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# BRANDING OF THE DESTINATION OF PODGORINA THROUGH THE ROUTE OF “RAKIJA ŠLJIVOVICA”, A UNESCO HERITAGE ROUTE

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## ABSTRACT

Plum brandy is one of the most recognizable symbols of Republic of Serbia. Production of plum brandy is recently on the UNESCO list and can be a very significant factor in the process of promoting the destination from the aspect of tourism. Looking at the current situation, through positive examples of practice and a review of the theoretical framework, the collection of statistical data obtained on the basis of previous research, it was observed that the destination of Podgorina has numerous predispositions for branding. The aim of this paper is to point out the importance of the formation of “The Rakija Šljivovica Route”, where the production of plum brandies would be a significant component of the branding process of the destination. In this way, permanent migration from rural to urban areas would be slowed down, the rich cultural heritage of this region, agriculture and traditional occupations would be revived.

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## Introduction

There is extensive literature of plum and plum brandy, as well as oral discussions. Production of plum brandy was included in the list of intangible cultural heritage of Serbia and then in the prestigious UNESCO list. Plum, and especially plum brandy, are one of the most recognizable symbols of Serbia and one of the first associations

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with our country among foreigners. In the destination, plum growing dominates the fruit production, while a huge percentage of the total plums produced is processed into plum brandy. Through the paper, in addition to the analysis of fruit production, and was analyzed the concept of intangible cultural heritage was explained, as well as its importance and influence on the branding of the tourist destination. At the end, it was considered how the production of plum brandy - šljivovica as an intangible cultural heritage of Serbia can be a component of attraction in the process of branding the destination of Podgorina through the formation of the "The Rakija Šljivovica Route" and its tourism valorization for the purpose of strengthening Podgorina villages and stopping depopulation in this area.

Based on the objectives of the paper, the following is set:

1. Basic hypothesis: The branding of the destination Podgorina through the formation of the "Podgorina Rakija Šljivovica Route" leads to greater interest of tourists in visiting this destination.
2. Auxiliary hypothesis 1: Increased interest in visiting the destination of Podgorina enables faster development of tourism in the destination.
3. Auxiliary hypothesis 2: The development of tourism in the destination Podgorina leads to the economic empowerment of Podgorina villages.
4. Auxiliary hypothesis 3: The economic empowerment of Podgorina villages stops the depopulation of the area and creates the conditions for a return to the countryside.

### **The theoretical framework of the intangible cultural heritage and source of value of the tourist destination brand**

UNESCO World Heritage List is also used as a means of attracting large numbers of tourists, given that the tangible or intangible heritage on this list is an important attraction for tourists (Ryan & Silvanto, 2009; Huang et al., 2012). The number of tourists visiting World Heritage Sites is steadily increasing (Shackley, 2006; Yang et al., 2010), which encourages communities to preserve it and present it in the best possible manner to tourists. Bearing in mind the importance of the UNESCO cultural heritage list, the subject of research in this study is the examination of intangible cultural heritage in the context of cultural and agro tourism based on traditional Serbian spirit. The paper also gives recommendations for a new modern form of tourism - route of „rakija šljivovica“. According to Portuguese creative tourism network, creative tourism combines different elements of tourism and creative content and incorporates them into the lifestyle. Consumers or travelers desire to participate actively in the experience and explore their creative potential or activities in the location (CREATOUR, 2017).

According to the basic division based on the type of material, cultural heritage is divided into: (Krivošejev, 2014)

- Movable material cultural heritage
- Immovable material cultural heritage
- Intangible cultural heritage

All natural and anthropogenic resources that are an integral part of one ambient unit represent tourist resources and as such can be used for tourist purposes and contribute to the economic development of each destination. After the completion of the shaping process, cultural resources can become or are becoming tourist resources of a destination, and after the completion and shaping of the process of presentation and interpretation, they become a cultural product. Based on the degree of attractiveness, aesthetics, uniqueness and landmarks, the cultural, touristic and economic value of each resource is assessed, and this assessment is also influenced by the favorable geographical location, traffic connections and distance from the emission centers, as well as by the source of demand and its size and finally the position of resources in relation to competitive and complementary tourist destinations (Mc Kercher & du Cros, 2002).

In recent years, a shift in focus has been observed in the cultural tourism sector, both on the demand side and on the supply side, in the direction from the dominant representation of immovable to movable and intangible heritage and products of cultural industries. This move, in addition to all the positive sides, also hides certain dangers, primarily related to the uncontrolled exploitation of these resources. For this reason, the management of cultural heritage as a whole implies systemic care, so that it is accessible, not only to present, but also to future generations (Jelinčić, 2010). The offer of tourism based on cultural resources intensifies the mutual influence of culture and tourism and reduces the negative effects on local communities. While the promotion of tangible cultural heritage has a long tradition, intangible heritage is just beginning to take its place in the tourist offer (Steward, 1981; Bandić, 1997).

Intangible cultural heritage consists of non-physical aspects of a certain culture, that is, social customs created during the historical development of a specific social community. (Krivosejev, 2014). According to the “Convention on the Preservation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” intangible cultural means practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills as well as instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces connected with them - which communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural inheritance. Such intangible cultural heritage, which is passed down from generation to generation, is recreated by communities and groups depending on their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity and thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (Official Gazette of the RS, 2010).

According to this Convention, intangible cultural heritage is manifested in several areas: (Official Gazette of the RS, 2010)

- oral traditions and expressions, including language as a carrier of intangible cultural heritage,

- performing arts,
- social customs, rituals and festive events,
- knowledge and customs concerning nature and space,
- skills related to traditional crafts

In order to preserve intangible cultural heritage, it is necessary to act according to the principles of sustainable development, i.e. in the direction of passing it on to the next generations and create the conditions for that process to be sustainable with constant interaction with nature and with respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. The achievement of this goal also depends on the interest of the community and the bearers themselves to preserve their intangible cultural heritage and pass it on to future generations. The success in achieving this goal, also, depends to a large extent on the cooperation of all actors in the chain of the protection system, which consists of the bearers of the heritage, local community, institutions and professional bodies.

According to Morgan branding was applied to consumer products long before the industrial revolution, but the idea of tourist destinations that follows the formulation of brand strategy (Morgan et al., 2015). According to Becker and Cameron, tourism destination marketing should “encompass all activities and processes that connect sellers and buyers, focusing on responding to consumer demands and competitive positioning (Baker & Cameron, 2008). Kerr and Miletić conclude that “The brand of the destination provides the promise of a pleasant travel experience to a certain destination for potential visitors, and for those who have already visited a certain destination, it serves to consolidate and strengthen the memory of good experiences” (Kerr, 2006; Miletić et al., 2023).

In addition to these characteristics, the destination brand includes the perceptions that a person has about a place and the key characteristics that the end users of tourist services remember. These are permanent and essentially values that differentiate a destination from competing areas. In order to achieve results, a strategic approach to destination branding is very important, and it includes the ways in which a destination communicates with the target group, while at the same time, nurturing, developing and presenting all the characteristics of the destination so that in the process it establishes, strengthens and even changes its image and reputation (Handbook on Tourism Destinations Branding, 2009). The conclusion is that the destination brand exists only and exclusively in the eyes of the consumer, not the creator of the offer.

According to the UNWTO, the main characteristics and forms of the tourist product are: accommodation services for visitors, catering services, passenger transportation (in road, rail, ship and air traffic), rental services of means of transport, services of travel agencies and other reservation services, cultural, sports and recreational services, specific tourist products (tourist souvenirs, etc.) and tourist services specific to a certain country (UNWTO, 2022). The goal of branding geographic locations for tourism purposes is to make people aware that that location exists and to acquire positive associations about that location (destination).

Veljković and Đorđević (2011) in their paper “Branding the destination and creating value for tourists”, and based on the views of Becker, Cameron and Hankinson, say that “the key factors of the success of the branding strategy are: strategic orientation, developing the appropriate identity of the destination, creating the desired image, involvement of stakeholders and good implementation, monitoring and revision of the strategy. That is why it is necessary to: develop an appropriate branding culture, establish appropriate leadership, ensure good cooperation between departments, create partnerships between interested parties, as well as establish adequate communication. Building and nurturing a destination brand is therefore a strategic decision and, generally speaking, it goes through several stages, namely: market research, analysis and determination of strategic development directions; developing brand identity and desired image; introducing and presenting the brand to the target market, communicating its vision; implementation (strategy) of the brand and monitoring, evaluation and revision. The main goals of destination branding are related to the stages of consumer guidance from ignorance to visiting the destination, and according to the primary tourist motives. That is why it is necessary to differentiate it from the competition, develop awareness and recognition among potential visitors, create a positive image (and thus increase the probability of visiting the destination) and create a strong and convincing brand identity”.

Innovative cultural and tourist products enrich the basic product, ie. destination brand, will increase consumption, tourist length of stay and satisfaction their stay (Gajić et al., 2021). When we talk about destination branding, we must know that it involves connecting different elements of value that already exist at the destination into a single whole, and this is achieved by integrating the elements of value of different carriers of the tourist offer at the destination, as well as natural and anthropogenic characteristics. In this way, the destination becomes recognizable on the market, guarantees quality, offers an unforgettable experience and emotional benefits for tourists. “Tourism is seen as a necessity due to the promotion of the tourist destination and building its identity through the goods of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which ultimately provides funds for its preservation. The development of tourism based on cultural and historical heritage needs to be viewed through the prism of the funds secured in this manner, which can be directed to the protection and further promotion of heritage” (Sančanin et al., 2023).

As already stated, there are different sources of value in tourist destinations and it is difficult to observe them separately, because tourists perceive them as a unique value, which influences the creation of a unique experience. The main sources of value in destinations can be:

1. The quality and organization of natural attractions: the possibility of staying and visiting the unique natural environment; the existence of natural facilities for various activities (swimming, skiing, surfing, rafting, etc.); arrangement and adequate content with natural attractions in the destination (night lights, entertainment facilities, attractive viewpoints, etc.);

2. The existence of cultural and historical sights and the possibility of visiting them: the existence of organized tours and the mood in the group during the tour; the familiarity of the locality and its importance in world history and culture; arrangement and presentation on the site (inscriptions, interpretation...);
3. The quality of the content of the stay in the destination: the existence of activities that do not exist near the place of permanent residence (diving, skiing, etc.); the possibility of getting to know new landscapes, history, architecture and culture; entertainment during the stay (cafes, discos, etc.); the possibility of getting to know and getting closer to the local population and tourists from other areas;
4. Built content and infrastructure with or outside of natural attractions that increase the comfort of stay: the connection of different attractions into a single whole; separate centers of natural attractions that offer the possibility of enjoyment, rest and activities (aqua parks, sports fields, etc.); facilities with natural attractions that enable an active holiday (ski jumping hills/ jumping ramp\*, scooter rental...);
5. Destination information: information about attractions and experiences in the destination; information about hotels and other providers of tourist offers (local agencies, restaurants, etc.);
6. The brand of the destination and economic actors in the destination: the image and brand of the destination per se; the hotel brand in the destination; the brand of the tour operator that organizes the trip to the destination; the brand of local travel agencies that provide services; familiarity and image of localities and attractions in the destination. (Veljković, Đorđević, 2011, p. 53);
7. The image of the tourist destination, which has an impact on the recognition of the experience that can be experienced in the destination and also affects the social value for tourists (to what extent the stay in a certain destination reflects the social status of the tourist). (Veljković, Đorđević, 2011, p. 55)

Contemporary theory that deals with topics in the field of tourism states that the brand of a tourist destination has a significant influence on the decision-making process on the demand side regarding the choice of destination. The basic values created by brands can be systematized as follows

1. The recognizability of the offer (which can be treated as the recognizability of the carrier or destination);
2. A clear idea of the benefits (values) and experience that tourists can get during their stay and use of services in tourist destinations;
3. Different values that distinguish the destination from other destinations (in essence, the basis of the created value implies that, with minimal risks, the

basic competitive advantage of the destination compared to others is clearly recognized; in this way, the need for additional information collection is reduced and the risks in the process are minimized decision-making, which is reflected in increasing value for consumers);

When we consider afore stated, we conclude that the value in destinations is a very complex category, and the destination brand is singled out as a special element of value, which leads to the conclusion that in modern business conditions, the brand has great importance. The importance of the brand in tourism stems from the fact that the brand is a significant source of value for tourists, and that it affects the value created and delivered to tourists, which ultimately affects the destination's competitiveness on the market. When we observe the impact of a brand on consumers and their purchase decisions, we start from the analysis of the basic dimensions of the brand: (Keller et al., 2008).

### **Materials and Methodology**

The methodological framework includes an overview of the theoretical field of cultural, intangible heritage and destination branding for the purpose of tourism development. By defining the basic terms and collecting data at the table through the analysis of existing statistical data, obtained in previous research, the analysis of a positive example of the impact of receiving UNESCO protection on the development of tourism, the results were obtained. Secondary sources were also used, such as domestic and foreign literature, data from the Tourism Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia, especially the Draft of Osečina Development Program 2023-2027 (Draft Tourism Development Program of the Osečina Municipality 2023-2027). Using the analysis method, the relevant characteristics of the tourist potential and shortcomings of the destination and intangible heritage were observed and recommendations were given for future development, which can significantly improve the rural areas of the Republic of Serbia, Podgorina. Description as a method was used to interpret the available data. The synthesis led to the confirmation of the initial hypotheses.

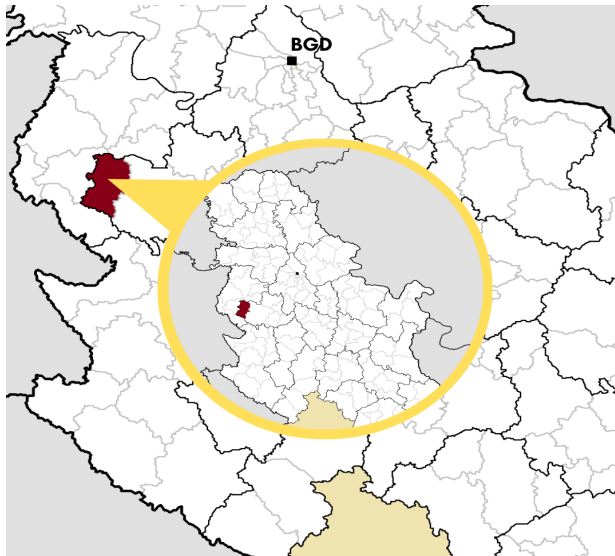
#### **Geographical - traffic and relevant demographic and tourist characteristics**

Podgorina stretches east from Podrinje, to the Tamnava, Kolubara and Ljig rivers and includes the Valjevska basin and the Suvobor, Povlen, Jablanik and Medvednik mountains. The name Podgorina comes from the time when dense forests prevailed in the area. The municipality of Osečina, with an area of 319 km<sup>2</sup>, is located in Podgorina, in the west of central Serbia, and has a relatively good geographical and traffic position. Its territory is crossed by two state roads. The state border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, at a distance of 44 km, and the proximity of the future highway Belgrade - Požega and the railway line Valjevo - Loznica, offer the possibility of yourist animation of transit traveler and excursionists.

Osečina is 120 km far from Belgrade, 128 km from Novi Sad, 34 km from Valjevo, 57 km from Šabac, and 151 km from Kragujevac, which is favorable for domestic tourism (*Figure 1*). The poor state of the local network of roads and traffic infrastructure, in

particular, makes communication difficult and affects the isolation of certain settlements and localities in terms of functionality and development. The roads have unfavorable geometrical characteristics, which is mainly due to the hilly and mountainous configuration of the terrain. Limiting factors are inadequate and incomplete roads and their irregular and inadequate maintenance. Traffic and tourist signage is solid but sporadic, which reduces traffic safety and the accessibility of some tourist locations. Rural settlements are still untapped tourist potential, slightly represented in the tourist offer (*Table 1*). Eliminating these weaknesses is hampered by the lack of material resources. The passage of the state road of the first order through the town of Osečina is also a disadvantage, because at every intervention within the urban area traffic is stopped.

**Figure 1.** Map of the destination location



*Source:* authors

Based on the guidelines from the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010 to 2020, the southern hilly-mountainous part of the Municipality of Osečina belongs to the primary tourist destinations with a dominant summer and modest winter offer in the Valjevo-Podrinjska Planina-Drina stretch. However, in the municipality of Osečina, not much has been invested in tourism for decades, so the material base of tourism is in the process of being formed.

According to the first results of the 2022 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, 10,011 inhabitants live in the municipality of Osečina according to the 2022 census, 2,525 less than in 2011. The population density is 31.38 people/km<sup>2</sup>, which is far from the average for RS, which is 75.65 people/km<sup>2</sup>. The average age of the municipality's population is 45.9 years, which is above the average for Serbia of 42.2 years.



**Table 1.** Available data on tourist traffic

Year	Number of overnight stays
2017.	294
2018.	283
2019.	386
2020.	744
2021.	1788
2022.	1915

Source: Tourist organisation “Podgorina” Osečina.

**Table 2.** Percentage of domestic and foreign tourists

Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
82,67%	17,33%

Source: Tourist organisation “Podgorina” Osečina

**Table 3.** Accommodation in the municipality of Osečina in 2023.

Type of accommodation	Name/place	category	Number of objects	Number of beds	Number of rooms
Hotel	-	-	-	-	-
Motel	-	-	-	-	-
Hostel	Sport center „Osečina“	-	1	22	8
Total			1	22	8
<b>Private accommodation</b>					
Lodgings for the night	Restaurant with lodging for the night „Dragić“	-	1	12	6
	Lodging for the night „Čava S“	-	1	23	7
	Restaurant with lodging for the night „Dragić“	-	1	8	3
Rural households	„Sokolske kolibe-Rožanj“ (Igor Rabat)	***	1	2	1
	Aleksandar Lukič	***	1	8	4
Total			6	75	29

Source: Tourist organisation “Podgorina” Osečina

### **Plum brandy - šljivovica as part of the branding strategy of the destination of Podgorina by forming “The Rakija Šljivovica Route”**

The list of intangible cultural heritage of Serbia includes 55 elements that form the core of Serbia’s cultural identity. On the proposal of the National Museum from Čačak on October 15, 2015 the production method of šljivovica spirit, was entered as an intangible cultural heritage of Serbia on the list of intangible cultural heritage of Serbia under number 30 (National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2022).

Traditional „šljivovica“ was registered in 2022 (17.COM) on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. “The element includes complex knowledge and skills for the preparation of drinks in the home environment as well as its use in everyday and ritual practices. Preparation has multiple phases involving families and communities. Plums are most often grown on family farms and harvested in the fall. They are boiled for 20 to 30 days and then distilled in handmade copper stills to produce a mild spirit. A stronger spirit is obtained by the second distillation. The last stage is aging in a barrel, usually made of oak, for at least one year. On festive occasions and during family celebrations, šljivovica accompanies toasts with wishes for health and well-being. It is also an important part of traditional medicine, where medicinal herbs or fruits are added to obtain medicines against colds and pains or antiseptics. In winter, boiled spirit is consumed. The practice is mainly passed down within families and communities, with younger members acquiring knowledge over time through gradual involvement in the various stages of preparation and use of plum spirit. Women also attach great importance to the transmission of knowledge and skills related to rituals, traditional medicine and gastronomy. Related craft knowledge, such as making copper vessels, is transmitted in workshops” (UNESCO, 2022).

A place on the UNESCO list ensures global visibility and recognizability of the product, which now places the tourist potential of the brand and destination in a very significant and favorable position. Serbia now has 5 elements on UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, namely: family Saint Patron’s Day since 2014, kolo - a traditional folk dance since 2017, singing with the fiddle since 2018, Zlakusa pottery since 2020 and now plum spirit from 2022. In this way, the number of foreign tourists could be significantly increased, since this ratio is very unfavorable today (*Table 2*), but the imminent inclusion of Šljivovica on the UNESCO list could very well start this trend. “Cultural heritage is a tool of the tourism industry to attract tourists to visit a country” (Stojanović et al., 2022).

Plums and plum products, especially spirit, occupy a special place in Serbian tradition, whether it is customs and beliefs or everyday life. This claim is supported by a large number of toponyms and family surnames that have plum or spirit as their base, and this tells us about the origin, lifestyle, occupations, etc. of the progenitors of those families and the regions where they lived and worked or came from. (Lazić, 2007). In his book “Šljiva, bre!”, Petar Lazić talks about how much the plum is represented in Serbian customs and ceremonies and how important it is in Serbian culture and tradition. A large number of folk epic songs talk about plum spirit and its influence on the combat morale and heroism of the Serbian insurgents in the battles against the Turkish invaders. Hence, Pavle Sofronić from Niš, writing about plum, says, “It goes without saying that in today’s civilized society, there is a different opinion about spirit.” But let’s not forget that our heroic ancestors would have had a hard time freeing themselves with their bare fists from their centuries-old oppressors, if they drank milk and boza instead of spirit” (Sofronić, 1990). Spirit is highly represented in the customs of the annual and life cycle, and because of this, in some Serbian regions, it has completely or partially

supplanted wine from cult practice. (Stojaković, 2000). Spirit is produced in almost every rural household, but it is mostly consumed there, because it is drunk on various occasions, so that there is no celebration in Serbs that can pass without the use of spirit (Antonić, 2004).

As plum brandy ranks as one of the most recognizable symbols of Serbia and that the production of plum spirit is on the list of intangible cultural heritage of Serbia and that as such it must be one of the significant factors in the process of promoting Serbia from the aspect of tourism. A special aspect and the most significant fact of this claim is the fact that since 2022, šljivovica spirit has been included in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage, and as such, it now represents not only the heritage of Serbia, but also the heritage of humanity, which is a new moment and strength of the brand's potential .

Plum is the most represented fruit crop in the territory of the municipality of Osečina, because it occupies 56% of the total area of agricultural land under fruit. (Strategy of rural development and agricultural development in the municipality of Osečina from 2016 to 2026, p. 39). Despite the large number of processing capacities, 70% of the plums produced in the municipality of Osečina are processed into spirit, of which 95.6% is consumed in Serbia (Strategy of rural development and agricultural development in the municipality of Osečina from 2016 to 2026). Based on these data, the conclusion is made that plum brandy - šljivovica and the production process should be a trump card in the process of branding destination of Podgorina by creating "The Rakija Šljivovica Route" as a new tourist product of the destination.

As already mentioned, a large share of plum processing goes to spirit, and in the area of Osečina, only one company is engaged in the production of alcoholic beverages, while the rest of the processing capacities are within rural households. The chance for plum brandy - šljivovica to become a brand of the destination, and the "rakija šljivovica" as a new tourist product of this destination, can be found in the event that spirit producers are included in tourist flows, that production is modernized, that the products of local brandy producers occupy a significant place in the catering offer of the destination, enriching the catering offer in households that provide or will provide services in rural tourism with local specialties and products produced at the destination. In this way, the agrarian tourism of the destination develops, the village develops and further depopulation is prevented. The benefits for tourists are multiple, in addition to getting to know the sights and famous people of the destination, enjoying the exceptional natural beauty, they can try the gastronomic offer of the destination and enjoy the flavors of the spirit of this region, but during their stay they can experience the life of a Podgorina peasant and participate in the process of making plum brandy and make plum brandy which they produced, they take with them as a personalized souvenir.

Modern tourists show an interest in local culture and lifestyles and during their travels buy souvenirs that symbolize the destination, which increases the chances of placing the offer, increasing income and developing the destination. Such tourists will pay a

higher price for a unique, authentic, modernly designed and packaged product, and if you add to that the possibility of visiting the places of production, participating in the production or just observing the production process, it increases the experience of the destination and influences repeat visits. “The unique tourist product “target” is the expectations of modern tourists, who are increasingly moving from the saturated mass tourist market to non-standard tourist products, striving for new experiences and unforgettable occurrences” (Borović, et al., 2022).

Bela Muhi in her work “Marketing aspects of the branding strategy of rural tourism of Vojvodina” says that the characteristics of modern tourism are the search for peculiarities, and that they are hidden in all aspects of local culture - peace, silence, clean air, ecologically healthy food, local wine and spirit, fresh vegetables, rural ambience, agricultural crops and domestic animals, specific rural architecture, old folk customs and almost forgotten crafts.

The driver of tourism in Podgorina can be plum farming, especially the production of plum brandy. “Although there are still no official data, according to some estimates, around 25% of tourists in the world annually opt for rural tourism” (Borović, et al., 2022). Agrarian or village or rural tourism or this new rakija tourism implies a combination of local values which in symbiosis with quality spirits and an adequate hospitality can start such a small and insufficiently developed tourist destination. This claim is based on examples of good practice in the country and neighboring countries, which concern wine tourism, as well as numerous relevant literature that follows this field of tourism. Wine tourism in Serbia is expanding, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy and Austria have made great progress in this area of tourism and are considered leaders and generate large revenues from this type of tourism.

**Table 4.** Advantages and limitations of branding the destination of Podgorina through the formation of „The Rakija Šljivovica Route“

<b>advantages</b>	<b>limitations</b>
geographical position	limited space suitable for tourism
traffic connectivity	accommodation
environmental natural characteristics	insufficient number of contents for recreation and animation
natural and anthropogenic factors	marketing and management
cultural heritage	modernization of the production process
events	financing
UNESCO protected intangible cultural heritage	government assistance and development strategies
rural tourism	better quality of roads

*Source:* Authors

## Recommendations for the development and branding of the destination through “The Rakija Šljivovica Route”

The good geographical position of the destination of Podgorina, adequate traffic connections with emission centers, and preserved nature, natural and anthropogenic factors, numerous and colorful cultural heritage (material and immaterial) (*Figure 2*), many manifestations, among which the Plum Fair is one of the most famous and in the most important plum farming not only in Serbia but also in the surrounding area, provide an excellent basis for the development of this type of tourism in this destination (*Figure 3*). Natural resources along with cultural heritage represent an important factor in the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia (Cvijanović, et al., 2022).

**Figure 2.** Rich cultural heritage - Tešman Soldatović's homestead



*Source:* Authors, 2022.

“The Rakija Šljivovica Route” should be designed and organized in such a way that tourists visit spirit producers along a pre-planned route and during those visits follow all stages of spirit production, participate in the production stages, but also get to know local history, culture, customs and traditions, the way of life of the locals and at the end they enjoy consuming spirit and local specialties during those visits. As this is a predominantly rural area and all producers are located in rural areas, this can be an additional comparative advantage of the destination, as this destination becomes an ideal place for vacation and escape from urban life.

Figure 3.18<sup>th</sup> Plum fair Osečina



Source: Tourist organization “Podgorina” Osečina

According to the data of the Republic Institute for Statistics of Serbia and the National Team for the Revival of Serbian Villages, plums are grown on 74,000 hectares in Serbia, and 42 million plum trees have been planted on this area. The annual production of fresh plums is 550,000 tons. According to the same source, the Toplički and Kolubar districts are one of the leaders in plum production in Serbia. Out of the total amount of plums produced, 20% of the crop is processed through several stages of processing, while 80% is processed into brandy. The export of prunes is about 5500 tons per year.

In Osečina, plum is the most represented fruit crop, as it occupies 56% of the total area of agricultural land under fruit. (Strategy of rural development and agricultural development in the municipality of Osečina from 2016 to 2026). Despite the large number of processing capacities, 70% of the plums produced in the municipality of Osečina are processed into brandy, of which 95.6% is consumed in Serbia. (Strategy of rural development and agricultural development in the municipality of Osečina from 2016 to 2026).

We conclude that šljivovica brandy and the production process should be a trump card in the process of branding the Podgorina destination by creating the path of brandy as a new tourist product. As already mentioned, a large share of plum processing goes to brandy, and in the area of Osečina, only one company is engaged in the production of alcoholic beverages, while the rest of the processing capacities are within rural households. We only see the chance for šljivovica brandy to become a destination brand. In order for small farms that are also producers of plum brandy to be included in tourist flows in full, it is necessary that these households will be enriched with catering facilities, primarily tasting rooms (arrangement of existing spaces or construction of new ones) in which they would present themselves, taste and sell household products

with an accent on spirit. Further development would go in the direction of construction or adaptation of existing household capacities for the needs of tourist accommodation and finally the development of recreation and animation content (*Table 3*). All these contents should correspond to the ambient whole both in terms of architecture and the use of materials for their construction and decoration. In this way, the surplus household products are sold, the incomes that are used for the functioning of the household and its development are actualized. (*Table 4*).

### Conclusions

The paper presents the state of production and processing of plums in the destination of Podgorina, which shows that a large percentage of the processing of all plums produced belongs to the production of spirit. It also shows how to brand a destination and what are the advantages of destination branding not only from the tourism side, but also from the economy in general, and how the production of plum spirit as an intangible cultural heritage can be a component of destination branding. In order to overcome these problems, it is necessary to establish cooperation with all stakeholders in the destination and to approach the branding of the destination in an organized manner from the point of view of spirit production as a component of attraction in that process. In order to achieve this, institutional and financial assistance from the state is needed through relevant ministries and administrations, as well as cooperation with the local government unit through incentive programs for agricultural producers. Serbia, as well as the destination Podgorina itself, have good prerequisites for the development of agrarian tourism and the development of rakija tourism through the formation of the “Podgorina Rakija Šljivovica Route”, as explained in the paper, which can greatly improve the tourist offer of the destination through the inclusion of rakija/spirit producers in the first place of rural households .

The creation of the “rakija šljivovica” route is a serious undertaking that requires an organized and well-coordinated process of involving tourism policy makers at all levels in the country. This process implies the networking of existing spirit producers with other stakeholders at the destination and their inclusion in tourist flows. In order to make this process as good as possible and as “painless” as possible for small producers, it is necessary to standardize the quality of spirit and modernize the production in order to meet the standards prescribed by law, but at the same time to maintain the traditionality in production, further steps in this process go in the direction of enriching the hospitality offers of households and the expansion of capacities for accommodation and food for tourists. Installation of tourist signage, construction of parking lots and road infrastructure would greatly help to mark small agricultural households as points of tourist activity in the destination.

The problems during this research were the difficult availability of information and the lack of cooperation of local self-government units. The results could be useful in further planning to overcome some of the negative consequences of urbanization and rural abandonment. Considering the complexity and multidisciplinary of organizing

and implementing activities in the field of tourism, this paper tries to point out concrete activities and measures of the active policy of developing destinations and brands of the Republic of Serbia. In some further research, other elements of Serbia's intangible cultural heritage that are on the UNESCO list could be researched as potentials for tourism development.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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