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Tourism Development Options in Marginal and Less-Favored Regions: A Case Study of Slovakia's Gemer Region

Daniela Hutárová, Ivana Kozelová  and Jana Špulerová * 

Institute of Landscape Ecology of Slovak Academy of Sciences, P.O. Box 254, Štefánikova 3, 814 99 Bratislava, Slovakia; daniela.hutarova@savba.sk (D.H.); ivana.kozelova@savba.sk (I.K.)

* Correspondence: jana.spulerova@savba.sk; Tel.: +421-2-32293628

Abstract: Marginal and less-favored regions are characterized by negative migration balance, lower living standards, aging of the population, a lower number of employment opportunities, lower educational level, and lower investments in the territory. Gemer is one of these regions in Slovakia. On the other hand, the Gemer region has a very interesting history and many cultural monuments, nature protection areas, and UNESCO World Heritage sites that create options for tourism development. The monuments of the Gothic Road have the potential for religious tourism. Karst relief and the sites and monuments related to mining present on the Iron Road provide suitable conditions for geotourism and mining tourism. Local villages contain traditional agricultural landscapes, which create suitable conditions for active rural tourism associated with creative tourism or agrotourism. There is also the promising possibility of cross-border cooperation with Hungary. However, the revenues from tourism do not reach the same level as in other, similar regions of Slovakia. The main failings of tourism development include the insufficient coordination of destination marketing organization stakeholders, lack of care for monuments, and underestimation of the potential of Roma culture and art production. However, analyzed state policy instruments on the promotion of tourism did not mitigate but rather exacerbated regional disparities in Slovakia.

Keywords: natural heritage; cultural heritage; traditional agricultural landscape; traditional mining landscape; Roma



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1. Introduction

The switch from a state-run to a market economy in Czechoslovakia after 1989 caused significant economic, social, demographic, civilizational, and infrastructure changes, in turn giving rise to regional disparities [1,2]. Poverty became significantly more visible and widespread, especially in the eastern and southern parts of central Slovakia. Insufficient connection to the main transport routes contributes to a lack of interest of investors. These regions are in danger of falling into a trap of lagging behind economically, socio-spatial exclusion, loss of self-esteem of the population, and anomie [3,4]. Within the territory of the Slovak Republic, there are today so-called corners of extreme poverty, found mainly in isolated rural areas and in areas with a high proportion of Roma in the population [5]. The number and percentage of Roma in the Slovak population is steadily increasing, and they have spread from the areas where they were historically concentrated into other regions [6], making the "Gypsy Question" an issue that needs addressing in those areas as well. The first data on their number in Slovakia dates from 1770 when approximately 18,000 to 20,000 Roma lived here. In 1893, 36,231 Roma lived in Slovakia. In the last census in 2011, 105,000 people declared Roma nationality. Measured by the use of the Romani language, their number is higher than 120,000. From a demographic point of view, the number of Roma is estimated at more than 400,000 [7]. According to the latest data, their number varies from 270,000 to 520,000 [8]. According to the median-probability forecast of population development, in 2030, the number of Roma in Slovakia will reach almost 590,000, or 10.6% of the total population [9].

One of the marginal regions with a high Roma population is our study area of Gemer. Using a typological differentiation of regions by a specific category of marginality, Gajdoš [1] categorizes all districts of the Gemer county (Rimavská Sobota, Revúca, Rožňava) as the “heavy problems” type. The Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the years 2020–2024 on the subject of tourism includes goals for the development of the tourist potential of the 20 least-developed Slovak districts, which include all of the districts of Gemer. The Program also addresses the issue of the inclusion of marginalized groups in the provision and consumption of tourism services.

Complex issues of participation and inclusion remain central to the creation of equitable, sustainable, and integrated rural tourism in Europe’s lagging regions [10]. A holistic view of the extent to which rural tourism is integrated into local economies and cultures is made possible by the methodology of the “integrated rural tourism” concept [11,12]. It can be seen that a series of tourism patterns (e.g., ethnic tourism, tribal tourism, and heritage tourism) exist that are based on cultural resources and contribute greatly to pro-poor growth and the development of regions in terms of “pro-poor tourism” [13]. Socio-economic and cultural factors, policy and governance, land ownership, community cohesiveness, assimilation of external stakeholders, and type of visitors are the main conditions that explain the differences of “community-based tourism” initiatives in developing nations [14]. Proven competitive strategies for poor areas also include the promotion of forms of tourism that are largely based on available and specific local resources (cultural tourism, agrotourism, rural tourism). Based on local characteristics, these forms of tourism are usually a great attraction for foreign tourists and can be implemented without large investments and extensive infrastructure construction [15]. Individual territories are characterized by their own specific makeup of the local population (locals, tourists, employees, managers responsible for their management and marketing, etc.) who dynamize the whole territorial system of services [16]. A preserved natural and cultural heritage is a prerequisite for uniqueness and high cultural value, which can contribute to economic and social development, particularly through the development of tourism [17]. All these elements give the landscape a unique character and image, and have potential value as tourist attractions that could help drive regional development.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the conditions of these marginal and less-favored regions and assess the possibilities of involving local people in the process of support and development of tourism in these regions.

Study Area

The territory of Gemer lies in the southern part of central Slovakia (Figure 1). It belongs to two natural-settlement nodal subregions of Slovakia: Rožňavský and Gemersko–Malohontský [18]. Today, it is split into two self-governing regions—the Banskobystrický self-governing region (Rimavská Sobota and Revúca districts) and the Košický self-governing region (Rožňava district). Geologically, it belongs to the sub-province of the Inner Western Carpathians with the Slovenské Rudohorie Mts. in the north and the Lučenecko-košická zníženina (lowland) in the south. The southwest of the region consists of the eastern part of Cerová vrchovina [19]. On the basis of various geomorphological conditions, there have arisen various types of erosion-denudation reliefs [20]. The climate of the region is warm and moderately humid with cool winters [21]. Its natural wealth is protected by nature conservation; three national parks are located in the study area—the Slovenský kras National Park (NP) and parts of NP Slovenský raj and Muránska Planina NP.

Slovakia, as part of the Hungarian Kingdom, was among the biggest producers of precious metals in Europe in the middle ages. In the territory of the Gemer region, ferrous, non-ferrous, and precious metals (especially silver and copper) were mined from the 14th to the 19th century. Mining activity in east Slovakia had already begun by the 12th century and significantly developed with the settlement of foreign miners after the Tatar Invasion (1241) [22–24]. In order to protect their privileges and common interests, and to coordinate proceedings in jurisdictional and military matters, some cities joined forces.

In eastern Slovakia, the Association of Mining Towns in Eastern Slovakia, also known as the Upper Mountain Mining Towns (oberungarische Bergstädte), was formed [25]. These seven mining towns (Gelnica, Smolník, Jasov, Rožňava, Spišská Nová Ves, Rudabánya, Telkibánya) were granted royal privileges. Mining activity was also developed in other settlements; however, these were just small towns or villages [17]. The regular trade contacts with foreign countries also led to the immigration of other foreigners, mostly of German origin. These immigrant specialists—miners, metallurgists and merchants—spread religion, law (mining and municipal), and custom, in addition to word-of-mouth dissemination of culture, e.g., rumors and superstition in the Middle Ages [22,25].

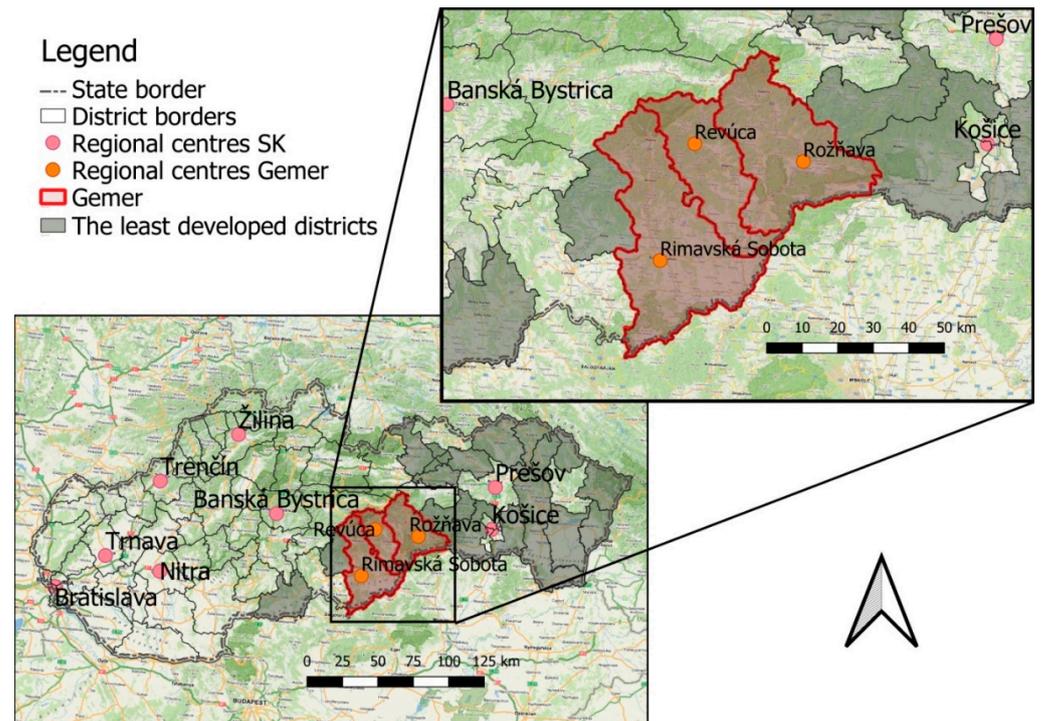


Figure 1. Location of Gemer region within the Slovak Republic.

Roma also gradually expanded their settlement range from the Byzantine Empire to central Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries. The first written document on the Roma population in Slovakia is from 1322. According to the 1785 census, there were 327 Roma in the county of Gemer. It also seems that the Roma preferred the southern regions, where the climatic conditions were more favorable [26]. The reasons for the much greater tolerance toward the Roma in the geographical area of the Balkans, Hungary, and Slovakia may be these areas' agrarian character and economic backwardness compared to Western Europe [24]. Rising tensions in Western European countries, persecution, and expulsion of the Roma caused numerous Roma groups to come to Hungary during the 16th and 17th centuries [27]. However, even in Hungary, living conditions were not easy for them. Study of archive documents indicates restrictions on the civil rights of the Roma at several levels in the 18th and 19th centuries, and measures that formed the basis for the ghettoization and ostracization of the Roma—regulations on the adoption of measures to coerce Roma into a settled way of life, on the way of raising Roma children, on their religious education, on the upbringing of Roma children for farmers, requiring entering service after the age of eight, and others [28]. Nevertheless, Romani craftsmen found it easier to find a job here [29], because even up until the 19th century, guild organization in the territory of Hungary was not as strongly established as in other countries [23]. In 1893, Gemer had the largest Gypsy community (5552) in Slovakia [27], which at the end of the 19th century was bolstered by nomadic groups of Wlachika Roma coming to this territory from Romania and

Moldavia [26,30]; however, from censuses dating back as far as 1782, we know that most of the Roma living in our territory were permanently settled here [30]. In the censuses of 1948 and 1958, 80–90% of the Slovak Roma still lived primarily in a rural environment [24,31]. At the end of the 1950s, the state authorities in Slovakia took measures to prevent the nomadic way of life, which affected about 28,000 persons [26]. After 1958, the intense violent assimilation of the Roma began (this lasted until 1970), and the institutionalization of the solution of the so-called Gypsy Question in our country, which ended in 1991. In 1965, the idea was born of dispersing the Roma from places where they were concentrated to flats in towns [24,29]. In the years 1970–1990, the Roma population in the cities increased from 30.8% to 43% of the urban population. This trend of urbanization stopped after 1989. Thereafter, as a result of growing usury, many Roma lost their flats and were forced to return to the rural settlements [8,24].

The process of the composition of the population shifting toward Roma is still most pronounced in Gemer. Of Slovak towns, Jelšava (Revúca district) has far and away the most Roma relative to its size, and the town has thus become the first in Slovakia where the Roma minority has become a majority. In these cities and regions, the phenomenon of “white flight” is manifested, characterized by the withdrawal of the white population from areas where the concentration of the non-white population is increasing [32–34], which can cause economic and social collapse of these regions. In some places, it can also be observed that depopulated villages, where even many houses of monumental character are abandoned, attract Roma who are leaving the cities—a trend that is, again, especially notable in Gemer [8,35].

The rugged terrain relief also forced the inhabitants to develop different methods of land management, which we call today (where it is preserved) the traditional agricultural landscape (TAL). Between 1500 and 1713, the Gemer region was also one of the three centers of fruit cultivation in Slovakia. In 1796, the oldest fruit hansa (merchant or trading guild) on the territory of Slovakia, Čerešnícky spolok v Jelšave (the Cherry-tree Association in Jelšava), was founded. The Pomological Association in Jelšava was founded in 1796, followed by the Viticultural Association in 1801. After the abolition of serfdom (1848), there was a boom in sheep breeders' associations. In 1867, Mutual Assistance in Veľká Revúca was founded, which is considered the first financial institution of its kind in Austria-Hungary. There were also several insurance companies or indemnification associations and agricultural credit unions providing loans to farmers. The Food Hansa in Veľká Revúca, a consumer-food cooperative, was founded in 1869, with the aim of helping its members and students of the local school to obtain groceries at an affordable price. In 1871, there arose the first agricultural cooperative of its kind in Austria-Hungary, Fatherland, in the Kraskov village, operating on the basis of voluntary land consolidation and the intensification of agricultural practices [36]. Demo et al. [36] state that the network of industrial and commercial companies in the Gemer region, which had developed from various guilds and from companies of carters, wagoners, and draymen, was the densest in Slovakia. The educational efforts of professors lecturing at the first Slovak Gymnasium in Revúca (1862) also played an important part in setting up these associations. At the beginning of the 19th century, they associated to form the Iron Order (iron and goods delivery).

Land and property were the measures of everything in the peasant environment. However, the one-child custom of the evangelical population in the southern regions of Slovakia, originally motivated by efforts to preserve the integrity of the family property, caused the disappearance of numerous families and specific local identities by the end of the 19th century. As the settlements emptied, the fields were abandoned and the special pastoral culture gradually disappeared [37]. The original monofunctional economic base, built mostly on the foundation of ore mining and processing and of agricultural production, weakened even further during the transition period after the Velvet Revolution [38]. Today, most of the inhabitants of Gemer work in the industry, health, public administration, and education. Information, communication, financial, insurance, and arts, entertainment,

and recreation are the sectors providing the least employment. Gemer districts are even characterized by the highest unemployment rates in the whole of Slovakia (Table 1).

Table 1. Population data and trends in 2019 and 2020.

Characteristic Sign	Slovak Republic	Revúca		Rimavská Sobota		Rožňava	
	Inhab.	Inhab.	Per Mille	Inhab.	Per Mille	Inhab.	Per Mille
Year-average number of permanent residents	5,445,089	39,870		84,313		62,271	
Balance of migration	3955	−154	−3.86	−107	−1.27	−131	−2.10
Total increase in population	7301	−235	−5.89	−61	−0.72	−49	−0.79
Number of permanent residents at the end of the year	5,450,421	39,736		84,270		62,286	
Unemployment rate (November 2020, %)	7.35	18.16		19.73		15.44	
Number of municipalities with Roma population (total municipalities in brackets)	(825) 2927	(42) 29		(107) 64		(62) 36	
Number of villages that are over half Roma	160	14		34		8	
Roma as proportion of population in district towns (%)		16		18		12	

Source: <http://datacube.statistics.sk/> (accessed on 26 February 2021); Atlas of Roma Communities (2019).

2. Theory and Methods

The basic situation to be addressed is the issue of high poverty and unemployment in a region rich in natural and cultural wealth with a high potential for tourism development, latter of which we assessed by several steps:

1. The natural and cultural attractions, as opportunities for tourism, were analyzed based on available data and literature review.
 - The most promising types, in terms of potential and opportunities for tourism, are described with reference to the natural and cultural attractions (Figure 2).
2. For each type of tourism, key characteristics were selected and available data were analyzed and used for assessment.
 - Religious tourism—Europe is characterized by a rich net of itineraries that were followed during the Middle Ages by pilgrims heading toward the holy places of Christianity. The aim of “religious tourism” is to visit sacred sites associated with a particular cult or religion, forms of spirituality, or special revelations [39]. The motivations and behaviors include not only religious factors but are also related to cultural heritage tourism, recreation, social/family life, new experiences, etc. [40]. Religious tourism represents an essential element for guaranteeing socio-economic sustainability to the hosting communities and is a precondition for the promotion of intercultural dialogue [41]. Pilgrimage tourism is considered part of religious tourism, which United Nations World Tourism Organization ranks as fifth-place among motivations to travel [42]. In our study, it was assessed on the basis of the presence of religious and sacred cultural monuments on the Gothic route.
 - Geotourism and mining tourism—based on the region’s mining history. Numerous monuments survive, which testify to the mining history of the area, and geological heritage resources offer options for the development of this type of tourism. Geodiversity is the natural range of geological rocks, minerals, fossils, geomorphological forms and processes, and soil features. It includes their assemblages, relationships, properties, and systems [43]. Geotourism is a multi-interest kind of tourism, exploiting natural sites and landscapes containing interesting earth-science features in a didactic and entertaining way [44,45]. Integrating

the preservation of geological heritage into a strategy for regional sustainable economic and cultural development is the general goal of geoparks [46,47]. A “geopark” is an area containing a number of protected geosites, which are included in an integrated concept of protection, education, and sustainable development [38]. Mining heritage, in Slovak terminology, falls under the category “technical monuments”; but the term “mining heritage” incorporates natural, historical, architectural, technological, technical, artistic, documentary, geomorphologic, and other aspects. Another relevant term is “mining heritage related to cultural heritage,” which additionally incorporates archaeological, industrial, and other attributes. It can also cover territories that have long depended on mining [25].

- Creative tourism—This offers an opportunity for learning and experiencing an intangible cultural heritage, traditional handicrafts, and folk art. Creativity relies on human capital and is viewed as a sustainable and renewable resource, which does not need a great number of funds for preservation and maintenance [48]. It can be used as an instrument to produce more meaningful and also stronger links between the environmental, social, and economic goals of sustainable development. It combines cultural interest with great natural beauty to develop places more suitable for vacation, permanent residency, employment, and investments [49]. Creativity and creative tourism are based on intangible and contemporary creativity and can be used as a way to stabilize communities and solve community problems [50,51]. Today, creative tourism consists of a bundle of dynamic creative relationships between people, places, and ideas, through which lives can be improved and injected with new potential [52]. In our study, it represents municipalities in which, according to the Centre for Folk Art Production, craftsmen keep their crafts alive.
 - Agrotourism—The presence of traditional agricultural land (TAL), which was evaluated by our own field research [53] on the basis of field mapping of TAL and aerial photos using a 1 km² network created in Google Earth, is also of great importance for sustainable tourism. TAL mainly constitutes extensively farmed fields, meadows, pastures, orchards, and vineyards, much of which has been abandoned or contains currently unused areas of low succession, and which was not affected by the intensification of agriculture during socialism. However, this type of landscape has been steadily disappearing since 1989, due to processes of abandonment of agricultural land [54]. The diversification of local farms can bring new job opportunities to rural regions on the basis of environmentally friendly agriculture, production, and tourism [55]. Our study focused on the selection of villages with the presence of TAL and with a real potential for agricultural renewal and rural tourism.
 - Roma culture—The population dynamics of the Roma, and their activity in the labor market, level of education, dependence on social assistance, health status, and crime levels have been addressed by a number of publications, but only a few literature analyses are devoted to their history and culture and the discrimination and marginalization they face in Slovakia [5–8,24,27,29,56–61]. The study of the heritage of Roma culture offers a great wealth of resources for tourism development, e.g., traditional Roma music and crafts. At present, opportunities for tourism development are provided by municipalities that seek to preserve Roma culture on the basis of an application for financial support from the Fund for the Support of the Culture of National Minorities.
3. In addition to tourism development options, we defined and discussed the main barriers to tourism development.

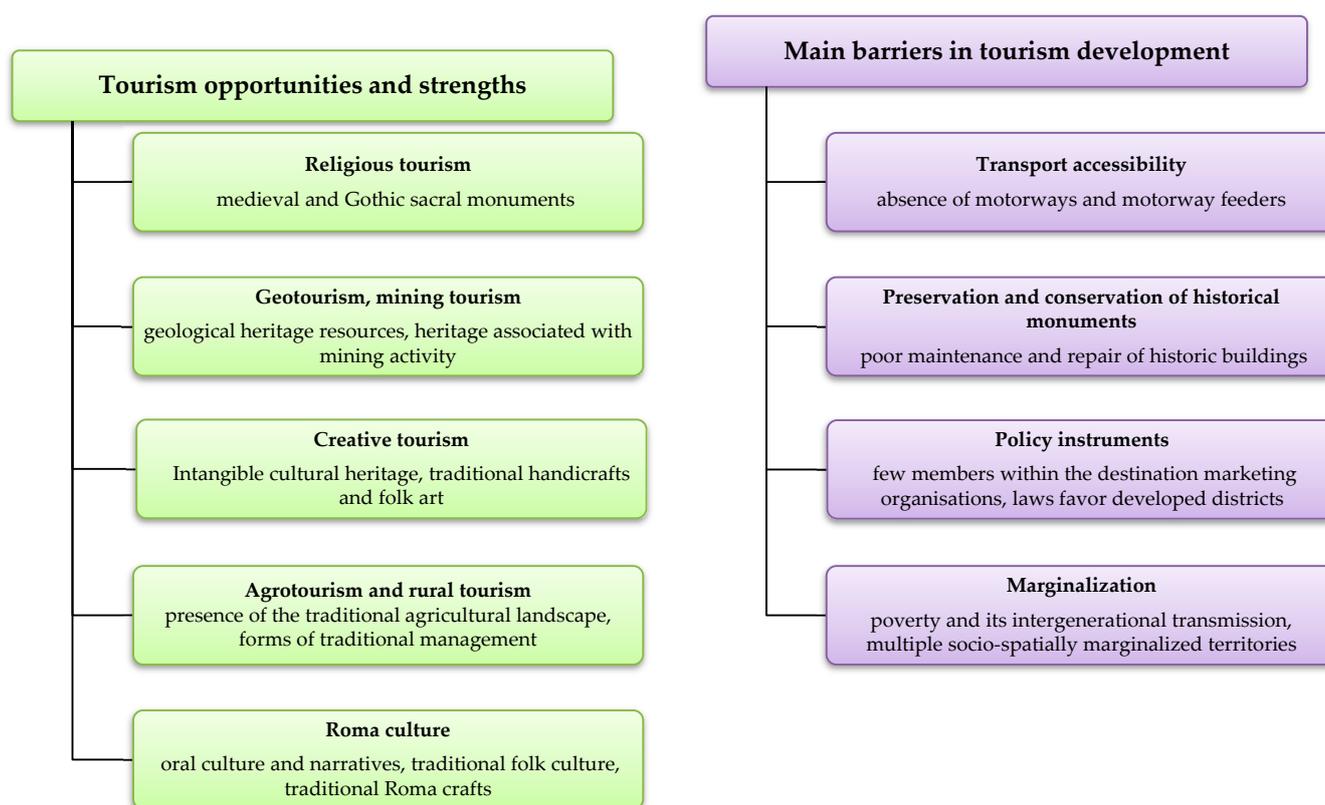


Figure 2. Methodological approach to the identification of opportunities and strengths, and barriers in tourism development.

3. Results

The potentially most significant elements of religious tourism, geotourism, and mining tourism, and creative and rural tourism in the Gemer region are described below. One notable set of possibilities is the tourism opportunities associated with the heritage of Roma culture (Figure 3).

3.1. Tourism Opportunities and Strengths

3.1.1. Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is one of the most widespread and oldest forms of tourism. The Gemer region abounds with valuable medieval and Gothic sacred monuments from the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries up to the 14th century. The most important churches, which during the Reformation passed into the hands of the Evangelical church, are those in Štítnik, Ochtiná, Kocel'ovce, Dobšiná, Rimavské Brezovo, Rimavská Baňa, Kyjatice, Kraskov, and Malé Teriakovce. The Roman Catholic churches in the area include the Church of St. Augustine in Stratená, Church of the Annunciation in Chyžné, and Church of St. Lawrence in Revúca [62]. These are only the most notable examples of local sacred architecture to be found along the "Gothic Route" [63], which is a 276 km-long circle and crosses the borders of Poland and Hungary. The board painting from 1513 in the gothic "Cathedral of the Assumption" (National Cultural Heritage) in Rožňava is unique in central Europe. It depicts St. Anna Samotretia (Metercia) against a background of various kinds of mining works in the medieval mine [64]. Gemer and Abov churches with medieval wall paintings are inscribed in the Tentative List of the Slovak Republic of the World Heritage List [65].

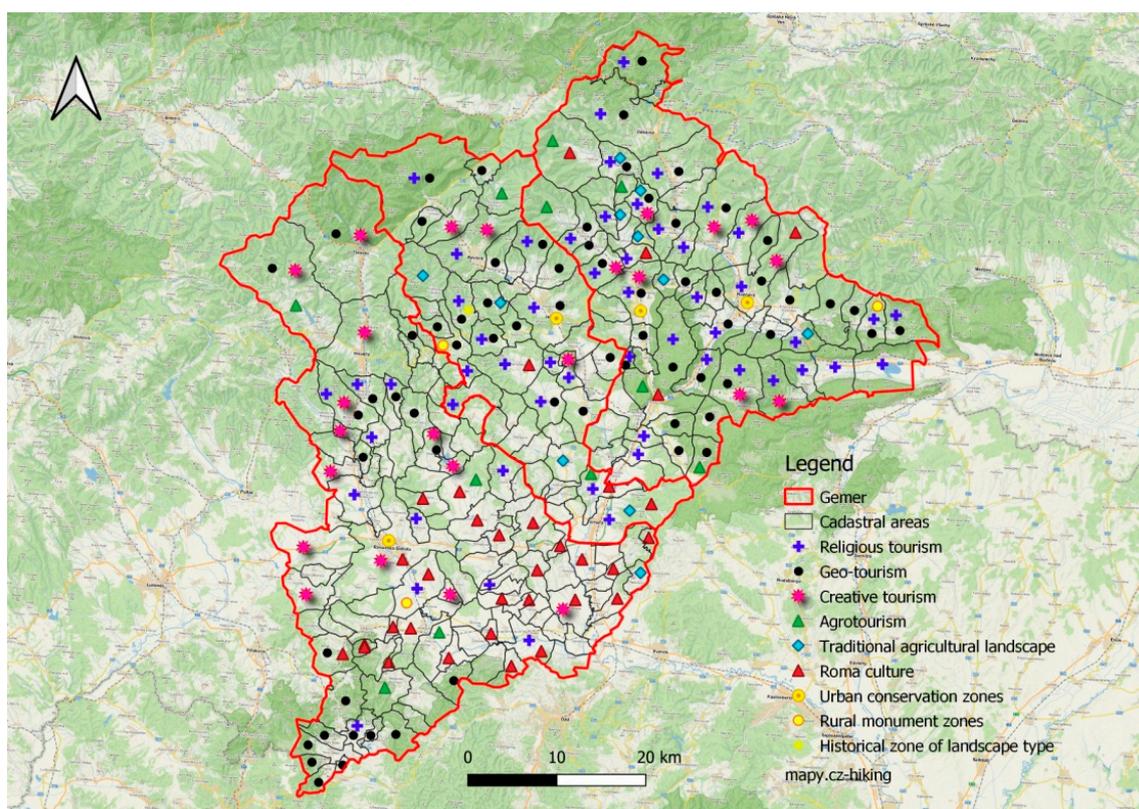


Figure 3. Map of tourism attractions in the Gemer region.

3.1.2. Geotourism and Mining Tourism

Geotourism combines natural geosites and heritage associated with mining activity. The largest karst area of the plateau type in central Europe is found in the Slovenský kras National Park (NP) and the Slovak Karst Biosphere Reserve [66]. Others include NP Slovenský raj and Muránska Planina NP [67]. The Caves of Aggtelek Karst and Slovak Karst (Domica, Gombasecká Cave, Jasovská Cave, Dobšinská Ice Cave and Ochtiná Aragonite Cave) are among the natural monuments inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List [65]. The Tentative List of the Slovak Republic of the World Heritage List also inscribed the Karst Valleys of Slovakia. The Novohrad–Nógrad Geopark is the first international (cross-border) geopark of the European Network of UNESCO Geoparks, and one of four transnational geoparks in the world [68].

The processes of extraction, transportation, and industrial production associated with wood, melting, and forge furnaces left an indelible mark on the landscape of the Gemer region. The countryside surrounding the historical ironworking centers combines nature and industry to create a traditional mining landscape. It includes mining works, portals and preserved parts of historical tunnels and shafts, relicts of shaft buildings, shafts, and equipment, the former administrative buildings of mining plants, former residential campuses for the employees of mining plants, residues of processing and finishing areas, furnaces and smelting facilities, monuments of water management technology, mining water dams, and distribution channels. The mining area at Sirk, under the hill Železník, is protected as a historical zone of landscape type [69]. Along with other monuments related to mining and iron processing (the historic blast furnaces in Sirk, Karlova Huta and Nižná Slaná villages, the foundry in Rákoš village and the cogwheel railway in Tisovec), they are included in the cultural tourism project referred to as the “Iron Way of Gemer” (Železná cesta Gemerom) or “Via Magna.” In 2007, the “Route of Iron” in central Europe was recognized as a “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” and in 2019 as a European Route of Industrial Heritage [70]. The Iron Way of Gemer meets the conditions for these types

of cultural routes but has not yet been classified as such (it currently only has recognition from the Slovak government).

3.1.3. Creative Tourism

Creative and rural tourism is of great importance for the local community. According to the Centre for Folk Art Production, there are 53 active craftsmen in Gemer (Figure 3); altogether there are 23 crafts that have been kept alive in the Gemer region [71]. On UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, there are two additional elements listed that are to be found in the Gemer region. In 2015, the element "Bagpipes and Bagpipe Culture in Slovakia" was inscribed under "Bagpipe Culture," and in 2019, the element "Wire Craft and Art in Slovakia" was also included. Other noteworthy elements of the intangible cultural heritage are listed in the national Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. These elements include "Traditional Manual Bell Ringing" and the "Bell Founders' Role in Slovakia" [72]. The list of registered and protected designations of origin and geographical indications of the Industrial Property Office of the Slovak Republic [73] includes Kyjatice toys with their traditional Slavic engraved ornamentation. The Klenovecký syrec cheese has been designated a Protected Geographical Indication.

3.1.4. Agrotourism Associated with the Traditional Agricultural Landscape

The history of this region is closely connected with agriculture and provides opportunities to develop the region's potential for agrotourism. In Gemer, the presence and character of TAL are determined by the historical methods of farming in the field on shallow, strongly skeletal cambisols with low soil quality in steep, difficult-to-access terrain at higher altitudes. These conditions led to livestock specialization and fruit growing in the north. The most fertile soils, suitable for growing vines, can be found in the south of the region, ranging from strongly skeletal medium-deep arenosols to deep fluvisols and skeleton-free haplic luvisols [74]. Traces of these activities remain today. We identified a total of 48 plots with TAL in 21 municipalities of the Rožňavský and Gemersko–Malohontský subregions and some of them have the potential for the development of agrotourism. The Fruit Genotype Collection is an important field gene bank for research, breeding, education, and practical use. Currently, one of the largest concentrations of old and native varieties of cherries in Slovakia is recorded in the village Brdárka. In a territory of 650 ha, 2283 cherries (*Cerasus* sp.), 184 apple (*Malus* sp.), 15 pear (*Pyrus* sp.) and 20 walnut (*Juglans* sp.) genotypes have been preserved [75], giving rise to the landscape type "TAL with dominant cherry-tree orchards." The tradition of producing high-quality wine on the volcanic slopes of the Cerová vrchovina Mts. goes back to the 14th–16th century [36]. The villages Gemerské Dechtáre, Širkovce, Veľký Blh, etc. contain "TAL with a mosaic of vineyards, orchards, permanent grassland, and arable land." The village Muránska Zdychava is characterized by "TAL with dispersed settlements" with archaic elements of folk architecture. Currently, 10 houses are protected as folk houses (rustic folk buildings) and seven as barns (buildings with shelter for animals). TAL with dispersed settlements covers an area of 2858 ha [76,77]. On the vast meadows of the Plešivecká planina plateau of the Slovak Karst there is another extraordinary architectural work—the dominant historical landscape structure Serényi cistern, the only one of its kind in Slovakia. It provided water for cattle that grazed on the plateau.

3.1.5. Heritage of Roma Culture

Due to their specific way of life, the communities of the formerly nomadic Wlachike Roma have isolated themselves from other settled Roma and from the majority societies in all European countries where they live and have preserved their original culture. Memorable narratives of how the Roma lived in the past are very popular. Other parts of the oral culture include Romani anecdotes, proverbs, riddles, and Romani folk poetry. Musical expression is accompanied by the snapping of fingers, clapping, stomping, or throaty

sounds [59,78]. One of the first Romani musicians known by name was Cinka Panna (1711–1772). Other well-known names of Gypsy orchestra leaders operating in the territory of Gemer are Márton Dombi (1801–1869), Ernest Dankó (1852–?), Július “Šima” Oláh (1911–1944), Elemér Farkaš (1919–?) and Pavol Berki (1938–?). Music and blacksmithing were the most frequent occupations of the Roma. Gold panning was almost exclusively a Gypsy occupation. For centuries, they produced both larger and smaller troughs, small round bowls with handles, spoons, ladles, and other wooden products for household and farm use. Traditional Roma crafts also included basketry and broom production. Some produced wicker baskets, especially in Gemer and Spiš. The burning of charcoal has been associated with blacksmithing for a very long time. They also worked with clay and textile. Trade-in horses were widespread for several centuries in Bohemia, Moravia, and especially in Slovakia, sometimes associated with trafficking [7,59].

The unique way of life of the Gypsies has also attracted some artists and documentarians. In particular, black-and-white positives capturing the Roma in the Gemer region in 1924 were unearthed during a study of photographer Karol Plicka's photograph collection. Interesting documentation of the life of the Roma in the southeastern part of Slovakia in the 1930s and 1950s is presented by the works of Václav Fiala [79]. Josef Polák also photographically documented various ethnographic and ethnological subjects, including the life of the Gypsies. The culture of the Gypsy ethnic group was popularized and made more comprehensible by Jozef “Fintický” Kolarčík, who compiled the most comprehensive collection of documents on the Gypsies' way of life. Despite the richness of material and spiritual expression of the Romani culture, the Centre for Folk Art Production [72] registers only one Roma artist in Gemer in the Register of Producers of Folk Art Production. The Traditional Folk Culture Collection [71] lists for Gemer only “Romani Folk Music Musicians from Revúčka” (1974), “Bráčista Anton Anderko from Revúčka” (1976) and “Folk Music from Slavošovce” (1969, Figure 4). Other elements, e.g., the folk dance “Volunteer Dance from Vlachov” (1974), are accompanied by gypsy music. However, the documentation of these elements took place about 50 years ago. Therefore, the Centre for Folk Art Production should cooperate with Romani artists and support the preservation of their unique culture in the present day as well. The Traditional Folk Culture Collection should also pay more attention to the documentation of Wlachike Romani traditional culture, language, customary law, and intergroup relations, and the culture of other Roma groups. The Romani language in the Czechoslovak area, which has 13 dialects, also deserves attention [30].

3.2. Main Barriers in Tourism Development

Despite the region's great tourist potential, the barriers to its development are significant. As the main weaknesses in tourism development, we have identified:

3.2.1. Transport Accessibility

If a region has good transport accessibility, this contributes to its overall attractiveness, and also results in increased tourist flows [80]. All of the old roads and railways had a north-south direction, and no east-west connecting routes were created during the Hungarian period [81]. Due to its remote position with respect to the principal locations of economic development in Slovakia (Bratislava, Košice, Žilina, Banská Bystrica, Prešov, Trnava, Trenčín, Nitra) [3], Gemer is on the periphery of economic development (Figure 5). Transport accessibility is very bad in all three districts. Motorways and feeder roads are still absent (as of 1. 1. 2020). In the districts of Rimavská Sobota and Revúca, there are expressways with a length of 18,179 km. Most of the transport network consists of third class roads (590,809 km), mostly in very bad conditions. The region's position on the border with Hungary, in addition to its common natural and cultural wealth, also offers opportunities for the development of cross-border cooperation, which is currently underdeveloped.



Figure 4. Szabó, Tibor: Folk Music from Slavošovce (©1993–2020 Internet Public Access - Cosmotron Slovakia, s.r.o.) against a background containing plots of the traditional agricultural landscape.

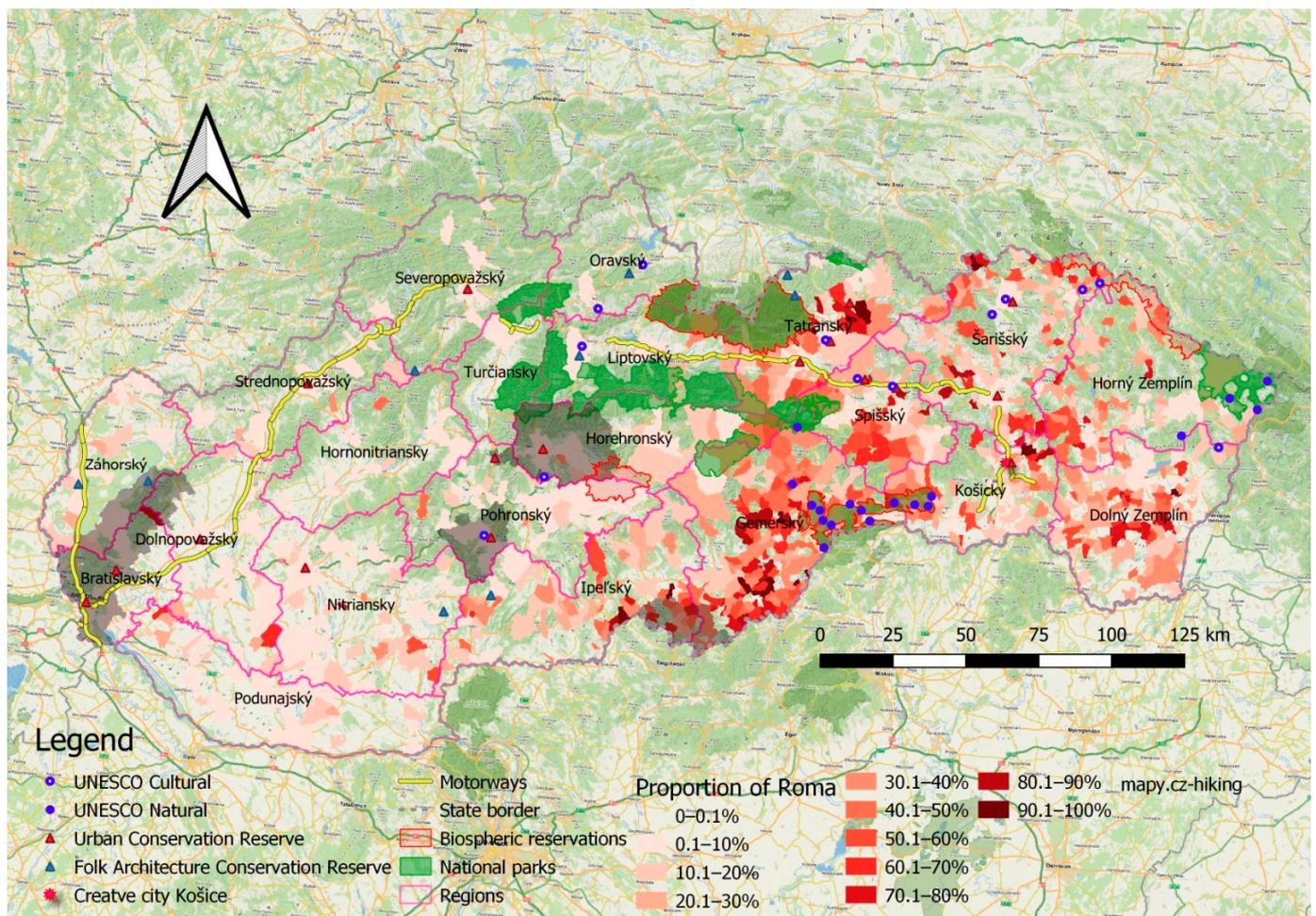


Figure 5. Map of the main attractions for and barriers to tourism development in the tourist regions of Slovakia.

3.2.2. Insufficient Preservation and Conservation of Historical Monuments

In the national Central List of Cultural Monuments [69], rural monument zones are listed in the villages of Lúčka, Ratková, and Rimavské Janovce, but there is no folk architecture monument reservation. The Central List of Cultural Monuments in the Gemer region declares urban conservation zones in the towns of Jelšava, Rimavská Sobota, Rožňava and Štítnik, but there is no declared urban conservation reservation (Figure 5). There are, however, several lesser-known but valuable territories, towns, and villages suitable for registration that would be an important promotional brand for the development of tourism. In addition, many historic settlements inhabited by Roma are not maintained and have fallen into disrepair. Greater attention should therefore be paid to the conservation and restoration of these buildings and objects (with an eye to maintaining their original functions as much as possible), as with appropriate care, some monuments in “satisfactory” condition could be classified as “well-preserved” monuments, and the town as a whole could be promoted from a conservation zone to a conservation reserve if those buildings currently in “disturbed” or “desolate” condition were restored (Figure 6).



Figure 6. (a) Coburg manor house on Republic Square in Jelšava and (b) interior of the building of the Evangelical School at the Evangelical Church in Jelšava.

3.2.3. Policy Instruments on the Promotion of Tourism

Destination marketing organizations (DMO) in Slovakia realize the value of monuments and rarities on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and consider it a competitive advantage; however, the Gemer DMO cannot take advantage of this. Currently (2020), there are 37 micro-regional DMOs in the territory of the 21 officially recognized tourism regions, and seven regional DMOs on the territory of the eight self-governing regions in Slovakia [82]. Each of these regional DMOs has the task of integrating the local DMOs. However, DMO Gemer has only 18 members—in addition to companies, these include five towns (Hnúšťa, Jelšava, Revúca, Rožňava, Tornaľa) and four villages (Jesenské, Muráň, Muránska Huta, Beltiar). In 2010, Act No. 91/2010 Coll. defining the principles of providing financial subsidies for tourism organizations was approved. According to Act. No. 347/2018 Coll. of 27 November 2018, amending Act No. 91/2010 Coll. [83], the conditions for less-developed regions have been further tightened. A regional organization may be established by a founding agreement with business entities of at least five municipalities, and the sum of overnight stays in accommodation facilities in the founding municipalities in the previous calendar year must reach at least 100,000 (originally 50,000) overnight stays. A regional organization may also be established by less than five municipalities if the total number of overnight stays in accommodation establishments in the territory of the founding municipalities in the previous calendar year was at least 250,000 (originally 150,000). Based on these conditions and the current sum of overnight stays in accommodation facilities in the districts, it is now not possible to establish smaller regional DMOs individually in the Revúca and Rožňava districts (Table 2). The Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic may also provide the subsidy for the relevant financial year of the DMO in the same amount as the total value of the selected membership fees of the DMO in the year preceding the previous financial year, while the maximum amount of

the DMO subsidy is limited to 90% of the total value of the collected tax on accommodation of all member municipalities of the DMO in the year preceding the previous budget year. According to the list of applicants who were provided with a subsidy from the state budget in 2020, only EUR 28,557 (0.38%) of the total amount EUR 7,544,616.31 was allocated to the DMO Gemer [84].

Table 2. Capacities and performances of accommodation facilities in 2019.

	Slovak Republic	Revúca	Rimavská Sobota	Rožňava
Number and proportion of accommodation facilities	4487	16 (0.35%)	28 (0.62%)	71 (1.58%)
Number and proportion of overnight stays of visitors in accommodation facilities	17,703,695	53,813 (0.30%)	101,927 (0.57%)	51,372 (0.29%)

Source: <http://datacube.statistics.sk/> (accessed on 26 February 2021).

3.2.4. Territories with Multiplied Socio–Spatial Marginalization

The Roma population group is poor due to its high unemployment rate (788 municipalities out of 825 monitored municipalities use compulsory labor for the long-term unemployed according to the atlas of Roma communities), low education level, and lack of skills and social capital, which means that they are at the bottom of economic, power, local governmental and professional structures. This excludes them from social participation and from opportunities to improve their living conditions. In addition, the standard of living decreases with every child, which creates a barrier to women's participation in the labor market [38,85]. Some Roma have limited employment due to ignorance of the official state language. The vast majority of Roma living in the south of Slovakia declare Hungarian nationality, and 95% of local Roma whose mother tongue is Romani have learned Hungarian since childhood and do not speak Slovak [8]. Furthermore, a new phenomenon, known as “secondary illiteracy,” has emerged in Slovakia, and the Roma community does not accept educated Roma as “theirs” [57]. They are also one of the groups most affected by long-term poverty and its intergenerational transmission. This poverty is mostly rural and affects women (the family is based on a patriarchal model of authority) and children most strongly (most poor communities are characterized by an expansive population pyramid dominated by under-14-year-olds) [2,85,86]. Roma living segregated in a marginalized area form a closed community with a homogenized structure, which creates the phenomenon of so-called multiplied marginalization [87,88]. These territories are locations of “historical marginalization” in Slovakia [3]. In principle, the situation of the Roma is generally more favorable in economically more developed regions, compared to Roma living in poorer areas. However, the accumulation of Roma has had a direct retarding effect on the development of some areas [7,30].

4. Discussion

Analyzing the heritage of a region points towards opportunities for regional development and tourism. The establishment of tourist infrastructure can generate new job opportunities, new economic activities, and additional sources of income, especially in rural regions [45]. This would be particularly beneficial in the marginal and less-favored regions. We have presented it as a case study from Slovakia, but the same approach could work in other marginal regions of the world.

Today, 40 years of socialism and mass car transport have caused the partial disappearance of traditional pedestrian pilgrimage [89]; however, the increase in spirituality in recent years could have a positive influence on the creation of new pilgrimage centers [90]. However, pilgrim tourism is having to accommodate new trends, such as an increasing variety of events, and journeys with more secular attractions [91]. When selecting and planning the pilgrimage routes, it is necessary to analyze the natural and cultural–historical

potential of the area, its infrastructure, and also the willingness of the local population to participate in tourist-specific services. However, pilgrimage centers are increasingly subject to secularization and commercialization [40]. To keep religious and pilgrimage tourism sustainable, the monuments and natural sites must be protected and restored in order to prevent congestion and not exceed load capacities.

The mining and processing of minerals constitute an integral part of the history of Slovakia, and they are of great importance in the context of European history [92] and an important source of sustainable development of tourism in Europe [70]. The “Iron Way” and “Alpine Way” are well known. The “Mediaeval Salt Route” and “Upper Hungarian Mining Route” could be included in a comprehensive mining tourism package for eastern Slovakia [22,25]. However, access to underground mining spaces is often not possible, or the major elements of the route have completely disappeared. For this reason, historically accurate 3D models of mining spaces are used, primarily for tourism and to educate locals, with an emphasis on the marginalized groups of people who often inhabit these localities, in the Gemer and Spiš regions [93–95]. The socio-economic situation of the cross-border Aggtelek Karst microregion (Hungary) has a positive impact on local development; however, it is not enough to solve deeply rooted social problems. The Slovak Karst is in a worse economic position, which is connected to the proportion of Roma in the local population [96]. However, despite the poverty and lack of development in the area, Slovak Karst has an advantage in preserved local folk architecture, which together with the semi-natural landscape gives the area significant (and generally overlooked) tourism potential [47]. Geodiversity can gain public attention and positively influence the state of protected areas [97]. These initiatives can improve the protection of geological sites and can play a crucial role in sustainable tourism development. Biodiversity depends on geodiversity; however, the importance of geodiversity is generally underestimated. Most of the geologically significant sites and historic industrial structures are not protected by law in Slovakia. As in many European regions and towns (Ostrava in the Czech Republic, the Katowice conurbation of Upper Silesia in Poland, Ida-Viru County in Estonia, the town of Balan in Romania), it is mainly local communities and organizations that handle the preservation, protection, or classification of these relicts and their use in tourism, but the terminology of mining heritage, post-mining tourism or mining heritage tourism is ambiguous [98–104]. For instance, the tourist attraction “Andráši Iron Kingdom” consists of the sites where the Andráši family has left significant and beneficial traces of their work activities, mainly in mining and metallurgy of iron in Slovakia. Applying values of geoethics to speleotourism can also contribute to cave protection and ensuring benefits for the local population in the short term, and to future generations in the long term [105]. Erikstad [106] is convinced that geo-heritage and geo-conservation should be integrated into the Habitats Directive and that EU policies on landscape should be strengthened and include geo-diversity.

Darulová [107] considers cultural traditions in general to be one of Slovakia’s most significant advantages in the field of tourism. The local and regional public authorities responsible for culture, creative industry, tourism, and regional development prefer creative tourism activities [108], which are very popular with tourists, but regional products are poorly accessible to, and poorly recognized by, domestic visitors [109]. Creative tourism could provide a framework for developing innovative approaches for sustainable cultural tourism that is place-responsive and community-engaged, balances local and visitor interests, and offers small-scale activities that may be well-suited to smaller communities [110]. Residents of smaller settlements tend to have a slightly higher preference for local products, which increases the importance of short food supply chains in rural development; however, such short supply chains are rare in rural and less-developed areas due to the lack of well-functioning producers’ markets [111]. Richards [52] highlights the growing importance of creativity as a development strategy, and more recently as a basis for placemaking and its application to tourism development.

TAL can also support the local market economy in the form of products for sale from the yard or in terms of short food supply chains. This landscape provides opportunities to enjoy and relax in TAL and opportunities to experience and learn traditional management practices. Agrotourism in Slovakia can help to maintain traditional rural settlements and the security of landscape and ecological functions [112]. However, areas with TAL are not subject to special protection [54,113] and today they are threatened by abandonment [114]. Except for TAL of vineyards, most of the preserved TAL in Slovakia is situated in less-favored areas (LFA), where the abandonment of TAL is significantly higher than outside the LFA. LFA support is part of the toolset of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); however, the application scheme for the allocation of subsidies should be simplified and adjusted for use by small farmers [115]. Maintaining the rural identity of a place, as manifest in locals' perception and knowledge of the place, is also a key factor in maintaining TAL [116]. The development of tourism also may provide a solution; however, an unfavorable agricultural market and a lack of financial resources are major hurdles [117]. Above all, tourism development should not have a negative impact on the country and its values [118]. Uncoordinated development of rural tourism has negative aspects as well, due to the construction of holiday cottages. It is necessary from the outset to consider the suitability of their construction in rural areas [119,120], particularly in areas with TAL or historical landscape structures which are candidates for inclusion in the UNESCO heritage, cultural heritage, or natural heritage lists.

The most important part of tourism development is to support the creation of tourism clusters [121]. Nevertheless, cluster initiatives in tourism are not appropriate for all rural areas, economies, and/or communities [122]. Frequently, a large number of stakeholders pursue conflicting goals, or mutually competitive agendas, thus posing a challenge for any kind of unified territorial management [16]. In any case, it is necessary for the destination to act as a tourist package, where the tourism services are complementary and form a unified whole. The essential tool for creating such a product is cooperative destination management. However, only three Slovak destinations (Bratislava, the High Tatras, and Liptov) attain the "most attractive destinations" rank, making them able to compete on the international tourism market. The majority of governmental subsidies go to the destinations with the most developed infrastructure, and the legislation Act No. 91/2010 Coll., which was intended to support the development of tourism, has contributed to the deepening of regional disparities [123]. The funding conditions are currently being tightened. According to the list of applicants who were provided with a subsidy from the state budget in 2020, the highest subsidies were approved for the most attractive destinations with the highest number of overnight stays—Bratislava DMO, the High Tatras Tourism Region, and Liptov Tourism Region.

Today, the Roma ethnic group in Slovakia is more internally divided—culturally, socially, and sub-ethnically—than in the days of socialism. The disintegration of the traditional Roma family has led to many negative effects and crisis phenomena, such as an unusual form of parasitism and loss of values, disrespect for individual creativity, the gradual loss of the Romani language, etc. [7,30,59]. Reliance on social (family and friends) and civic (state, organizations, and helping professionals) resources appears to be an effective strategy, provided that these resources are available [86]. However, Finka [124] confirms that funding the regions through subsidies is undertaken non-systematically, and thus inefficiently, and hence delivers little result. What is really needed is a territorial capital-based inclusive strategy to evaluate the potential of the region, followed by carefully and holistically designed projects to capitalize on this potential. Moreover, the ability to build relationships and social networks with non-Roma is considered an important skill that simplifies access to various resources (including work) and promotes social inclusion [5]. The creation of developmental conditions that will make it possible for the Roma in Roma-heavy regions to mobilize and exploit their human, social, and cultural capital, making them capable of becoming integrated into the overall socio-economic development of the country, is a possible solution for marginal regions [1]. These alternative tourism products include,

for example, Roma festivals, music, art, fashion, gastronomy, and creative tourism [125,126]. Several funding options for the development of the study area offer EU Funds, including the European Structural and Investment Fund, European Investment Bank and European Investment Fund, The EU Programme for the Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Creative Europe, Programme for Employment and Social Innovation and funding for young entrepreneurs within European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. One these projects applied in the Gemer region—the Social Entrepreneurship in Sparsely Populated Areas (Interreg Europe, SOCENT SPAs) project— is focused on implementation of an action plan for the development of social entrepreneurship in Gemer with the aim of creating job opportunities for the long-term unemployed and stopping the outflow of population from the region. Another successful project, “GemerNation game,” deals with promotion of the region by the Agency for the development of Gemer. It created a patented didactic tool of informal education that leads players throughout the Gemer–Malohont region and familiarises them with its rich history, cultural and natural heritage. The civic association Hidden Treasures of Slovakia, in cooperation with the local government, strives to beautify the surroundings of historical monuments related to mining history, by installing information boards, constructing a tourist information center, and building mining museum and measures. In particular, raising the level of education is a way to ensure the growth of the living standard of the population, which is of paramount importance for the Roma population [127]. In some municipalities, the number of Roma children already exceeds the number of non-Roma children. The development of the local labor market and the local economy will therefore depend on the activity of the Roma population. However, the employment rate of Roma is about 10%, and their unemployment rate about 46%. The main reasons are the discrimination they face in applying for jobs, and their low education level. Roma receive almost 30% of the social benefits paid by the Slovak state, and due to their higher birth-rate, they receive substantially higher child and parental allowances. However, it is possible that due to their high numbers of children and tendency to leave school as early as possible (which terminate child support to end), they receive less support per child than non-Roma. Securing the main source of income through child allowances gives women control over the family budget, which is reflected in the overall more dominant position of women today [30,61,128].

Residents initially tend to have high expectations of tourism development, but their support declines over time [129], and local communities do not share the benefits of ecotourism and have no influence or control over it [130,131]. Gertner [132] insists that place marketers must listen to the leaders of the communities involved, engage members of all stakeholder groups, and ensure that they approve of and benefit from the dissemination and commercialization of their cultural elements. Landscapes cannot be separated from the activities of the inhabitants that occur within them, and those landscapes consequently change with the evolution of the social practices of their inhabitants [133]. The consumption and construction of place are simultaneous processes in which both tourists and locals play an active role [134,135]. Marginalized people might also be ethically and beneficially included in the production and consumption of tourism, on the basis of so-called pro-poor tourism. There is also the potential to strengthen the environmental awareness of places of poor communities and stimulate the conservation activities of unique natural resources, which with the development of tourism activities will become a source of benefits to the communities [15,136]. However, the challenges of achieving substantial social change through inclusive tourism are formidable, given the constraints within the sector and in the wider political economy [137]. Here tourists can also play a key role, leading us to coin the term “tourist’s social responsibility.” For community development initiatives, in particular, this gives rise to both challenges and opportunities [138].

The natural, cultural and historical preconditions of the Gemer region point to an unfulfilled potential for rural tourism [139,140]. Several development strategies have been drawn up in the study area, including the Action Plan for the development of the target

districts Rimavská Sobota, Revúca and Rožňava; Priority Program of Support for regional and local economies; and Strategy for Tourism Development for Revuca district, as a part of Gemer region, but the actual application of this knowledge has yet to occur. They take into account the richness of the natural environment and cultural heritage and the potential of the mining tradition as the main attractions of tourism promotion. They are aware that solution of social issues like increasing education level, creation of job opportunities, support of local labor market, and inclusion of Roma communities is essential for regional development. To develop an effective strategy for tourism development in marginal and less-favored regions, detailed future research is needed to understand the main issues and difficulties involved, and to find integrated approaches and economic and social possibilities for strengthening local human capital. In particular, the so-called Gypsy Question is a very broad, complicated, and sensitive topic in Slovakia.

5. Conclusions

The local people and their activity, work, and social and cultural potential are the main driving forces in regional development. The lagging districts of the Gemer region are characterized by the Roma being the highest proportion of the population of any place in Slovakia. Local Roma families are affected by discrimination, multiple instances of marginalization, and intergenerational transmission of poverty. The low economic production and representation of private companies result in the highest unemployment rates in all of Slovakia and in the withdrawal of the white population, which again weakens the region significantly. This area, which once represented a major center of economic and cultural life, has become the poorest region in Slovakia. Even in the past, the Gemer region had the largest Roma population in Slovakia, but thanks to the natural wealth and ability of the local people, it was one of the most developed areas in Hungary. Today, one of the possible solutions for this marginal region is the integrated development of different forms of tourism, reflecting its history and heritage. The most important forms that we identified in the Gemer region would be religious tourism, geotourism, mining tourism, and creative and rural tourism. The area also has strong potential for the development of literary tourism or spas. However, there are only few destination management organization members involved in promoting the numerous natural and cultural attractions of Gemer. The cooperation of agricultural and economic associations and guilds in the past helped to develop the whole territory. A similar model should be used today to strengthen existing destination marketing organizations in Slovakia. More effort should be undertaken to motivate and involve the cooperation of local companies. In the regional development strategies, more attention should be paid to the cultural, educational, and employment opportunities for marginal communities. The preservation and propagation of natural, cultural, and social diversity through Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, the Central List of Cultural Monuments, UNESCO Global Geoparks, the Traditional Folk Culture Collection and the Centre for Folk Art Production, the Industrial Property Office, and the list of UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage is vital for tourism development, in this region and in other marginal regions in the world.

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