

TOURISM POTENTIAL OF POČITELJ AND POLICY CHALLENGES

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Abstract: The Old Town of Počitelj represents a unique urban and architectural ensemble of Herzegovina. Its ambient and cultural-historical value is authentic and holds significant tourism potential for Bosnia and Herzegovina. This paper analyzes the approach to authentic cultural heritage through the lens of political discourse, which has an undeniable impact on the valorization of Počitelj as a tourist destination. In this context, attention should be focused on preserving authenticity, protecting the environment, and improving the quality of life of the local population. Special emphasis is placed on the controversies surrounding the construction of the Hercegovina Bridge and the Počitelj–Zvirovići highway, which have raised questions about the balance between infrastructural development and the preservation of the cultural landscape. The research findings indicate persistent challenges in institutional governance, issues of maintenance and protection, and the need for a sustainable tourism model that integrates economic development with the preservation of cultural identity. Despite infrastructural changes, Počitelj has maintained its tourist appeal and continues to record an increase in visitors, confirming its importance as a key cultural and tourism resource of the municipality of Čapljina and the wider Herzegovina region. The paper concludes that the future development of Počitelj depends on an integrated approach to cultural policy, spatial management, and the active involvement of the local community in decision-making processes.

Keywords: Počitelj, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, infrastructural development, political discourse

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism represents a form of tourism activity in which visitors acquire knowledge, explore, and experience the tangible and intangible cultural attractions of a destination (UNWTO, 2017; Richards, 2018). It includes visits to monuments, museums, and galleries, engagement with local culture and customs (Razović, 2009), as well as elements that reflect the lifestyle of a particular community (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990). Cultural tourism can also be understood as a socio-cultural interaction in which various actors, ranging from planners, policymakers, and researchers to marketing professionals and travel agencies, play an important role in the promotion and organization of activities (Mousavi et al., 2016). Tangible heritage refers to monuments, buildings, sites, and museum objects and is defined as “material heritage,” while intangible cultural heritage encompasses traditions, oral narratives, performing arts, social practices, rituals, knowledge, and skills transmitted from generation to generation, elements that are not physically tangible but are essential to the identity and culture of a community (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009).

This form of tourism offers opportunities for the development of sustainable practices that contribute to heritage preservation, environmental protection, and the improvement of the quality of life of the local community (Bobanović, 2025). Although practice shows that this is difficult to achieve, a sustainable approach should reconcile the needs of the tourism sector with those of artistic and cultural heritage management (du Cros & McKercher, 2020).

Due to the significant contribution of historical and cultural heritage to tourism development (Ismagilova et al., 2015), cultural tourism has become an important economic activity (Lopes & Simões, 2020), and UNWTO forecasts that interest in this form of tourism will continue to grow (CBI, 2021). The importance of cultural tourism has been particularly recognized by the European Union, which highlights culture as an integral part of a unique tourism experience and as a means of strengthening European values (Neuts et al., 2023), as well as a key motivation for travel (Kurtović, 2007). It is estimated that cultural tourism accounts for approximately 40% of all tourism activities in Europe (European Commission, 2024), and that cultural tourists spend 38% more per day and stay 22% longer than other tourists (CBI, 2021).

Cultural tourism often remains in the background, as priority is frequently given to attractions oriented toward mass tourism (Molinar, 2006). Zhang et al. (2025) note that China’s Ningxia Hui region possesses rich cultural and historical heritage, yet its tourism potential remains underutilized due to economic underdevelopment and uneven spatial distribution. Similarly, Debes (2011) found that Northern Cyprus lacked a clearly defined strategy for planning cultural and heritage-based tourism products.

Comparable observations were made by Yu and Xu (2019), who emphasize that rich cultural heritage may remain unexploited if adequate interpretation and integration into tourism products are lacking. Moliterni et al. (2025) analyzed the role of cultural heritage in rural tourism development, highlighting that the Italian region of Basilicata possesses significant yet still underutilized tourism potential based on its cultural identity and culinary heritage.

A typical example of underutilized tourism potential is Počitelj, one of the most valuable historical and cultural ensembles in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although it represents an exceptionally well-preserved Ottoman ensemble and offers significant opportunities for the development of cultural tourism, Počitelj faces challenges related to insufficient investment, lack of systematic management, weak infrastructure, and underdeveloped tourism services. Key challenges include political influence, privatization of heritage properties, and the absence of institutional management. Therefore, the aim of this research is to highlight the inadequate approach to cultural heritage resulting from the lack of coherent management policies and strategic development, with an emphasis on preserving authenticity, protecting the environment, and improving the quality of life of the local population.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are several locations capable of meeting the demands of contemporary tourists; however, numerous problems persist, ranging from an unorganized tourism sector and insufficient financial support to limited care and investment by responsible institutions. This situation demonstrates that, in the absence of a clear tourism policy and strategy at all levels of governance, the country's rich cultural and historical heritage and other tourism assets remain underutilized and self-serving, rather than attracting and retaining visitors (Kurtović, 2007). Bosnia and Herzegovina has made certain efforts to integrate its rich cultural and natural heritage into tourism development; however, the framework for enhancing natural and cultural heritage within tourism remains at an early stage of development. The complex governance and institutional structure requires significantly greater human and financial resources compared to other economies in the region, while partnerships with stakeholders at the state level remain relatively weak (Pobrić & Osmanović, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a research approach based on a combination of qualitative research methods, field observations, and an analysis of available professional and scientific literature on Počitelj, its tourism development, and challenges related to spatial management. Through the systematization of relevant sources including scientific studies, planning and strategic documents, UNESCO reports, and publications on cultural-historical and natural heritage, key theoretical perspectives on tourism marginalization, spatial degradation, socio-political challenges, and the development potential of Počitelj were identified.

Field observations conducted during the summer of 2025 provided insight into the condition of cultural-historical buildings, tourism infrastructure, the quality of access roads, communal maintenance, and environmental pressures. A particularly important component of the research involved the collection of information from local residents, tourism service providers, vendors of local products, and visitors.

These interactions were conducted as informal, experience-based conversations rather than through a formally structured questionnaire, with a focus on perceptions of tourism development in Počitelj, feelings of neglect by decision-makers at both local and higher levels of governance, and the identification of key problems and development potentials. The combination of these methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of Počitelj as a space in which cultural-historical values intersect with challenges of institutional governance and sustainable tourism development.

STUDY AREA

Počitelj is located on the left bank of the Neretva River, approximately 3–5 km south of Čapljina and about 30 km south of Mostar, along the main transport corridor Sarajevo–Mostar–Metković. Its position on a natural terraced slope above the river creates a distinctive amphitheatrical landscape setting. The location of Počitelj is the result of its pronounced military and geostrategic function in the past. The fortress, as its principal landmark, protected the entrance to the lower Neretva Valley, primarily serving to control the Drijeva–Blagaj routes, which were crucial for medieval trade flows. This transport route constituted the basis of the fortress’s urban intensity, and the early urbanization of Počitelj was therefore strongly influenced by political dynamics at the broader regional level (Kurtović, 2014).

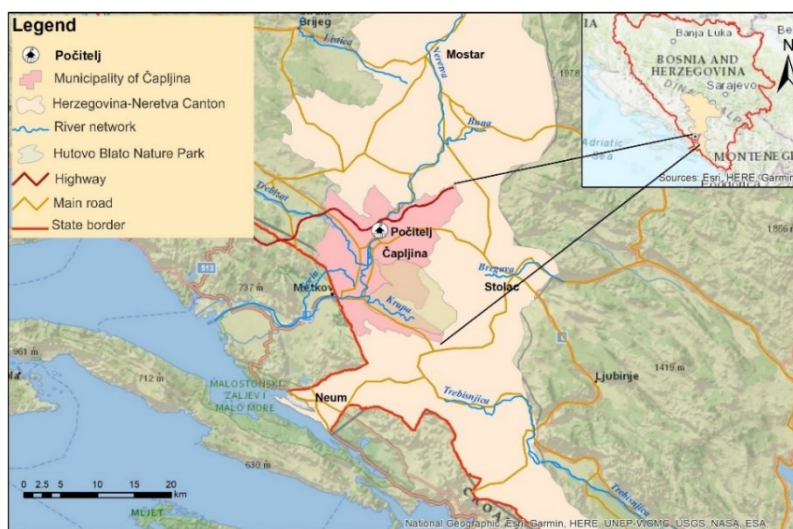


Fig. 1. Geographical position of Počitelj

Source: adapted by the authors

The first written reference to Počitelj dates back to 1444, in a charter issued by the Aragonese–Neapolitan King Alfonso V, in which it is mentioned as the property of the prominent Bosnian noble family Kosača. Počitelj later served as a military stronghold during the conflicts between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Following the Ottoman conquest in 1471, the fortress underwent extensive expansion, accompanied by the development of the lower settlement. The Ottoman period of Počitelj's development was marked by the formation of an Oriental urban core consisting of a *čaršija* (bazaar), residential *mahale*, and public buildings, including a mosque, madrasa, hammam, clock tower, and han (inn). During this period, Počitelj gradually acquired a distinctive Oriental–Mediterranean architectural identity, and in the 18th and 19th centuries it functioned as the seat of a *kadiluk* and a captaincy (Kurtović, 2014).

Počitelj represents a unique “open-air amphitheatre city” (Hadrović, 2023) characterized by an exceptionally authentic Ottoman urban structure. It is a small town in which public spaces, residential zones (*mahale* arranged along the slopes), and a fortification complex located at the highest point are clearly distinguished. This fortification constitutes a significant component of the cultural-historical urban landscape; however, despite its value, many structures are currently deteriorating due to long-term neglect.



Fig. 2. Urban structure of Počitelj

Source: <https://bljesak.info/magazin/religija/zapoceo-proces-rekonstrukcije-i-revitalizacije-medrese-u-pocitelju/483851> (accessed: 1 December 2025)

The geographical location, historical development, and urban genesis of Počitelj constitute the basis for understanding its spatial structure and ambient values. With the aim of identifying elements of the greatest cultural-historical, landscape, and tourism significance, as well as those particularly exposed to processes of degradation, an inventory of the key ambient and architectural–urban values of Počitelj was conducted.

Fortress

It has not been reliably established who built the first fortification at this site or when the earliest settlement emerged (Čelić, 1959). It is, however, known that the fortress of Počitelj (the Gavrankapetanović Tower) was constructed between the 15th and 18th centuries, with occasional interruptions (UNESCO, n.d.). During the conflicts between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, Počitelj represented a key strategic point in the lower course of the Neretva River (Kurtović, 2014). The oldest medieval part of the fortress forms its core, within which two construction phases can be clearly distinguished: an older inner fortification consisting of a donjon tower and a small outer ward dating from the late 14th century, and later extensions and reinforcements from the second half of the 15th century. It is assumed that a smaller settlement existed below the fortress during this or an even earlier period. By the late 17th century, the fortress was significantly expanded and strengthened, resulting in a more robust defensive system. At that time, ramparts were constructed enclosing a square tower, two bastions (Mehmed Pasha's and Delibaša's), the Dizdar's house, a granary, a mosque, and a cistern with an entrance area and stairway. During this period, the fortress also featured two large and two small gates (UNESCO, n.d.). Despite periods of neglect, insufficient care in recent decades, and natural deterioration, this unique ambient complex has been largely preserved to the present day (Kurtović, 2014). In recent years, media reports have warned of structural collapse due to neglect, while the partially restored Kulina and Paša Tabija have frequently been targets of vandalism (Hebib, 2020).

Šišman Ibrahim Pasha Mosque

The Šišman Ibrahim Pasha Mosque, also known as the Hadži Alija Mosque, is one of the most valuable examples of classical Ottoman single-space domed mosque architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to available sources, the original mosque was built by Hadži Alija in 1562–1563, while Ibrahim Pasha of Počitelj, known in local tradition as Šišman Ibrahim Pasha, erected a monumental mosque with a large dome on the foundations of the earlier structure in the mid-17th century (Mehmedović, 2017).

In its immediate vicinity were other public buildings, including mektebs, an imaret, a madrasa, a hammam, a han (inn), and a clock tower. During the most recent war, the mosque suffered extensive damage; however, subsequent restoration returned it to its original function (UNESCO, n.d.; Fejzić & Fejzić, 2023).

Šišman Ibrahim Pasha Madrasa

Although historical sources indicate that Ibrahim Pasha built the madrasa in 1665, featuring one large and five smaller lead-covered domes (Mehmedović, 2017), the travelogue of Evliya Çelebi suggests that the madrasa in Počitelj existed prior to 1664. Similar to the mosque, the madrasa was restored after sustaining damage from shelling during the war (UNESCO, n.d.). As part of the Šišman Ibrahim Pasha Madrasa has collapsed and the structure faces the risk of complete destruction, the Commission to Preserve National Monuments has repeatedly called upon the competent authorities to undertake the necessary protective measures (Commission to Preserve National Monuments, 2021).

Hammam

The hammam, an Islamic public bath, holds a dual value within cultural heritage. On the one hand, it represents a valuable historical structure characterized by complex architecture and distinct cultural phases; on the other, it constitutes an important element of socio-cultural heritage (Kolb & Dumreicher, 2008). Hammams were constructed to maintain hygiene for population groups who did not have bathing facilities in their homes, as well as for travelers and for rest and relaxation of wealthier citizens. To date, only three original hammams have been preserved in Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Gazi Husrev-beg Hammam in Sarajevo, the Čejvan-Čehajina Hammam in Mostar, and the Ibrahim Pasha Hammam in Počitelj (Mehmedović, 2017).

Evliya Çelebi's travelogue indicates that the Ibrahim Pasha Hammam in Počitelj was constructed prior to 1664, with the building works carried out by craftsmen sent from Istanbul (UNESCO, n.d.). The structure was built using local limestone and tufa, and the methods of processing and application of these materials testify to the exceptional skill of the builders in working with them (Mujezinović, 2012).

Šišman Ibrahim Pasha Han

Hans were facilities located within urban areas, constructed to facilitate trade, ensure the safety of travelers, and provide accommodation (Cesaris et al., 2014; Ateş & Oğuz, 2025). The han in Počitelj was built around 1665 as a single-storey structure organized around a central courtyard intended for the accommodation of horses. Only fragments of the original structure have been preserved. During the 1970s, the building was restored and repurposed for catering and hospitality uses (UNESCO, n.d.).

Clock tower

Clock towers are tall stone structures topped with pyramidal roofs, resembling Romanesque church towers in form, though lacking their characteristic details (Kreševljaković, 1957). The Počitelj Clock Tower, erected in the second half of the 17th century, represents one of the three dominant vertical landmarks of the town and serves as an example of the preservation of Romanesque architectural elements during the Ottoman period (Čelić, 1959). It is a typical example of a Herzegovinian clock tower, shaped under the influence of Mediterranean–Dalmatian architecture (UNESCO, n.d.). The clock tower remained in operation until 1917, when the bell believed to have been brought from Crete following its conquest by the Ottomans was removed (Kreševljaković, 1957).

Residential architecture

The residential architecture of Počitelj does not conform to any standard typology found elsewhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although based on Ottoman-Islamic architectural principles, the houses were constructed on morphologically and geologically demanding terrain (Aličić, 2013). The buildings combine Mediterranean elements, such as gabled roofs, massive stone walls, and small windows with Oriental features, including hipped roofs, doksats (oriel windows), hajat spaces, and divanhana. Constructed primarily of stone, the houses are characterized by round chimneys and roofs clad with irregular stone slabs, while wealthier residences contained multiple bathing spaces (UNESCO, n.d.). The 1992–1995 war caused catastrophic damage, during which many significant structures were destroyed and the remaining houses suffered severe deterioration (Aličić, 2013). Due to its exceptional historical and cultural value, Počitelj was included in 1996 on the list of the 100 most endangered cultural heritage sites worldwide by the World Monuments Watch (Lučić, 2021).

Gavrankapetanović house

The Gavrankapetanović residential complex, constructed during the 16th and 17th centuries, represents the most significant example of residential architecture in Počitelj. The complex consists of two smaller and one larger building, organized according to the traditional division into selamluk (male/public quarters) and haremluk (female/private quarters). Particularly distinctive are the arched windows on the western façade (UNESCO, n.d.). By the mid-20th century, the complex had fallen into neglect and was in poor condition. Adaptation began in 1961 and was completed in 1975, when the complex was repurposed as the Počitelj Art Colony, an important institution of the Association of Fine Artists of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Federal Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2010). During the war, the complex suffered severe damage, particularly to the haremluk and the wooden structural elements and cladding. Restoration within the framework of the Programme for the Permanent Protection of Počitelj enabled the complex to regain its function as an artists' colony (UNESCO, n.d.). The Gavrankapetanović House forms an integral part of the protected ensemble of Počitelj's historic core, which was proclaimed a National Monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Commission to Preserve National Monuments in 2003 (Hadrović, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite the distinctive importance of Počitelj as an authentic urban ensemble in Herzegovina, the town was for a long period left to informal care by its residents, without an official managing authority or an adequate system of maintenance. Major problems included improper waste disposal in public spaces, neglected walls of cultural-historical structures, inadequate public lighting, and the absence of appropriate tourist signage³. Local residents, most notably Jadranka Dizdar, representing the Počitelj Tourism Association, and the academic painter Safet Zec, have for years warned the competent institutions about the urgent need to protect cultural heritage and improve the town's tourism image. Their long-term advocacy was primarily focused on preventing the deterioration of Počitelj's tourism integrity, particularly in the context of the planned construction of a bridge on the Corridor Vc.

³ <https://www.hercegovina.info/hercegovina/pocitelj-urbana-hercegovacka-carsija-sve-vise-propada/181628/> (accessed: 01 October 2025)

The construction of the bridge and the Počitelj–Zvirovići motorway subsection, later renamed the Hercegovina Bridge and Tunnel⁴, which were opened to traffic in 2024, resulted from strategic decisions made by JP Autoceste of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Federal Ministry of Transport and Communications. Through decisions regarding the project's name and route alignment, the authorities sought to emphasize the importance of large-scale infrastructure projects for the wider Herzegovina region, with strong support from the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and international financial institutions, including the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the European Union. During the construction phase, the local population of Počitelj expressed concerns that the new route bypassed the historic town, potentially leading to reduced tourist inflows and lower sales of local products. These concerns reflected fears of traffic-related marginalization, shaped by earlier experiences following the construction of the Stolac–Neum road.

The decision on the motorway alignment generated profound local and cultural controversies. As early as 2008, nearly 1,000 residents of Počitelj, led by the renowned artist Safet Zec, advocated relocating the bridge further north of the town in order to protect the ambient and visual values of the historic core, which has been designated a National Monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁵. While this civic initiative resulted in partial modifications to the project design, it simultaneously led to the cancellation of the planned motorway rest area near Počitelj, thereby reducing its visibility and accessibility as a stopover destination.

⁴ <https://hms.ba/hms-doznaje-most-i-tunel-pocitelj-preimenovani-u-most-i-tunel-hercegovina-uskoro-nastavak-gradnje-autoceste-od-juga-ka-sjeveru-mostara/> (accessed: 30 September 2025)

⁵ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/1352919.html> (accessed: 30 September 2025)



Fig. 3. Hercegovina bridge near Počitelj

Source: <https://storage.radiosarajevo.ba/image/811529/1180x732/most-hercegovina-most-kod-pocitelja-pocitelj-most-autocesta-koridor-5c-16.jpg> (accessed: 4 December 2025)

Institutional decisions regarding the routing of the motorway in the vicinity of Počitelj clearly reflect an insufficient level of state responsibility and commitment in the implementation of strategic development projects. A lack of understanding of the interests of the local population of Počitelj is evident, as well as the absence of measures aimed at creating preconditions for tourism development and the improvement of everyday living conditions. Despite official narratives emphasizing the importance of the motorway for integrating Herzegovina into European transport corridors, the local community stresses that the construction of the bridge and its opening to traffic have led to a decline in visitor numbers and have threatened the livelihoods of residents engaged in tourism, hospitality services, and the sale of local products.

However, research conducted in 2025 indicates that Počitelj continues to attract visitors⁶, including tourists from Turkey, Poland, and Italy. A significant ongoing challenge remains the retention of visitors and the extension of their length of stay, which requires additional investment in tourism infrastructure, promotion, and the rehabilitation of historical buildings.

⁶ <https://www.hercegovina.info/vijesti/bih/most-hercegovina-nije-zaustavio-turiste-pocitelj-i-dalje-atraktan-za-posjetitelje/243105/> (accessed: 01 October 2025)

Tourists particularly organized tour groups often remain in Počitelj for only a few minutes, frequently without entering hospitality or craft establishments. As a result, the local economy, largely based on small-scale retail, the sale of local products, and service activities, records declining revenues. In the absence of an active tourism offer and strategically planned infrastructure designed to prolong visitor stays, continued neglect places the local community at risk of Počitelj becoming an unsustainable tourism destination.



Fig. 4. The neglected state of the Gavrankapetanović fortress

Source: <https://friendsofpocitelj.org/saving-pocitelj-urgent-challenges/> (accessed: 4 December 2025)

In addition to the challenges related to infrastructural changes, inadequate management of cultural heritage represents a significant issue. The deterioration of cultural-historical structures such as the Gavrankapetanović Tower, whose roof, walls, and internal structure are in a neglected condition and pose a risk to both local residents and visitors reflects the absence of institutional engagement in planned conservation measures. The restoration of the fortress, which was partially initiated in the early 2010s, was discontinued shortly after 2014 due to a lack of funding. Moreover, the value of some restored elements has been compromised by acts of vandalism, indicating deficiencies in supervision, maintenance, and overall heritage management.

Additional challenges related to spatial management, protection, and use arise from problematic privatization processes. According to statements by local residents, in early 2009 a private investor acquired a significant number of buildings and land parcels within the historic core of Počitelj at low prices, including areas of public importance such as the space surrounding the water reservoir. This privatization of

space resulted in the physical restriction of access for tourist buses through the installation of barriers, thereby creating infrastructural constraints for organized visitor groups and negatively affecting accessibility and visitor circulation within the site.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, recent years have witnessed positive examples in the field of cultural heritage restoration, indicating the presence of tangible potential for the revitalization of Počitelj. In early 2024, the reconstruction of the Šišman Ibrahim Pasha Madrasah was initiated following the return of waqf property, previously alienated through privatization processes, to the Islamic Community. The involvement of local residents and the religious community in restoration activities demonstrates that the local community is willing to assume a more active role in heritage preservation when adequate institutional support is provided.



Fig. 5. The process of reconstruction and revitalization of the Madrasah in Počitelj
Source: <https://bljesak.info/magazin/religija/zapoceo-proces-rekonstrukcije-i-revitalizacije-medrese-u-pocitelju/483851> (accessed: 4 December 2025)

CONCLUSION

Počitelj represents a spatially and typologically unique ambient ensemble, whose authenticity is reflected in the clear differentiation of public and residential zones and in the architectural synthesis of medieval, Oriental, and Mediterranean influences. Despite its status as a National Monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its inclusion on the UNESCO Tentative List, and its rich cultural-historical heritage and exceptional tourism potential, Počitelj faces a series of challenges that threaten its position on the regional tourism map. Spatial and developmental processes in Počitelj are characterized by challenges related to large-scale infrastructure projects, the lack of systematic heritage management, economic dependence on tourism, and pressures arising from privatization.

Although Počitelj continues to attract a significant number of visitors, the key challenge remains the extension of visitor stays, along with the improvement of tourism services and supporting infrastructure. The restoration of degraded structures and the establishment of a clear cultural heritage management model, one that integrates the local community, public institutions, and the private sector, require a well-defined strategic framework. Only through the combination of these approaches can the sustainable revitalization and long-term protection of this unique cultural-historical site be ensured.

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