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Marketing Strategy for all seasons "tourist product" for the Municipalities of Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo under the Project



Cultural Area

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1. Executive Summary

The marketing strategy is based on research of successful European marketing practices for sustainable and responsible tourism related to cultural and natural heritage, reflecting specific approaches to different target groups and fulfilling the project goals and benefiting the local authorities, public and private organisations, and professionals working in the field of tourism and culture and other interested parties – tourists, employees from state, private, and educational institutions, the artistic community, citizens, the media, etc.

The 'Cultural Area' strategy positions the Kyustendil – Dupnitsa – Kriva Palanka – Kratovo cross-border region as a distinctive, year-round cultural and tourism destination. The region combines rich heritage, natural beauty, authentic traditions, and sustainable experiences.

Key priorities:

- Build a recognizable and competitive regional brand.
- Diversify tourism products (heritage, gastronomy, wellness, eco-routes).
- Boost digital visibility and engagement through storytelling, influencers, and SEO.
- Strengthen cross-border partnerships and stakeholder cooperation.

Target audiences include families, cultural enthusiasts, eco-travelers, adventure seekers, foodies, wellness tourists, and students. The strategy emphasizes measurable KPIs, structured monitoring, and annual evaluations to ensure impact.

2. Action Matrix

Priority	Key Actions	KPIs	Timeline	Responsibility
Brand & Awareness	Develop unified logo, slogan, and identity. Launch multilingual	Brand recall surveys, website traffic +30%,	6–12 months	Marketing team, Municipalities, Design agency

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	website & social media.	social reach & engagement.		
Product Development	Create cross-border routes ('Crafts Trail', 'Fortresses', 'Gastronomic Journey'). Package offers with tour operators.	Number of tourists, Avg. stay length, Repeat visits.	12–18 months	Tourism centres, Tour operators, Municipalities
Digital Engagement	Run storytelling campaigns, 360° tours, influencer partnerships.	Engagement rate +50%, Video views, Shares, Comments.	6–12 months	Video team, Marketing team, Influencers
Partnerships & Events	Host annual cross-border festival, organise journalist/blogger study visits.	Number of cross-border initiatives, Media mentions, Partnerships formed.	Annual	Municipalities, NGOs, PR agencies

3. Monitoring & Evaluation

- Annual monitoring of KPIs (visitor data, digital analytics).
- Annual evaluation reports shared with stakeholders.
- Based on results launch of surveys to adjust campaigns.

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1. Introduction

The Kyustendil – Dupnitsa – Kriva Palanka – Kratovo cross-border region stands as a geographical and cultural nexus, offering a rich tapestry of heritage and natural beauty with significant, yet often untapped, potential for year-round tourism. Strategically positioned along Pan-European Corridor VIII and near to the capital cities - Sofia and Skopje, this area is primed to become a vibrant "Cultural Area" destination.

The region is strategically positioned as "**The Living History of the Balkans**", a concept that aims to weave together its rich cultural heritage, traditional crafts, and pristine natural environment into a cohesive and sustainable tourism product. This approach leverages the distinct characteristics of each municipality to create an integrated and appealing destination for visitors.

The region's allure as a "Cultural Area" is deeply rooted in its multifaceted strategic efforts and resources enhancing the Tourism potential of the cross-border region such as:

- **Historical, Architectural and Archaeological Cultural Heritage:** Kyustendil boasts the ancient Roman baths within the "**Pautalia-Velbazhd-Kyustendil**" **architectural and archaeological reserve** and the medieval "**Pirkova**" **defensive tower**. Dupnitsa envisions revitalising the "**Kulata**" **fortress** into a historical attraction. Kriva Palanka is historically significant as a centre of **Karposh's Uprising** and is home to the late antique **Gradište castellum**. Kratovo, one of the oldest living cities in the Balkans, features extensive **remnants of ancient and medieval mining, including underground tunnels and passages**, and a distinctive old-town architecture.
- **Religious heritage and rich cultural calendar:** Kriva Palanka is home to the renowned **St. Joakim Osogovski Monastery**, a major draw for visitors. Kyustendil proudly displays the **10th-11th century Church "St. George"** and the works of art in the "**Vladimir Dimitrov - Maistora**" **Art Gallery**. The region comes alive with numerous **cultural events and festivals**, such as Kyustendil's "Pautalia" folklore festival, "Kyustendil Spring", and "Cherry Festival", and Kriva Palanka's "Jazz Factory Festival" and "Shopska Sofra". Kratovo contributes with its **rich traditional cuisine** and various historical and traditional events. Moreover, efforts in



Kyustendil and Kratovo aim to revive and showcase **traditional crafts** such as pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, and embroidery.

- **Natural Resources:** The region is blessed with **ecologically clean environments** and diverse landscapes. Kyustendil is famous for its **hydrothermal resources**, positioning it as a **national SPA and balneology resort**, and is known as the "fruit garden of Bulgaria". Dupnitsa includes part of the **Rila National Park**, offering opportunities for eco-tourism and winter sports. Kriva Palanka boasts the **Osogovo Mountains**, ideal for hiking to peaks like Kalin Kamen and Tsarev Vrv. Kratovo features the unique geological formations of the **Kratovo-Zletovo volcanic area**, the largest extinct volcanic area in North Macedonia, and untouched natural beauty.

2. The Concept of the 'Cultural Area'

The recognition of tourism's pivotal role in local development is evident across all four municipalities. Specifically:

- **Dupnitsa** considers tourism development an **important priority**, recognising its potential as a source of **employment and income**, enhancing local attractiveness, and attracting new investments. The municipality aims to promote various types of tourism, including cultural, educational, festival, sports, eco-tourism, and rural tourism. Furthermore, its strategic plans aim to develop natural, cultural, and recreational tourism by creating a complex tourist product and implementing marketing strategies, including digital marketing, for promotion.
- **Kyustendil** is already recognised as an **important tourist destination** within the country. Its geographical location, natural features, and cultural-historical heritage, combined with its position along European transport corridors E-4 and E-8, make it exceptionally suitable for tourism, described as a "gold mine" for complex tourism development, including **Spa, Balneological, Cultural, Mountain, Hunting, Winter, Rural**, and other forms of tourism. The municipality's development profile focuses on enhancing these diverse tourism potentials through improved promotion and integrated packages.



- **Kriva Palanka** has formally adopted a **Tourism Development Strategy for the period 2020-2025**, explicitly defining tourism as one of its **priority economic activities**. Its vision for the region is to transform from a mere transit environment into an example of **sustainable tourist development**, leveraging its rich cultural and historical heritage and excellent mountain resources to foster local economic growth.
- **Kratovo** also developed a **Tourism Development Strategy for the period 2020-2024**, viewing it as a key measure to enhance the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the municipality through **sustainable tourism** that benefits both the local population and the business sector. The strategy clearly outlines its mission and vision for future tourism development, emphasizing concerted efforts from all stakeholders in the sector.

This widespread acknowledgment highlights a collective commitment across the four municipalities to harness tourism as a **fundamental driver of economic growth and social well-being**, fostering a cohesive and appealing year-round tourism product by capitalising on their combined strengths.

3. Situation Analysis / SWOT

Situational analysis

Kriva Palanka

General Profile and Location: Kriva Palanka is located in the **northeastern part of North Macedonia**, bordering the Republic of Bulgaria. It is approximately 100 km from the capital city of Skopje, and the Deve Bair border crossing with Bulgaria is in its immediate vicinity. The municipality was founded in 1633 as a fortified place. It has shown **positive demographic growth** between 1948 and 2002, primarily attributed to its non-Albanian population. The municipality includes 34 populated places, with 33 categorized as rural settlements. The average annual temperature is 10.2°C, with July being the hottest and January the coldest. Notable rivers include Kriva Reka and Durachka Reka, and forests

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cover 36.47% of its total area. Approximately 31% of the land is arable, and the Osogovo mountain range is significant for mining.

Tourism Potential and Resources: Key attractions include the **Osogovo Monastery**, located just 2 km from the city centre. The area also boasts the Tsarev Vravv, where Kriva Reka springs, and Kalin Kamen, home to the Bazyachko Bardo and Vlachki Kolibi dams. Kriva Palanka hosts various cultural events, art colonies, carving colonies, and an international school of architecture, which contribute to its cultural heritage. The St. Nikola church in Tarnovo village, dating from the period of Turkish domination, contains seven icons.

Existing Tourism Infrastructure and Promotion: The Municipality of Kriva Palanka has its own **Tourism Development Strategy for 2020-2025**. It maintains a presence on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, publishing attractive photos and historical information. Its official website, www.KrivaPalanka.gov.mk, offers extensive information on various tourism types, including cultural, eco, religious, culinary, amateur, business, and events. Kriva Palanka has experience in implementing cross-border cooperation projects, particularly in environmental protection and tourism.

Challenges and Weaknesses: Kriva Palanka faces challenges such as a **lack of systematized and comprehensive information** about its "hidden" cultural and historical sites. Tourism is often poorly represented in national and regional development plans. The existing tourist infrastructure is not fully developed, with an unsatisfactory road network, inadequate signposts, and accessibility issues for persons with disabilities. The region is generally not well-known in the tourist market and lacks adequate advertising.

Strategic Goals and Plans: The municipality's strategy aims to **popularize "hidden" historical and cultural sites**, especially among young tourists. It focuses on registering the property status of tourist spaces, constructing new sites, and restoring/maintaining existing ones. There are plans to improve road networks and signage. Kriva Palanka is a partner in a cross-border project (CB006.2.21.150) with Dupnitsa, aiming to increase the value and efficient management of sites, disseminate best practices, and promote joint territorial management. This includes efforts to strengthen economic development,

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popularize local tourism products, and raise awareness. Future plans involve cooperation with Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, and Kratovo to enhance visibility, develop cultural routes and common tourist products, and use digital technologies like holograms, 3D models, VR/AR, gamification, QR codes, mobile applications, and a digital platform with cultural routes and calendars to enrich visitor experience.

Notable Events: Local events include **Voditsi** and the **Piftiyada culinary festival** in January, **Todorica** in March, **Saint Joachim's Day Osogovski** (also the Day of Kriva Palanka) on August 16, the **Off-road rally "Kalin Kamen"** in August, and the **Theater Festival "St. Joachim Osogovski"** in September. The **Transverzala Tsarev Vrv** mountaineering event is held on the last weekend of June, and the **4M International Mountaineering Transversal** (St. Gavril Lesnovski – St. Joakim Osogovski) is an annual tradition.

Kratovo

General Profile and Location: Kratovo is one of the six municipalities in the **Northeast Planning Region of North Macedonia**. The municipality comprises the city of Kratovo and 30 or 31 villages. It has a population of 10,441 residents, with a population density of 27.8 residents/km² (as of 2016 data). The population is predominantly Macedonian (97.99%), with 51% male and 49% female. Like many cities in the country, Kratovo is experiencing **alarming demographic decline**, largely due to mass emigration of its younger population.

Tourism Potential and Resources: Kratovo's natural resources include mountains such as **Osogovo, Kozjak, German, and Bilina Planina**. The region is known for its unique natural denudation formations, including the Basalt plates "Kostoperska karpa," remnants of small volcanic cones, volcanic bombs, and **stone dolls at the "Kuklica" and Tsocev Kamen localities**. Rivers like Pchinja, Kriva Reka, and Kratovska Reka, as well as artificial lakes like Lipkovsko and Glazhnja, also add to its natural appeal. The city itself is notable for its **old architecture, including defensive towers (кули), bridges, significant monasteries, a Turkish hamam, and historic old-town houses**.

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Existing Tourism Infrastructure and Promotion: The municipality's health infrastructure includes a public health centre with satellite ambulances in several villages, eight private medical practices in Kratovo (covering general medicine, paediatrics, gynaecology, and dentistry), and two pharmacies.

Challenges and Weaknesses: The most significant challenge highlighted for Kratovo is its **alarming demographic decline**, particularly the emigration of its young population, which directly impacts local economic development.

Strategic Goals and Plans: Kratovo has a **Tourism Development Strategy for 2020-2024**. The strategy's overarching goal is to **create conditions for and increase the development of tourism**. This involves three main priorities:

1. **Creating tourism offers and local tourism products**, including developing a mobile application, organizing events and manifestations, designing tourist arrangements, diversifying tourism types, and creating gastronomic offers.
2. **Strengthening capacities for tourism development**.
3. **Developing tourism infrastructure and promotion**, which includes plans for reconstruction of streets and access roads to tourist sites, especially historical monuments like towers, bridges, and old houses. The municipality also aims to promote itself nationally and internationally, producing promotional materials and souvenirs. Kratovo will also be part of a cross-border project with Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, and Kriva Palanka, focusing on enhancing visibility, cooperation, developing cultural routes, and common tourist products. It plans to integrate digital technologies for virtualizing cultural heritage sites to enrich visitor experiences.

Dupnitsa

General Profile and Location: Dupnitsa is an administrative-territorial unit in **Southwestern Bulgaria, located within the Kyustendil district**. It serves as a regional center and is strategically positioned in the development axis between Sofia and Blagoevgrad. As of 2019, Dupnitsa had a population of 29,134 in the city and 9,519 in its

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16 villages, with a high urbanization coefficient of 75.4%. The municipality has a high population density (117.5 persons/km²) but is experiencing **population decline and an aging demographic structure**. The climate is moderate-continental with some Mediterranean influence. Road and rail transport are key, with the E-79 highway and an electrified railway line passing through.

Tourism Potential and Resources: Dupnitsa is a **starting point for tourist routes to major natural attractions** such as the Seven Rila Lakes, Rila Monastery, Skakavitsa waterfall, Bistrishka waterfall, and the natural phenomenon Moreni. A significant cultural asset is the **architectural and archaeological reserve "Pautalia - Velbzhid"**, which includes Roman baths, and the acropolis of Pautalia. The municipality also has a historical museum and two house-museums (Stanke Dimitrov and Zhelio Demirevski). The Panichishte locality in Rila Planina offers conditions for winter sports. There are also natural conditions conducive to balneotherapy and spa tourism.

Existing Tourism Infrastructure and Promotion: Dupnitsa benefits from a **favorable transport and geographical location** and good territorial connectivity. Infrastructure exists but often requires improvement. The municipality uses social media (Facebook, Instagram) for online marketing communication.

Challenges and Weaknesses: Dupnitsa faces challenges common to the region, including being **weakly known in the tourist market** and having **inadequate advertising**. There is a noted **lack of communication and cooperation** between institutions responsible for the maintenance and exploitation of cultural sites. **Systematized information about "hidden" sites is lacking**, making it difficult for tourists to find details. Tourism is often poorly represented in national and regional development plans, and existing infrastructure is not fully developed (e.g., unsatisfactory road networks, lack of appropriate signposts, accessibility issues). Other issues include low average salaries leading to migration, water quality inconsistencies in some areas, and noise pollution in urban areas. The municipality is also at risk from landslides.

Strategic Goals and Plans: Dupnitsa Integrated Development Plan (PIRO) for 2021-2027 integrates tourism as a strategic focus aiming to transform the area into a competitive

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and sustainable destination. The plan identifies tourism as a key economic activity with potential to boost employment, local income, and quality of life. It emphasizes the development of **nature-based, cultural, recreational, and adventure tourism**, leveraging the municipality's proximity to **Rila National Park**, natural landmarks, and cultural heritage sites.

Key initiatives include the creation of **eco and mountain trails**, restoration of historical sites, and construction of tourist attractions such as a **park of architectural miniatures, extreme sports facilities, and cultural centers**. There are also plans for **ski and spa tourism zones**, improved transport connectivity, and digital marketing strategies to promote local tourism products. The municipality is actively pursuing inter-municipal **and cross-border cooperation**, particularly with Saparava Banya and partners in Serbia and North Macedonia, to develop integrated tourist routes and shared cultural projects.

Tourism development is supported under **Priority 3** of the plan, which focuses on economic growth through local potential, and is backed by EU funding, national programs, and municipal resources. The overarching goal is to create a **diversified, high-quality tourism offering** that integrates innovation, sustainability, and regional collaboration.

Notable Events: Dupnitsa hosts **May cultural holidays**, the **Southwest international "Peace in the Balkans" folklore festival** in May, the **National folklore festival "Rila is watching us"** in July, and the **International Festival of Male Choirs "St. Ivan Rilski"** in October.

Kyustendil

General Profile and Location: Kyustendil is the **administrative, economic, and cultural centre of the Kyustendil district in Southwestern Bulgaria**. The district borders North Macedonia and Serbia. Its terrain is diverse, comprising fertile valleys, hilly lands, and mountains. The climate is moderate-continental. Kyustendil has a relatively **dense road network** (21 km/100 km²) and railway network (4 km/100 km²), and the Struma highway contributes to its connectivity. The municipality is facing a **declining population and an aging demographic structure**. It also experiences a relatively high risk of poverty.

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Tourism Potential and Resources: Kyustendil is rich in cultural and natural heritage. It is home to the **architectural and archaeological reserve "Pautalia - Velbzhd"**, which includes Roman baths from the 2nd-3rd centuries and findings from the Stone and Copper Age to the late Middle Ages. Other historical sites include the acropolis of Pautalia, an ancient/late-antique fortress, the medieval Pirgova kula, the Ahmed Bey mosque, and the 10th-century church of St. Georgi. The region is also a starting point for the **Rila Monastery Nature Park** and offers opportunities in the Osogovo Mountain and Panichishte resort (Rila) for mountain and winter sports tourism. Its **healing mineral waters and favorable climatic conditions** make it suitable for spa tourism.

Existing Tourism Infrastructure and Promotion: Kyustendil has a good road infrastructure and a developed municipal administration that includes departments for urban planning, environmental protection, and social services. The municipality operates its own Tourism Development Program as an appendix to its Integrated Development Plan.

Challenges and Weaknesses: Similar to other municipalities in the region, Kyustendil may face challenges in **tourism promotion and information dissemination**. The demographic issues of **population decline and aging** are significant, as is the relatively high poverty risk. Uneven distribution of water resources is also a concern.

Strategic Goals and Plans: Kyustendil's Integrated Development Plan (PIRO Kyustendil) for 2021-2027 includes a **Program for Tourism Development**. The program aims to:

- **Develop cultural and natural tourism**, conserve resources, and increase the attractiveness of heritage sites for business investments.
- Conduct **market research** for niche tourism markets and support the municipal Tourism Council.
- **Inventory resources for rural tourism** and establish, reconstruct, or equip tourist information centres.
- Organize **promotional campaigns**, including "Food truck festivals".
- Implement **innovative practices** such as infotours with tour operators, travel agents, and journalists, and organize tourist forums.



- **Develop a comprehensive tourist product** for Kyustendil.
- Foster **collaboration and partnership**, including cross-border cooperation with municipalities like Kriva Palanka, including projects for zoo improvement, thermal spring research, digital and ecological centers, urban environment enhancement, and cross-border guesthouse complexes. Kyustendil is also participating in a cross-border project that involves Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo, aiming to increase visibility, strengthen cooperation, develop cultural routes, create common tourist products, and promote tourism through marketing. It also plans to incorporate digital technologies for virtualizing cultural heritage to enhance visitor experiences.

Notable Events: Kyustendil hosts **annual holidays** unique to the city. The "**Festival of Fertility**," an autumn festival of abundance, is a legacy of the first national fruit competition in 1896.

SWOT analysis of the cross-border region

The region is characterized by rich cultural heritage, authentic traditions, and strategic proximity to major markets such as Sofia and Skopje. At the same time, it faces weaknesses related to insufficient infrastructure, weak marketing, and demographic decline. Opportunities lie in the development of sustainable tourism, cross-border cooperation, and access to European funding, while key threats include strong competition from established destinations, seasonality of demand, and the depopulation of the region.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the cross-border region are outlined as follows:

Strengths

- **Rich and Diverse Natural and Cultural tourist resources:** the cross-border region between North Macedonia and Bulgaria possess rich and diverse natural and cultural resources, as a solid foundation for development of complex portfolio of tourist products and routes.

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- **Proximity to Key Areas and Resources:** the region's location is near to the capital. It is strategically positioned between the cities of Skopje and Sofia, and benefits from its proximity to European markets, offering strong potential for attracting international tourists.

Weaknesses

- **Insufficient Promotion and Awareness** of the region. Despite individual efforts by municipalities to promote their tourism potential, the region suffers from insufficient promotion and awareness. As an integrated destination, it remains largely unknown to both domestic and international tourists.
- **Limited accessibility and quality of information:** Visitors often struggle to find reliable details about cultural monuments and events. Much of the available online content is scarce, predominantly in local languages, and lacks English translations, making it difficult for international tourists to engage with the region.
- **Inadequate infrastructure and accessibility:** Many remote or lesser-known sites suffer from poor road conditions and a lack of clear signage, particularly in English. Significant investment is needed to uncover, preserve, and effectively market the region's cultural heritage.
- **Fragmented tourism offerings and uneven distribution of accommodation facilities:** The region lacks a cohesive tourism product, with services and experiences scattered across municipalities. Accommodation options are unevenly located, contributing to an imbalanced and less coordinated visitor experience.
- **Demographic and economic challenges:** The region faces negative demographic trends, including population outflow to more developed areas. Additionally, the relatively low standard of living among residents poses further obstacles to sustainable tourism and regional development.

Opportunities

- **Digital transformation for tourism promotion** is identified as a key priority in the strategic plans of all municipalities. Initiatives include GIS-based tourist portals, e-

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tourism promotion on global platforms, and active engagement through social media.

- **Product diversification and unique experiences:** Developing cross-border thematic tourism products to build a diverse portfolio that offers distinctive and memorable experiences for visitors.
- **Market segmentation and niche tourism:** Targeted and tailored offerings based on tourist profiles and regional resources can enhance competitiveness and appeal.

Threats

- **Heritage Degradation:** Intensive resource use and insufficient care threaten the preservation of cultural and natural heritage due to the lack of sustainable management strategies.
- **Competitive Pressure:** The region's small-scale economy faces strong competition from more developed cities and tourism destinations.
- **External Shocks & Climate Risks:** Pandemics, extreme weather events, and climate change pose serious risks to tourism stability and long-term growth.
- **Depopulation & Migration:** Ongoing migration and demographic decline undermine the sustainability and innovation potential of the tourism sector.
- **Weak Implementation & Coordination:** Limited strategic vision among businesses and financial constraints in smaller municipalities hinder effective policy execution and project development.
- **Aging Infrastructure & Environmental Hazards:** Outdated water and waste systems, pollution, and unregulated landfills present persistent environmental and infrastructural challenges.

4. Strategic Vision & Objectives

Specifically for the four municipalities of Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo, the "**CULTURAL AREA**" project aims to **leverage cultural connectivity to generate integrated actions, exchange good practices, and develop sustainable, attractive, year-round, and accessible tourism**, ultimately leading to employment growth in the tourism

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sector. This project also seeks to **promote integrated development through tourism marketing approaches.**

Vision

The vision for the Kyustendil – Dupnitsa – Kriva Palanka – Kratovo region is to establish it as a **vibrant, year-round "Cultural Area" tourism destination**, celebrated for its **interwoven tapestry of ancient history, rich cultural traditions, pristine natural landscapes, and authentic local experiences**, fostered through **strategic cross-border collaboration** and a commitment to **sustainable development.**

Strategic Marketing Goals

To realise this vision, the following strategic marketing goals should be pursued:

1. **Enhance Regional Brand Recognition and Visibility:** Establish a cohesive and compelling brand identity for the "Cultural Area" that highlights its unique selling points across national and international markets.
2. **Attract more visitors, Develop Diverse and Integrated Tourism Products:** Create attractive year-round tourism packages that seamlessly combine the cultural, historical, natural, and gastronomic offerings of all four municipalities. Attract more visitors.
3. **Boost digital engagement.**
4. **Strengthen Cross-border and Inter-municipal Tourism Cooperation:** Foster strong partnerships to leverage shared heritage, develop joint routes, and attract a wider international audience.

2. Plan of Activities

Key Marketing Activities and Initiatives

1. Product Development and Packaging

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The "Cultural Area" product will focus on creating integrated, multi-thematic routes and experiences that highlight the complementary strengths of each municipality. This is essential and major effort for attraction of tourist.

- **Themed Tourism Routes:**

1. **"À La Franga" Cultural Route: Local Traditions and Europe's Influence in everydaylife during the Revival period** (Architecture, Artistic Ornamentation, Local Culture, Fashion, and Lifestyle)
2. **"The Old Town Houses Tell Stories"** (houses from the 19th and early 20th centuries in the region - Kjustendil, Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka and Kratovo, which are gradually losing their appearance and authenticity.)
3. **"Ancient Echoes & Mining Heritage Trail"**: This route would connect Kyustendil's significant architectural and archaeological reserve "Pautalia-Velbazhd", including its Roman baths from the 2nd-3rd century and the Medieval defensive "Pirkova" tower, with Dupnitsa's potential historical attractions like the "Kulata" fortress, Kriva Palanka's rich cultural and historical offer, and Kratovo's ancient and medieval mining remnants, underground tunnels, and old town architecture. Kyustendil also has a planned "Ancient Fortresses and Settlements" route.
4. **"Monastery & Sacred Sites Journey"**: Feature Kriva Palanka's St. Joakim Osogovski Monastery, an important attraction, alongside Kyustendil's Church "St. George" and other religious sites.
5. **"Nature & Adventure Escape"**: Emphasise the region's natural beauty, including the Rila National Park (Dupnitsa, Kyustendil), Osogovo Mountains (Kriva Palanka, Kyustendil) with attractions like Kalin Kamen and Tsarev Vrv for hiking, mountain biking, and paragliding, and Kyustendil's Hisarlaka forest park and Konyavska Mountain. Kratovo's Kratovo-Zletovo volcanic area offers unique geological tourism.
6. **"Flavours of the Balkans Gastronomic Route"**: Showcase Kratovo's distinctive traditional cuisine (e.g., *pastrmajlija*, *mezal'k*, *k'tsana sol*, *katmer*, *zelnik*, and local brandies/wines), Kriva Palanka's ecologically healthy local food, and Kyustendil's renowned "fruit garden"

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produce (especially cherries). This can be supported by events like Kriva Palanka's "Shopska Sofra" and "Food Festival".

7. **"Crafts & Traditions Discovery"**: Highlight the traditional crafts in Kratovo, such as carpet weaving, pottery, and milling, and in Kyustendil, including pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, and embroidery, potentially revived through projects like "Revival of Old Crafts".
- **Infrastructure Enhancement:**

The themed routes are essential, but not sufficient to attract tourists, Based on SWOT analysis the accommodation capacity should be also addressed by encouraging investment in diverse types, including rural guesthouses and hotels.

Additionally the suggested themed routs should be also completed with signage and Information by Installing clear, multilingual tourist signage, information boards, and maps for all attractions and routes. The signage should be branded and following the overall marketing approach.

The existing Visitor Centres Dupnitsa's "Visit Rila" portal and Kyustendil's plan for an information portal could be upgraded with information and marketing materials for the cross-border region.

II. Promotion and Communication

- **Online Presence:**
 - Develop a **unified, multilingual "Cultural Area" website and social media channels** for the entire region, featuring all attractions, events, and tour packages.
 - Implement **SEO strategies** to improve online visibility and reach a global audience.
 - Utilise high-quality photos, videos, and virtual tours to showcase the region's beauty and unique experiences.
- **Content Marketing:**

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- Produce engaging stories, blog posts, and articles about the region's history, legends (e.g., Kriva Palanka's name origin), traditional way of life, and unique attractions.
- Collaborate with travel bloggers, influencers, and media outlets to generate authentic content.
- **Partnerships:**
 - **Tour operators and Travel Agencies:** Engage with national and international travel agencies and tour operators to develop and sell integrated "Cultural Area" tour packages. **Cross-border Cooperation Programs:** Actively seek funding and implement projects under existing EU cross-border cooperation programs (e.g., Interreg - IPA Bulgaria-North Macedonia, Bulgaria-Serbia). Dupnitsa and Kriva Palanka are already partners in the "Rivers Without Borders" project.
 - **Local Businesses & NGOs:** Work closely with local businesses, craftspeople, cultural institutions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to develop and promote authentic local experiences and ensure community involvement.
- **Events & Festivals:**
 - Create a consolidated regional calendar of **cultural and sports events**, promoting them widely as year-round attractions. This includes Kriva Palanka's "Jazz Factory Festival", "Joyfest", "International Cartoon Festival", "Tsarev Vrv Transversal", Kyustendil's "Pautalia" folklore festival, "Kyustendil Spring", and Kratovo's numerous historical and traditional events. The "Tromeđa" meeting already demonstrates successful cross-border collaboration.
 - Host joint regional festivals or adapt existing ones to include cross-municipal participation, such as Kyustendil's international gatherings.
- **Target Audiences:** Focus on families, cultural enthusiasts, adventure travellers, eco-tourists, foodies, wellness seekers, and students interested in educational tourism.

III. Organisational Aspects

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- **Regional Tourism Board/Committee:** Establish a joint committee or working group with representatives from Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Kriva Palanka, and Kratovo, along with local businesses and NGOs. This body would coordinate marketing efforts, product development, and applications for regional and international funding.
- **Funding:** Actively seek funding from diverse sources, including EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), Interreg programmes, national budgets (e.g., Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Tourism), regional development agencies, private investors, and philanthropic organisations. All municipalities highlight the importance of securing external funds for development.
- **Capacity Building:** Implement training programs for local businesses and communities to enhance tourism entrepreneurial skills and raise awareness about the importance of tourism, addressing weaknesses identified in Kriva Palanka and Dupnitsa.

Marketing Strategy Goals Table

Goal	Activities	Channels	KPIs	Timeline	Responsibility	Results
Attract more visitors	Develop 5 cross-border tourism routes (e.g. 'Crafts Trail', 'Medieval Fortresses', 'Gastronomic Journey') and promote via tour operators and online campaigns.	Tour operators, Brochures, Mobile app, Travel fairs	Number of tourists on routes, average stay duration, % repeat visitors	12 months and ongoing	Tourism info centres, Tour operators, Municipalities	Attract at least 10% more domestic and international visitors to the cross-border region annually.
Increase brand awareness	Develop a unified digital brand (logo, slogan, visual identity) and launch a multilingual	Website, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube,	Website traffic growth +30%, reach &	6–12 months	Marketing team, Municipalities, Design agency	Increased brand awareness by 20% within

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	website and social media channels.	Printed brochures	impressions, brand recall surveys			the first 12 months
Boost digital engagement	Run storytelling campaigns with video content, 360° virtual tours, influencer collaborations.	YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Project website	Video views, Engagement rate (%), Shares, Comments	6–12 months	Video production team, Marketing team	Boost digital engagement (social media and website) by 25% within the first year.
Strengthen cross-border cooperation	Organise annual cross-border festival and joint PR campaigns, plus study visits for journalists/bloggers.	Events, PR, Social media, Blogs	Number of cross-border initiatives, Media mentions, Partnerships formed	Annual	Municipalities, NGOs, PR agencies	Launch of 3 new joint initiatives between municipalities

5. Monitoring & Evaluation

Indicators to be monitored

Tourist arrivals

The most important indicators to measure success in the tourism are number of tourist arrivals, visiting the region, Distribution of tourists by months and seasons, trends or percentage of increase or decrease from previous years.

Numbers of arrivals, goals for the next years

Income:

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Total revenues from tourism in the region. Average expenditure of tourists by different categories (accommodation, food, entertainment and others). Profitability of tourism investments.

Average stay:

The average length of stay of tourists. Repeat visit rate.

Data collection

To collect the data needed for the evaluation, will be used a variety of sources and methods:

Surveys and interviews:

Conducting surveys among tourists to measure their satisfaction and preferences.

Feedback.

Interviews with local tourism businesses and staff for first-hand

Statistical data:

Use of data from official statistics, by tourism organizations, such as visitor numbers and revenue.

Analysis of data from travel operators and agencies.

Social media monitoring:

Monitoring the discussions and reviews of tourists on social media to assess the reputation of the region.

Analysis and corrections

After we collect the data, we need to analyze it and draw key conclusions. This process includes:

Comparison with targets:

Comparison of collected data with the objectives set in the marketing strategy.

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Identification of successes and weaknesses.

Trend Identification:

Determination of trends in tourist flow and tourist preferences.

Identification of new opportunities for tourism development.

Corrections and recommendations:

Suggestions for adjustments to the marketing strategy if necessary.

Recommendations for improving tourist service and satisfaction.

Regular monitoring, adaptation and optimization

The evaluation and monitoring process is not static, it must be continuous and constantly updated. In order to ensure the successful development of tourism, it is important to carry out constant monitoring and adaptation of the marketing strategy and re-evaluation.

- **Marketing plan**

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Objective	Activities	Channels	Target Group	Expected Outcome	Key Performance Indicators	Timeline	Responsible Partners
Increasing the recognition of the region as a Cultural Area	Creation of a joint website and social media profiles	Website, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube	Young tourists, families, cultural travelers	A unified digital brand	Web traffic, followers, reach	6 months	Municipalities, marketing team
Establishing a strong brand identity	Developing a logo, slogan, visual style	All marketing materials	Wide audience	A unified visual image of the region	Brand recognition (surveys, associations)	3 months	Design agency, project team

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<p>Attracting tourists through cultural routes</p>	<p>Developing 3 cross-border routes: "Ala franga" – traditions and innovations in everyday life during the Renaissance; "Old Houses Tell Stories"; "The Path of Crafts," "Gastronomic Journey," "Medieval Fortresses," etc.</p>	<p>Brochures, maps, mobile application, tour operators</p>	<p>Domestic and international tourists</p>	<p>Increased stay and variety of activities</p>	<p>Number of tourists on routes, length of stay</p>	<p>12 months</p>	<p>Tourist information centers, tour operators</p>
<p>Increasing digital engagement</p>	<p>Online campaign with storytelling videos and 360° virtual tours</p>	<p>YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, website</p>	<p>Young tourists, international markets</p>	<p>Viral content and broader digital presence</p>	<p>Views, shares, comments</p>	<p>6–12 months</p>	<p>Video team, marketing team</p>

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Increasing media presence	Organizing promo tours for bloggers and journalists	PR, social networks, blogs	Journalists, travel influencers	More positive publications and reviews	# publications, media coverage	1 year (annually)	PR team, NGOs, media
Strengthening regional cooperation	Conducting an annual cross-border festival	Events, partnerships, media	Local residents, regional and foreign tourists	A sustainable cultural event with tradition	Festival visitors, partners	Every year	Municipalities, cultural centers
Attracting external markets	Participation in international tourism exhibitions (Berlin, London, Belgrade)	Exhibitions, presentations, brochures	Tour operators, foreign tourists	Partnerships and greater recognition	New contracts, contacts, participation	Every year	Tourist boards, municipalities
Improving access to information	Development of the "Cultural Area BG-MK" mobile application	Google Play, App Store	Young and digital tourists	Easier planning and navigation	# downloads, active users	9 months	IT team, project team
Promoting gastronomy and crafts	Organizing tastings, workshops, fairs	Events, influencers, partners	Tourists interested in culture and culinary arts	Increased interest in local identity	Participants, media coverage	Annually	Craftsmen, restaurateurs, NGOs
Increasing local community engagement	Creating volunteer and educational programs	Schools, NGOs, local clubs	Local residents, schoolchildren, students	More inclusion and support for tourism	# participants, initiatives	Ongoing	Educational institutions, NGOs

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Strengthening sustainable tourism	"Green Tourism" campaign – eco-routes, zero waste	Social networks, events	Eco-tourists, families	Sustainable reputation of the region	# participants , eco-initiatives	1 year	Eco NGOs, municipalities
Market diversification	Developing package deals with SPA and wellness centers in Kyustendil and Dupnitsa	Hotels, tour operators, website	Tourists seeking health and relaxation	Increased length of stay and revenue	Number of packages, sold overnights	1–2 years	Hotels, tour operators

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