewing archaeological, historical and ethnological exhibitions and learning about cultural heritage and life in the Kumanovo area.
Kumanovo Art Gallery	Cultural and exhibition tourism	Visits to art exhibitions and other cultural offerings in accordance with the institution's exhibition programme.
Kumanovo — festival and cultural venues	Event tourism	Attending the International Tamburitza Festival, Days of Comedy and other cultural events. Availability is tied to event programmes and dates.
Kumanovo Spa, Kumanovo	Spa and wellness tourism, accommodation and short stays	Accommodation, restaurant, mineral-water pool, sauna, steam bath and massage services. The offer combines relaxation and accommodation in one complex.
Monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo, Kriva Palanka	Religious, cultural, mountain and weekend tourism	Visiting monastery churches, viewing architecture and frescoes, spending time in the complex and overnight stays in available accommodation.
Kriva Palanka Town Museum	Cultural and educational tourism	Visiting museum displays and exhibitions and learning about the history, traditions and cultural heritage of the Kriva Palanka area.
Kalin Kamen and surrounding Osogovo landscapes	Mountain, nature-based and sports and recreational tourism	Walks and mountain excursions towards the summit and lakes of Kalin Kamen, Vlashki Kolibi, Vlashka Mandra and Carev Vrv. The area includes rest areas, a small sports ground and accommodation for small groups, although their current availability is unconfirmed.

Site/establishment	Tourism offering	Description of the offer
Stanechki Waterfalls, Kriva Palanka Municipality	Nature-based and excursion tourism	Waterfall visits, walking and landscape photography. An infrastructure intervention on the access trail is documented, but insufficient updated information exists on its full functionality and maintenance.
St Theodore Tyron Church, Konopnica	Religious, traditional and event tourism	During the Brides' Pilgrimage, a local custom is presented with brides and mothers-in-law wearing traditional costumes. Visits depend on the event date.
Ranch Ethno Complex, Rankovce Municipality	Rural, gastronomic, family and weekend tourism	Accommodation, restaurant, walking and rest space, pond, mini-zoo and children's facilities. The offer combines dining and overnight stays with recreation in a natural setting.
Rankovce and surrounding settlements	Recreational cycling	Cycling routes through settlements and natural landscapes are available on digital platforms. These are routes for independent travel, not a confirmed network of purpose-built, fully marked cycle paths.
Lake Lipkovo, Glazhnja and the Lipkovska Reka valley	Nature-based and excursion tourism	Viewing lakeside and river landscapes, walking in accessible sections and fishing where permitted and in accordance with applicable regulations. Swimming, boating and organised water activities are not presented as confirmed services; restrictions relating to water supply and management must be checked.
Hisarlaka Fortress and Forest Park, Kyustendil	Cultural, nature-based, family and excursion tourism	Visits to restored fortress sections, walks along alleys, rest on benches and in shelters, panoramic views and children's facilities. Lighting, toilets and catering services exist near the older entrance; full accessibility is unconfirmed.
Health Alley, Hisarlaka	Recreational walking	Marked walking trail within the forest park, complementing urban and spa stays. It is not a medical programme.
Adventure Park, Hisarlaka	Recreational infrastructure	Newly built and fenced under the project. Opening hours, conditions of use and full operational status have not been established.
Open-air stage, Hisarlaka	Cultural events and panoramic sightseeing	Stage with amphitheatre seating and views towards Kyustendil, near medieval church remains.
Urban cultural heritage, Kyustendil	Cultural and educational tourism	Ancient Pautalia baths, museum facilities, the Vladimir Dimitrov – The Master Gallery, and religious and historic buildings. Specific visiting times are established with managers.
Balneological and spa establishments, Kyustendil	Spa, wellness and short stays	Packages with accommodation and spa services offered by hotel operators and sales platforms. Services vary by establishment and are not equated with medical treatment.
Osogovo landscapes in Kyustendil Municipality	Mountain and active tourism	Mountain walks, trekking and seasonal winter activities, including Osogovo Fun Park. Availability depends on the operator and season.
Living Places of Kyustendil – local hosts	Rural, gastronomic, craft and educational tourism	Individual experiences involving bread baking, tea preparation, crafts, sustainable farming practices and wellness sessions. An identical offer is not assumed for all members.

Site/establishment	Tourism offering	Description of the offer
Kyustendil and Shishkovtsi – events	Event and gastronomic tourism	Cherry Festival, Fertility Festival, Balkanska Cherga and Hisarlaka Experience. Offerings are linked to specific events and their programmes.
Roman Baths of Pautalia, Kyustendil	Archaeological and educational tourism	Viewing the remains of the ancient public bath from the second–third centuries, rooms and underfloor heating system. The site presents ancient urban and spa traditions.
Academician Yordan Ivanov Regional History Museum, Kyustendil	Museum, cultural and educational tourism	Archaeological and numismatic exhibitions and other museum offerings on local history. Visits and exhibitions follow the museum's programme and opening hours.
St George's Church, Kolusha, Kyustendil	Medieval heritage and educational visits	Viewing medieval church architecture and wall paintings within the museum complex. A museum virtual tour is also available.
Dimitar Peshev House Museum, Kyustendil	Historical and memorial tourism	Museum visit dedicated to Dimitar Peshev and the involvement of Kyustendil figures in opposing the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. The exhibition presents documents and historical evidence.
Ilyo Voyvoda House Museum, Kyustendil	Historical and educational tourism	Visit to the historic house and museum exhibition associated with Ilyo Voyvoda and liberation movements. Visiting conditions are established with the Regional History Museum.
Emfiedzhieva House, Kyustendil	Ethnological heritage; temporarily unavailable exhibition	Historic house with an exhibition on urban life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is temporarily closed for repairs and is therefore not routinely available to visit.
Vladimir Dimitrov – The Master Gallery, Kyustendil	Fine art and exhibition tourism	Viewing works by Vladimir Dimitrov – The Master and exhibitions by other artists. The permanent collection and temporary exhibitions present the city's artistic tradition.
Vladimir Dimitrov – The Master House Museum, Shishkovtsi	Memorial, cultural and rural tourism	Visit to an exhibition on the painter's life and work in Shishkovtsi, presenting links between the artist, village and local rural setting.
Pirkova Tower, Kyustendil	Medieval architecture and urban walks	Viewing the medieval defensive tower in the central urban area. Interior visits are not assumed to be continuously available and depend on opening arrangements.
Ahmed Bey Mosque, Kyustendil	Architectural heritage and exhibitions	Viewing the historic building and visiting exhibitions when the exhibition hall is open. The building is included among the museum's exhibition venues for 2026.
Fatih Sultan Mehmed Mosque, Kyustendil	Architectural heritage and exterior sightseeing	Historic building in central Kyustendil on Tsar Osvoboditel Street. Included for exterior viewing; regular tourist access to the interior is unconfirmed.
Dormition of the Mother of God Church, Kyustendil	Religious and cultural tourism	Visiting the town church built in 1816 and viewing its religious architecture while respecting worship arrangements.
St Luke's Monastery, Granitsa	Religious and excursion tourism	Visiting the monastery complex near Granitsa village and spending time in the surrounding natural setting. Accommodation or restaurant services are not assumed without confirmation from the manager.

Site/establishment	Tourism offering	Description of the offer
Old beech forest near Granitsa	Nature-based and educational tourism	Exploring the woodland landscape near St Luke's Monastery. The natural resource is not equated with a confirmed fully developed and accessible tourism trail.
Strimon Garden Medical Spa Hotel, Kyustendil	Accommodation, spa, wellness and family stays	Hotel accommodation, mineral-water pools, spa facilities and restaurant services. Packages are available; specific services and conditions vary according to the selected package.
Kyustendil Park Hotel	Accommodation, spa and short stays	Hotel rooms, swimming pool, spa facilities and parking in green surroundings near the city. Access to individual services depends on the package and operator's conditions.
Lime House, Kyustendil	Apartment accommodation and wellness	Accommodation apartments and an aqua zone with mineral water, jacuzzi, steam bath and sauna. The salt room is an ancillary wellness facility; no guaranteed health benefits are stated.
Ramira Family Hotel and Restaurant, Kyustendil	Accommodation and gastronomic offer	Hotel accommodation and a restaurant in the city. The establishment combines overnight stays and dining for visitors to Kyustendil and its surroundings.
Friends Bar & Grill, Kyustendil	Restaurant services and urban gastronomy	Restaurant service with a varied menu, including salads, pizzas, Asian dishes and sushi. A menu and delivery service are available online.
Military remains and bunker at Hisarlaka	Military-historical heritage	Early twentieth-century remains survive at the site. No organised interior visit or separate museum service for the bunker is confirmed.
Hisarlaka Zoo	Family and educational infrastructure undergoing modernisation	The facility is undergoing expansion and modernisation. It is not presented as a completed new tourism service; operational status must be confirmed with the manager.
Kadin Bridge and Nevestino	Cultural and excursion tourism	Viewing the historic bridge and Struma riverside setting. The bridge is treated as a cultural attraction, not a transport investment.
St Anna, Smolichano, Nevestino Municipality	Religious, cultural and local excursion tourism	Visiting the Church of Sts Joachim and Anna, the chapel with holy spring, the twelve-spout fountain and memorial. Religious traditions do not constitute medical services; no tourist centre is confirmed.
Rest area near St Anna	Family picnics and relaxation	Newly built covered seating area with two barbecue spots across the access road. It is not a restaurant; use depends on safety and protection rules.
Smolichano Waterfall	Nature visits and photography	Separate point approached near the old school.
Village accommodation in Nevestino Municipality	Rural stays and overnight accommodation	Guesthouses, a boarding house and room establishments listed in the tourism register. There is no confirmation of accommodation in unused buildings near St Anna.
Church of St George the Victorious and rock formations, Lilyach	Religious, nature-based and traditional tourism	Visiting the church and squeeze-through rock passage. Local traditions are cultural content, not verified health benefits.

Site/establishment	Tourism offering	Description of the offer
Elenin Kamak, Nevestino Municipality	Nature sightseeing and photography	Rock beside the Eleshnitsa River, with a pool and surrounding vegetation. A fully developed and secured tourist path is unconfirmed.
Gabra Reserve, Tsarvaritsa	Natural heritage and educational interest	Forest reserve with old black pine woodland. Recorded as a natural resource, not a freely accessible recreational park; visits depend on the permitted regime.
Chetirska Cave, Chetirtsi	Speleological heritage	Cave site identified as a local tourism asset. Lighting, guide services and secure tourism infrastructure are unconfirmed; it is not presented as a developed show cave.
Old oak trees, Dolno and Gorno Tishanovo	Nature-based and rural tourism	Local natural landmarks, including Margitina Dabitsa, linked to village landscapes and traditions. No organised tourism service is confirmed.
River landscapes near Pastuh	Picnic and angling interest	The area includes places for relaxation and fishing. An organised package with equipment and a guide is unconfirmed; fishing depends on applicable regulations.
St Ivan's Church, Pastuh	Religious and cultural tourism	Viewing a small medieval single-nave church that has been restored. Interior visits require checking local opening arrangements.
Church of the Holy Mother of God and Skaleto, Pastuh	Medieval and archaeological heritage	Historic church and an area containing fortification remains. The sites are recorded as heritage, without confirmed regular opening hours, guides or fully organised reception.
Historic churches near Marvodol, Vaksevo and Rakovo	Local religious and cultural heritage	Cemetery church near Marvodol, church at Selishte near Vaksevo and Holy Trinity in Rakovo. Consolidated operational information for tourist visits is missing.
Moshteni and Studena Voda prehistoric sites	Archaeological and educational resource	Recorded settlement sites near Nevestino and Vaksevo. No organised open-air museum display or regular tourism service is confirmed.
Mireva House, Nevestino	Rural stays and accommodation	Accommodation is available in Nevestino near the Struma. Published capacity figures differ, so no single bed count is given; availability is confirmed with the host.
Struma Sings Folklore Festival, Nevestino	Event and folklore tourism	Folklore performances and a competition programme. The programme covers the twentieth edition on 22–23 August 2026. The offer is tied to the festival dates.
Mineral springs in Nevestino	Mineral resource and local spa tradition	The municipality has mineral springs and a public bath and laundry. No hotel-spa complex or specialised medical offer is presented without further confirmation.

Cross-border connections and market presence

The two sides of the border have different market structures: the Macedonian side features cultural and nature excursions, while the Bulgarian side features accommodation with spa services in Kyustendil and smaller independent services. Examples include day trips, particularly in the North-East Planning Region, but the available information is insufficient to establish overall market coverage across all three areas.

5. SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis systematises the strengths and weaknesses of tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region, Kyustendil Municipality and Nevestino Municipality, alongside external opportunities and threats affecting its development. It covers the entire area of the three territorial units, including urban centres, rural settlements and cultural, historical and natural sites.

The focus is on infrastructure provision, accommodation and catering capacity, tourism services, signage, digital information, accessibility and management and maintenance conditions. The existence of a tourism resource is distinguished from its readiness for organised, safe and accessible visits.

STRENGTHS

- Diverse cultural, historical and natural heritage in the North-East Planning Region, Kyustendil and Nevestino.
- Complementary cultural, spa, mountain, rural and gastronomic tourism offerings.
- Existing accommodation, catering and spa facilities, particularly in Kyustendil, and tourism facilities in several centres and sites in the North-East Region.
- Museums, galleries, religious buildings, archaeological sites and traditional urban and rural settings.
- Local gastronomy, fruit growing, agricultural products, craft heritage and cultural events.
- Experience in cross-border projects, institutional cooperation and the inclusion of sites in travel agency programmes.

WEAKNESSES

- Uneven infrastructure provision between urban centres, rural settlements and tourism sites.
- Insufficient integration of attractions, accommodation, catering and supporting services into joint tourism products.
- Uneven spatial distribution of facilities and a limited range of services in some rural areas.
- Incomplete signage, interpretation and information on visiting conditions at some sites.
- Limited accessibility for persons with disabilities and insufficient verified information on adapted paths, entrances and sanitary facilities.
- Fragmented digital content, incomplete joint records and insufficiently defined responsibilities and resources for maintaining some infrastructure.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Access to cross-border and other development programmes for tourism infrastructure, heritage and local development.
- Partnerships with travel agencies, associations, educational institutions and private operators.
- Marketing combined cultural, spa, nature-based and rural programmes to wider tourism markets.
- Availability of digital technologies for promotion, booking, navigation and multilingual interpretation.
- Programmes and partnerships for accessible tourism, heritage protection and renovation of existing buildings.
- Knowledge exchange and joint promotion of local products, events and thematic routes.

THREATS

- Uncertain external funding and rising construction, equipment and maintenance costs.
- Competition from better-equipped and better-promoted tourism destinations.
- Market changes, reduced purchasing power and changes in cross-border travel conditions.
- Fires, floods, erosion and extreme weather threatening sites and infrastructure.
- Depopulation, population ageing and labour shortages, especially in rural settlements.
- Vandalism, uncontrolled use of space and conflicting interests in the tourism use of resources.

Strengths

The joint area's principal advantage is the diversity and complementarity of its tourism resources and existing services. The North-East Planning Region has cultural and historical sites, monasteries, traditional urban centres, geological features and mountain landscapes. Kratovo, Kokino, Kuklica and the Monastery of St Joachim of Osogovo form part of this resource base.

Kyustendil Municipality contributes its spa tradition, mineral waters, hotel and wellness facilities, ancient and medieval heritage, museums and galleries. Its offer extends beyond the city to Osogovo landscapes, villages, orchards and local cultural traditions.

Nevestino Municipality complements the joint area with Kadin Bridge, the Struma valley, natural and rural landscapes, religious heritage and local events. These assets enable urban and spa stays to be connected with visits to smaller settlements and natural sites. Existing cross-border cooperation provides an additional institutional basis for joint action.

Weaknesses

The fundamental weakness is uneven development of infrastructure and supporting services. Urban centres and individual tourism complexes have a broader offer, while some rural settlements and sites have limited conditions for visitor reception, information and longer stays.

In the North-East Planning Region, municipalities and sites differ in access, equipment, signage and maintenance. In Kyustendil Municipality, service concentration in the city and individual complexes does not imply equal provision in mountain and village areas. In Nevestino Municipality, resources are geographically dispersed and their connections to accommodation, catering and organised tourism services are limited.

Shared constraints include fragmented digital information, insufficient service integration and limited accessibility. The lack of verified data on sanitary conditions, adaptations and maintenance further complicates planning. As individual examples, Hisarlaka needs better integration and interpretation of existing facilities, while St Anna requires further development of basic tourism support.

Opportunities

External opportunities relate to development funding, cross-border partnerships, digital technologies and cooperation with the tourism sector. Using these opportunities can support connections between the North-East Region's cultural heritage, Kyustendil's spa and cultural offer and Nevestino's natural and rural attractions.

Cooperation with agencies, local hosts, producers and cultural institutions creates opportunities for joint routes, short stays and thematic programmes. Heritage protection, accessibility and local development programmes can support renovation and adaptation of existing buildings, while digital channels enable joint promotion and easier access to information for the entire area.

Threats

Climate and natural risks may damage access roads, walking trails, riverbanks, woodland spaces and cultural heritage. Vandalism and uncontrolled site use further increase protection and maintenance costs.

Depopulation and population ageing reduce staff and local service-provider availability, particularly in rural parts of the three territorial units. Economic changes, rising investment costs and dependence on external funding may delay infrastructure interventions. Competition from other destinations and changes in cross-border travel conditions pose additional risks. These threats are assessed risks, not certain future events.

Conclusion

The SWOT analysis shows that the North-East Planning Region, Kyustendil Municipality and Nevestino Municipality possess a diverse, complementary tourism base. The principal limitation is not a lack of resources but uneven infrastructure provision and insufficient connections between sites and functional, accessible and continuous services.

The strategic approach should cover the entire area, distinguishing the needs of urban centres, rural settlements and natural and cultural sites. The priority is to improve existing infrastructure functionality, accessibility, information and maintenance, alongside clear management responsibilities. Long-term results depend on the three territorial units' ability to connect their different strengths into a coordinated tourism offering benefiting local residents.

6. Vision, mission and strategic objectives

6.1. Vision

The vision is for the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino to develop as a recognisable, sustainable and accessible cross-border tourism area, where cultural and natural heritage is connected with high-quality, functional and well-maintained infrastructure. The area will provide meaningful and safe experiences for all visitors, preserve local identity and deliver long-term benefits to residents on both sides of the border.

6.2. Mission

The strategy's mission is to establish a joint framework for planned improvement, integration and sustainable management of tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino. Through coordinated action by municipalities, the regional centre, public institutions, private operators, religious site managers and local communities, it directs investment into existing facilities and missing services, with specific elaboration for Hisarlaka and St Anna.

Particular emphasis is placed on accessibility for all visitors, high-quality information and interpretation, digital connectivity and clear management and maintenance responsibilities. Tourism sites and services are thereby connected into a coordinated cross-border offer that respects heritage and creates long-term benefits for local residents.

6.3. Overall strategic objective

To improve the quality, functionality, accessibility and sustainability of tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino by upgrading existing facilities, providing new attractions and integrating them into a cross-border tourism offering. Achieving this objective should improve visitor experiences and lengthen stays, preserve natural and cultural heritage and increase benefits for local residents.

6.4. Specific strategic objectives

No	Specific strategic objective	Scope of the objective	Expected result
1	**Improving the functionality and quality of tourism infrastructure**	Developing and equipping sites and public tourism spaces; improving pedestrian access, toilets, rest areas and recreational facilities; upgrading accommodation and catering facilities. Joint scope: functional regional sites, consolidation of Hisarlaka and basic services at St Anna.	More functional, safer and better-equipped tourism facilities and spaces.

No	Specific strategic objective	Scope of the objective	Expected result
2	**Increasing accessibility and inclusiveness of the tourism offering**	Removing physical, information and communication barriers; providing adapted entrances, paths, rooms, toilets and accessible information. Pilot audits and a continuous accessible visitor route where feasible; verified information on remaining barriers.	Greater independence and equal use of tourism facilities by persons with disabilities and visitors with different needs.
3	**Improving tourism information, signage and interpretation**	Coordinated tourist signage, functional information and tourist points, multilingual content and regularly updated visiting information. Coordinated signage and interpretation at the two pilot sites, connected with other destinations.	Easier visitor orientation and better understanding of natural and cultural heritage.
4	**Improving digital accessibility and connectivity of tourism offeringings**	Connecting data on sites, services and events; digital maps and stay-planning tools; publishing verified accessibility information. Joint data model and Macedonian, Bulgarian and English content, with responsible local editors.	Coordinated and accessible digital information facilitating planning and use of the tourism offering.
5	**Spatial and thematic integration of the cross-border tourism offering**	Developing thematic routes and joint programmes connecting sites, accommodation, catering and local products; including rural settlements. Connecting North-East Region sites with Kyustendil, Hisarlaka, Nevestino and St Anna, using verified services.	A more integrated cross-border offer, wider distribution of visits and better conditions for multi-day stays.
6	**Ensuring environmentally sustainable use and protection of tourism spaces**	Waste management, efficient water and energy use, heritage protection and alignment of infrastructure interventions with site sensitivity and natural risks. Specific protection of the forest park and fortress, sacred space, spring and waterfall.	Reduced adverse environmental impacts and more resilient tourism infrastructure.
7	**Strengthening management, maintenance and institutional cooperation**	Defining responsibilities and maintenance funding sources; strengthening staffing; public-private coordination; updated inventory and results monitoring. Coordination among the eight municipalities and regional centre; separate legal and financial responsibility of managers.	More sustainable management, regular maintenance and investment based on verified data and established priorities.

The specific objectives apply throughout the joint area. Hisarlaka and St Anna are pilot sites for their practical elaboration, not substitutes for the needs of other sites. Each objective distinguishes shared tourism service standards from investments justified only at a particular location.

7. Priority areas

Priority areas establish the main directions for improving tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino. They derive from the situation analysis, review of recorded infrastructure and the tourism offering and SWOT analysis, linking the vision, mission and strategic objectives with specific measures and projects.

Their definition is based on the need to improve existing facilities' functionality, provide missing amenities and distribute tourism services more evenly. Priority is given to interventions addressing basic shortcomings, increasing safety and accessibility, preserving heritage and ensuring long-term infrastructure usability.

Priority areas are not isolated sectors. Developing a site, for example, is functional only when connected to appropriate access, sanitary facilities and services, signage, available information and clear maintenance responsibility. The strategy therefore provides an integrated approach to planning and implementing interventions.

Overview of priority areas

Priority area	Content and direction of intervention
1. Developing and equipping tourism sites and public spaces	Improving pedestrian access, rest areas, toilets, street furniture, picnic and recreational facilities. Providing basic conditions for safe, organised visits consistent with site character and sensitivity. Joint scope: functional regional sites, consolidation of Hisarlaka and basic services at St Anna.
2. Accessibility and inclusiveness	Reducing physical, information and communication barriers in public tourism spaces, cultural buildings, accommodation and catering. Particular attention is paid to unobstructed movement and use of adapted toilets. Pilot audits and a continuous accessible visitor route where feasible; verified information on remaining barriers.
3. Tourism information, signage and interpretation	Establishing coordinated signage, improving information points and providing multilingual, accessible content about natural and cultural heritage. Coordinated signage and interpretation at the two pilot sites, connected with other destinations.
4. Digital tourism infrastructure	Connecting and updating tourism information, developing digital maps and interpretation content and improving online visibility of sites and services. Providing clear opening-hour, visiting-condition and accessibility data. Joint data model and Macedonian, Bulgarian and English content, with responsible local editors.
5. Quality and integration of tourism services	Improving accommodation and catering services and connecting them with sites, thematic routes, events and local products. Including rural settlements and creating conditions for longer visitor stays. Connecting North-East Region sites with Kyustendil, Hisarlaka, Nevestino and St Anna, using verified services.

Priority area	Content and direction of intervention
6. Heritage protection and environmental sustainability	Aligning tourism use with protection of natural and cultural assets, better waste management and efficient resource use. Including measures for resilience to climate and other natural risks. Specific protection of the forest park and fortress, sacred space, spring and waterfall.
7. Management, maintenance and institutional capacity	Defining management and maintenance responsibilities, securing financial and staffing support and strengthening intermunicipal cooperation and partnerships. Establishing an updated inventory and system for monitoring conditions and results. Coordination among the eight municipalities and regional centre; separate legal and financial responsibility of managers.

Implementation principles

Implementation of priority areas is guided by accessibility for all, heritage preservation, territorial balance and sustainable use of public funds. Selection of specific interventions considers identified needs, expected benefits for visitors and residents, implementation readiness and prospects for long-term maintenance.

Accessibility, environmental sustainability and maintenance responsibility apply across all priority areas, not merely as separate activity groups. New investments are considered together with opportunities to renovate, adapt and better use existing infrastructure.

Territorial targeting of priorities

In the North-East Planning Region, priority is given to basic gaps in sanitary facilities and services, accessibility, signage and maintenance at selected sites. At Hisarlaka, priorities are consolidating the complex, clear entrances and boundaries, directions between facilities, stage-area safety, interpretation features and assessing conditions for a joint museum and tourist centre.

In the St Anna area, priorities are an entrance point with basic information, sanitary services, organised visitor movement and signage for the separate waterfall approach. These are followed by assessment of converting an unused building and developing a small tourist centre interpreting local heritage. Commercial facilities and picnic use must align with the religious function.

8. Measures and activities

Measures and activities translate the priority areas into specific interventions to improve tourism infrastructure in the North-East Planning Region and the municipalities of Kyustendil and Nevestino. They cover upgrading existing facilities, providing missing amenities, increasing accessibility and strengthening management and maintenance.

Each measure is a complete course of action, while activities define implementation steps. Site selection and intervention scale are based on verified conditions, identified needs, ownership and management relations, protection requirements and technical readiness.

Measures and activities are linked to the specific strategic objectives and priority areas, ensuring clear connections between desired results and concrete interventions. The table identifies each measure's primary strategic objective, although individual measures contribute to several objectives.

Site-specific activities for Hisarlaka and St Anna are incorporated into existing measures, with additional specialised measures for tourist centres, interpretation points and entrance zones. They are strategic proposals, not approved investments. Scope, financing and lead bodies are confirmed after property, technical, conservation and operational checks.

Implementation should be phased, prioritising interventions that address basic safety, sanitary and access shortcomings and restore existing facilities' functionality. In addition to implementation conditions, every investment must identify its manager, required operating funds and post-completion maintenance obligations.

Joint coordination is organised through the Centre for Development of the North-East Planning Region, its six municipalities and Kyustendil and Nevestino municipalities, involving managers and competent institutions. Each partner remains responsible for its assets, permits and maintenance; the joint body has a coordinating rather than supranational regulatory role.

The first phase establishes indicator baselines: functional and accessible toilets, marked entrances, verified trails, serviceable boards, updated digital records and facilities with designated managers and maintenance budgets. Visits, overnight stays and satisfaction are monitored separately by site and municipality using comparable methodology and avoiding double counting. Financial amounts are not set without quantity and cost estimates.

Code	Specific strategic objective	Priority area	Measure	Key activities	Expected result
1.1	**SO1 – Improving the functionality and quality of tourism infrastructure**	Developing and equipping tourism sites	Improving pedestrian access and safety	Field assessment; repair and improvement of trails and stairs; installation of fences, handrails and appropriate lighting; marking hazardous places. Hisarlaka: inspect stairs and the connection to the open-air stage. St Anna: safe pedestrian movement between the courtyard, rest area and separate waterfall approach, without road construction works.	Safer and easier movement to and within sites.
1.2			Providing sanitary and utility support	Construction or reconstruction of public and adapted toilets; waste-bin installation; provision of visitor drinking water where conditions permit; organised cleaning and servicing. Hisarlaka: inspect existing toilets and adaptation options. St Anna: sanitary service and cleaning plan; check water quality before labelling it drinking water.	Improved hygiene conditions and basic visitor services.
1.3			Improving picnic and recreational spaces	Renewal and installation of benches, tables and shelters; development of rest areas and viewpoints; repair of recreation areas and children's facilities; shading and planting. Maintain park amenities at Hisarlaka and the covered rest area at St Anna; rules for barbecue use and fire protection.	Better-maintained spaces for relaxation, recreation and family visits.
1.4			Defining site boundaries and organising entrance areas	Hisarlaka: coordinate components, entrances and site map. St Anna: main reception at the complex and a separately marked waterfall point. Property checks; parking coordination outside the strategy's investment scope.	Clearly defined tourism areas and rules for reception and movement.
2.1	**SO2 – Increasing accessibility and inclusiveness of the tourism offering**	Accessibility and inclusiveness	Accessibility assessment and planning	Checks involving people with different disabilities; recording barriers; preparation of adaptation plans and identification of priority interventions. Separate user-involved audits at both pilot sites: gradients, stairs, entrances, toilets and interpretation accessibility.	Verified basis for systematic barrier removal.
2.2			Physical adaptation of buildings and spaces	Construction of ramps and accessible paths; adaptation of entrances, doors and counters; vertical access where feasible; adaptation of rooms, toilets and parking spaces. Designing a continuous accessible route to main attractions that can be made accessible; alternative interpretation for sections that cannot be physically adapted.	Continuous access to facilities and greater visitor independence.

Code	Specific strategic objective	Priority area	Measure	Key activities	Expected result
2.3			Providing accessible information and services	Preparation of readable materials, audio descriptions, captioned videos and tactile content; publication of accurate accessibility information; staff training in inclusive service. Macedonian, Bulgarian and English information for the joint offer; audio, captions and verified barrier descriptions, avoiding unsupported blanket ‘fully accessible’ labels.	Reduced information and communication barriers.
3.1	**SO3 – Improving tourism information, signage and interpretation**	Tourism information, signage and interpretation	Establishing coordinated tourist signage	Sign inventory; preparation of a plan and unified visual system; installation of direction signs and maps; replacement of damaged and inaccurate boards; assignment of update responsibility. Hisarlaka: complex map and directions at junctions. St Anna: entrance board and signage from the old school to the waterfall.	Clearer orientation and recognisable identification of tourism facilities.
3.2			Improving information and tourist points	Assessment of existing centres; equipment and staffing organisation; opening-hour definition; additional information points in existing buildings where justified. Assess location, ownership, staffing and operating costs for an integrated centre at Hisarlaka and a small centre at St Anna; detailed development under Measure 3.4.	More accessible and reliable destination information.
3.3			Developing heritage presentation content	Preparation of verified multilingual texts, thematic boards, audio guides and exhibition content; inclusion of local stories; expert review and compliance with protection requirements. Hisarlaka: fortress, forest park and Osogovo. St Anna: monastery life, fountain, holy spring, local history and waterfall; clear distinction between facts and traditions.	Better understanding and richer site experiences.
3.4			Preparation and phased establishment of tourist centres	Hisarlaka: integrated museum and tourist centre with exhibition, information and toilets. St Anna: assess conversion of an existing building into a small centre with self-service information and toilets. Prerequisites: feasibility, approvals, operator, staffing and budget; size determined through project design.	Justified centres connecting heritage and services; implementation only once prerequisites are met.

Code	Specific strategic objective	Priority area	Measure	Key activities	Expected result
3.5			Interactive site interpretation	Hisarlaka: panoramic board near the stage, Osogovo model and interactive modules along alleys. St Anna: panels on the church, fountain, holy spring and waterfall; presentation of monastery history. Select durable, easily maintained solutions with expert review.	Richer, accessible educational visits without compromising authenticity.
4.1	**SO4 – Improving digital accessibility and connectivity of tourism offeringings**	Digital tourism infrastructure	Establishing a joint tourism database	Collect and verify location, service, contact, opening-hour and accessibility data; geotagging; assign responsible persons and update procedures. Separate records for each municipality and pilot site; condition, verification date, manager and 'existing/being implemented/proposed' status.	Coordinated and verifiable data on the regional offer.
4.2			Connecting digital channels and maps	Connect or upgrade web content; interactive map; adaptation for mobile devices and accessible use; connections to contacts and booking services. Connect with existing municipal websites and visit-kyustendil.eu; joint map without duplicate data and with designated local editors.	Easier visit planning and greater online visibility.
4.3			Developing and maintaining digital interpretation	QR codes with updated content; virtual tours, audio and video materials; functionality testing; secure usage rights, hosting and technical maintenance. QR content for both pilot sites; basic information usable without continuous internet; backup physical boards and a technical servicing plan.	Functional digital content with continuity of use ensured.
5.1	**SO5 – Spatial and thematic integration of the cross-border tourism offering**	Quality and integration of tourism services	Improving accommodation and catering services	Needs assessment; advisory support on quality, accessibility and resource efficiency; service and digital sales training; inclusion of local products. Cooperate with hotels and spa operators in Kyustendil and rural hosts in Nevestino; verify categorisation and actual accessibility conditions.	Higher-quality services and stronger links to the local economy.

Code	Specific strategic objective	Priority area	Measure	Key activities	Expected result
5.2			Functional integration of thematic routes	Select sites with verified conditions; define routes, duration and rest points; connect with accommodation and dining; test, signpost and establish maintenance arrangements. Pilot joint cultural-natural programmes including Hisarlaka, Kadin Bridge and St Anna; this is a new proposal, not an existing fully marked cross-border route.	Usable thematic routes with clear information and supporting services.
5.3			Developing joint programmes and short stays	Cooperate with agencies and local service providers; one-day and multi-day programmes; connect cultural, natural, gastronomic, recreational and event offerings; include rural hosts. Connect spa stays, museum and park visits in Kyustendil with local experiences and North-East Region sites; agreements with actual service providers.	A more varied offer and better conditions for longer stays.
6.1	**SO6 – Ensuring environmentally sustainable use and protection of tourism spaces**	Heritage protection and environmental sustainability	Aligning visits with site protection	Assess sensitive spaces; define permitted uses; direct movement; codes of conduct; monitor damage and coordinate with competent institutions. Protect walls and woodland setting at Hisarlaka; respect the churchyard, cemetery, spring and waterfall at St Anna.	Reduced pressure on natural and cultural heritage.
6.2			Efficient use of resources	Water- and energy-saving systems; separate waste collection with assured removal; durable materials; reduced single-use plastics and unnecessary lighting. Solutions adapted to actual utility connections and waste-removal options; avoid equipment without an operator or regular servicing funds.	Reduced environmental impacts and lower operating costs.
6.3			Improving resilience and risk preparedness	Assess exposure to fire, flooding, erosion and extreme temperatures; protective and drainage solutions; warning, evacuation and temporary-closure procedures; manager training. Assess fire risks in the forest park and barbecue areas, slipping on wet and icy surfaces, and conduct during seasonal trail closures.	Greater safety and reduced infrastructure vulnerability.

Code	Specific strategic objective	Priority area	Measure	Key activities	Expected result
7.1	**SO7 – Strengthening management, maintenance and institutional cooperation**	Management, maintenance and institutional capacity	Establishing an updated infrastructure inventory	Record facilities, equipment, ownership, managers, capacities and condition; photographic and geographical documentation; field checks; connect to the tourism database. Inventory every component at both pilot sites, including property status; record unused buildings and facilities undergoing modernisation separately.	Verified basis for planning, investment and condition monitoring.
7.2			Ensuring regular maintenance and operating funding	Designate managers; maintenance plans and budgets; cleaning, inspection and repair schedules; procedures for reporting and remedying faults. Separate annual plans and budgets for Hisarlaka and St Anna; agreed cleaning, supervision, recreational equipment inspections and toilet maintenance.	Longer service life and continuous infrastructure functionality.
7.3			Strengthening coordination and professional capacity	Designate contact persons; coordinate municipalities, institutions and the private sector; training in project planning, visitor management and accessibility; prepare joint projects. Joint coordination group of the regional centre and municipalities; participation by museums, religious site managers, tourism associations, the tourism school and private operators.	Clearer responsibilities and more effective regional cooperation.
7.4			Monitoring strategy implementation and impacts	Indicator baselines and targets; monitor functionality, use and accessibility; visitor feedback; annual reporting. Comparable records by municipality and site; distinguish visitors from overnight stays, monitor condition and accessibility; annual review and mid-term revision by 2031.	Measurable progress and timely adjustment of measures and investment.