

A possible strategy for the economic restructuring of a rural region based on wine tourism: Case study of Blue Mountains, Moravia

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Abstract

The article deals with the restructuring of a region focused on intensive agriculture at a time when agriculture ceases to be a source of wealth. It explores the possibilities of using tourism in an area with a high proportion of arable land without either significant historical heritage nor natural attractions. The study method is a complex geographical analysis that determines the conditions under which the transformation of the microregion takes place. This analysis results in an overview of the microregion's most significant strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The applied solution is the use of a specific brand, using the significant presence of wine culture. The use of this brand for marketing is presented. The increase in competition ability is based on the introduction of the idea to promote the area under the brand Blue Mountains and the use of other ideas that significantly differentiate the studied region from its neighbours. The key prerequisites are the cooperation of the actors. The main contribution of the article lies in the study of local experiences with tourism promotion and place marketing as one of the possibilities for transformation into a post-productive economy.

Keywords: agricultural region, economic restructuring, wine tourism, brand marketing, Moravia

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Introduction

In connection with the transition to a post-productive economy, labour productivity is increasing in the manufacturing sectors that were crucial for rural employment in Czechia. Workers are moving into services, both within manufacturing sectors and into the service sector in general. One of the proposed options is the development of tourism. As the most economically affected rural areas are peripheral microregions, this is a seemingly appropriate strategy as these regions tend to have a less disturbed natural environment. However, what about rural microregions in fertile areas, which are characterised by a high degree of ploughing, and their landscape is highly transformed and unattractive?

A certain advantage of these microregions is the better transport accessibility of regional centres compared to peripheral mountain microregions, so their inhabitants can conveniently commute to work. However, it is probably not possible to build the economy of entire microregions on commuting alone. The combination of commuting with own activities of villages in at least some settlements is desirable. Therefore, it is necessary to look for local or regional aspects that can create a competitive advantage. In the sphere of tourism, it is then necessary to look for such an advantage in the cultural forms of tourism.

There has been strong discourse aimed at transforming rural places from venues of production into truly diverse socioeconomic landscapes (ALMSTED, Å. *et al.* 2014). In areas with intensive agricultural production,

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some authors speak about hyper-production (BROUDER, P. *et al.* 2015), which means introducing additional economic activities and branches, among other factors. Rural areas and rural landscapes are increasingly becoming areas of consumption. One of the most frequent areas of rural consumption is rural tourism (EUSÉBIO, C. *et al.* 2017). However, MACKAY, M. and PERKINS, H.S. (2019) point out that these areas are also the residence of their inhabitants.

In general, economic transformation in the countryside means a transfer of workers to services. However, services generally tend to be concentrated in cities or resort villages. In rural areas, tourism services or social services in particular come into consideration in rural areas. Examples of post-socialist countries with developed tourism services is, for example, Slovenia (GAJIĆ, T. *et al.* 2018), and Hungary (KÓRÓDI, M. and DÁVID, L.D. 2019). The question is, of course, whether tourism services can compensate, either quantitatively or qualitatively, for job losses in agriculture and industry.

European rural peripheries see the development of tourism as a potential for stabilising and revitalising settlements (REICHERT-SCHICK, A. 2016). On the other hand, in the fertile flat rural areas, which have a high portion of arable land, relatively few forests and pastures and unattractive terrain, the focus remains on cultural tourism. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation defines cultural tourism as a movement of people essentially for cultural motivations, such as study tours, performing arts and cultural tours, travel for festivals and other events, visit to sites and monuments, travel to study nature, folklore or art and pilgrimages. MCKERCHER, B. (2020) identifies four segments of cultural tourism: the purposeful cultural tourist, the sightseeing cultural tourist, the serendipitous cultural tourist, the casual cultural tourist and the incidental cultural tourist. Major research trends include the shift from tangible to intangible heritage, more attention on indigenous and other minority groups and a geographical

expansion in the coverage of cultural tourism research (RICHARDS, G. 2018). In our case, we will consider cultural tourism as those forms that significantly include cognitive function (ŠŤASTNÁ, M. *et al.* 2020). This is the interaction between the destination and the traveller depending on whether the tourist is interested and has the potential to explore the destination. It can concern learning about history, architecture and art, nature, the way of life for the locals, customs and gastronomy.

Individual rural microregions can compete in tourism on various factors. This can be price, quality of services, various accompanying attractions, information and marketing, infrastructure, accessibility etc. (DEMIROVIĆ, D. *et al.* 2017). In reality, however, these options are limited, because internal micro-regional resources are usually limited. An important competitive factor is also the institutional support of municipalities (ROMAN, M. *et al.* 2020). Under these circumstances, the character of one's own place remains as one of the possible effective and real resources. However, this needs to be asserted in competition with other places. A possible form is place marketing through a brand.

Area with intensive agriculture looking for an economic restructuring is represented by South Moravia in our study, namely the microregions located in the Dolnomoravská and Dyjskrosvratecká lowlands. It is a non-central part of the Hodonín, Břeclav and Znojmo districts (LAU 1). The comparative advantage of this area is viticulture. However, this advantage applies to the entire region. The question is what specialty to offer visitors to encourage them to visit certain municipalities or a group of municipalities. In our case, another element of competitiveness comes into play – a unifying destination marketing (HANNA, S. *et al.* 2020), idea that allows, on the one hand, cooperation and the interconnection of service providers and residents, and on the other hand, the promotion of a place under one heading and identity (DASZKIEWICZ, M. and WOŁOSECKA, A. 2019).

The paper tests such a possibility using the example of five municipalities in the district

of Břeclav, which created a voluntary association called Blue Mountains and devised a proposal to create a recessionary republic in their territory focusing on viticulture and wine tourism.

Theoretical background

Although rural transformation was overshadowed by urban changes, its progress was rapid and radical in the second half of the 20th century (SCHMIED, D. 2005). Although structural changes affect both cities and rural areas, rural areas have certain specificities in this process – environmental, social and cultural (CLOKE, P. 2006). The change from a productive to a post-productive countryside specifically means, among other things, the partial replacement (in terms of labour and wealth creation) of productive sectors (in the case of rural areas, especially agriculture) by consumption sectors, which in rural areas can be represented, among other things, by tourism.

The commodification of the countryside through tourism takes a range of forms from purely passive to those that are associated with the activities of tourists (WOODS, M. 2011). Tourism is an increasingly important component of rural development, which can act as an economic engine. However, MARCOUILLE, D. (2013) warns that this sector increases social differentiation, as it produces low-paid and low-skilled employment opportunities and, on the other hand, increasing profits for entrepreneurs who are often not even resident in the region. The issue of target groups is also important. SZÖRÉNYINÉ KUKORELLI, I. (2011) documents using the example of Hungary that although entrepreneurs would like to expect foreign tourists, rural tourism still depends more or less on domestic visitors. Food and wine tourism is one of the progressive forms of rural tourism. Recently, the offer has expanded towards experiences such as wine trails, folkloric events, direct sales and consumption, and the like (HALL, D. 2005). However, the development of wine tourism can also be associated with

certain risks, such as overcrowding, land speculation, and loss of local identity (COSTA DA SILVA, M.A. *et al.* 2024).

However, it should be noted that the countryside is not a homogeneous space. For example, MURDOCH, J. *et al.* (2003) identify four types of countryside in Great Britain, each with different characteristics and requiring a different approach. Similarly, in Moravia, different rural areas can be identified (STONAWSKÁ, K. and VAISHAR, A. 2018), such as suburbanized rural areas, intermediate rural areas (usually intensively used for agriculture), and peripheral rural areas (which can be divided into inner and border peripheral areas).

In Czechia, the share of employees in primary sectors in municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants have fallen below 7 percent. In some rural regions, declining job opportunities in manufacturing sectors may be associated with depopulation and/or aging trends (e.g. LABIANCA, M. and NAVARRO VALVERDE, F. 2019). Alternatively, there may be a departure of young and educated people from the countryside and, thus, a deterioration of its social structure compared to cities (VAISHAR, A. and PAVLŮ, A. 2018). In Moravia, this development mainly concerns the most peripheral rural areas (VAISHAR, A. *et al.* 2020).

The European Union is spending considerable resources on slowing down the downward trend in jobs in agriculture (GARRONE, M. *et al.* 2019). These efforts are, however, directed against natural economic and social development. The rapid reduction in the number of jobs in the manufacturing sectors is inevitable and requires the restructuring of the countryside. HRUŠKA, V. and PÍŠA, J. (2019) identified six models of rural restructuring in post-socialist Czechia: globally integrated, service-oriented, entrepreneurial, industrialised, post-productivist and de-industrialised, including post-mining and energy-producing rural localities.

Vine growing, wine production and related tourism belong to possibilities of the rural tourism development. The scientific litera-

ture concerning this topic has been collected by GÓMEZ, M. *et al.* (2019). However, even in these cases, according to BRUWER, J. and RUEGER-MUCK, E. (2018), the scenic charm is crucial for the attractiveness of the site. Wine tourism can be considered as part of gastronomic tourism. However, it is often associated with folklore elements, whether living or artificial. It often includes wine trails via walking or cycling (PROKEŠ, M. 2019). In Czechia, wine tourism is considered an important factor in rural development, especially in southern Moravia (ŠÍP, J. *et al.* 2018).

However, wine tourism is usually covered by relatively large rural regions; therefore, it is necessary to find a factor that would increase the competitiveness of the site. Place marketing is the tool (SCORRANO, P. *et al.* 2019). Destination brand development has been described by ALMEYDA-IBÁÑEZ, M. and GEORGE, B.P. (2017). Recently, more and more participatory approaches have been promoted in this direction (SAN EUGENIO-VELA, J. *et al.* 2020). Some authors speak about community-based tourism (DURKIN, J. *et al.* 2017), which includes the incorporation of different local stakeholders.

The geography of branding is approached by PIKE, A. (2009). He presents three basic components of this aspect: geographical origin and socio-spatial history, spatial circulation of values and meanings in uneven development, and territorial-relational spaces and places. Some politicians even consider place branding to be a key part of regional development strategies. On the other hand, MEDARIČ, Z. *et al.* (2021) found, using the example of Lake Balaton, that brand marketing is the worst rated factor in this destination. Geography uses the concept of place to study it (ANDERSSON, I. 2014). MICHAELIS AHARON, K. and ALFASI, N. (2022) proposed a case study methodology to analyse a brand in a hierarchical structure.

Branding in geography is linked to the theory of sense of place. According to ASHWORTH, G.J. and GRAHAM, B. (2017), sense of place is inextricably linked to time and heritage. JEPSON, D. and SHARPLEY, R. (2018) studied

the relationship between sense of place and deeper emotional experience of tourists in the Lake District in rural England. They concluded, among other things, that being in the landscape, preferably through physical activities, is fundamental to the emotional connection. However, according to LIU, S. and CHEUNG, L.T.O. (2016), the sense of place also influences the interest of local small and medium-sized entrepreneurs to engage in tourism. The place-based approach contributes to increasing the resilience of small rural communities (SALVIA, R. and QUARANTA, G. 2017) through three interrelated aspects: the restoration of previously disrupted social relations, the cascading effect of initial activity, and the adoption of a systemic approach that connects sectors. WALKER, K. and MOSCARDO, G. (2018) move the issue from the level of sense of place to the level of care for the place with the aim of preserving values.

The essence of the place-based approach lies in overcoming the sectoral approach in favour of a holistic understanding of place (VASTA, A. *et al.* 2019). From this perspective, it is a highly geographical issue. According to KASTENHOLZ, E. *et al.* (2020), place attachment is very important in rural tourist destinations with a loyal customer base. JARRATT, D. *et al.* (2018) point out that current branding processes may miss the target groups of rural tourists and therefore introduce the concept of a sense of place. In the competition between destinations, the uniqueness of a place and its use play a significant role (ROMÃO, J. 2018).

The local development strategy in the European Union is implemented primarily in the LEADER program, and more recently through community-led local development. Its basic idea is a bottom-up approach. The organizational units are local action groups (LAGs), the creation of which is subject to relatively strict rules. The most important of which, from our perspective, is the participation of the public, private and non-governmental sectors and the prohibition of the majorisation of one of them. The creation of local strategies and their evaluation is also important.

One of the objectives of this activity is to strengthen the sense of belonging to the micro-region, its natural, agricultural, historical and cultural traditions (MENCONI, M.E. *et al.* 2018). This can of course work provided that the LAGs are created in accordance with these traditions. However, in many cases the view is promoted that the LEADER programme serves mainly as an additional subsidy source and belonging is not preferred. One of the obstacles is the excessive institutionalization by which individual states or regional activities try to control the activities of LAGs (CHMIEŁIŃSKI, P. *et al.* 2018; TIRADO BALLESTEROS, J.G. and HERNÁNDEZ, M.H. 2018). A covert top-down approach is still being pursued (KONEČNÝ, O. *et al.* 2020).

Local action groups also have a role to play in the development of local tourism. TRINAJSTIĆ, M. *et al.* (2023) state that their contribution lies not so much in direct investment in tourism, as the conditions set would limit the future flexibility of entrepreneurs, but rather in building infrastructure and various supporting activities. The possibilities of using community-led local development in the development of gastronomic tourism were pointed out, for example, by MURMURA, F. *et al.* (2024). However, in some countries, especially in Southern and South-eastern Europe, great emphasis is still placed rather on the development of agriculture (KONEČNÝ, O. 2019).

Tourism depends on the reputation of destinations (DARWISH, A. and BURNS, P. 2019), which minimizes possible traveller's disappointment. A destination brand helps with this, the purpose of which is to simply distinguish the respective destination from its competitors. A destination brand usually includes a name, symbol, logo or other graphic eventually a story that emphasizes the uniqueness of the area for tourism and differentiates it from competitors (KELLER, K.L. 2002). Destination marketing combines a geographical unit (region) and a tourism product. According to the author, brand equity is studied from the perspective of three approaches: customer psychology, economics, and a biological-sociological approach.

TASCI, A.D.A. (2021) distinguishes between financial and non-financial brand equity as well as brand value from the perspective of the customer, provider, employee and resident. GULISOVA, B. (2021) points out that states, large cities and important tourist destinations apply branding similarly to companies, that is, with a centralized approach. Rural areas, which often do not form a strong administrative unit, are looking for differentiated paths. MURRAY, A. and KLINE, C. (2015) identified three main factors of brand loyalty using the example of analogue rural beer tourism in North Carolina: connection to the community, quality product and satisfaction.

In modern times, e-branding is becoming increasingly popular (KAVOURA, A. and BITSANI, E. 2013). Its advantage lies in the ease of use, the intimacy of search, interactivity, access to comments of previous visitors. Potential visitors can view the destination through aerial or street views. Visitors' familiarity with the use of IT technologies is a prerequisite. The analysis by BONAROU, C. *et al.* (2019) focused on the analysis of the place marketing of wine tourism through the Internet. SCORRANO, P. *et al.* (2019) believe that the level of convergence between online brand identity and online brand image is of increasing importance for the adoption of an effective territory promotion strategy. Online applications (DIMITROVSKI, D. *et al.* 2019) are increasingly being used for branding purposes.

The question of brand marketing in wine tourism was raised by GÓMEZ, M. *et al.* (2015), who stated that the study of this problem was in its infancy. The role of wine tourism in shaping brand image and brand loyalty was later studied by JOY, A. *et al.* (2021) based on TripAdvisor data. They emphasized the importance of social interactions. MADEIRA, A. *et al.* (2019) state three dimensions of such interaction: guest, host and place. In some cases, the brand in wine tourism is represented by the certification of protected brands (MOLLEVÍ, G. *et al.* 2020). Telling oral stories from the cellar door is an important strategy to strengthen heritage and differentiate a winery from its competitors.

(FROST, W. *et al.* 2020). FOUNTAIN, J. *et al.* (2020) point out certain problems in this regard. This is a contradiction between local culture (preserving authenticity) and the global demands of tourists (increasing professionalism).

The following theoretical assumptions result from the above:

- The structural transformation of rural regions towards a shift from production to consumption is part of the general transformation of society and is inevitable.
- One of the possibilities for consuming the countryside and its landscape is the development of tourism, which uses not only general but also local attractions and peculiarities.
- This activity is connected with the sense of place and destination marketing, eventually using an appropriate brand.
- In this sense, the participation of local citizens, building a sense of place and institutional support of municipalities are extremely important.
- The commercialization of tourism by external entities must be mostly avoided,

because the departure of benefits from the place and, conversely, burdening the place with negative accompanying phenomena of tourism threats.

Methodology and area under study

From a methodological point of view, this work is based on a case study. It includes a comprehensive geographical analysis of the selected territory with a special regard to tourism. This analysis was prepared on the basis of public statistical data, the study of secondary sources and repeated field research made in the summer season of 2022. At that time, the impact of COVID-19 anti-pandemic measures on tourism was also relevant. The knowledge gained made it possible to emphasize the urgency of the solved problem and to name the strengths and weaknesses of the studied region, opportunities and threats to its further development and to discuss possible strategy as parts of the SWOT analysis.

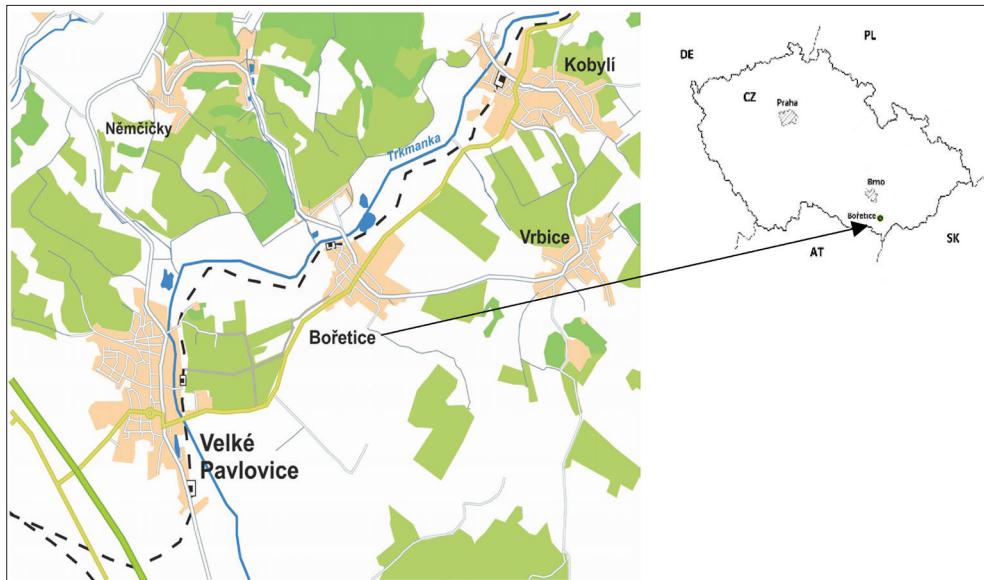


Fig. 1. Map of the study area. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

This basic geographical analysis of the studied area is followed by a description of the marketing approach of the association of municipalities of the selected territory, specifically the Blue Mountains microregion and within it the Free Federal Republic of Kráví Hora. Local experience was used in this process. Furthermore, the importance of the implemented marketing approach for the development of the microregion was discussed. This assessment can only be indirect, as there is no comparison of how tourism in the region would develop without this brand.

The area under study is located in the Velké Pavlovice wine region. It consists of five municipalities (Figure 1). All villages have a positive migration balance and a negative natural balance (Table 1) which indicates a relatively high average age of the population. The total population growth over the last five years was 2.2 percent. Together 200 new dwellings have been built in the last five years, i.e. 24 dwellings per thousand inhabitants. Further growth can be expected in connection with the immigration of Ukrainians, which statistics have apparently not yet captured.

The ratio of children to seniors is 0.75. The educational structure of the population over 15 is dominated by apprenticeships (39.3%), followed by graduates (25.2%) and people with basic education (23.2%). This corresponds more to a moderately skilled industry. In total, 30 percent of the economically

active population, commute to work. The studied municipalities therefore provide a significant majority of job opportunities for their inhabitants in the area.

According to the 2021 census, the area employed a highly above-average 9.8 percent of the population in the primary sector (the national average for rural municipalities was 6.5%). The share of employees in industry and construction was 39.3 percent (the national average for rural municipalities is 37.4%). 15.7 percent of economically active persons were employed in business and transport activities, 11.8 percent of people were employed in education and healthcare. Catering and accommodation services, which can be related to tourism, employed 4.6 percent of economically active persons (nationally 2.8% in rural municipalities). The share of workers in manufacturing has slightly increased since the 2011 census, contradicting the transition to a post-productive economy. Unemployment has fluctuated between 2.5 and 4 percent in the last years with a seasonal increase in winter (Figure 2).

The area geomorphologically belongs mainly to the Ždánický Les highland. The terrain rises towards the east. The lower parts of the area are used for agriculture due to fertile soils, viticulture and arboriculture of thermophilic species, such as apricots, peaches, hawthorns and almonds. There are also forest-steppe and steppe communities. The climate is relatively

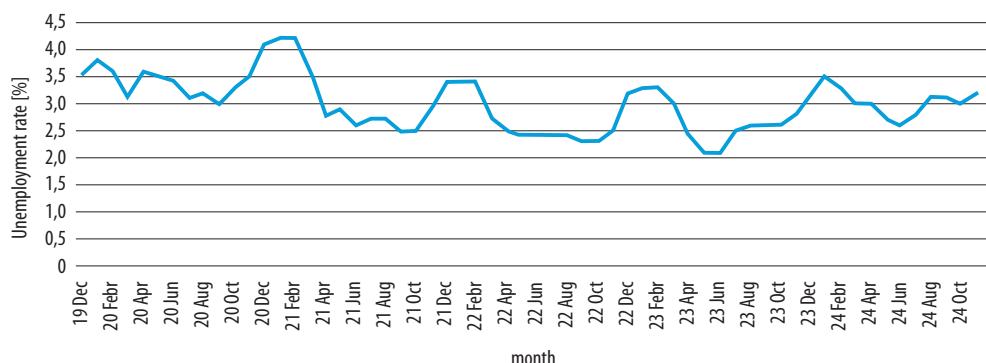


Fig. 2. Unemployment rate in the area under study during the period December 2019 – April 2023. Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic. Authors' own elaboration.

Table 1. Population of the area

Municipality	Population, 2023	Population balance, 2019–2023		
		Natural	Migration	Total
Bořetice	1,379	-2	+115	+113
Kobylí	2,001	-35	+1	-34
Němcíčky	792	-13	+117	+114
Velké Pavlovice	3,072	-38	+40	+2
Vrbice	1,087	-26	+24	-2
<i>Total</i>	8,331	-114	+297	+183

Source: Czech Statistical Office Prague and authors' own calculations.

warm and dry. The axis of the area is formed by the small river Trkmanka.

The total area is 7,055 ha, which represents a population density of 114 people per km². The macrostructure of land use is shown in *Figure 3*. More than half of the territory is occupied by arable land. The second most common land use is vineyards, followed by gardens and orchards. Forests and permanent grasslands occupy negligible areas in the highest positions, while water areas are minimal. The studied area, thus, represents an unattractive landscape with a minimum of forests, meadows and water areas.

The area is accessible by the road number 421, which connects to the D2 highway Brno–Bratislava. The second transport axis is the local railway line. The village of Bořetice,

located roughly in the middle of the studied area (*Photo 1*), can be reached from the district town of Břeclav by car in 23 minutes, by public transport in 34 minutes and by bike in 106 minutes. It can be reached from the regional centre of Brno in 40 minutes by car, 43 minutes by public transport and in 200 minutes by bike. From Bratislava, the area can be reached in 63 minutes and from Vienna in 86 minutes by car. Within the integrated transport system of the South Moravian region, the entire area is connected by the bus line 551 and the train line S52. The frequency is 31 pairs of connections on working days and 12 pairs of connections on free days. In the vicinity, there are other small towns: Velké Bílovice (12 minutes by car), Podivín (14 minutes) and Hustopeče (15 mi-

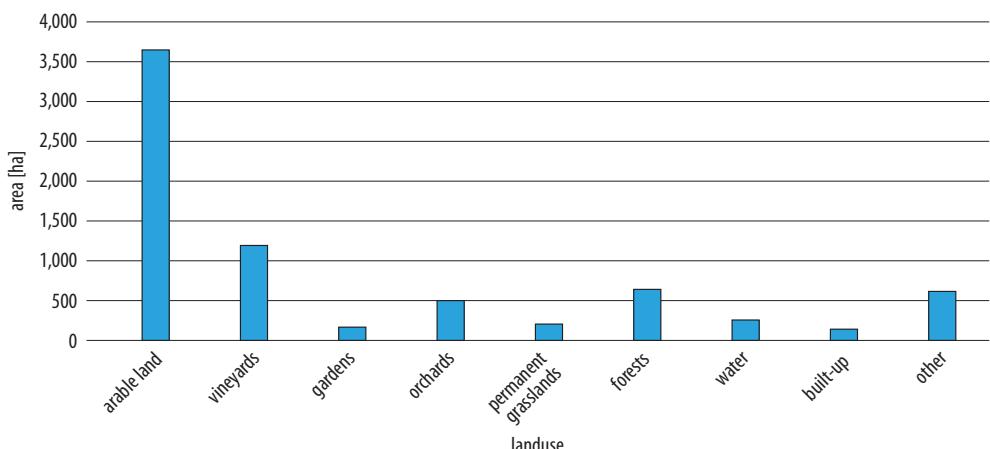


Fig. 3. Land use of the study area, 2024. Source: Czech Statistical Office, Prague. Authors' own elaboration.



Photo 1. Hotel Blue Mountains in Bořetice in a rustic style. The flag in the left side is the flag of the Free Federal Republic of Cow hill.

nutes). The last one ensures some administrative functions for the area and has a grammar school and a hospital.

The most important manufacturing companies are Scott Automation Bořetice (custom industrial automation projects), LOMAX Bořetice, (manufacture of metal doors and windows with 80 branches in Czechia and abroad), and PATRIA Kobylí (plastic constructions, building materials). Agriculture is represented by the agricultural cooperatives Velké Pavlovice (plant and animal production), Němčičky (viticulture), and Bořetice (plant production, fattening of broilers). Food processing includes Czech Wineries Velké Pavlovice, and Velké Pavlovice Poultry Plants. There are also about 60 registered wine growers in the area. It can be stated that the microregion is home to companies that process mostly local products but strive for value-added production.

The data show that the studied microregion manages the restructuring of manufacturing industries with problems. Its companies strive for primary production and for the processing of local resources. Individual municipalities have a sufficient population to maintain basic services.

Tourism development

The municipalities have decided to use key ideas to support microregional marketing.

In 2008, the municipalities founded a voluntary association called Blue Mountains. The name symbolises the fact that wine production is based mainly on 'blue' varieties (Blaufränkisch, Saint Laurent and Blauer Portugieser). This is an example of terroir tourism (MARLOWE, B. and LEE, S. 2018), i.e. a travel destination based on natural conditions for growing grapes in combination with tradition and the art of winemakers.

Although the association's goals are defined as general microregional development, its promotion is strongly focused on the development of tourism. As the microregion does not have significant monuments of historical heritage (perhaps only the baroque church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the Theresian contribution granary in Velké Pavlovice), it based its promotion on viticulture, gastronomy, folklore and on attractions of various types, which have been created at present. These include lookout towers, a sports complex in Němčičky, an ethnographic museum in Kobylí, a salt cave, the Trkmanka eco-centre, the Zahájka biocentre, the Vrbice Peace Cairn and more. *Table 2* summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the microregion in terms of tourism development. Based on the knowledge obtained, we came to the idea of a SO strategy, which consists in using strengths and opportunities to eliminate weaknesses and threats.

Wine culture in South Moravia is often linked to still partially alive folklore.

Table 2. Strengths and weaknesses of the microregion in terms of tourism development

Strengths	Weaknesses
Developed viticulture	Low natural attractiveness of the landscape
Satisfactory availability and infrastructure	Absence of significant architectural monuments
Cooperation	
Occasions	Threats
Rising demand for adventure tourism	Competition from similar microregions
European, national and regional grants	External influences (political, epidemics)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Intangible heritage is realised through events (costumed feasts, vintage, open-cellar days, wine and spirit tastings, harvest festivals). The microregion is part of the ethnographic region Hanakian Slovakia, which is represented by typical costumes, wind and dulcimer music and men's dances. Together with other municipalities, the microregion is part of the Hustopeče local action group. The development of wine tourism is one of its priorities.

Physical activities should be part of the tourist offer. The Němčíčky sports complex in particular fulfils this role in the Blue Mountains. The curious thing is that it is the lowest Alpine skiing area in Europe, located at an altitude of 180 metres. This activity extended the period of tourism in the Blue Mountains to include the winter season, which is crucial in Czech conditions. However, the area mostly offers opportunities for summer tourism. These are swimming pools, playgrounds and courts for various ball games and a bobsled track with a length of 825 metres. The microregion is interwoven with wine trails, the best-known being the André trail. It is an increasingly popular way of combining physical activity and gastronomic tourism.

The problem with excellent accessibility may be that visitors may prefer one-day visits without an overnight stay. This always means that the financial benefit for local businesses is significantly smaller. This disadvantage is partially offset by the orientation towards wine tourism, where events usually take place until late into the evening, and tourists often prefer to spend the night in the same location. Therefore, the wine cellars also provide the possibility for guests to stay overnight.

In terms of mass tourism facilities, there are 39 collective accommodation facilities in hotels, boarding houses or hostels in the microregion. There were 1,275 beds in 485 rooms in 2023. They accommodated a total of 41,967 guests (5 guests per resident), who spent 79,622 guest nights here. The share of foreigners was 9.3 percent. A large part of the 375 unoccupied flats can also be used to accommodate guests. Therefore, it can be assumed that the total accommodation capacity of the microregion is at least 2,000 beds, and their actual use can be up to twice that of the statistics. These capacities are followed by a number of catering facilities of various types (except the most expensive ones, as the microregion is not aimed at a large clientele). Highly popular are corporate events, such as teambuilding or training, as well as weddings. One of the other impulses may be the reconstruction and creation of a new centre of the largest municipality Velké Pavlovice, which will reflect the Blue Mountains microregion. The construction of the conference centre will support corporate tourism.

A specific urban form is wine cellars, which can occur individually but more often create entire streets or groups. They were originally intended for the production and storage of wine. Today, many of them have acquired commercial and recreational functions, including accommodation. The wine cellars in Bořetice and Vrbice (Photo 2), or the so-called drunk cellars in Velké Pavlovice (Photo 3) are famous.

An interesting question is the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the prosperity of tourism in the area. The first results (VAISHAR, A. and ŠŤASTNÁ, M. 2020) suggest that it may not be fatal. Tourism in the microregion is largely



Photo 2. Traditional wine cellars in Vrbice



Photo 3. Wine cellars in Velké Pavlovice. Whereas some cellars reflect the traditional form, others are modern residences with the accommodation function on the second floor. (Photos taken by the authors.)

focused on domestic tourism, which has not been so severely affected. On the contrary, in the summer season 2022, the number of overnight stays increased by 42 percent compared to 2019. In any case, the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a challenge to certain changes in the tourism industry (SIGALA, M. 2020). MARINO, A. and PARISO, P. (2022) assume that wine tourism can help to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the development of the number of overnight stays over the last three years was 76,992 in 2021, 86,988 in 2022 and 79,622 in 2023. It seems that during the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in domestic accommodation increased, but is now returning to normal.

Within the scope of Destination management of the Lednice-Valtice Area and the Hustopeče Region (Garden of Europe), the Blue Mountains, offering 50 tourist attractions, are one of three recommended destinations. The Blue Mountains Tourist Product (www.modrehory.cz) has been in operation since 2011, and includes a web portal interconnected with an information kiosk in each of the five municipalities with not only a general information but also a range of services and events. This product is in Czech and Polish, which defines the expected range of visitors. KRÁLIKOVÁ, A. *et al.* (2021) attempted to measure visitor satisfaction, who identified seven key loyalty factors for a sample of the entire Moravian wine region. Namely, the factors include: quality of wine, relaxation, information about wine, natural attractions, friendly acceptance by the locals, wine culture and traditions, as well as vineyard excursion. The Blue Mountains Association focuses on these factors.

When evaluating the success of this activity, we proceed from the fact that the primary goal was not economic profit, but micro-regional development. Therefore, we see success in the stabilization of demographic development, employment and cultural and social life of the micro-region and the improvement of its image. An example is the awarding of the title of Village of the Year 2005 to the municipality of Bořetice. However, it must be admitted that external

conditions contributed to the positive development to a certain extent. This is a large increase in immigration from abroad, especially in connection with the war in Ukraine, and measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily redirected tourist flows from foreign to domestic tourism.

The fact that this is an initiative of municipalities in cooperation with local entrepreneurs ensures that investments and, thus, profits mostly remain in the region. Direct income of municipalities from accommodation (local fees) is not significant, the benefit is rather overall development.

Free Federal Republic of Kraví hora (Cow hill) as an example

The problem is that the surrounding micro-regions are in a similar situation. 96 percent of Czech vineyards are concentrated in South Moravia. So the question is how to highlight the studied microregion compared to its neighbours so that it stands up to their competition (CARMICHAEL, B.A. and SENESE, D.M. 2012). To promote wine tourism in the microregion the brand marketing approach has been used. The Free Federal Republic of Cow Hill at the cadastre in the village of Bořetice has been established. It is a recessive micro-state without permanent residents. Formally, it is a voluntary association.

In November 2000, state officials were elected. At the same time, a Republic was proclaimed. Passports and postage stamps were also issued. On April 2001, the Republic was granted the right to use the emblem and the flag by the Subcommittee on Heraldry and Vexilology of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic. The Republic has its own constitution and currency, anthem, academy of sciences with the Research Institute for the Fight against Starlings, information service and the like. It is a member of the Moravian Rear Defense Association (MATO) together with other recessive states Wallachian Kingdom and Lacchian Margravate. The Republic has three consulates

in Czechia and one in Slovakia. (Recessive micro-states do have a head of state, a flag, an anthem, issue money and passports, but they lack the ability to enforce their respect. It is therefore more of a social and cultural phenomenon than a political one. The motivations of the founders vary, it can be a desire to rule something, even a fictitious one, or a joke in a group of friends; but also an ambitious social utopia or a conspiracy on the verge of organized crime. Such communities can be found all over the world and are often tourist attractions. The most known of them, in addition to the three Czech examples mentioned, include the Conch Republic in Florida, the Principality of Hutt River in Australia, Christiania in Copenhagen, Saugeais in eastern France or Liberland on the borders of Serbia and Croatia.)

The Republic consists of three groups of ca. 260 wine cellars (hence it is the federal one). Its mission is to take care of maintaining and improving the quality of local wine and the development of wine tourism. The government of the Republic organizes wine events, excursions to wine regions abroad, recessionary and cultural events. It has its own choir. In order to improve accessibility, an airport for small aircraft and rescue helicopters (code LKANDR) has been set up.

The Free Federal Republic of Kraví hora has existed for more than 20 years. Although, of course, the proclamation of the Republic and its first steps aroused the greatest attention and interest, the Republic still organizes events and has become an integral part of the folklore of South Moravia. The basic factor of success was a good idea and the availability of people who were willing to implement it. The second factor of success is the product, i.e. quality wines, a comprehensive offer, including opportunities for cultural, tourist and sports activities.

The Republic also organizes recessionist events. For example, there was an anti-referendum demanding the stop of the Ferris wheel in Vienna's Prater because it was driving frost into the vineyards of Bořetice, in response to the Austrian referendum on the Czech Temelín nuclear power plant. There was also a referendum on EU accession with a positive result.

This type of marketing supports participation, defined as the involvement of local people in activities (MCAREAVEY, R. 2009), which is one of the essential prerequisites for any rural development.

The Free Federal Republic of Kraví hora and the voluntary association of the Blue Mountains municipalities solve one of the biggest problems in the development of Czech tourism, namely the cooperation of municipalities and service providers. Stakeholders have confidence that they will benefit from the joint work.

Discussion

The transformation of the economy in post-socialist states was perceived as a post-socialist or post-communist transformation at the beginning of the 21st century. However, at the same time, structural changes were also taking place, caused by the development of productive forces. CSURGÓ, B. *et al.* (2018) show, using the example of Hungary, a sharp decline in the importance of agriculture for GDP generation and a simultaneous decline in the number of jobs in this sector. One of the consequences is also a significant differentiation of the countryside and the transformation.

There is not a wide range of possible strategies. Rural microregions close to regional centres and on major transport routes are likely to benefit from their location and co-operate with the centres and with each other, while having to overcome the risk of losing their rural identity. The rural periphery can benefit from a less disturbed environment and attractive landscapes, while having to deal with remoteness, which limits investment and the availability of services. Intermediate regions with intensive agriculture need to restructure their economic base. Developing tourism is one option.

However, the importance of tourism for rural development cannot be overestimated. HRUŠKA and PİŞA (2019) state that only a few rural locations in the most attractive positions of national parks have experienced

an increase in the number of job opportunities. This is also consistent with our findings, which indicate stabilization of the microregion rather than its growth. However, the question arises whether the goal should be development in quantitative terms. If we were to conclude that quality of life is more important, then stabilization at a certain (perhaps even lower than the current) level could be the right goal. Therefore, the development of tourism brings rather a slowing down of negative developments in a sense of resilience (HEIJMAN, W. *et al.* 2019) and a necessary reorientation of the countryside from a productive to a post-productive economy.

It should not be forgotten that the main goal of tourism development is to improve the quality of life for the local population (BÁNDI, A. *et al.* 2020). So what benefits does the development of tourism bring to the local population? It is generally said that these are job opportunities that prevent people from leaving the countryside. However, these job opportunities can create 1–2 percent of the total number of jobs only. Another possible benefit may be tax revenues and fees. Czech municipalities may receive income from recreational fees and income from real estate tax. None of these revenues is (with the exception of very extreme cases) crucial for the municipal budget.

Far more interesting can be the direct profits of business entities, either directly through tourism or through induced activities. However, this assumes that businesses are predominantly local. This seems to be a key issue for the importance of tourism for rural development. The specific financial benefits of these individual local entrepreneurs are, of course, unknown. However, the crucial thing is that these are mostly local entities so the finances stay in the region. However, the activity of municipalities, cooperation (for example within voluntary associations or local action groups) and grant support from the European, national or regional levels are necessary. Another possible benefit is the increase of the general awareness of the region, which may attract other

activities or increase the attractiveness of the area for residential preferences.

In the past, the Blue Mountains microregion was part of a fertile region, whose wealth was based on highly fertile soils and a favourable climate. Today, agriculture is no longer a wealth-rich sector competing with other regions, and the local climate is struggling with drought, which is caused by higher evaporation due to rising temperatures.

Nevertheless, our microregion shows quite a successful restructuring. Of course, it can be argued that in our case, wine growing played an important role, which other areas in Czechia do not have. However, we believe that this advantage has been strongly supported by a unifying idea and cooperation. This possibility exists practically everywhere. But it requires ideas and activity. If a specific idea is a leading element of development, it must be systematically developed in the future, otherwise its main meaning will disappear. Maintaining the initial impulses is often a more complex task than their original establishment.

For the sake of completeness, it is necessary to mention the possible negative effects of tourism development. In this case, it is an increased movement of tourists, their means of transport and the associated noise and garbage in sense of overtourism (BUTLER, R.W. 2020). This may be of particular concern to residents who are not interested in the economic development of the microregion (for example seniors, pensioners). It is a question of the carrying capacity of the territory (BAÑOS-PINO, J.F. *et al.* 2024).

Conclusions

The article tries to use the strengths and opportunities of economic and social transition in the microregion under study to eliminate its weaknesses and possible threats using the place marketing idea in condition of the existing wine culture, relatively easy accessibility (for domestic tourists) and existing cooperation, which is also institutionally anchored. This aim of the study was fulfilled.

From a theoretical point of view, the contribution draws attention to brand marketing in the rural area, which is characterized by a less centralized approach and more horizontal cooperation. Another important aspect – so far little appreciated – is the importance of brand marketing for previously intensively farmed agricultural regions. These regions used to be considered rich and therefore less problematic compared to the peripheries. However, even these regions are going through structural changes and since their attractiveness for tourism is not high, brand marketing is one of the possible solutions.

Although the presented case study discusses the specific use of place branding for rural transformation, we are convinced that the general findings, i.e. the use of a sense of place, original ideas of branding and cooperation between local residents and stakeholders, are applicable in any traditional rural microregion. The condition is the cohesion of rural residents.

The paper attempted to emphasise that the original idea and cooperation of stakeholders in the promotion of the microregion is crucial for the successful development of tourism in a less attractive microregion. The process of restructuring former agricultural or agro-industrial microregions into post-productive regions with a higher share of tourism requires significant endogenous activity. The study can also serve as an example of good practice.

Monitoring this process is an important task for the future. In the near future, an interesting issue will be the resilience of the nascent new economic structure due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-pandemic measures. The changing position of the microregion in the process of Europeanisation and globalisation will also be important.

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