

UNLOCKING BLUE GROWTH: POLICY SYNERGIES AND REGIONAL BRANDING IN CASPIAN MARITIME TOURISM

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Abstract: The Caspian Basin, a geopolitically complex maritime region, holds significant potential for sustainable tourism. This study critically assesses barriers and opportunities in maritime tourism development, using a mixed-method approach that integrates Porter's Diamond Model, the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), and Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA). Findings reveal that policy fragmentation, infrastructural gaps, and ecological concerns hinder growth. However, cross-border cooperation and unified regional branding are identified as key drivers of tourism competitiveness. By presenting an empirically grounded roadmap, this research provides policymakers and industry stakeholders with strategic recommendations to elevate the Caspian Basin's position as a globally competitive maritime tourism hub. The purpose of this study is to assess the competitiveness of regional tourism products in the Caspian Basin. The key objectives are to analyse factors influencing tourism development, examine the potential of the Caspian Tourism Corridor and Silk Road Heritage for joint regional branding, and propose strategic recommendations for cross-border collaboration and sustainable maritime tourism growth. This study applies a mixed-methods approach, combining Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis, adapted TTCI and Porter's Diamond models, and qualitative stakeholder interviews. Data were drawn from TTCI reports, national statistics, and expert insights to assess the competitiveness and collaborative potential of Caspian Basin tourism. The study reveals striking asymmetries in tourism competitiveness across the Caspian region, visualized through a custom radar chart and strategic mapping tools. Stakeholder insights expose deep-rooted barriers and untapped synergies, particularly around digital transformation and eco-tourism. Integrating the Silk Road legacy and maritime connectivity into a unified branding strategy – structured via the Tourism Branding Strategy Matrix and visual project management – emerges as a game-changing opportunity to reposition the Caspian as a globally competitive cultural corridor. The study confirms that sustainability-focused policies and a unified Silk Road branding strategy are vital for strengthening the Caspian Basin's tourism competitiveness. Structured project management and coordinated governance emerge as key drivers for sustainable, inclusive, and resilient tourism development.

Keywords: multi-criteria decision analysis, Caspian cross-border regions, regional tourism product, regional collaboration, unified tourism branding

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INTRODUCTION

Maritime regional tourism is a crucial driver of sustainable economic development, cultural exchange, and environmental conservation. The Caspian Sea, as the largest enclosed inland body of water in the world, offers a unique case for analysing the interconnection and influence of regional tourism development. The competitiveness of regional tourism products in the Caspian Basin countries reflects the complex interplay of geographical, cultural, economic, and political factors that shape the appeal and sustainability of tourism in the area. This paper synthesizes contemporary research on the topic, focusing on how these factors influence competitiveness, using established frameworks such as the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) and Porter's Diamond model. This study aims to examine the competitiveness of tourism products in the Caspian cross-border regions, focusing on strategic spatial planning and regional collaboration. The Caspian Basin, encompassing Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, represents a heterogeneous region with shared geographical proximity yet diverse socio-economic contexts and tourism development strategies. Additionally, regional collaboration is pivotal for enhancing the collective competitiveness of the Caspian Basin. Joint marketing initiatives, such as the proposed Caspian Tourism Corridor, aim to capitalize on shared historical and cultural ties while addressing transboundary challenges like environmental degradation and cross-border transportation (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

Cultural and heritage tourism offers another avenue for differentiation within the region. The shared legacy of the Silk Road provides a unique narrative for joint tourism branding, but the successful realization of this potential depends on cohesive storytelling and infrastructure development. Initiatives such as the Silk Road Heritage Corridor have received international recognition; however, substantial investment is required to enhance accessibility and improve the overall

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visitor experience (UNESCO, 2019). Enhanced collaboration among Caspian Basin countries could position the region as a premier destination for cultural tourism. In conclusion, the competitiveness potential of the regional tourism product in the Caspian Basin countries is shaped by a mosaic of factors, including natural resources, policy frameworks, infrastructure, and regional collaboration. The study's findings will contribute to the broader discourse on regional tourism development by providing actionable recommendations for policymakers and industry stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of maritime tourism products is underpinned by sustainable tourism theories that advocate for a balance between economic growth, environmental preservation, and cultural sensitivity (Butler, 1980). In the context of the Caspian Sea, this balance is critical due to its fragile ecosystems and diverse cultural heritage. Gössling & Hall (2006) emphasize that the integration of natural and cultural assets is essential for creating cohesive and attractive tourism experiences. This notion is supported by Juganaru & Pletea (2023), who underline the importance of transitioning to sustainable business models in coastal tourism, citing best practices from European destinations. However, many of these models assume a high level of institutional integration and environmental regulation, which are still evolving in the Caspian region.

Scholarly research highlights the necessity of governance structures and regulatory frameworks to facilitate maritime tourism development. The 2018 Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea marked a critical milestone, outlining sovereign rights, resource use, and environmental responsibilities (Kadir, 2019). Building on this, Mehdiyev (2025) provides a nuanced analysis of the Convention's outcomes, noting that while it formalised long-standing negotiations, the resulting legal arrangements have produced unequal benefits among the littoral states. These disparities, shaped by geopolitical interests and legal ambiguities, continue to hinder cohesive policy implementation and coordinated regional development.

Beyond governance frameworks, the interconnection between infrastructure, transport, and tourism growth is explored by Akbulaev & Bayramli (2020), who identified a positive link between maritime transport and regional economic development. Nevertheless, their analysis largely focuses on macroeconomic variables, without engaging sufficiently with tourism-specific needs such as destination image, tourist services, or cross-border mobility barriers.

Recent studies provide useful comparative perspectives. Czarnecka-Gallas et al. (2025) examined umbrella branding for boating tourism in the Baltic Sea and demonstrated how cohesive regional identity boosts competitiveness. Their findings suggest clear parallels for the Caspian, where branding remains fragmented. However, the Baltic case benefits from EU cohesion policies and institutional support structures that are absent in the Caspian Basin. Likewise, Tătar et al. (2020) analysed the Bihorhajdu/Bihar Euroregion, emphasising marketing awareness and stakeholder involvement in cross-border tourism. Their approach, while insightful, does not fully address the ecological and geopolitical fragilities specific to closed seas. Dwyer & Kim's (2003) comprehensive destination competitiveness framework remains widely cited for its inclusion of demand conditions, supporting industries, and destination management. However, it has been critiqued for being too generic to apply to unique geopolitical contexts like the Caspian, where institutional fragmentation, post-Soviet legacies, and ecological vulnerabilities complicate competitiveness dynamics.

Environmental and climate-related limitations are gaining increasing attention in recent scholarship. Court et al. (2025) highlight the alarming rate of Caspian Sea level decline, noting potential risks to biodiversity, coastal infrastructure, and the long-term sustainability of tourism. While their study offers a robust ecological perspective, further exploration of socio-economic dimensions – particularly for tourism-reliant communities – remains necessary. Similarly, Xenarios et al. (2025) provide valuable insight into the region's water governance challenges and sustainability trade-offs. Their analysis underscores the importance of coordinated environmental strategies, though targeted implications for the tourism sector have yet to be fully developed. From a socio-spatial perspective, Mikhaylova et al. (2023) apply geospatial modelling to identify functional coastal zones and propose development corridors based on attraction density. While the method is promising for spatial planning, it does not incorporate real-time tourist behaviour or inter-seasonal fluctuations. Bautista et al. (2025), using remote sensing to examine seasonal health tourism in Iran's Caspian coast, found strong variability in visitor flow and resource availability, indicating that natural resource mapping must be coupled with adaptive tourism strategies. However, the study remains confined to a national case, limiting its generalisability to broader regional frameworks.

Building on this spatial dimension, Liu & Chamaratana (2025) explored sustainability practices in border regions of the Mekong Subregion, emphasizing local stakeholder involvement and policy integration – factors that mirror the challenges faced in the Caspian Basin. However, the relative political and institutional cohesion in the Mekong makes direct application difficult. Likewise, Sansyrbayeva et al. (2021) highlighted the significance of natural and recreational assets in fostering economic integration in border areas of Kazakhstan and Russia, aligning with the Caspian's transboundary tourism objectives, though their analysis remains limited to bilateral cooperation. In a broader review of marine tourism impacts, Baltranaitė et al. (2025) synthesised evidence from multiple coastal regions and concluded that tourism both relies on and degrades ecosystem services. While their review is valuable in identifying global patterns, it lacks region-specific prescriptions for mitigating these impacts in politically unstable or environmentally closed regions like the Caspian.

Despite its potential, the Caspian region continues to face substantial barriers to maritime tourism development. Environmental concerns – such as pollution from oil extraction and industrial activity – threaten the integrity of local ecosystems. Climate change and decreasing water levels further exacerbate these issues, impacting biodiversity and coastal infrastructure (Nejat et al., 2018). Farzaneh et al. (2012) warn of environmental degradation in southern coastal zones driven by uncontrolled tourism, underscoring the urgency of coordinated sustainability frameworks. Additionally, geopolitical tensions remain a persistent challenge. As Sharpley (2002) noted, unresolved regional conflicts can destabilize cross-border tourism. More recently, the Second Karabakh War (2020) and the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2022) have disrupted infrastructure

and investor confidence, altering travel dynamics and reducing destination security across parts of the Caspian. Aghayev (2023) highlights that perceptions of instability and post-conflict fragility in the South Caucasus significantly affect travel motivation, with safety concerns acting as primary deterrents. However, while such analyses illuminate tourist perceptions, they often overlook institutional dimensions of post-conflict recovery and the practical mechanisms for rebuilding trust across borders. Cross-border trust and cooperation remain essential for maritime tourism development. Korneevets et al. (2019) demonstrated that tourism flows are shaped by inter-regional political and social relationships, yet empirical research on long-term trust-building and cooperation in post-conflict maritime regions remains limited.

In sum, current literature provides conceptual frameworks, ecological diagnostics, and comparative models, yet few works propose a regionally tailored approach to tourism development in the Caspian. Many remain either too locally focused or normatively driven without addressing implementation complexity. Critical gaps persist in (1) cross-border branding mechanisms, (2) conflict-sensitive governance, and (3) practical integration of ecological thresholds into tourism planning.

This study aims to address these gaps by proposing a systemic model for the Caspian Tourism Corridor – a multi-country, sustainability-oriented initiative that integrates spatial planning, branding, and regional governance to enhance the resilience and global positioning of the Caspian Sea as a maritime tourism destination.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journals, reports by international organizations, and regional case studies. Data sources include the World Economic Forum's TTCI reports (2019; 2021) and country-specific tourism strategies. Comparative analysis focuses on indicators such as natural and cultural resources, infrastructural capacity, and policy environments. To address the research gaps and provide a comprehensive analysis of tourism competitiveness in the Caspian Basin, we propose an integrative mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. This methodology allows for a holistic evaluation of the region's strengths, weaknesses, and potential collaborative opportunities. The approach emphasizes the use of advanced analytical tools, customized frameworks, and empirical data collection tailored to the Caspian context. The research will test the following hypotheses:

H1: Sustainability-focused policies, including eco-tourism and conservation initiatives, are critical for ensuring the long-term viability and appeal of the Caspian Basin's tourism sector.

H2: A unified tourism branding strategy based on the shared Silk Road heritage can amplify the region's attractiveness to international tourists.

Methodological Framework

Quantitative Analysis

Research employed Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA) to compare and evaluate the tourism competitiveness of the five Caspian Basin countries: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Iran. This method allows us to assess multiple factors, such as:

- **Natural Resources:** Biodiversity, ecological features, and scenic attractions.
- **Cultural Resources:** Heritage sites, festivals, and historical landmarks.
- **Infrastructure:** Transport, accommodation, and ICT infrastructure.
- **Policy and Governance:** Visa policies, international cooperation, and environmental regulations.
- **Sustainability:** Integration of eco-tourism and conservation initiatives.
- Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA):

- Data on natural resources, cultural assets, infrastructure, digital readiness, and sustainability were normalized on a 0-100 scale.

- Comparative radar charts visualized disparities.

The TTCI framework was customized to assess five key dimensions of competitiveness – natural and cultural resources, infrastructure, digital readiness, policy, and sustainability. Data was normalized on a 0-100 scale to facilitate cross-country comparison. Porter's Diamond was adapted to the Caspian context by analysing factor conditions; demand conditions; supporting industries; strategy and rivalry. By combining Porter's model with TTCI, this study bridges the gap between qualitative and quantitative analyses. The TTCI's quantitative scores validate the qualitative insights derived from Porter's model, offering a more nuanced understanding of competitiveness.

Qualitative Analysis

Authors conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including policymakers, tourism operators, and local community representatives. This will provide insights into:

- Perceived barriers and opportunities for regional collaboration.
- The role of digitalization and innovation in enhancing competitiveness.
- Perspectives on sustainability and environmental management.

Semi-structured interviews with 25 stakeholders (5 from each country) provided qualitative insights into barriers and opportunities. Research scholars gathered the secondary data from the World Economic Forum's (2019; 2021) Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, national tourism statistics from government portals.

Thereafter, a primary data was collected from interviews with key stakeholders across the Caspian Basin. Additionally, case studies of successful regional tourism initiatives (e.g., Baltic Sea or Adriatic Sea collaborations)

served as benchmarks for identifying actionable strategies applicable to the Caspian Basin. Our research will conclude by presenting a roadmap for enhancing the Caspian Basin's tourism competitiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview: the selection of participants for the interviews is crucial to obtaining diverse, comprehensive, and actionable insights into the regional tourism landscape of the Caspian Basin. The 25 participants should represent a balanced cross-section of stakeholders directly involved in or impacted by the tourism sector. Presented below (Table 1) is a detailed analysis of the target individuals, their respective roles, and the strategies for their identification and engagement.

Table 1. Stakeholder Interviews (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Category	Who they are	Why they are important	No. of participants	Countries represented
Policy-makers	- Representatives from national or regional tourism ministries or departments in each country (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Iran). - Officials involved in tourism policy-making, strategy, or international collaborations.	- Provide insights into government strategies, policies, and regulatory frameworks. - Identify barriers and opportunities for cross-border collaboration and investment.	5	1 from each country
Tourism Operators	- Owners or senior managers of travel agencies, tour operators, and hotel chains. - Representatives from eco-tourism or adventure tourism businesses.	- Provide operational insights into tourism challenges, such as infrastructure gaps, marketing, and customer preferences. - Offer perspectives on the effectiveness of digital platforms and sustainability initiatives.	5	1 from each country
Local Community Leaders	- Representatives of community-based tourism initiatives, such as homestays, handicraft cooperatives, or cultural organizations. - Leaders of local NGOs working on tourism-related projects, particularly in rural or eco-sensitive areas.	- Provide grassroots perspectives on how tourism impacts local livelihoods, culture, and the environment. - Highlight challenges in integrating local communities into the broader tourism framework.	5	1 from each country
Digital and Marketing Specialists	- Experts in digital marketing, social media, and online tourism platforms. - Representatives from technology companies providing services like booking platforms or smart tourism tools.	- Offer insights into the region's digital readiness and the effectiveness of digital campaigns. - Highlight opportunities for improving digital presence and integrating smart tourism technologies.	5	1 from each country
Environmental and Sustainability Experts	- Environmental scientists, eco-tourism planners, and conservationists. - Representatives from international organizations like UNESCO or WWF working in the Caspian Basin.	- Provide insights into sustainability practices, environmental challenges, and eco-tourism opportunities. - Offer expertise on balancing tourism growth with conservation.	5	1 from each country

MCDA

Below there is presented the strategic components for clear understanding and visualized the competitiveness factors of the Caspian Basin countries using a radar chart (Figure 1). This chart highlights the disparities and strengths among the countries in key dimensions such as digital readiness, infrastructure, branding, sustainability, and knowledge sharing.

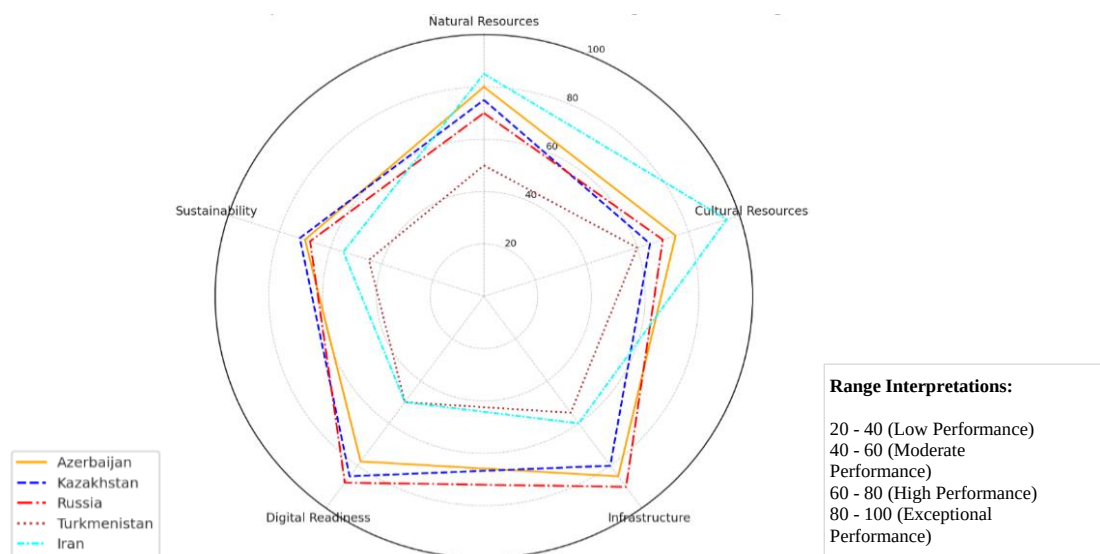


Figure 1. Tourism Competitiveness of Caspian Basin Countries (Note: compiled by the authors based on the source of the TPCI data - WEF)

The chart visually represents the tourism competitiveness of five Caspian Basin countries – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Iran – across five key dimensions derived from the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). Iran ranks the highest in natural resources (90) and cultural heritage (95) due to its rich biodiversity and numerous UNESCO World Heritage sites. Conversely, Turkmenistan scores the lowest in both categories (70 and 65, respectively) due to limited utilization of natural assets and underdeveloped cultural tourism infrastructure.

Russia leads in infrastructure (90) and digital readiness (90), demonstrating well-developed transport networks and advanced digital tourism strategies. In contrast, Turkmenistan ranks the lowest in both dimensions (60 and 50, respectively) due to inadequate transport facilities and minimal adoption of digital platforms in tourism management.

Regarding sustainability, Russia achieves the highest score (78), reflecting initial efforts in eco-tourism and resource management, while Iran ranks the lowest (60) due to challenges in integrating sustainable tourism policies.

The findings, visualized through a radar chart, highlight disparities and strengths among the countries. The data were normalized on a 0-100 scale to ensure consistency, and distinct line styles were applied for better readability. The scores represented in the radar chart were developed using simulated data based on a synthesis of secondary sources and insights from tourism competitiveness frameworks.

Strategically, collaborative tourism branding, investments in digital transformation, and eco-tourism development could enhance regional tourism growth. The radar chart provides a comparative overview, offering insights for policymakers and stakeholders. Future research should focus on long-term studies and qualitative analyses to refine these findings and explore untapped opportunities. Strengthened policy reforms and regional cooperation are essential to unlocking the Caspian Basin's full potential as a competitive and sustainable tourism destination.

Porter's Diamond Model

Porter's Diamond Model (Figure 2) serves as a comprehensive framework for assessing the tourism competitiveness of the Caspian Basin, integrating qualitative and quantitative insights through its four key components: Factor Conditions, Demand Conditions, Related and Supporting Industries, and Firm Strategy, Structure, and Rivalry.

- Factor Conditions highlight natural and cultural resources as key tourism assets, with Iran and Kazakhstan excelling in biodiversity and eco-tourism, while Azerbaijan leverages urban tourism and mountain resorts. However, Turkmenistan underutilizes its cultural and archaeological heritage due to restrictive policies.

- Demand Conditions show strong domestic tourism demand in Russia and Kazakhstan, supported by growing disposable incomes. However, international tourism remains limited, particularly in Iran, due to visa restrictions and geopolitical challenges.

- Related and Supporting Industries emphasize the role of ICT and infrastructure, where Russia and Kazakhstan lead in smart tourism technologies, while Iran and Turkmenistan lag significantly. Azerbaijan's investment in luxury resorts and transport hubs strengthens its tourism appeal.

- Firm Strategy, Structure, and Rivalry reveal policy disparities, with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan adopting liberalized tourism policies, while Turkmenistan's restrictive policies hinder tourism growth. A lack of regional collaboration, such as shared visa agreements and joint marketing initiatives, limits the potential for a cohesive tourism strategy.

The study integrates Porter's Model with the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) and Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA), ensuring a robust evaluation of tourism potential. The findings underscore the need for regional cooperation, infrastructure investment, and digital transformation to enhance competitiveness. A unified tourism strategy could unlock the Caspian Basin's full potential as a globally competitive and sustainable destination.

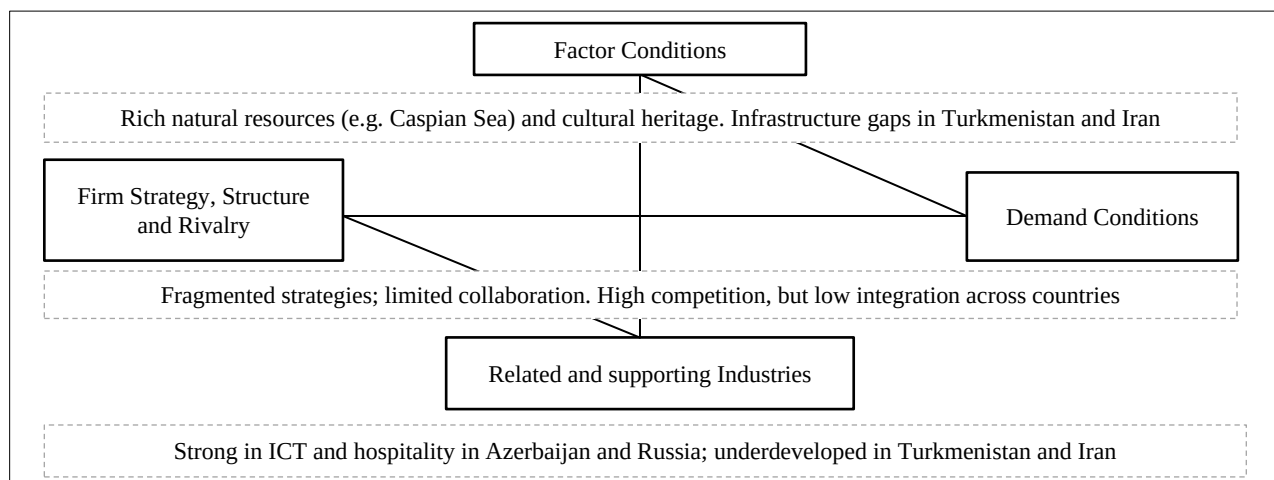


Figure 2. Porter's Diamond Model (Porter, 1990) adapted for the Caspian Basin context

Note: compiled by the authors based on the source of the Porter's Diamond Model

To further contextualize these findings, it is beneficial to examine successful regional tourism strategies that have been implemented in other maritime regions. The Baltic and Adriatic Seas serve as relevant case studies, demonstrating how cross-

border cooperation, infrastructural investments, and cultural heritage promotion can enhance tourism competitiveness. Previous research has highlighted that regional integration through coordinated policies and joint marketing strategies significantly boosts tourism development and economic resilience (European Commission, 2009; Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, 2020). By evaluating these established frameworks, the Caspian Basin can adopt best practices tailored to its unique geographical and geopolitical context, ultimately fostering a more cohesive and competitive tourism industry.

Examining successful tourism development strategies in the Baltic and Adriatic regions offers valuable insights for the Caspian Basin. In the Baltic region, the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) has been instrumental in enhancing cooperation among coastal nations, focusing on environmental sustainability, economic growth, and regional attractiveness. This strategy underscores the importance of political support, multi-level governance, and adequate funding for successful implementation (European Commission, 2009).

Additionally, the establishment of the Euroregion "Baltic" has fostered cross-border cooperation, leading to joint tourism initiatives and the development of a strong regional brand. This collaboration, supported by the Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021-2027, has enhanced the region's competitiveness in the international tourism market through projects such as SB WELL (South Baltic Wellness Tourism), CATCH (Coastal Angling Tourism – a Catch for the Future), and MANTA (Maritime Nature-based Tourism Activities), which focus on sustainable tourism, coastal wellbeing, and maritime heritage (Interreg South Baltic Programme, 2021-2027).

In the Adriatic region, countries have collaborated through macro-regional strategies like the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), which includes a dedicated pillar on Sustainable Tourism. This cooperation has led to improved infrastructure and the promotion of cultural routes – such as the Adriatic Highway – connecting historical cities and UNESCO World Heritage sites, thereby attracting tourists interested in cultural and historical heritage (European Commission, 2021). To build upon the insights gained from the Baltic and Adriatic regions, it is essential to explore how similar approaches can be adapted to the Caspian Basin. While these regions have successfully leveraged cross-border cooperation, infrastructural investments, and cultural heritage promotion to enhance their tourism sectors, the Caspian Basin presents a distinct geopolitical and historical context that requires a tailored strategic framework.

One of the most promising opportunities for tourism development in the Caspian region lies in the integration of Silk Road heritage into cruise tourism. Given the region's historical role as a critical link between Central Asia, Persia, and the broader Mediterranean, aligning modern tourism initiatives with this legacy could strengthen regional branding, attract high-value cultural tourists, and foster economic growth. Furthermore, by positioning the Caspian Cruise Route as a maritime extension of the Silk Road, stakeholders can capitalize on existing international recognition of the Silk Road as a globally significant historical and cultural network. The following section examines the potential for Silk Road-oriented cruise tourism in the Caspian Basin, emphasizing its historical significance, thematic integration strategies, economic implications, and sustainability considerations. This approach builds on global best practices in heritage-based tourism while addressing the region's unique economic and geopolitical landscape.

The Caspian Basin holds immense potential for developing a heritage-based cruise tourism sector that aligns with historical trade networks. The proposed Caspian Cruise Route links major ports in Azerbaijan (Baku), Kazakhstan (Aktau), Russia (Astrakhan), Turkmenistan (Turkmenbashi), and Iran (Bandar Anzali). As illustrated in Figure 3, this maritime corridor extends beyond conventional tourism, integrating historical Silk Road trading hubs such as Samarkand, Mashhad, and Tabriz, reinforcing cultural and economic connectivity within the region.

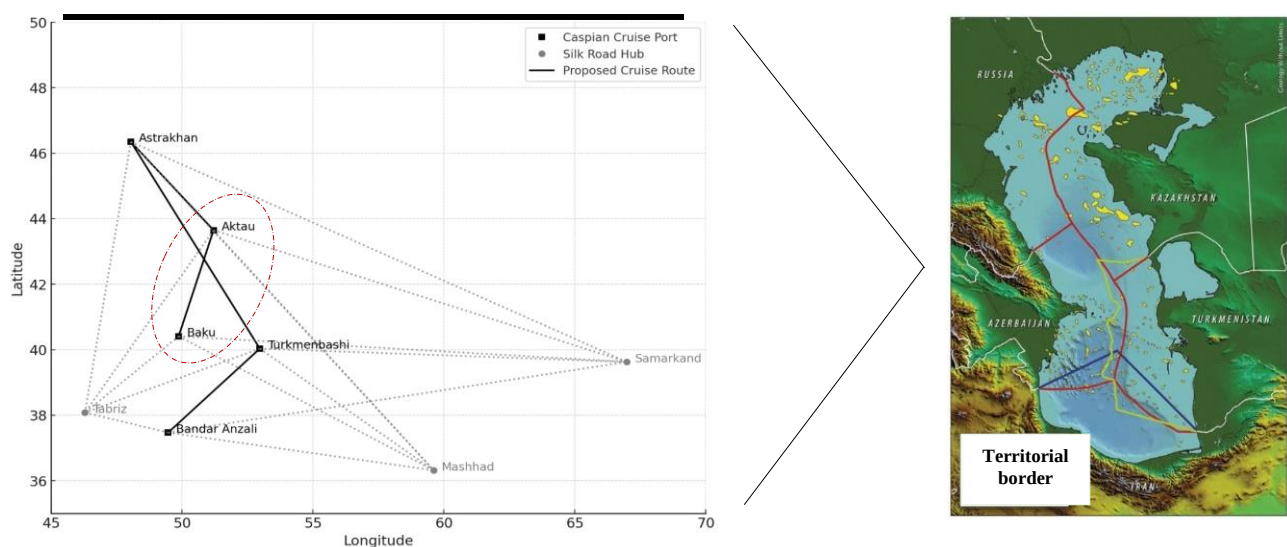


Figure 3. Caspian Cruise Route and Silk Road Connections (Source: the map of the Caspian Sea with territorial borders – Cross, 2021)
Note: the graph was compiled by the authors based on the data and conceptual framework presented in the study

Historically, the Caspian Sea played a pivotal role as a maritime extension of the Silk Road, facilitating trade in silk, spices, ceramics, and metals between Central Asia, Persia, and the Mediterranean (Ekinci, 2014). Key coastal settlements

such as Baku and Astrakhan served as logistical hubs, while Samarkand and Tabriz acted as major inland commercial and cultural centres. This historical backdrop provides a strong foundation for revitalizing the region's cultural tourism potential through thematic cruise itineraries. Cruise tourism presents a promising opportunity for enhancing regional collaboration and economic growth in the Caspian Basin. The shared coastline of the Caspian Sea making it an ideal setting for cruise routes that showcase the region's cultural and natural attractions.

Integrating the Silk Road heritage into Caspian cruise tourism presents a unique opportunity to position the region as a leading cultural and historical tourism destination. By aligning with the historical narrative of the Silk Road, the Caspian Basin can foster economic growth, cultural pride, and international collaboration. This approach not only revives one of history's greatest trade routes but also ensures its relevance for future generations.

The proposed Silk Road cruise route highlights the Caspian's role in historical trade networks, creating a bridge between the past and present. With strategic investments, policy coordination, and sustainable tourism practices, the region can unlock its full potential and establish itself as a premier cultural tourism destination on the global stage.

Building upon the integration of Porter's Diamond Model and the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), the Caspian Basin's Tourism Strategy extends to the development of a cruise route that aligns with the region's historical and cultural significance. In addition, strategic implementation actions and their expected results are provided below (Table 2).

Table 2. Canva for Tourism Development Strategy (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Strategic Actions for Development			
Regional Collaboration	Infrastructure Investment	Environmental Safeguards	Marketing and Branding
Joint Policies: Develop a unified framework for cruise tourism, addressing visa requirements, port standards, and environmental protections. Caspian Cruise Alliance: Establish a governing body composed of representatives from all five countries to coordinate cruise tourism efforts.	Port Upgrades: Modernize port facilities to accommodate cruise ships, including passenger terminals, docking stations, and logistics services. Transport Integration: Improve transport links between ports and nearby attractions to enhance tourist accessibility.	Eco-Friendly Ships: Encourage the use of low-emission ships with advanced waste management systems. Marine Conservation Zones: Designate protected areas where cruise activities are restricted to safeguard biodiversity.	Promotional Campaigns: Highlight the uniqueness of Caspian cruises through international tourism fairs and digital marketing. Collaborative Branding: Develop a shared cruise brand, such as "Caspian Voyages," emphasizing luxury, culture, and sustainability.
Expected Outcomes			
Economic Benefits	Strengthened Regional Ties	Enhanced Global Visibility	Sustainable Tourism Growth
- Increased revenue for local communities through port fees, tourism spending, and job creation. - Development of related industries, including shipbuilding, hospitality, and transport.	Cruise tourism can foster collaboration and mutual economic dependence, reducing geopolitical tensions.	Establishing the Caspian Basin as a cruise destination will elevate its status in the global tourism market.	By integrating eco-tourism principles, cruise tourism can contribute to long-term environmental and economic sustainability.

This initiative not only enhances regional connectivity but also integrates seamlessly with historical Silk Road hubs, reinforcing the region's rich cultural and economic heritage. By linking the cruise route with Silk Road trading centres the initiative highlights the historical significance of the Caspian Basin as a vital node in ancient trade networks. The region served as a crucial link between Central Asia, Persia, and the broader Mediterranean, facilitating the exchange of goods, culture, and knowledge. Integrating this legacy into the cruise tourism experience offers a unique thematic dimension that enhances the global appeal of the Caspian as a sustainable and culturally enriching destination.

Reviving the historical Silk Road narrative within the framework of Caspian cruise tourism presents an opportunity to create immersive and educational experiences for travellers. Cultural heritage cruises can include guided visits to Silk Road-era landmarks such as caravanserais, UNESCO World Heritage sites, and historical trade centres in port cities. Interactive museum exhibitions and historical re-enactments can further deepen tourists' engagement with the region's past, providing a compelling narrative that connects maritime and overland Silk Road routes. Additionally, educational and experiential cruises, featuring lectures by historians and archaeologists, hands-on cultural workshops, and culinary demonstrations, offer further avenues to engage academic and cultural tourism segments. Establishing seamless transport connections between ports and inland Silk Road hubs such as Tabriz and Samarkand can enhance accessibility, allowing visitors to experience the full historical and cultural depth of the region. Joint tour packages combining cruises with overland expeditions would position the Caspian as a holistic travel destination, bridging maritime and terrestrial tourism.

The integration of Silk Road heritage into cruise tourism not only strengthens the region's cultural identity but also yields significant economic and diplomatic benefits. Emphasizing the Caspian as a modern extension of the Silk Road can attract high-value cultural tourists, who seek deeper engagement with historical and educational experiences. Promoting the region under a unified branding strategy as "The Silk Road of the Seas" can create a strong global identity, expanding tourism markets across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Moreover, cross-border collaboration among Caspian Basin countries can foster regional economic growth by stimulating investment in tourism infrastructure, hospitality, and cultural initiatives. Governments can leverage global initiatives such as UNESCO's Silk Road Program to secure funding and gain international recognition for conservation and tourism development projects.

Strengthening partnerships with modern Silk Road initiatives, including China's Belt and Road Initiative, can further enhance investment opportunities, aligning infrastructure development with long-term tourism objectives.

Sustainability remains a central pillar of this initiative, ensuring that the increased influx of tourists does not compromise the region's historical and natural assets. Conservation of Silk Road landmarks, restoration of heritage sites, and eco-tourism initiatives must be prioritized to maintain long-term viability. Implementing responsible tourism practices that minimize environmental impact while preserving cultural integrity is essential for maintaining the authenticity and sustainability of the destination. Engaging local communities as key stakeholders in tourism development fosters economic inclusion and ensures that cultural traditions remain an integral part of the visitor experience. Community-based tourism programs focusing on traditional crafts, local storytelling, and artisanal heritage can empower local artisans and contribute to cultural preservation while providing meaningful experiences for visitors. A portion of tourism revenues should be allocated to educational programs and conservation efforts, reinforcing the region's commitment to sustainable tourism development.

The Caspian Basin's strategic position as a maritime and cultural crossroads underscores its potential as a premier destination for cruise tourism. By integrating the Silk Road narrative into the region's tourism framework, stakeholders can unlock new opportunities for economic growth, international collaboration, and cultural exchange. This approach not only revitalizes the legacy of one of history's most influential trade networks but also ensures its relevance for future generations. As a result, the Caspian Basin can emerge as a globally competitive and sustainable tourism destination, balancing economic prosperity with cultural and environmental stewardship.

The successful incorporation of Silk Road themes into Caspian cruise tourism necessitates a comprehensive approach involving thematic itineraries, seamless transport integration, and collaborative marketing strategies. The following components of the Strategy Development are critical for its effective execution:

- Thematic Cruise Itineraries
- Connecting Maritime and Inland Silk Road Hubs
- Enhancing Regional Tourism Revenues
- Fostering Cross-Border Collaboration
- Revitalizing Local Economies and Cultural Heritage
- Unified Branding Strategy.

The integration of Silk Road themes into Caspian cruise tourism necessitates a comprehensive strategic approach encompassing thematic cruise itineraries, maritime and inland hub connections, regional tourism revenue enhancement, cross-border collaboration, local economic revitalization, and a unified branding strategy.

The proposed Tourism Branding Strategy Matrix (Figure 4) outlines a structured project management framework, progressing through phases of discovery, integration, activation, and transformation. This framework incorporates governance structures, funding mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation processes, as well as branding initiatives such as regional roadshows and international tourism fairs. The ultimate goal is to achieve sustainable tourism development through strategic alignment, implementation efficiency, performance optimization, and long-term project sustainability. The integration of Silk Road heritage into Caspian cruise tourism presents a unique opportunity to enhance regional tourism competitiveness, foster economic growth, and promote cross-border cooperation.

By leveraging the historical and cultural significance of the Caspian Basin, this initiative has the potential to establish the region as a leading global destination for heritage-based tourism. However, the success of this strategy is contingent upon the implementation of sustainable development practices, collaborative governance, and effective marketing, aligning with global best practices observed in the Baltic and Adriatic regions.

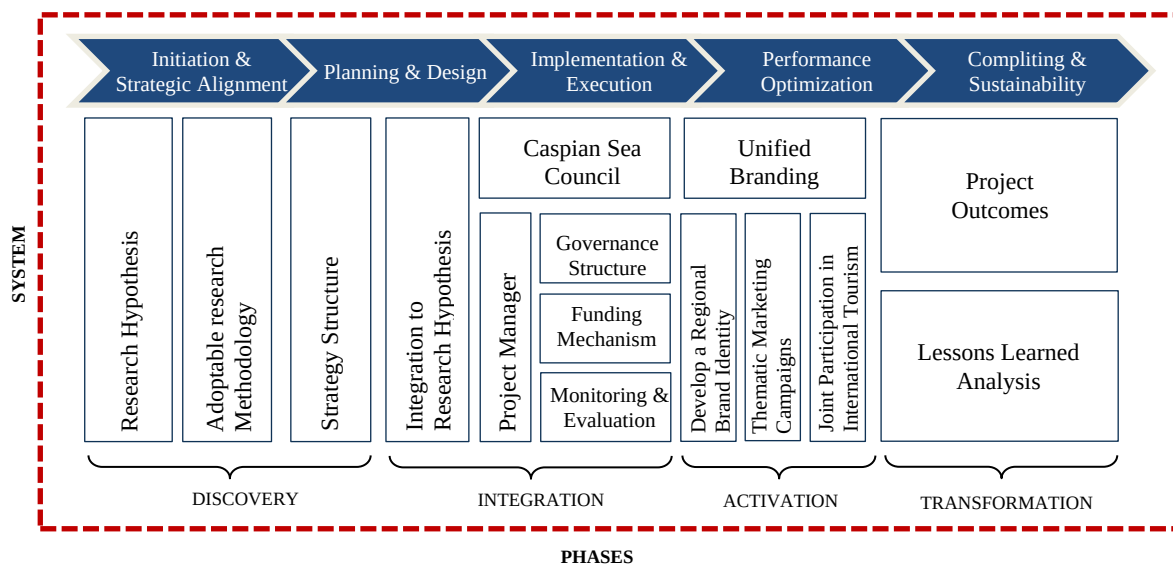


Figure 4. Development a unified Tourism Branding Strategy Matrix through the project management implementation (H2)

Note: compiled by the authors based on the Project Management Model (PRINCE2)

A critical aspect of this process is the establishment of regulatory frameworks to ensure strategic oversight and coordinated action among stakeholders, including government authorities, tourism enterprises, and local communities. Regulation provides a structured approach to managing cross-border collaboration, economic incentives, and cultural preservation while mitigating potential risks associated with large-scale tourism development.

As one of the most effective instruments, the author proposes project management, which provides a structured approach to overseeing processes across all phases – ranging from initiation and planning to execution, monitoring, and sustainable development. Project management ensures the efficient allocation of resources, risk mitigation, and continuous evaluation of key deliverables, allowing for adaptability in response to dynamic conditions. Moreover, its implementation supports the integration of financial mechanisms, the development of strategic marketing campaigns, the organization of international tourism fairs, and the establishment of a unified regional branding strategy. By integrating regulatory oversight with structured project management, Caspian cruise tourism can achieve long-term sustainability, positioning the region as a premier cultural and historical tourism hub. This approach not only strengthens regional economic resilience but also ensures the preservation of Silk Road heritage, fostering a dynamic and competitive tourism landscape.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research confirm the validity of the proposed hypotheses, demonstrating that sustainability-focused policies and a unified tourism branding strategy are essential for the successful development of Caspian Basin tourism.

Regarding H1, the analysis highlights that sustainability-focused policies, including eco-tourism and conservation initiatives, play a pivotal role in ensuring the long-term viability and appeal of the Caspian tourism sector. Empirical evidence and best practices from other maritime tourism regions indicate that sustainable management approaches not only mitigate environmental degradation but also enhance the economic and cultural resilience of local communities. The study reaffirms that integrating sustainability principles into policy frameworks is crucial for maintaining the ecological and cultural integrity of the Caspian Basin while simultaneously boosting its competitiveness as a tourism destination.

Similarly, H2 has been substantiated, revealing that a unified tourism branding strategy leveraging the shared Silk Road heritage significantly enhances the region's appeal to international tourists. The research findings demonstrate that cohesive branding fosters a distinct and compelling regional identity, bridging historical narratives with modern tourism experiences. By adopting a well-coordinated branding strategy, Caspian nations can differentiate themselves in the global tourism market, attracting culturally motivated travelers and fostering cross-border cooperation.

Furthermore, the study underscores the necessity of regulatory mechanisms and structured project management for the effective implementation of both sustainability policies and branding strategies. Establishing clear governance structures, defining stakeholder roles, and integrating digital tools for real-time monitoring are key to ensuring efficiency, transparency, and long-term success. The adoption of project management methodologies further strengthens strategic alignment, optimizing resource allocation and risk mitigation throughout the implementation process. In conclusion, this research provides a robust foundation for advancing sustainable and heritage-based tourism in the Caspian region. By prioritizing regulatory coherence, collaborative governance, and strategic project execution, Caspian nations can unlock the full potential of their maritime tourism sector, ensuring its resilience, inclusivity, and global competitiveness.

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