CULTURAL ROUTES AND IMMOVABLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: PREREQUISITES AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY OF VARNA

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Abstract. The article explores the possibilities for developing cultural routes based on the immovable cultural heritage of the city of Varna and its surrounding region, with a focus on their role in sustainable urban development. The analysis considers the city's historical, architectural, and natural heritage, as well as existing tourism and digital initiatives, including digitization projects and the use of GIS technologies. The study emphasizes that cultural routes can serve as an effective tool for sustainable development by combining historical heritage, cultural experiences, and modern technologies, while simultaneously ensuring the long-term preservation of heritage assets and fostering active social engagement of local communities.

Keywords: immovable cultural heritage cultural routes, cultural tourism, immovable cultural heritage, Varna.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is a key concept aimed at achieving a balanced integration of economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. In this context, the United Nations developed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which lays the foundations for global policies and actions in this field. The Agenda comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that define strategic priorities and serve as a framework for coordinated efforts at the global, national, and local levels.

Urban sustainable development occupies a central place within this system of goals and is articulated in SDG 11 – "Sustainable Cities and Communities." Within this goal, particular emphasis is placed on the protection and safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage (Goal 11.4), as well as on the application of integrated approaches to urban planning and the development of sustainable tourism as instruments for long-term local and regional development [1].

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Culture and cultural heritage are key resources for achieving inclusive and sustainable urban development. According to Prof. T. Krustev, in recent years, the share of travel motivated by cultural heritage has been steadily increasing, while cultural heritage itself is regarded as a "gold mine" for the development of national economies. [2]. In the European context, they are regarded not only as values to be preserved, but also as active instruments for economic, social, and territorial development. Within the European Union's policy framework, three main areas of action are outlined: the regeneration of cities and regions through cultural heritage; the promotion of adaptive reuse and redevelopment of buildings as carriers of cultural memory; and the achievement of a balance between access to cultural heritage, sustainable cultural tourism, and the protection of natural heritage [3].

Cultural routes are an effective instrument for integrating immovable cultural heritage into contemporary policies for sustainable urban development, as well as a means of promoting the immovable cultural heritage of a given city and region. This perspective is embedded in the Preamble of the Charter on Cultural Routes of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which states that cultural routes constitute a qualitatively new approach to the theory and practice of cultural heritage conservation [4].

The aim of the article is to outline some of the opportunities for the creation of cultural routes based on the immovable cultural heritage of the city of Varna, emphasizing their significance for the city's sustainable development.

2. ESSENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL ROUTES

According to the Council of Europe, a cultural route is defined as "a cultural, educational, heritage and tourism cooperation project aimed at the development and promotion of an itinerary or a series of itineraries based on a historic route, a cultural concept, figure or phenomenon of transnational importance and significance for the understanding and respect of common European values" [5]. In order for a given route to be designated as "cultural," it must possess specific characteristics. According to ICOMOS, these characteristics include the following:

- a traditional route, representing a physically determined historical pathway;
- correspondence to a specific historical function and purpose;
- inclusion of both tangible and intangible cultural phenomena;
- origin in and reflection of interactive movements of people, resulting from multidimensional, continuous, and reciprocal exchanges of goods, ideas, knowledge, and values among peoples, countries, regions, or continents over a significant period of time;
- the need to be fostered by the mutual enrichment of the cultures involved across space and time, as reflected in both tangible and intangible heritage;

– integration, within a dynamic system, of historical relationships and cultural values associated with or connected to its existence [4].

The creation of cultural routes has the potential to contribute to the overall sustainable development of the region [6], to mitigate the pronounced seasonality of tourism along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast [7], and to become part of the manifestations of corporate social responsibility of businesses in the context of their role in regional development and local communities [8]. As an additional effect of economic development, the potential to limit the factors that stimulate emigration can also be identified [9]. All of these aspects highlight the significant social relevance of the development of cultural routes and determine the practical value of the present research.

The Council of Europe launched its Cultural Routes Programme in 1987 with the Declaration of Santiago de Compostela. By its nature, the Programme represents a framework for cooperation among the 47 states that have ratified the European Cultural Convention. The rules governing the Programme are defined in Resolution 2007 [10]. The significance of cultural routes has also been acknowledged by other European institutions. An example in this regard is the International Scientific Committee on Cultural Routes, established in 1998 within the framework of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Among the objectives of the Committee are the enhancement of cultural routes, the promotion of international cooperation, and the protection and maintenance of immovable cultural heritage, cultural landscapes, and related values.

According to the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes, the definition of a cultural route requires a specific methodology that involves the establishment of a system of coordinated and integrally managed activities. The first step consists of defining the route as a whole and its individual sections, together with an inventory of the assets that comprise it and an analysis of their state of conservation. This facilitates the development of a strategic plan for its safeguarding. Such a plan must necessarily include measures aimed at raising awareness of the route and generating public interest in it [4].

In essence, the process of creating a cultural route can be considered a six-stage process, the stages of which include:

1. Selection of the route theme – the creation of a thematic core based on the specific characteristics of the cultural corridor and in accordance with the objectives of the tourist journey;
2. Selection of the cultural and natural resources to be included in the route, corresponding to the thematic core;
3. Selection of accommodation facilities along the route;
4. Determination of the mode of transport and selection of means of transportation;
5. Selection of catering establishments and leisure facilities;
6. Selection of additional attractions, as well as tourist services and products [11].

3. PREREQUISITES FOR THE CREATION OF CULTURAL ROUTES INCLUDING THE CITY OF VARNA

Varna possesses a number of prerequisites for the creation of cultural routes based on its immovable cultural heritage. Among the most significant are:

– a rich historical past of Varna and its region. The city has a history spanning several millennia and is one of the oldest cities not only in Bulgaria but also in Europe. The earliest traces of human presence in Varna and the surrounding region date back to the Paleolithic period (around 100,000 years ago) [12]. Evidence of this includes the Varna Eneolithic Necropolis discovered near Lake Varna in 1972 (Fig. 1). The ancient Varna culture laid the foundations of European civilization, with notable achievements in the socio-economic and spiritual life of its society [13]. According to the Tourism Development Program of Varna Municipality 2014–2020, the city contains material and spiritual traces from all historical epochs of human development, which serve as incentives for tourist visits [14].

Fig. 1. The Varna Necropolis Treasure
Source [12]

– the presence of sites of national significance within the city: Roman Baths, the Old Bulgarian Defensive Wall – Asparuh's Wall, Early Christian Basilica at Dzhanavara Tepe, Aladzha Monastery, the Thracian Tomb in Vladislav Varna Park, and the Central Entrance of the Sea Garden.

– a significant number of immovable cultural monuments, many of which are archaeological sites (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Immovable Cultural Heritage Sites in the City of Varna

Buildings with the Status of Architectural, Historical, Artistic, or Landscape Immovable Cultural Heritage Sites	**Archaeological sites**	**Buildings without Status – Proposed for New Designation**
510	105	150

Source: [18]

Varna and its surrounding area offer not only architectural and archaeological heritage but also natural and landscape sites, such as the Sea Garden, the coastal zone, the Pobiti Kamani (Stone Forest), and natural reserves around the city. This enables the creation of routes combining cultural, educational, and nature-based tourism.

Varna is an established destination for seaside vacation tourism. Its favorable location and historical development have contributed to its transformation into not only an important commercial and economic center but also the country's first seaside resort [15].

Varna hosts a large number of museums (Fig. 2) that constitute a key component of the city's and the region's cultural offer, attracting both domestic and international visitors [16].

Fig. 2. Regional History Museum – Varna
Source [12]

Use of new and modern technologies for promoting the immovable cultural heritage of the city of Varna. An example of this is the project by the NGO "Nepoznatie" titled "Digitization of Inspiring Architectural Monuments in the City of Varna" [17]. The project involves the digitization of 12 architectural monuments in Varna and is funded by the "Culture" Fund of Varna Municipality. The digitized content is presented in video format, contributing to the promotion and advertisement of these sites on the Internet and social media. Another positive example in the field of digitizing immovable cultural heritage is the Varna City Register of Immovable Cultural Heritage [18]. The register includes a "Routes" section, which provides information on archaeological sites related to the founding of Odessos, Varna during Antiquity, as well as the city's medieval, Ottoman, and Revival periods, and its modern history. A possible direction for the future development of promoting tourist routes linked to immovable cultural heritage is the use of GIS technologies for site localization and their integration with other infrastructure elements [19].

Varna Municipality and local organizations actively support cultural heritage and tourism projects. The Tourism Development Program for the Varna Municipality 2021–2030 [19] includes targeted measures for promoting historical sites, digitizing monuments, and developing cultural routes. This provides an appropriate institutional framework, which is key for sustainable urban development (SDG 11).

A detailed inventory and documentation of cultural and historical monuments (describing the condition of existing and potential tourist resources) has been carried out within the territory of Varna Municipality [20].

At the same time, it should be noted that there are a number of issues concerning immovable cultural heritage that act as barriers to the creation of cultural routes based on such heritage. Among these are:

– poor condition of some immovable cultural heritage sites (see Table 2).

Table 2. Technical condition of the immovable cultural heritage sites in Varna

In good condition	In fair condition	Demolished buildings	Poor condition	Buildings at risk	Under restoration
208	195	3	95	10	3

Source:[18]

– there is a lack of funds for additional archaeological research and for conservation work on the already discovered sites. The Varna Eneolithic necropolis was discovered 50 years ago, but the excavations have not been completed. Only in 2021, after a thirty-year hiatus, were the excavations resumed. International experience has shown that preserving architectural monuments uncovered by archaeologists requires three to twenty times more funding than the excavations themselves [21];

– the issues related to the carrying capacity threshold of cultural and historical resources [20];
– although the city is one of the oldest in Europe, there are still no sites included in the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage List.

An important aspect in the development of cultural routes based on immovable cultural heritage is the assessment of the resource potential of the sites and their use as tourist attractions. This requires the establishment of a reliable system of quantitative and qualitative indicators. Such a system includes indicators for evaluating their attractiveness, accessibility, capacity, and safety (see Table 3):

Table 3. A system of indicators for determining the resource potential of immovable cultural

	Criteria for determining resource potential	**Indicators for evaluating the key characteristics of immovable cultural heritage sites**
1	**Attractiveness**	1. Popularity 2. Interaction with the surrounding environment 3. Authenticity and degree of preservation 4. Cognitive value and aesthetic merits
2	**Accessibility**	1. Availability and level of development of appropriate infrastructure 2. Provision of adequate conditions for visitation 3. Availability and functionality of a visitor information system
3	**Capacity**	1. Carrying capacity for a defined time period (day, month) 2. Degree of load on technical and environmental systems 3. Load capacity of visitor service facilities
4	**Safety**	1. Level of visitor safety during visitation 2. Availability and effectiveness of measures to prevent damage to the property 3. Degree and nature of external environmental impacts on the property

4. CONTRIBUTION OF CULTURAL ROUTES TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY OF VARNA AND THE REGION

Cultural routes based on immovable cultural heritage contribute to:
– the integrated management of sites and resources through the combination of tourism, archaeological, and educational programmes, thereby optimizing the use of limited financial resources and reducing pressure on the most vulnerable heritage monuments;

- create opportunities for year-round tourism, which in turn leads to increased hotel occupancy outside Varna's traditional summer tourist season;
- create conditions for improved cooperation with other municipalities (for example, with the Municipality of Devnya, which hosts sites such as the Mosaic Museum and the Marcianopolis Amphitheatre);
- contribute to the development of new cultural-tourism products based on immovable cultural heritage.;
- create opportunities to combine cultural tourism with other types of tourism characteristic of the city of Varna;
- lead to increased visibility and prestige, as well as enhanced investment attractiveness of the city of Varna and the region;
- facilitate the generation of financial resources necessary for restoration or repair activities of immovable cultural heritage. This perspective is reflected in the Resolution of the IV Conference of the Council of Europe, which emphasizes that "revenues from cultural tourism can contribute significant funds to the maintenance and conservation of cultural heritage" [23]. The generated revenues can be tracked through Indicator 11.4.1 – expenditure per capita on the conservation and protection of cultural and natural heritage [24]. This provides an opportunity to monitor investment effectiveness and ensures that immovable cultural heritage becomes a sustainable resource.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be noted that the immovable cultural heritage of the city of Varna represents a resource whose potential has not yet been fully utilized. Its conservation, use, and promotion need to become a priority for local authorities and other stakeholders. In this way, the city has the potential to establish itself as a sustainable and attractive tourist destination that combines historical heritage, cultural experiences, and modern technologies, while simultaneously ensuring long-term preservation and the social engagement of local communities.

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