

SACRED PLACES IN A SHADOW AS A RESOURCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM: A CASE STUDY IN SOUTHWESTERN BULGARIA

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Citation: Stoykova, P., & Kiriakova-Dineva, T. (2026). Sacred places in a shadow as a resource for the development of religious tourism: A case study in southwestern Bulgaria. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 68(4), 2805–2814. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.68416-1897>

Abstract: This study aims to analyze less familiar Orthodox sites in Blagoevgrad District of Southwestern Bulgaria, defined here as “sacred places in a shadow” as a factor for religious tourism development, specifically through community-led charitable activities for their renovation. Observations and visual data serve as the starting point of the analysis. Next, the study applies the mixed-methods approach, integrating field observation and visual documentation of six selected sites with 34 in-depth interviews. These were conducted with adult Bulgarian citizens residing in the territory of Blagoevgrad district. The interviewees included persons directly involved in local church activities (e.g. priests, church members, lay officials (klisari)), which made it possible to outline the different aspects of the research problem. The results are contextualized through an analysis of a national representative survey (n =1283) to evaluate broader trends in religion and socialization. The findings suggest that the “sacred places in shadow” can function as vital tools for social cohesion, evidenced by localized efforts and volunteer-led renovations. These activities demonstrate that besides the scope of tourism, these sites are a tool for collective philanthropy and community spirit. The data indicate that these “sacred places in a shadow” contribute to the local society spirit and they are a factor for the development of religious tourism in the region. The study concludes that their integration into the tourism product profile can strengthen regional identity and better align with the principles of community social value. This approach offers a replicable framework for peripheral regions seeking to balance cultural heritage preservation with sustainable economic growth. By repositioning overlooked spiritual landmarks for civic engagement, the research underscores the profound interconnectedness of faith and regional development.

Keywords: Orthodox heritage, sacred places in a shadow, charitable giving, community spirit, revitalization, religious tourism, Southwestern Bulgaria

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of intense globalization processes necessitating the use of cultural, historical and anthropogenic resources, Bulgaria still has a considerable potential to activate various heritage-related initiatives. This aspect can contribute to the sustainable development of medium-sized cities, locations or enterprises (Alberth, 2023; Vîlcea et al., 2023; Ndlovu, 2026) worldwide. One of the most viable activities of religious tourism is related to the community revitalization (Hassan, 2020), and even new types of tourists such as Do-it-Yourself travellers (DIY) (Atikah et al., 2022), the architectural pilgrims (Al-Mughrabi et al., 2026), adventure tourist (Alemshet & Legese, 2019), or even equestrian tourists (Jaelani et al., 2022). These are driven by the veneration of monasteries, churches, and other holy sites, including the worship of relics of saints and miraculous Orthodox icons - on the one hand, and the general practice of charitable giving (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011), on the other. Consequently, the interaction and socialization processes that foster spirituality within social work (Canda, 2002) are inherently linked to this religious potential, forming the central nexus of the present study. The economic and social importance of cultural heritage tourism is acknowledged worldwide (Hassan et al., 2022; Hronček et al., 2022; Datta, 2024; Ghosh et al., 2025). However, it still faces difficulties in certain peripheral zones. In the case of overlooked holy sites in the Blagoevgrad administrative district, religious tourism is currently underutilized; it needs to be recognized as a strategic tool for community development and social intervention. Religious tourism in Bulgaria continues to exist at the national and provincial levels (Troeva, 2017), and is carried out as cultural or educational excursions, rather than as pilgrimages to spiritually embedded sites.

Blagoevgrad region, located in Southwestern Bulgaria, is estimated as home to the Rila Monastery, one of the most important cultural and spiritual national symbols of Bulgarian Orthodoxy and a UNESCO's World Heritage Site. As the largest monastery in the country, the Rila monument attracts the majority of religious and cultural tourism flows in the

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region, often overshadowing the numerous smaller churches, monasteries, and chapels that share its historical and spiritual roots. This study deliberately moves beyond such prominent landmarks to focus on lesser-known Orthodox sacred places within the administrative district of Blagoevgrad, referred to here as “sacred places in the shadow”.

These sites, though less visited, possess considerable cultural, historical, and architectural value, and continue to serve as essential spaces for local religious practice and communal interaction. By investigating their role in socialization and building community, this study contends that these sites remain an underutilized spiritual asset for cultural identity and beneficial social development at the local level. Finally, the study suggests reclaiming these sites by emphasizing the need for the authorities to examine and incorporate such sacred spaces in more expansive cultural, religious, and social development approaches. From a social work and sociological perspectives, these sacred sites have transcended purely religious function, functioning as critical social spaces that foster solidarity, mutual support, and emotional resilience among local populations (Narasimhan & Saputra, 2023), and revealing tourism resource potential in countries with diverse religious backgrounds (Al-Makhadmah, 2020; Alkhawaldeh, 2022; Rakhimzhanova & Mussina, 2025).

These spaces often become significant community “hubs” for cultural exchange, dialogue, and shared rituals, and serve as both a moral and spiritual barometer, all essential elements in strengthening the “social glue” and fostering a sense of spiritual belonging. Recognizing their capacity for socialization can be useful for greater understanding of how religious spaces provide community spirit and social continuity, offering vital spiritual capital for local residents with long term consequences (Guest, 2010). Thus, integrating sacred sites, even the ‘shadowed once’, into social development and cultural preservation initiatives can be a powerful means of nurturing regional identity and advancing religious tourism.

If there are historical dimensions considered alongside the emerging possibilities for religious tourism in Bulgaria (the Blagoevgrad District), then any strategy must prioritize social embeddedness over purely economic returns. Increased attention to lesser-known Orthodox sites could increase not only awareness and engagement in the community but also cultural education and spiritual enrichment. This perspective serves as a preliminary frame of reference for navigating the intersection between sustainable religious tourism and the broader goal of fostering social inclusion within the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Initiatives on Sacred Places and Religious Tourism: Insights from Bulgaria

In her work “State of the study of holy places, pilgrimages and religious tourism in Bulgaria” (2013), Karamihova provides an in-depth analysis of the characteristics and classification of sacred sites. She argues that these locations “simultaneously play the roles of places of the memory and places in oblivion for past repression or favoritism” (2013: 20).

In view of the present research, it is precisely the duality of memory and oblivion that serves for strengthening cultural heritage revitalization. This can be achieved through the rediscovery of Orthodox holy places and the enhancement of their socializing value. The scientific validation of these holy places has gained significance with the publication of the encyclopedia *The Sacred Places of Bulgaria* (2022). As the first systematic attempt to catalog the nation’s spiritual topography from prehistory to the present, this work confirms the functional continuity and important cultural value of over 600 sites in Bulgaria. This scholarly interest of cultural heritage of the holy places is further expanded by the interdisciplinary expeditions organized by the Center for Ancient European and Eastern Mediterranean Cultures at South-West University “Neofit Rilski.” Collaborations between the National Archaeological Institute (BAS) and regional museums, such as the expedition “Thracian Sanctuaries from the Western Rhodopes, Pirin, and Rila”, have utilized archaeological, ethnological, and archaeoastronomical surveys to uncover the deep historical layers of the region. Contemporary research by Yankov & Markov (2004) and Spasova (2012) reveals new insights into multiplier effects and spiritual practices, whereas parallel studies address modern challenges such as the interpretation of heritage (Pashova & Kirilov, 2020) and the contemporary system of values (Kristeva, 2020). From a social and economic perspective, Kadiyska (2022) claims an intensified public interest in places of authentic cult practices. Georgieva (2012) sees the next benefit: such religious places and centers are a fundamental resource, including for developing an integrated product of cultural and religious tourism based on multiculturalism (Belova-Ganeva & Georgieva, 2021). In this way, the sacred places, well-known or “almost forgotten”, offer a personalized approach to community development at both macro and micro levels, revealing both artistic and architectural merits.

Consequently, as guardians of national identity, the holy sites require more than just academic documentation; they demand active attitude and preservation regardless of the state of their popularity. In the Blagoevgrad district despite local authorities, cultural institutions, and the tourism industry are making significant efforts to promote “shadowed” holy places, there remains a gap in the achieved socializing value. The endeavors of citizens, local communities, and institutions require a more synchronized approach and a more rational and sustainable revitalization of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the region while boosting the merits of religious tourism and its socializing potential.

Religious tourism can be seen as a kind of cultural-historical tourism, since its objects are also very important components of cultural and historical heritage (Kolev, 2015: 17). It can be understood as an independent form of tourism, especially when tourists travel to participate in practices related to the religion or in sharing religious values. However, when it is related to visiting holy places with cultural and educational purposes, and when the primary goal of the visitors is acquiring new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs (Richards, 1996; Galí-Espelt, 2012; Aulet & Vidal, 2018), this form of religious tourism should be regarded as cultural and educational tourism.

Although the functioning of the modern society “leaves little room for religion and allows limited recognition of its opportunities” (Wilson, 2001: 62), the modern man, however, is not completely satisfied with the rational social organization, and the coincidences of human life urge individuals more often to seek help, comfort, and support what is the subject matter of religion (Wilson, 2001: 61). From this point of view, it can be assumed that the leading motive in

religious tourism derives from spiritual needs, which undergo some changes at different stages of the historical and political development of the modern society. According to some researchers, at the beginning of the millennium religious tourism in Bulgaria “was not so up-to-date topic in the conversation of historians, archaeologists, museum curators, statesmen, municipal administrators and tourism experts” (Marinov, 2008: 48). At the present moment, however, there is a relatively large increase of the interest in different aspects in the cross section between religion and tourism and it is becoming more and more of a challenge for local and national authorities. The public sector and the key stakeholders in the face of municipal and district institutions, different ministries - Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Directorate of the religions, local economic structures and branch organizations for tourism, hoteliers, tour operators and travel agencies, regional history museums, museums in monasteries, educational centers, departments of tourism at the universities, etc.. They all together contribute to the profile and the development of the religious tourism in Bulgaria. The First Black Sea Forum for Religious Tourism, held by the Tourist Chamber Varna in 2008, as well as the published materials from the forum Religious tourism: Monasteries - holders of the Bulgarian spirituality - could be regarded as an important step towards that direction. Religious tourism is also a central theme of national-level scientific events such as the National Conferences on Cultural and Religious Tourism in 2014, 2016 and 2017.

The development of tourism is generally determined by the existence of many types of tourism resources (tangible archeological, natural and cultural heritage objects), by specific state policies, national and municipal strategies for economic development, by tourism and transport infrastructure, by increasing free time as an opportunity for “filling the gap” with different tourist attractions for diverse segments of the population. These circumstances can be regarded as well as prerequisites concerning the religious tourism, which, however, additionally is shaped by the regional specificity in the particular country. Bulgarian religious tourism is very similar to the tourism in the other Balkan countries. The presence of two of the world’s leading religions - the Christianity and the Islam broaden the possibilities for its development. It is only a matter of using the “tourist commodity” (Potter, 2015) to become part of the economic lifecycle of every “tourist destination”, i.e. village, city, district, province, region, country” (Kolev, 2015: 15).

According to Marinov (2008), the purpose of the travelers visiting sites of religious value is “to explore and experience places, objects and activities that represent authentically religious beliefs, events, personalities and temples, both in the field of historical heritage and in the modern religious life of the local population as well” (Marinov, 2008: 48). These religious sites could also be determined as ‘holy places. In view of their nature, in this research holy places are defined as sacred i.e. religious. Aulet & Vidal (2018) postulate that „they serve in some way to articulate the relationship between the community and its religious practices and to manifest the relationship between the human and the transcendent, the divinity (reflecting again the uniting sense of religare)“ (Aulet & Vidal, 2018: 238).

In terms of the relationship of the holy paces with the tourism practice, the holy places can be seen as prerequisites for the development of the religious tourism, especially as defined by Riegl (1982) when the primary aim of the visitor is subordinated to one of the two goals: „the maintenance of the cult in its original sense of religious respect; or the cult rendered to physical monuments of the collective memory“. In other words, when the main goal of the visitor is not subordinated to the relationship between man and God, then the tourist practice is generated by another motivation which may be an attitude towards cult or towards objects of cultural memory. Travelers to holy places are travelers to sacred spaces; they thus interact with the local culture, the cultural and religious institutions, and with other tourists (and pilgrims). Moreover, the number of the religious travels is expected to grow even in front of the deepening spiritual crisis in which “the individual returns to places that in the past were (and may continue to be) significant in the formation of more or less homogeneous social groups based on belief in spiritual and specifically in religious values” (Hristova, 2015: 80).

In the context of Orthodox religious tourism, a visit to the holy places is often identified as “a spiritual growth” and “an endeavor to learn more about Eastern Orthodox Christian culture” (Karamihova, 2011: 139). The leading motive for traveling to holy Orthodox places is the sharing, empathy and commitment to the values of Orthodox Christianity.

The importance of Orthodox shrines - churches, monasteries, chapels, and miraculous icons, as well as places with healing springs (ayazma) is indisputable (Ganeva-Raycheva, 2013). Their authenticity and uniqueness is due to the following peculiarities: cultural value belonging to the Orthodox heritage (among them are sites of national or local importance); architectural value; intriguing narratives (cults, stories, legends) for sacred objects and people; many rituals and practices of the folk tradition. These features are the source for a specific type of shared knowledge that can be assimilated not only in the spiritual-religious context but also can be transferred into an integrated tourism product (religious or pilgrim tourism) practiced mainly by believers or people interested in the cultural heritage of the Orthodoxy.

As one of the largest bastions of the Orthodox faith, Bulgaria has many Orthodox shrines and holy sites. They have become anchors of national identity and national spirit over the centuries and have flourished not only in Sofia and the Sofia Region, and in the larger settlements, but are also spread throughout the country.

As a result of the current demographic crisis, the depopulation of the state and the disappearance of the Bulgarian village, however, many of the Bulgarian valuable holy places are being forgotten. We regard these forgotten holy places as an unused tourist resource and at the same time as an important prerequisite for the socio-economic development of smaller settlements.

In 2012, a round table was held by IEFSEM-BAS, presenting the in-depth results of a project entitled “Holy Places in Sofia and Sofia: Narrative Traditions and Pilgrimage Practices” realized in the period 2010 - 2012 by Prof. Albena Georgieva and her team. The round table made a significant contribution to the development and validation of the holy places, not only in ethnological and folklore studies, but also in connection with the theory and practice of tourism science, because they were defined not only as beautiful places attracting worshipers, but also as significant contributors to the “debate on the relationship between worshipping, tourism and local faith” (Baeva, 2012:19).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, integrating observation, qualitative data from primary research conducted by the authors with quantitative findings from a nationally representative survey on donation culture and charitable giving.

Phase I. Field Observations and Visual Documentation

During the initial stage, twelve nearly forgotten Orthodox sites were visited. Following a rigorous screening process, six of these sites were identified as meeting the specific criteria for “oblivion”. The analysis includes visual documentation (photographs) of both “forgotten” and successfully restored sites (e.g., the Church of St. George in the village of Gabrovo, Blagoevgrad Municipality). These cases were evaluated based on their socialization function, analyzed through the dual lens of the sites’ current physical condition and the efficacy of local community initiatives aimed at their restoration.

Phase II. In-depth Interviews

At a later stage, between March 1st and April 19th, 2019, 34 in-depth interviews were conducted with adult Bulgarian citizens residing in the territory of Blagoevgrad district. The interviewees included persons directly involved in local church activities (e.g. priests, church members, lay officials (*klisari*)), which made it possible to outline the different aspects of the research problem.

Phase III. Quantitative Context

To contextualize the findings, data from a 2015 representative sociological survey on the topic “Attitudes towards Donation in Education” (n = 1283), were used to outline attitudes towards donation for religious purposes. Although focused on education, the dataset provides critical insights into broader attitudes toward charity for religious purposes. This quantitative framework helps delineate the prevailing trends and challenges facing religious philanthropy, which also directly affect the survival and revitalization of sacred places in a shadow, even a decade later.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative data from There are many sources and a potential available in the Blagoevgrad Region, including religious tourism, but one of the most important assets that is often overlooked is the ability for people to come together through Orthodox Heritage. Although ‘Orthodox Religious Tourism’ is generally considered to be a subset of Cultural Tourism, the authors view it as an important resource to revitalize communities and maintain national identity. The potential to transform these sacred sites from places in oblivion into active social hubs is supported by several key prerequisites discussed.

A rich cultural and historical heritage associated with Orthodoxy

A total number of 49 sites of the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage are located in the Blagoevgrad District, which have the status of immovable cultural objects of national importance; 13 of them are related to Orthodoxy and are recognized as examples of the high Bulgarian architecture and art. The more famous sites of the cultural and historical heritage of Orthodoxy with an archaeological, artistic and historical value are the Rozhen Monastery and the church “St. St. Teodor Tiron and Teodor Stratilat” in the village of Dobarsko. The architectural and spiritual landscape of the district is anchored by several high-profile complexes. Central to these is the Rozhen Monastery, which comprises several distinct monuments, including the Church of the Holy Virgin, a site of national significance, alongside the monastery ossuary, the Church of St. John the Baptist, and the Church of St. Cyril and Methodius.



Figure 1. The entrance of the church „St. Archangel Mihail, the village of Leshko (Source: The authors, 2019)



Figure 2. A detail above the front door of the church (Source: The authors, 2019)

These sites represent a dense concentration of architectural and artistic merit that provides a foundation for regional spiritual identity. Beyond the monastic centers, the region's socializing potential is distributed across various rural parishes. Notable examples include the iconostasis of St. St. Teodor Tiron and Teodor Stratilat in Dobarsko and the Church of St. Dimitar in Dolno Draglishte. In the historic town of Melnik, the churches of St. Nikolay the Wonderworker, St. Anthony, St. Yani, and St. St. Peter and Paul stand as testaments to a rich urban religious heritage. Of particular analytical interest are the churches of St. Archangel Michael in both Leshko and Logodazh, as well as St. Dimitar in Teshevo. Particularly prominent among these sites is the Leshko church; constructed in 1816, it was reconstructed in 1940 and 2011.

The interior is notable for its one-of-a-kind mural paintings - especially the uncommon depiction of a four-legged devil - that continues to make the church a popular site for cultural and spiritual tourism today. For this reason, the church "St. Archangel Michail" in the village of Leshko, which has been declared for a Bulgarian cultural monument with national importance and which is part of the Bulgarian National Cultural and Historical Heritage (Figures 1 and 2) is presented first.

Presence of the "Sacred Places in a Shadow"

"Sacred places in a shadow" date from various historical periods and possess diverse architectural and cultural value. Rock monasteries and medieval churches from are particularly distinguished by their high cultural, archaeological and symbolic significance, given their rarity in the Orthodox Balkan tradition. In the district of Blagoevgrad there can be found not many old Orthodox shrines, and if there were some, they might be known mainly to the local population, effectively remaining outside the popular tourist routes. A prime example of great importance to the local community in the Petrich municipality is the medieval rock church of "St. Pantaleymon" (Figures 3 and 4). Such sites represent a "hidden" layer of heritage that holds significant socialization potential if properly integrated into the regional cultural map.

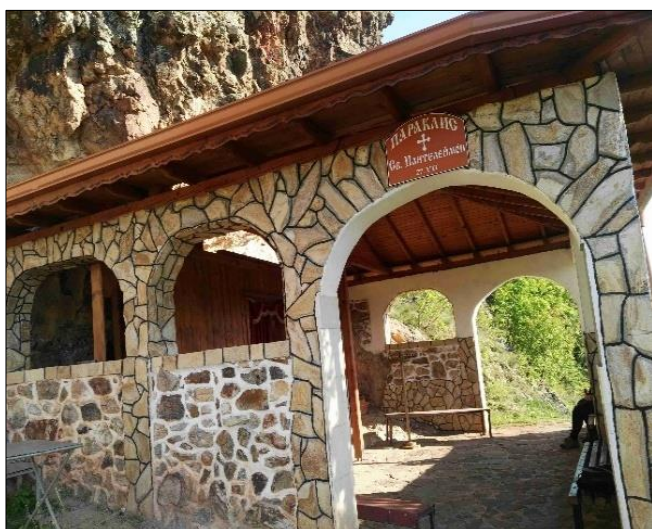


Figure 3. The Rock church "St. Pantaleymon"
(Source: The authors, 2019)



Figure 4. The niche in which, according to legends, St. Panteleymon has lived (Source: The authors, 2019)

The inventory of Sacred Places in a Shadow also includes several other notable sites: the Troskovo monastery "St. Archangel Michail" in the village of Troskovo (Simitli municipality), the Church of "St. St. Peter and Paul" in the village of Mechkul (Simitli municipality), the Church of "The Assumption of the Virgin Mary" in the village of Obel, renowned for its mural paintings (Blagoevgrad municipality), and the Monastery "Mary Mother of God – Life-Giving Spring" (active women's monastery in Gotse Delchev municipality). Further significant locations include the National Revival Church "Sts. Archangels Michail and Gabriel" (Gotse Delchev municipality), the Obidim monastery "St. Pantaleymon" (Bansko Municipality), The Gorno Breznik Monastery "St. Prophet Iliya" (Kresna Municipality), and the Churilov Monastery "St. George" (Petrich Municipality). Some other Shadowed sacred objects are not included here.

Given the complexities of defining the 'shadowed' state, the number of the almost 'forgotten' holy places in the district cannot be categorically determined. We can, however, assert that the risk of symbolic oblivion is intensifying. This risk is growing bigger in the present conditions of population decline and the gradual disappearance of Bulgaria's smaller settlements, which leaves these sanctuaries without their traditional communal guardians.

The Integration of Religious tourism into Multifaceted Tourism Products

In contemporary practice, tourism is rarely experienced in a singular form. The cultural and historical sites within the Blagoevgrad district provide unique opportunities for synergistic integration, where religious heritage acts as a core component of a broader regional offering. This cross-sectoral approach is essential for bringing "shadowed" sites back into the social sphere. In the Bansko municipality, for instance, mountain, sport, and eco-tourism are already successfully intertwined with religious visits. Similarly, wellness and spa travelers in Sandanski frequently engage with cultural and spiritual landmarks as part of their health-oriented itineraries. In Melnik, religious tourism finds a natural synergy with viticulture (wine tourism), hiking, and architectural exploration; here, the density of temples and churches

creates a layered experience for the visitor (Figure 5). Furthermore, the well-preserved rural and eco-tourism landscapes of Kovachevitsa (Garmen) and Dolen (Satovcha) offer ideal conditions for incorporating Orthodox heritage into a combined tourism product, thereby enhancing the site's visibility and its role in regional community revitalization.



Figure 5. Information board in the town of Melnik (Source: The authors, 2019)

Spiritual Capital and Local Community Efficacy

Bulgarian folk tradition frequently defines sacred sites as „folk antiquities“, and the locals treat them with profound respect and stewardship. It is not an exception when local groups form committees to spearhead preservation initiatives, funding restoration through personal donation and performing the physical labor themselves. This involvement is critical for the „sites of shadowed sacred“ located far from the primary transport corridors, which is the reason why they are less frequently visited, and meanwhile, the roads leading up to them become more difficult to pass, and the signboards indicating their location fade over time. Today, fortunately, there are some examples of good practice where the local population and civic groups from the Blagoevgrad district join their forces to conserve the old churches.



Figure 6. An image placed on the donation box in the temple with a view of the temple before its restoration (Source: The authors, 2019)

Such a case is the rebuilding of the temple “St. George” in the village of Gabrovo, Blagoevgrad municipality (Figure 6 and Figure 7). Collective efficacy, proven by these examples, illustrates how spiritual assets can help create social capital and resilience among people who live in different areas. By creating community hubs from previously abandoned sanctuaries, these grassroots initiatives express foundational tenets of community-focused social work practice theory and put local powers in charge of regional revitalization.

Citizen Perspectives on Socializing Barriers and Potential

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Do not use any advanced Word features, such as automatic reference tools, drawing objects, automatic table of contents and table of indexes, bookmarks, background or font colors, highlighting, strike-through, embossing, etc. The final appearance of your article may differ to some extent from this submission.

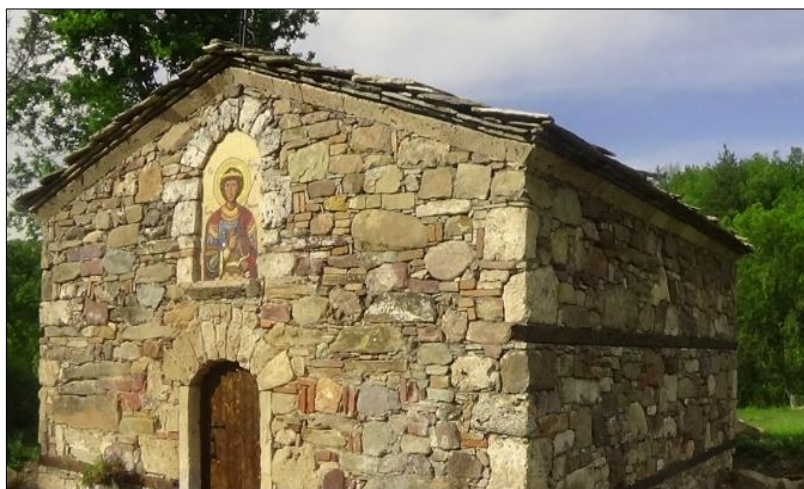


Figure 7. The entrance of the temple "St. George" in the small village Gabrovo, restored in 2019 (Source: The authors, 2019)

Between March and April, 2019, 34 in-depth interviews were conducted with adult Bulgarian citizens living in the Blagoevgrad Region. The main goal of the research was to reveal challenges standing open for the advancement of the Orthodoxy, including potentials for the religious tourism in the region. All respondents were Christians and they were selected on the basis of the following criteria: permanent place of residence (residents from the different municipalities), age, education, gender and direct involvement in the activities of a particular church (such as priests, church members, sextons, etc.), providing a multifaceted view of the 'shadowed' heritage landscape.

While nearly all respondents characterized religious tourism in their municipality as underdeveloped, they shared the opinion that both in their municipality and in the Blagoevgrad Region as a whole, the religious and pilgrimage tourism has potentials for development. The interviewees' answers were combined in view of the following three arguments in support of their opinions:

1. Spiritual heritage, seen in the enduring presence of holy places, holy springs and miraculous icons, that have proved their strength for believers;
2. Revitalization Capacity, seen in the existence of numerous „abandoned“ and „forgotten“ old monasteries and temples that could be reintroduced into the social sphere through infrastructure improvements and targeted promotion;
3. Regional Competition, seen in the need for domestic tour operators to prioritize local pilgrimage routes; one respondent from Sandanski notably observed that pilgrimage initiatives currently favor Greek holy sites over Bulgarian ones (this is the opinion of a resident of Sandanski Municipality);

Some of the respondents also noted the prerequisites that determine the degree of development of the Orthodox religious tourism. According to them, the challenges to the studied type of tourism are the following:

- more efforts by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to attract the people to the Orthodox church;
- greater involvement of the state in the religious education.

Some of the interviewees agreed that a stronger faith should lead to the development of the religious tourism. Regarding the opinion of the interviewed members of the local church, they noted that its influence increased after the totalitarian regime, and the crosses placed near each settlement can visibly prove this. However, the religious symbols are not a definitive proof of the importance of religion in the believers' everyday lives. Other indicators revealing their religiosity, such as citizens' commitment to religious causes, need to be additionally sought.

According to the data from the representative sociological survey „Attitudes towards giving in Education“ and conducted in 2015 (n = 1283 Bulgarian citizens), within the project „Culture of giving in Education: social, institutional and personal dimensions“ (funded by the Scientific Research Fund at the Ministry of Education), the contemporary Bulgarians donate most often in the following three causes:

1. in causes of social occasions;
2. for health reasons;
3. for overcoming the impact of natural disasters.

There are less donations for education, culture and art, for religious purposes, as well as for animal care, ecology and sports initiatives. This conclusion is based on the answers to the question „Which of the following causes have you donated for?“ The question was raised to the persons (not enterprises) that have donated in the last five years (Table 1).

Revitalization Pathways

The integration of the Orthodox "sacred places in the shadow" into the regional cultural and religious tourism strategies of the Blagoevgrad District serves a dual purpose. At the macro level, it enriches the regional tourism

segmentation; at the micro level, it addresses the socio-economic vulnerabilities of small, depopulating settlements. The proposed Socialization Model concerns the existing spiritual and cultural resources of the region and directs them to community development. Optimizing the flow of tourists and pilgrims toward these lesser-known sanctuaries, operators can raise public awareness of their special value and foster cultural exchange.

Table 1. Charitable activity for different causes (Notes: (1) The project leader is Prof.D.Sc. Pepa Boyadzhieva. A member of the project team is the co-author of the present article Petrana Stoykova. The data has been processed by SPSS)

Which of the following causes have you donated for?	Yes	No	Total
Social causes (for disadvantaged people, the needy people, adults, orphans)	81.1 %	18.9 %	100 %
Health causes (for treatment of children, purchase of equipment)	63.4 %	36.6 %	100 %
For overcoming the impact of natural disasters	59.5 %	40.5 %	100 %
Education	25.9 %	74.1 %	100 %
Culture and art	24.7 %	75.3 %	100 %
Religious purposes	24.1 %	75.9 %	100 %
Animal care	18.9 %	81.1 %	100 %
Ecology	16.3 %	83.7 %	100 %
Sports initiatives	16.1 %	83.9 %	100 %

Additionally, the physical and spiritual process of restoration functions as a socio-spiritual practice. This mobilization of community resources serves as a powerful measure to the social fragmentation caused by rapid modernization and demographic decline, effectively transforming “oblivion” into active social capital.

CONCLUSION

This study applied a mixed-method approach using qualitative inquiry and exploratory quantitative survey analysis from the Blagoevgrad District, with the specific focus of examining the ‘shadowed’ Orthodox sacred sites of the Blagoevgrad District to illustrate that they are not simply archaeological or architectural remains; rather they are unused sources of spiritual and social capital needed for supporting local community resilience.

These places provide opportunities to connect fragmented, local identities with long-held traditions of faith, memory, and belonging to a collective whole, particularly within the unique historical and ethno-confessional landscape of the Balkans (Kahl, 2014). In Bulgaria, pilgrimage practices have evolved since 1989 from religious forms of expression into diverse, personal and local manifestations of spiritual travel (Troeva, 2017), expanding to various practices such as well-being (Kiryakova-Dineva et al., 2019), and general spirituality. In this respect, pilgrimage is not exclusively confined to established religious pathways, but increasingly encompasses the rediscovery of local sacred spaces, creating opportunities for spiritual exploration and the development of social ties.

Today we see the resurgence of “sacred places in a shadow” as a response to larger shifts in global religiousness which are defined by experiential participation in faiths versus formal religious practices, or by replacing formal religion with the search for meaning. Recent studies show that people are increasingly looking for ways to combine religious tourism and experience (i.e. through sensory stimulation, cultural and experiential events like food and drink, rituals, and symbolic acts) into one activity (Adirestuty et al., 2025; Jaelani et al., 2020).

In addition, the idea of “architectural pilgrimage” describes how sacred space itself and its geometry, aesthetics, and spatial symbolism gives life to experiencing and interpreting one's religiosity (Dolcos et al., 2021). When taken together, both concepts demonstrate that “sacred sites” should be viewed as dynamic, ever-evolving cultural assets, rather than being viewed simply as static cultural properties. Restoring and activating these places of worship through charitable organisations not only preserves the Orthodox Christian cultural heritage of these places, but also helps reduce the economic situation of many small/medium rural communities. These processes will also create new opportunities for sustainable tourism based on authentic experiences that include involvement from local residents.

In conclusion, the research on the paradigm “Sacred Places in a Shadow” opens a perspective for rethinking the social inclusion and its relevance importance to local communities.

Their purpose would go beyond being a place for religious worship, but rather serve as places for intercultural dialogue, interpretation of heritage, and development of tourism through community involvement.

Future research and policy should focus on creating an integrative framework that will allow these spiritual and social values to work together through a collaborative governance model with all parties involved in the physical area. Developing collaborative partnerships between local residents, municipal authorities, local cultural organizations, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is fundamental to developing a sense of how to sustain these sites for the long term.

At the same time, as the definition of religion and pilgrimage continues to evolve, it is important to recognize how many traditional lines separating the sacred and secular, the individual and collective, the local and the global are being obfuscated by contemporary practices. Therefore, even those sites located “at the edges of sorrow” can be viewed as important nodes of social life and the development of resiliency; they can provide examples of how sacred spaces are transforming in our modern society and serving as a place and centre of social lives and wellbeing.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.S. and T.K.D.; methodology, P.S. and T.K.D.; software, P.S.; validation, P.S. and T.K.D.; formal analysis, P.S. and T.K.D.; investigation, P.S. and T.K.D.; resources, P.S. and T.K.D.; data curation,

P.S. and T.K.D.; writing – original draft preparation, P.S. and T.K.D.; writing – review and editing, P.S. and T.K.D.; visualization, P.S. and T.K.D.; supervision, P.S. and T.K.D. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The APC of this article was funded by South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it did not involve sensitive data. All 34 in-depth interviews were conducted under strict anonymity, ensuring that no sensitive personal or medical data were collected, and the participation was entirely voluntary. The second survey adhered to all methodological and ethical requirements for representative studies.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. All participants were fully informed that their insights would be used exclusively for academic publication and research purposes. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and all data were strictly anonymized to ensure identity protection.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The qualitative interview data are not publicly available due to privacy considerations regarding the participants.

Acknowledgements: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of Generative AI: Not applicable.

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