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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN THE WESTERN PART OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Arben ODA<sup>1\*</sup>, Sali ZHAKU<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Tetovo, Faculty of Economics, Macedonia

\*Corresponding author e-mail: arben.oda@unite.edu.mk; sali.zhaku@unite.edu.mk

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### Abstract

The aim of the research is to explore the possibilities of developing religious tourism in Republic of North Macedonia, as one of the most specific forms of tourism and with great opportunities for sustainable development of the western part of the country. The study examines the potentials of the cultural, historical and religious heritage of the western part of the country, attempting to provide a model for the development of an authentic religious tourism product in the Republic of North Macedonia. Through the SWOT analysis of some of the religious monuments, the aim is to provide some general recommendations and strategies as an alternative for the development of multi-religious tourism.

*Keywords:* religious tourism, multi-religious tourism, sustainable development, religious tourism product, Republic of North Macedonia.

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### 1. Introduction

The global market of religious tourism represents one of the largest tourism segments and with continuous growth in the overall international tourism market. According to the UNWTO, out of 1.46 billion tourists in 2019, a third (488 million) belongs to travel for cultural and religious reasons. Religious tourism today is seen as a real opportunity for economic development of countries and at the same time as an opportunity for sustainable tourism development. Given the abundant cultural and religious heritage of the Republic of North Macedonia, creation of a religious and multi-religious tourism product would put the country on the map of the most attractive tourist destinations in the world. Thanks to its geographical location, located in the territory of south-central Balkans, it represents a treasure of almost all important cultural and historical epochs that mark European civilization. From the Illyrians, the ancient Macedonians, the ancient Romans, the Byzantines, the Ottomans, etc., all have left important traces in the anthropogenic heritage in the territory of Macedonia. The purpose of the research is to identify the opportunities for the development of religious tourism and to provide some recommendations and strategic alternatives, as a basic framework for the creation, directions and further development of this tourism product in other sub-products with the same motive of travel.

### 2. Literature review

Religious tourism is considered a real opportunity for sustainable tourism development. It is considered a special type (niche) of tourism where people for religious reasons travel to holy places or based on religion and is often referred to as spiritual tourism. The trips are individual or group, also for reasons of pilgrimage,

missionary or entertainment. Fernandes<sup>1</sup> defines religious tourism as a form of tourism where people of faith travel individually or in groups for religious or spiritual reasons in order to know their meaning. It can also be understood as tourism where believers travel to holy places in search of a communication with the divine. Many authors consider religious tourism or pilgrimage as a journey that takes place for religious reasons as well as to holy places and for reasons of an inner spiritual understanding. According to Griffin and Raj<sup>2</sup>, in addition to the classical pilgrimage, a modern version of the pilgrimage is becoming increasingly popular, which in addition to visiting shrines and religious monuments, also includes visits to cultural and historical heritage monuments and cultural pilgrimage. However, a distinction must be made between regular tourism, religious tourism and religious pilgrimage. Religious tourism encompasses all kinds of travel motivated by religion, when destination is such a site. Notably, these sites need to be associated with a living religion: sometimes one finds impressive remnants of artifacts and cultural heritage of now-extinct ones that still draw tourists<sup>3</sup>. Leppakari addresses the distinction between pilgrims and religious tourists, based on observing the way people behave pilgrims make the journey a ritual by for example reciting religious songs at critical moments, while religious tourists do not. simply, traveling to a sacred site does not make one a pilgrim.

### 3. Religious tourism as an opportunity for sustainable development

Pilgrimage helps support the sustainable development of tourism as a comprehensive and systematic approach<sup>4</sup>. Religious tourism should help promote the sustainable development of tourism. Religious tourism as one of the forms of cultural heritage, presents real opportunities for a sustainable development as an optimal balance between the social, economic and environmental aspect in a certain destination. At the same time, this balance helps preserve cultural heritage, nature and the structured environment. Where, the local community represents the essential element in enabling this balance<sup>5</sup>. Religion pushes people to move from certain places and travel in search of meanings, values, beliefs, experiences and self-knowing, while some also experiment with self-enrichment within cultural, tourist and religious places. This, in addition to bringing positive economic effects to the local community, at the same time raises awareness of both residents and religious tourists in the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. The positive effects are related to the creation of new jobs, the creation of new tourist services, the construction of guesthouses especially for religious tourists, etc., who prefer the emotional difference from the conventional. Because religious tourism itself is an ethical, responsible, sustainable, ecological journey that contributes to human and spiritual uplift. It is an expression of cultural tourism that is particularly attentive to religious buildings and places of historical and artistic interest. Religion, culture and natural environment are the fundamental motives of religious tourism<sup>6</sup>. Pilgrimage is a social phenomenon and an opportunity to promote local products, where all cultural and economic resources must be integrated into a single system to ensure a sustainable environmental, economic and social development. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) suggests that "religious tourism can be one of the most effective tools for promoting inclusive and sustainable development." In this sense, it identifies three main benefits of religious tourism: (1) it raises awareness of the common heritage of humanity and

<sup>1</sup> Fernandes, C., Pimenta, E., Gonçalves, F., & Rachão, S. (2012). A new research approach for religious tourism: The case study of the Portuguese route to Santiago. *International Journal of Tourism Policy*, 4(2), 83-94. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTP.2012.048996>.

<sup>2</sup> Griffin, K., & Raj, R. (2017). The importance of religious tourism and pilgrimage: Reflecting on definitions, motives and data. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7242Z>.

<sup>3</sup> Leppakari, Maria K. (2008). Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage. Management: An International Perspective, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol 35(2), 611-612.

<sup>4</sup> Roxas, F. M. Y., Rivera, J. P. R., & Gutierrez, E. L. M. (2020). Framework for creating sustainable tourism using systems thinking. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(3), 280-296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2018.1534805>.

<sup>5</sup> Pilving T., Kull T. et.al. (2019), "The tourism partnership cycle in Estonia": Striving towards sustainable multisectoral rural tourism collaboration", *Tourism Management Perceptions* 31, 219-230.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriella Trombino & Anna Trono, Religious Pilgrimage Routes and Trails, Sustainable development and management, CABI International, CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, 2018.

provides resources for their preservation, (2) it can contribute to local development, and (3) it enhances cultural understanding<sup>7</sup>.

#### **4. Research methodology**

The research is based on a thorough study of numerous international and local literatures on religious and cultural tourism, as well as various scientific journals in the field. The collection of information and data is based on official tourism statistics in the Republic of North Macedonia, WTO, and web. specialized sites, as the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia, statistical office in R.N.M., local communities, websites of various religious institutions, publications, references and studies on religious tourism in the country and the region. To compare data on tourism activities, we have compiled a questionnaire for travel agencies and tour operators in the country. Then, through the SWOT analysis, we highlighted the possible strategies of religious tourism and the possibilities of cooperation with the countries of the region in creating joint religious tourism packages. The study aims to determine the potential and opportunities for development of religious tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia. Based on the great cultural and religious heritage of the country, we aim to determine a basis on which religious tourism will be oriented and developed, as a real opportunity for a sustainable economic development.

#### **5. Religious Tourism in Republic of North Macedonia**

Thanks to its geographical location, located in the territory of the south-central Balkans, North Macedonia represents a treasure of almost all important cultural, historical epochs that mark European civilization. This makes North Macedonia a specific environment, with rich cultural, historical and religious heritage, with great potential for the development of religious tourism. Cultural heritage poses an important challenge for countries where there is a large and significant cultural heritage. The heritage protection system treats numerous ancient monasteries, churches, inns, early Christian basilicas, archaeological finds, mosques, and other Ottoman heritage sites. In the Republic of North Macedonia there are 11,200 objects registered as cultural heritage, 4,485 archaeological sites, 1,726 churches and monasteries with over 150,000 m<sup>2</sup> of frescoes, 1213 buildings of old urban and rural architecture, 47 towers, fortresses and bridges, 1,026 monuments and memorials of which 250 religious monuments such as churches, monasteries, mosques, masjids (tekke), cathedrals and early Christian basilicas, 126 objects of Islamic architecture, 24 bazaars (old bazaars) and other historical units, urban-architectural, 32 commercial objects and several other types of buildings and 5,328 properties, as well as over 500,000 museum relics. In the Republic of North Macedonia there are over 3,000 religious objects (churches, chapels, monasteries, mosques, cathedrals, synagogues, etc.)<sup>8</sup>. There are many monasteries of special interest and are protected cultural monuments. Most monasteries have a local, regional and national character. Over twenty monasteries are also of international importance.

#### **6. Analysis of potentials for the development of religious tourism in the western part of the country**

The western part of the Republic of North Macedonia has a very rich cultural and religious heritage. It includes the Skopje region, the Polog region, the Southwest region and the Pelagonija region<sup>9</sup>. In the region of Skopje, we have the Monastery for men "St. Pantelejmon" on v. G. Nerezi, Monasteries of women "St. Demetrius", "St. Mary", Monastery "St. Nicholas", "St. Archangel", Cathedral "St. Clement of Ohrid", Cathedral "Holy Heart of Christ", Church "St. Andrew", "Mustafa Pasha" Mosque, "Sultan Murat" Mosque and clock tower,

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<sup>7</sup> UNWTO (1995) Concepts, Definitions and Classifications for Tourism Statistics, UNWTO, Madrid.

<sup>8</sup> [www.uzkn.gov.mk](http://www.uzkn.gov.mk)

<sup>9</sup> [www.tourismmacedonia.gov.mk](http://www.tourismmacedonia.gov.mk)

“Jahja Pasha” Mosque, Mother Teresa's House, Holocaust Memorial, archeological site “Skupi”, etc. The Polog region has the Monastery of “Leshok”, the Monastery of Bigorski “St. John the Baptist”, the Monastery “St. Naum”, the Monastery “St. Nicholas”, the Church “Various Mosque”, the “Arabati Baba Tekke”, the “Clock Tower Mosque”, etc. The Southwest region has the following objects of religious heritage: Stavropegjial Monasteries for men “Holy Mother of God”, “Saint Naum of Ohrid”, “Mother of God Perivlepta”, Monastery “All Saints”, monasteries for women “Saint George”, “Saint George the Victorious”. St. Sophia Cathedral, St. Panteleimon Church, St. John Church, St. Erasmus Cave Church, St. Stephen Monastery, St. Cyril and Methodius and St. Benedict Catholic Church, St. George Church, Church “St. Nikola”, Church “St. Michael”, Mosque of “Ali Pasha”, Mosque “Mustafa Çelebi”, “Hajati Baba Teqe”, Mosque “Inqar”, etc. The region of Pelagonija has the Monasteries for women “Saint Arhangel Mihail”, “Saint John the Baptist”, “Saint Athanasius the Great”, the Cathedral “Holy Martyr Dhimitri”, “Jeni Mosque”, the mosque “Isak Çelebi”, the mosque “Haxhi Ramadani”, Church of St. Peter, Church of the Holy Revelation, Church of St. George, Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Basilica of Heraklea Linkestis, Hebrew Cemetery, etc.

*6.1. Analysis of some selected religious objects of this region:* Even though each region has many religious and cultural objects, the paper describes and analyses some of them, on which different tourist packages can be built, with special itineraries.



*6.1.1. "Mustafa Pasha" Mosque - Skopje*, was built in 1492, as the legacy of Vizier Mustafa Pasha. The construction of the mosque belongs to the architecture of Constantinople and is a monument of cultural heritage. The facility includes a prayer hall, turban, fountain, madras and minaret with a height of 47 meters. The tomb of Mustafa Pasha and the sarcophagus of his daughter Umi are preserved there. The mosque is still active today for religious services and serves for the inauguration of the newly elected Grand Mufti of IRC.



*6.1.2. "Jahja Pasha" Mosque - Skopje*, was built in 1504 by Jahja Pasha. The mosque has been renovated and reconstructed several times and continues to serve today for religious services and worship. It has been declared a cultural heritage monument. The mosque has walls, a pulpit and a mihrab covered with marble tiles and stalactite ornaments. The minaret of the mosque is 50 meters high and is considered the highest among the minarets of other mosques.



*6.1.3. Lesok Monastery "St. Athanasius the Great"*, v. Lesok, Tetovo. The monastery is the seat of the Metropolitan of Tetovo and Gostivar and has its abbot. During its history, it was destroyed and rebuilt several times. The monastery has been declared a protected cultural heritage, is active and represents a complex consisting of several buildings, such as the church of “St. Athanasius the Great” and the church “The Most Holy Mother of God”, of the 14th century. “Kiril Pejcinovic” is a spiritual-cultural centre within monastery with a multifunctional space for cultural events. The monastery has its own restaurant, street access and arranged parking.





6.1.4. *Bigorski Monastery “St. John the Baptist” - Mavrovo and Rostuse.* The monastery is located on the road Gostivar-Debar, by the river Radika and is an active complex consisting of a church dedicated to “St. John the Baptist” and many rooms dedicated to the activists of the monastery. Monastic life was restored in 1995 and today the fraternity numbers about 25 monks. The most beautiful decoration in the church is the unique iconostasis made in deep carving and ennobled with a colourful performance of many scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The monastery is a true spiritual centre that restores the former traditions of the church, art, literary-educational activities, monastic life, and numerous humanitarian activities.



6.1.5. *“Pasha Mosque” - Tetovo, was built in 1495 and its original name was Alaja (basma, multicolour cotton).* In the 19th century the Pasha Mosque was renamed after its restorer Abdurrahman Pasha. It is considered one of the most interesting monuments of Islamic holy buildings. The Pasha Mosque has a turbine fountain, hammam, a small green park and an administrative building next to the main buildings.

6.1.6. *“Arabati Baba Tekke” - Tetovo,* is an important institution of cultural and architectural heritage. The tekke belongs to the Bektashi order and constitutes a pearl of Islamic cult constructions. The shrine was built in the 14th century by Rexhep Pasha and his son Abdurrahman Pasha. The Bektashi missionary Sersem Ali Dedei lived and worked in this tekke. Arabati Baba tekke consists of a series of objects such as: shrine, summer guest house, library, summer corner, fountain, winter house, small shrine, mausoleum, kitchen, tower of Fatima (daughter of Rexhep Pasha) and tomb of Baba Mehmet Hara, restaurant, bakery, barns, fountains, cemetery and watchtower. The tekke has four gates in which there are inscriptions and engraved figurines, which symbolize elements from Bektashi doctrine. The Tekke shrine is functioning, and the five times of prayer are prayed.



6.1.7. *Monastery “The Most Holy Mother of God” – v. Kalista, Struga.* Just a few meters from the lake, near the monastery, there are two cave churches dating back to the 15th century. One is dedicated to the “Mother of God” and the other to “St. Athanasius”. Nearby is the church of “St. Peter and Paul Monastery”. Due to the attractiveness of the cave churches, this monastery complex ranks among the monasteries with high potential in the southwestern region. The summer residence of His Beatitude the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia Mr. Dositej was built there, while today it is the summer residence of the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia and Justinian I, Mr. Stefan. The

feast of the monastery is the Nativity of the Holy Mother - on September 21.



6.1.8. *“Mustafa Çelebi Mosque” - Struga.* According to the guide Evlia Çelebi, the mosque was built at the end of the 15th century, by the son of Mahmud Ohrizade named Sinan Çelebi. According to some other data, Jusuf Çelebi is also mentioned as a builder. Restoration of the mosque begins in 1989/90 and was placed in the function of the believers.



6.1.9. *The Church of "St. George" - Struga*, is in the centre of the city and is the oldest Christian religious building in the city. It dates from the middle of the 13th century and according to legends is one of the oldest spiritual shrines in the Balkans and in Europe. The age of the church so far has been determined by the icon of St. George which dates from 1267.



6.1.10. *"St. Sophia Cathedral" - Ohrid*. It is a cult monument representing the medieval period and was erected during the mission of "St. Cyril and Methodius" on the foundations of an old sacred building. It served as a cathedral during the reign of Samoil in the late 10th century. The interior is preserved with frescoes of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. With the arrival of the Turks, the church was turned into a mosque in order to use it for Muslim religious ceremonies. The frescoes were painted with lime, parts of the iconostasis were used to build minarets, and a minaret was erected over the northwest dome. From 1950 to 1957 conservation and restoration work was carried out. The interior of the church, together with the courtyard and the colonnade, are an important place for holding cultural events, such as:

Ohrid Summer, concerts, etc.



6.1.11. *Monastery "St. Naum of Ohrid" - Ohrid*. It dates to the year 900 and its founder was St. Naum the greatest follower of St. Clement. In 910 after his death, St. Naum of Ohrid was buried in the small chapel of the monastery. The chapel still exists today and is decorated with beautiful frescoes with scenes from the life and wonders of the saint. The monastery is visited daily by worshipers of the cult of St. Naum and tourists, especially in summer. A unique element in the monastery is its iconostasis in gilded carving, made in 1711. The monastery of St. Naum has two celebrations. One is on January 5

(St. Naum-Winter) and the other on July 3 (St. Naum-Summer).



6.1.12. *The mosque of "Ali Pasha" - Ohrid*, was built in 1491, or at the end of 15th and beginning of 16th century. It is built of stone and baked brick; it has a square shape, with minarets and a dome and was renovated during the 19th century. Within the mosque in 1823 was opened the madras which does not function today.



6.1.13. *Bigorski Monastery "St. John the Baptist", Mavrovo*. The monastery was built in 1835 and its frescoes were painted by several painters, among them the famous Dičo Zograf. Today, the monastery has a certain order, which includes a full liturgical life with regular liturgies, morning and evening services, as well as night vigils against Sundays and holidays. The monastery feast is St. George (May 6), and the second feast is the Day of the Cross (September 27).





6.1.14. *“Inqar Mosque” or “Fatih Sultan Mehmet Mosque” - Debar.* It was built in the period of 1467-68 and it was renovated in 1938. The Inqar Mosque was built as a continuation of Mehmet II (1451-1481). The mosque is a mirror of local construction dominated by clean and precise forms. In the courtyard of the mosque is the tomb of Shaban-baba.



6.1.15. *Knezina Monastery “St. George the Victorious”- Kicevo.* The monastery dates from the 12th or 13th century and is built on the foundations of an older basilica dating from the 5th -6th century AD. In the courtyard of the monastery there are two springs through which flows spring water, which people consider healing. The patron saint of the monastery is St. George celebrated on May 6th.



6.1.16. *Catholic Church “St. Cyril and Methodius and St. Benedict” – Ohrid.* It was built in 2001, while in 2007 it was consecrated with a relevant religious ceremony. The author of the frescoes in the Catholic Church in Ohrid is the Italian artist, Vincenzo Bianchi.



6.1.17. *Temple “Holy Martyr Demetrius”- Bitola,* is a cathedral of the Orthodox Diocese of Prespa and Pelagonia. The church was built in 1830 on the site of a former chapel that was burned in 1726. In the church are preserved relics of St. Gospel of the Monastery. The monastery has special beauty and the same has been declared as cultural heritage.



6.1.18. *Jewish Cemetery in Bitola - They are located at the entrance of the Monastery,* opposite the cemetery of the church "Holy Sunday" and the old Turkish cemetery. The entrance to the cemetery, as well as the protective wall, was built in 1929 at the initiative of Rabbi Jain, who raised donations from American-born Jewish immigrants to Bitola.



6.1.19. *“Isak Celebi Ibn Isa Mosque” - Bitola.* It was built in 1506, as a complex between the then administrative buildings near the covered market of Bezisten and the Great Bridge and the Broad Alley. The construction of the mosque was funded by Judge Isak Celebi, son of Isa Fakih. The minaret is 50 meters high, and the mosque has been declared a cultural monument.

## 7. Results and discussions

Religious tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia is very underdeveloped and according to the questionnaire given to the tourist organizers, it turns out that most of them do not have religious tourist packages and do not cooperate with religious sites to organize such visits. Only 10% of tourist packages include visits to religious sites and there is almost no cooperation between tourism organizers to promote joint religious packages between countries in the region. There is no tour operator or tourist agency at the national level that specializes in religious tourism and there is also a lack of specialized tourist tours in this field. Relevant educational or state institutions do not have education and training programs that will train tourism workers

for this market. According to the answers received, there is almost no real cooperation between tourism organizers, religious sites and state bodies, both national and local. Even though the religious tourism market is attractive and growing, there is no national strategy for the development of religious tourism, which would define the necessary objectives and activities of each entity, whether state, private or religious institutions.

*SWOT analysis of religious sites in the western part of the Republic of Northern Macedonia*

<b>Strengths</b> Relatively good road infrastructure, We have two international airports in the region, Skopje and Ohrid. Rich religious and cultural heritage Active religious objects Business buildings are relatively close Border point with the Republic of Albania, the Republic of Kosovo, the Republic of Serbia. There are well-known tourist destinations and traditions in tourism (lake, rural, winter tourism, etc.)	<b>Weaknesses</b> Investments in road infrastructure that connects tourist spots. Lack of road signs marking tourist places (religious facilities, rest points, etc.) Accommodation capacities are lacking in most of the accommodation facilities. The promotion of religious tourism is lacking There is a lack of specialized operators for religious tourism. The national strategy for the development of religious tourism is missing.
<b>Opportunities</b> Growing religious and cultural tourism globally Establishment of joint tourist packages with the countries of the region Joint promotion in the global market with neighbouring countries Proximity and good road connection between destinations of different regions Creating a common narrative of religious tourism Creation of combined tourist packages (religious, cultural, rural, etc.). Creating special packages for members of the Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Bektashi, etc. religions. Development of accompanying tourist infrastructure	<b>Threats</b> Damage to cultural heritage sites Negligence and maintenance of religious facilities Environmental pollution Terrorism, war, political destabilization, etc. Natural disaster

## 8. Recommendations and conclusions

Based on the descriptive analysis of some religious sites in the western part of the country and the results obtained from the questionnaire on the stage and opportunities for the development of religious tourism in the country, we can conclude that religious tourism has a symbolic development although there is a great potential for this market. Based on the SWOT analysis, religious and cultural sites are of special cultural and historical value not only in the region but also beyond. Weaknesses encountered can be easily remedied if investment is made in eliminating them and creating an overall strategy for the development of this market. In this regard, they can become a real advantage and opportunity for the development of a unique internationally recognized product. Most of the facilities have good road infrastructure, are active, have special events, offer gastronomic services, etc. which can be used to enrich the tourism product. The use of existing inns and the construction of inns in religious complexes will affect the stay of tourists in the country. A good narrative based on the rich religious values and heritage of the country, will place the country on the map of the most attractive religious destinations in the world. In this sense, in order to valorise the abundant heritage of the country, it is necessary:

- Compiled a national strategy for the development of religious tourism,
- Cooperation between various state, private and religious institutions on the need and benefits of the



development of religious tourism.

- Established certain policies of the relevant bodies for education and training of tourism workers and the production of guides with narrow specialization in this field.
- Subsidizing specialized tourism organizers in the religious tourism market.
- The following are some recommendations that can be used as a model for the development of religious tourism at the national level:
- Formation of religious tourist packages with visits and 3-5 days stay of Christian, Islamic, Bektashi, and Jewish objects.
- Formation of special religious tourist packages for groups of special religious affiliations, for Christians, Muslims, etc.
- Formation of combined religious tourist packages (religious, cultural, historical, architectural, archaeological, religious manifestations, etc.).
- Formation of joint religious tourist packages with neighbouring countries.

## 9. Study limitation and future research

The paper is analytical and generally focuses on the collection of general information and does not include state institutions and visitors in the questionnaire. Religious institutions were not included in the survey and the number of surveyed agencies is not very large. In order to have a realistic picture of the situation, the analysis should include a larger number of hotels, tour operators, state and religious institutions, analysis of visitors for a longer period and analysis of the situation in neighbouring countries on the possibility of cooperation in creating of joint religious tourism packages.

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