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DOI 10.5937/turpos-66474

UDK 338.48 52:796.5(497.11)

Originalni naučni rad / Original scientific paper

POZICIONIRANJE PEŠAČKIH RUTA SRBIJE NA PEŠAČKOJ MAPI EVROPE

POSITIONING SERBIA'S HIKING ROUTES ON THE EUROPEAN HIKING MAP

Apstrakt. Rad se bavi strateškim planiranjem i pozicioniranjem planinarsko-pešačkih ruta u Srbiji u kontekstu održivog razvoja turizma i međunarodne konkurentnosti. Planinarenje i hajking turizam vođeni su rastućom potražnjom za autentičnim, prirodnim i zdravstveno orijentisanim iskustvima. Uprkos raznovrsnim pejzažima, bogatim kulturnim nasleđem i dugoj tradiciji planinarenja, Srbija još uvek nije u potpunosti iskoristila potencijal svojih planinarskih ruta kao prepoznatljive komponente svoje nacionalne turističke ponude. Istraživanje je sprovedeno 2025. godine kvantitativnim pristupom putem onlajn ankete na koju je odgovorilo 29 stejkholdera uključujući predstavnike planinarskih klubova, lokalnih turističkih organizacija i specijalizovanih turističkih agencija. Podaci su analizirani deskriptivnim i analitičkim metodama, fokusirajući se na organizacione, infrastrukturne i promotivne aspekte upravljanja planinarskim rutama. Rezultati pokazuju da nedovoljno finansiranje, neujednačena infrastruktura, ograničena koordinacija između institucija i slaba digitalna vidljivost predstavljaju ključne prepreke efikasnom pozicioniranju planinarskih ruta u Srbiji. Međutim, nalazi takođe ukazuju na snažan potencijal za poboljšanje kroz standardizaciju, digitalizaciju i specijalizaciju obuke za vodiče. Studija predlaže nekoliko strateških pravaca: uspostavljanje nacionalnog sistema sertifikacije i

Abstract. This research explores strategic planning and positioning of hiking routes in Serbia within the context of sustainable tourism development and international competitiveness. Hiking tourism has become increasingly significant form of travel, driven by the growing demand for authentic, nature-based, and health-oriented experiences. Despite its diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and long tradition of mountaineering, Serbia has not yet fully utilized the potential of its hiking routes as a distinctive component of its national tourism offer. The research was conducted in 2025¹ by using a quantitative approach through an online survey distributed to 29 stakeholders, including: representatives of mountaineering clubs, local tourism organizations, and travel agencies specialized in outdoor tourism. The data were analyzed using descriptive and analytical methods, focusing on the organizational, infrastructural, and promotional aspects of hiking route management. The results show that insufficient funding, uneven infrastructure, limited coordination between institutions and weak digital visibility represent key obstacles to the effective positioning of Serbia's hiking routes. However, the findings also indicate strong potential for improvement through standardization, digitalization, and specialized

¹ The research was conducted for the purposes of the master's thesis "Strategy for Positioning Hiking Routes in the Serbian Tourism Market", Vlaisavljević, M. (2025), Academy of Applied Studies Belgrade, The College of Tourism, Serbia.

signalizacije usklađenog sa standardima Evropskog udruženja planinarsko-pešačkih ruta (ERA), stvaranje centralizovane digitalne platforme „Planinarske rute Srbije“, razvoj i promocija akreditovanih programa obuke za planinarsko-pešačke vodiče i negovanje javno-privatnih partnerstava za održavanje i promociju ruta.

Ključne reči: planinarsko-pešačke rute, Evropa, strateško pozicioniranje, održivi turizam, Srbija

Introduction

The goal of the research was focused on the analysis of resources, infrastructure, institutional support, the perception of key actors in the tourism sector in order to assess the strategic positioning of Serbia's hiking routes within European market. The study was conducted as primary empirical research with elements of descriptive analysis by using a structured questionnaire. Google Forms was used for data collection, which enabled efficient distribution of the survey and facilitated access to respondents from different parts of Serbia among representatives of mountaineering clubs, specialized travel agencies and local tourist organizations. Due to the limited number of domestic scientific and professional sources dealing specifically with the strategic positioning of hiking routes in Serbia, as well as the insufficient research coverage of this topic, the paper is primarily focused on empirical research and the analysis of primary data collected from relevant stakeholders. The subject of the research is the identification of weaknesses and opportunities within Serbia's hiking route system, as well as the formulation of recommendations for a national model of sustainable positioning in this type of tourist activities.

Thus, the research contributes to both the theoretical understanding of positioning process in tourism and their practical application in the strategic planning and development of competitive domestic tourism products, in accordance with international principles of sustainable development and European standards. Special attention was

training for hiking-guides. The study proposes several strategic directions: establishing a national certification and signage system aligned with European Ramblers' Association (ERA) standards, creating a centralized digital platform "Hiking Routes of Serbia," developing accredited training programs for hiking guides, and fostering public-private partnerships for route maintenance and promotion.

Key words: Hiking routes, Europe, Strategic Positioning, Sustainable tourism, Serbia

given to examining the level of organization and maintenance of hiking trails, the education mountain guides, the application of safety standards and the principles of sustainable development, by testing the following hypotheses:

Main research hypothesis:

H0: The lack of integrated marketing strategies of hiking routes in Serbia limits their international potential.

Specific (auxiliary) hypotheses:

H1: The organization and infrastructure of hiking routes in Serbia do not meet European standards.

H2: Serbia has a significant but underutilized potential for (the development of) hiking routes in sustainable tourism development.

H3: Education of mountain guides, standardization of services and safety system are key prerequisites for successful positioning of hiking routes.

SWOT Analysis of the Potential of Hiking Routes in Serbia

Hiking trails (or routes) represent maintained and marked directions of movement intended for recreational, mountaineering and tourist use, which can be classified according to length, difficulty, elevation and purpose of use. In the European context, the terms *trail*, *path* and *route* include networks of interconnected sections that enable the safe and sustainable movement of visitors through natural environments. The maintenance of hiking routes includes regular marking, access control, erosion prevention and the



preservation of landscape values. When these processes are neglected, trail degradation, soil damage, and a reduction in destination attractiveness may occur, directly affecting the tourist visit and the perceived quality (ISO 3021:2023).

The primary goal of the SWOT analysis is to examine the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of key stakeholders regarding the organization, promotion, safety and sustainability of hiking routes that, as part of the international European hiking corridor, pass partly through Serbia. In this way, the findings are aimed at identifying opportunities for improving the route management model through the application of modern standards, digital tools and principles of sustainable development.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean values) and interpretive analysis through the grouping of responses into thematic units.

Categorical variables (e.g. type of organization, promotion channel) are presented as percentages, while Likert scale responses are

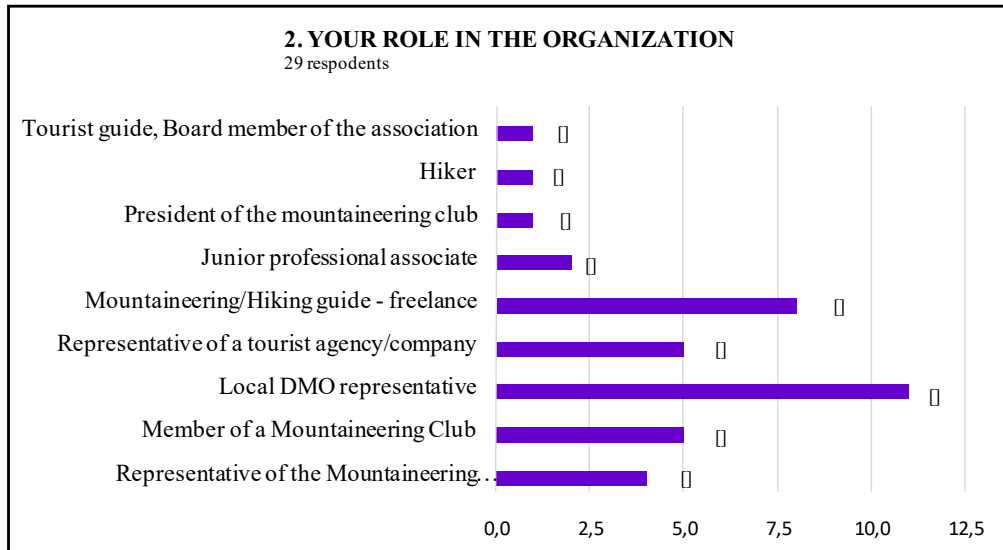
analyzed using mean values. Open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic approach - identifying key words and recurring patterns in respondents' comments.

The research was conducted in the period from July 21 to October 16, 2025 through a questionnaire consisting of 19 questions (a combination of closed, multiple-choice and open-ended questions), administered to 29 respondents, as shown in Graph 1. The structure of respondents according to the type of organization was as follows: about 45% of respondents accounted for mountaineering clubs and organizations, 28% local tourist organizations, while 27% came from the travel agencies, guiding services or NGO sectors. Most participants had more than five years of experience in organizing or promoting hiking tours, which confirms the relevance of the sample.

Graph 1. Respondents Roles within the Organization



Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)

Graph 2. Challenges Related to the Maintenance of Hiking Trails in Serbia

Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)

Graph 2 shows the most common challenges through the weaknesses of hiking trails in Serbia: poor signage, limited budgets and weak coordination, which indicates the need for a systemic intersectoral approach that includes participation of local governments, mountaineering organizations and the state sector. The given answers confirm hypothesis H1 that the organization and infrastructure of hiking routes in Serbia do not meet European standards.

As for the factors that contribute to international potential, respondents mostly opted for natural resources (79%) and cultural and historical attractions (65%), while safety and international cooperation were indicated by 41% of participants in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Factors of International Potential

Factor	Frequency (%)
Natural resources	79
Cultural and historical attractions	65
Safety	41
Geographical location and connection with the EU market	38
International cooperation / partnerships	34

Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)



It can be also noted that the perception of respondents towards natural and cultural values as key elements of the “Hiking Serbia” brand is consistent with the principles of sustainable tourism and, according to Vujović, Cvijanović, Štetić (2012) with the valorization of local resources in destination management. As key steps for the improvement of hiking routes, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, the majority of respondents identified the following:

- improvement of infrastructure (86%),
- education of the local population and hiking guides (62%)
- digitization and promotion (55%)
- intersectoral cooperation and strategic management (48%).

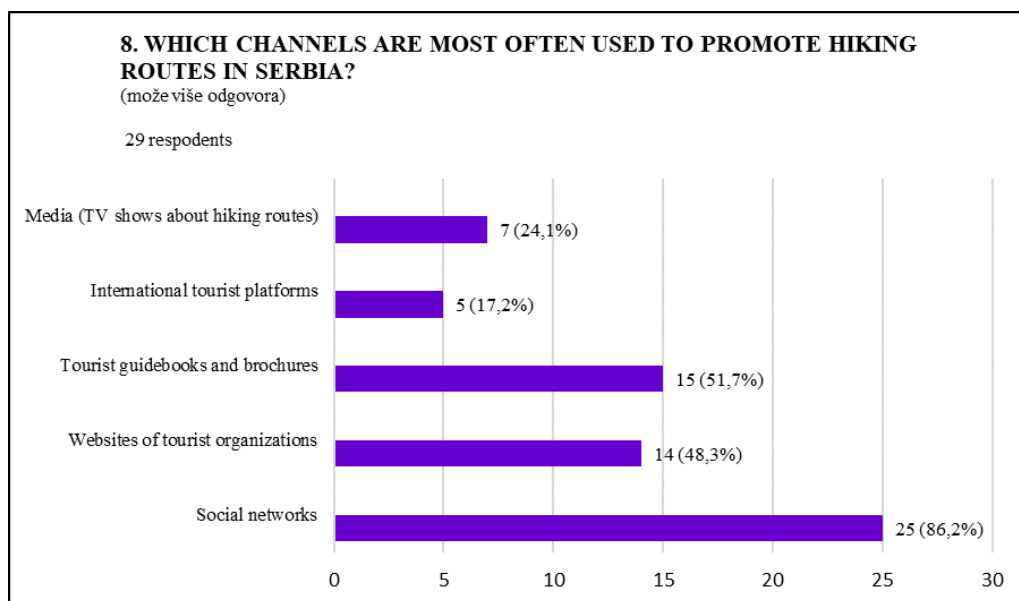
Positioning of Serbian Hiking Routes within the European Network

In tourism, digital marketing involves the use of interactive tools and internet platforms for the purpose of promoting destinations, improved communication with visitors and creating authenticity. According to research

by Acevedo-Duque et al. (2022), digital tools enhance the visibility of small tourist destinations and encourage participatory content creation through users (so-called *user-generated content*). For this type of tourist activities, digital strategies include, in addition to social media use, route mapping using GIS technology and mobile applications for navigation and promotion of this type of events. Therefore, promotion should be based on digital channels (SEO, social networks, applications), with a brand message that emphasizing authenticity, safety and sustainability.

Hiking routes are promoted in several ways, most often through social media through stories and user-generated content, and through tourist websites (TripAdvisor, AllTrails, etc.), as shown in Graph 3. Cooperation with bloggers, vloggers and other influencers has a significant impact on enhancing authenticity. Among other promotional tools are traditional tourist organizations, which conduct campaigns through brochures and fairs as well as newsletter systems, which inform subscribers about new routes and seasonal tips. In addition, partnerships with hotels and

Graph 3. Leading Promotional Channels for Serbian Hiking Routes



Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)

specialized agencies including tour packages, loyalty discounts, and similar programs, play an important role in the promotion of hiking routes.

In Graph 3, we can also see that digital channels represent the key basis for route promotion and positioning, but the lack of a centralized digital platform (portal, interactive maps) limits the reach to the international market. This additionally supports the main hypothesis (H0) about insufficient integration of marketing strategies. Also, more than 85% of respondents indicated social media as the main channel of communication with visitors, while 30% highlighted the websites of tourist organizations and specialized agencies. Traditional promotional materials (printed brochures and guides) and media are significantly less used.

Standardization and Training of Mountaineering and Hiking Guides

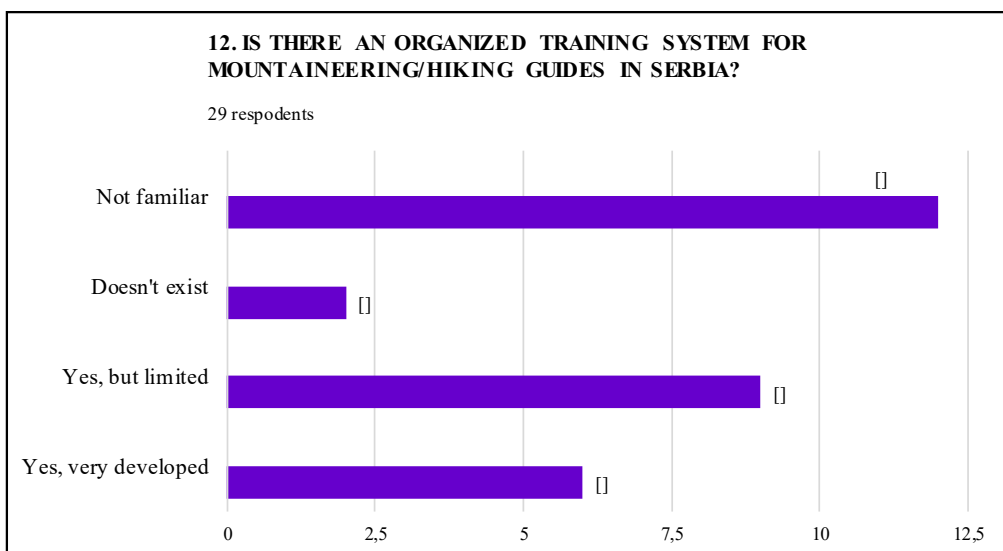
Safety in all areas of tourist movements, and especially in outdoor activities, involves route planning, knowledge of terrain boundaries

and wearing appropriate equipment (sticks, protection from the sun, water conditions, snow, rain, wind, etc.). It is also important to move in groups of at least three participants, follow the instructions of the mountain and/or ERA guide and stay on marked trails, in order to avoid loss or injury. When asked whether prescribed safety procedures for participants are applied in Serbia, 45% of respondents answered “yes”, 28% “no”, while 27% stated that they are “not familiar” with the regulations. These results indicate insufficient institutionalization of safety protocols in hiking tourism and the need for educating all stakeholders about safety standards. More than 70% of respondents believe that training standards are not fully aligned with ERA standards.

As shown in Graph 4, the majority of respondents (about 60%) stated that there are certain forms of training, but that they are limited in scope and unevenly distributed across regions. Only a small number of respondents (10%) rated the system as “very developed”.

The results confirm hypothesis H3, which

Graph 4. Training System for Mountaineering and Hiking Guides in Serbia



Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)



states that education and standardization of guide services are key prerequisites for the successful positioning of hiking routes. In this case, the absence of certification systems and formal coordination with ERA standards represents a limiting factor for development.

According to respondents' views in Graph 5, orientation skills and knowledge of trails rank highest (93.1%). These are followed by communication skills (79.3%) as well as knowledge of safety procedures and first aid, along with foreign language proficiency (19%). At the lower end of ranking, but no less important, are health and fitness condition, knowledge of trails, and interpretation of the natural environment. As experienced guides noted: "Learning a trail does not automatically mean being a good guide" highlighting responsibility, emotional intelligence and the ability to adapt to different situations and participant profiles in hiking mountaineering tourism).

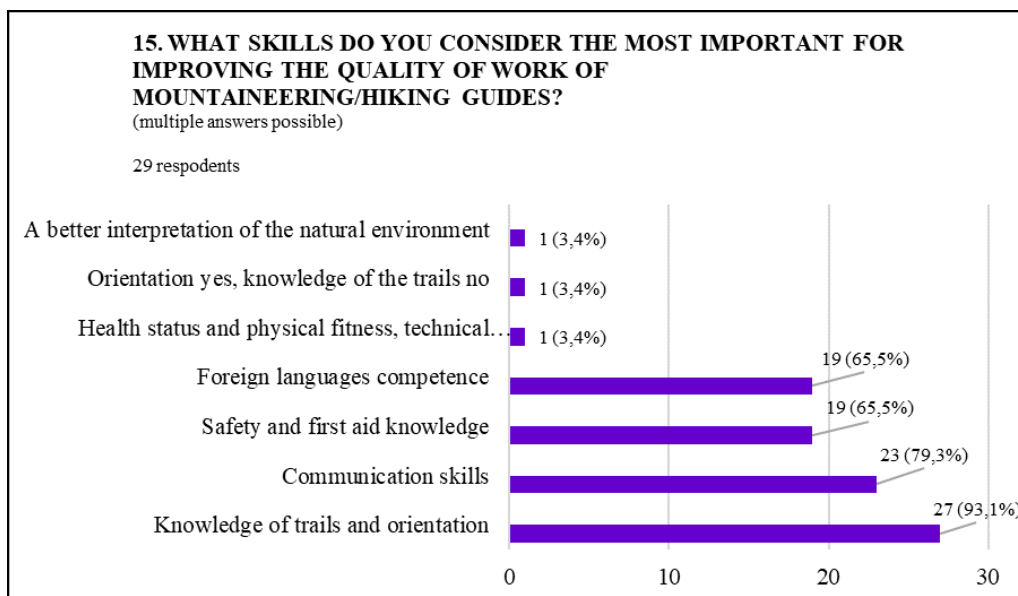
Results and Discussion

In the open-ended responses, the respondents highlighted the need for the development and marking of trails, improved promotion of hiking in nature as a healthy and accessible form of recreation, as well as the inclusion of younger generations and schools in organized activities. Respondents identified the most important skills of hiking guides as:

- knowledge of trails and orientation (92%),
- communication skills (78%),
- knowledge of safety protocols and first aid (66%), and
- digital skills and use of GPS applications (34%).

Key challenges and opportunities in the development of hiking routes were identified as: lack of financial resources, uneven infrastructure quality, insufficient coordination between institutions and weak digital promotion. The interviewees pointed out the absence of a unified standardization system, and non-compliance with European

Graph 5. Skills for Enhancing the Quality of Mountain Guide Performance



Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)

standards for the training of mountaineering and hiking guides, which supports hypotheses H1 and H3. Nevertheless, the high motivation and willingness of stakeholders to improve the current situation, as well as the growing interest of domestic and inbound visitors in active and sustainable tourism, certainly indicate a strong potential for further development. The results support the main hypothesis H0, namely the lack of integrated marketing strategies limits the international potential of hiking corridors in Serbia. Although social media represent the dominant communication channel, the lack of a centralized digital database, interactive maps and a common brand limits the effectiveness of promotion. This confirms the need for the establishment of a national platform that would consolidate all relevant information on hiking routes, hiking guides, thematic and traditional local events and safety protocols. Hypothesis H2 that Serbia has a significant, but underutilized potential for hiking routes in the context of sustainable tourism development has been strongly supported. The respondents clearly indicated the need for infrastructure improvement, training of guides for hiking

in natural environment and digitization of the offer, as well as an integrated approach and intersectoral cooperation. These measures represent a foundation for sustainable tourism development, where a balance is achieved between the preservation of natural resources, the enhancement of local community well-being and visitor satisfaction, both domestic and international. The uneven infrastructure, poor digital visibility and limited institutional cooperation also confirm the findings of the Tourism Development Strategy of Serbia (2016-2025), which identifies spacial organization and the qualitative valorization of resources as a fundamental prerequisites for the competitiveness of tourist products.

Chart 2. Overview of Key Research Findings

Thematic area	Key findings	Hypothesis Status
Organization and infrastructure	Insufficient funding, poor waymarking and signage, uneven quality	H1 supported
Promotion and marketing	Dominance of digital channels, without a central database	H0 supported
Education and standards	Incomplete compliance with ERA standards and need for certification	H3 supported
Safety	Uneven application of regulations; need for guidelines at the national level	H3 supported
Sustainable development	Focus on infrastructure, education and digitalization	H2 supported

Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)

**Chart 3. SWOT Analysis of Hiking Routes in Serbia**

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Abundance of natural resources and scenic landscapes (nature parks, mountains, lakes)	Lack of funding and system management	Increased awareness of healthy lifestyles and ecotourism	Depopulation of rural areas and lack of workforce
Tradition of mountaineering and active tourism	Uneven infrastructure and signage	Availability of EU funds for the development of rural and sustainable tourism	Climate changes affecting seasonality
Growing interest in <i>outdoor tourism</i>	Limited visibility and marketing	Development of digital platforms and interactive maps of hiking routes	Commercialization and unsustainable use of natural resources
Connection with European hiking corridors (E3, E4, E7)	Incomplete standardization and non-compliance with ERA standards	Regional cooperation within the ERA network	Limited institutional support and bureaucracy
Role of <i>Mountaineering Association of Serbia</i> as a key actor in promotion	Insufficient promotion of safety and sustainability	Involvement of youth and fostering volunteering programs	Competition from destinations with more developed infrastructure

Source: Empirical research (Vlaisavljević, M. 2025)

SWOT analysis of strengths indicates a high degree of authenticity and natural diversity in Serbia as a hiking destination, while weaknesses highlight the need for a strategic approach to financing, standardization and marketing. The opportunities are related to the trends in sustainable and health tourism, while threats, as shown in Chart 3, highlight risks of unplanned development and institutional inertia. The main challenges in the development of hiking routes in Serbia include insufficient coordination, uneven quality of infrastructure and limited marketing capacities. At the same time, strong potential in natural resources, mountaineering tradition and the growing demand for sustainable and healthy ways of traveling are recognized. Despite the existence of international hiking corridors (E3, E4 and E7), Serbia still does not use them sufficiently in promotional campaigns, which limits its

desirable positioning within the European network of hiking routes promoted by ERA. These findings represent the basis for strategic recommendations and an integrated discussion on the positioning of Serbia's hiking routes in the context of European standards and sustainability in tourism.

According to Najdić (2012), creating a marketing image, refers to the positioning of products and services in consumers' minds through a set of competencies and activities which are unique compared to competitors in terms of variety of services, needs or approaches and positioning them according to diversity of consumer needs and marketing approach. The creation of a national portal of hiking routes in Serbia with an interactive map, GPS data, descriptions and photographs would contribute to a better dissemination of attractive hiking routes across Serbia. In

this regard, the respondents' willingness to improve the education of mountaineering and hiking guides, standardize waymarking and signage, and introduce user-friendly digital tools in the promotion of routes (e.g., GPS maps, mobile applications, integration with specialized platforms such as AllTrails or Waymarked Trails) should be highlighted.

The implementation of standards in mountain and hiking tourism plays a crucial role in the preservation of both natural resources and the safety of participants. Standardization includes uniform trail marking, defined codes of conduct, training of mountaineering and hiking guides and application of the "Leave No Trace" principle. According to ISO 21102 (2020), failure to apply the such standards, may lead to serious consequences such as soil erosion, water pollution, damage to flora and fauna, as well as risk to visitor safety.

According to the principles of UNWTO (2019), the long-term success of tourism projects depends on the capacity to preserve the natural landscape and cultural identity of an area, which is a prerequisite for the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of tourist destinations. Accordingly, the implementation of certification programs and environmental standards (e.g. Green Trails initiatives) can contribute to international recognition and responsible destination branding.

It is also necessary to establish national guidelines for waymarking, safety and tour management, aligned with ERA standards as well as to create a register of certified mountaineering and hiking routes, including quality criteria, length, difficulty and safety features of each trail.

Education of tourism professionals, especially in the segment of active and outdoor tourism, provides a basis for quality service and safety in outdoor activities. According to WTTC (2023) research, continuous training and professional development of staff directly influence visitor satisfaction, repeat visits and destination reputation. It is necessary to develop an accredited training program for hiking guides through the cooperation of higher education institutions i.e. faculties, vocational colleges and

academies, the Mountaineering Association of Serbia as well as the the Ministry in charge of tourism. Such training should include terrain knowledge, orientation, communication and digital skills, as well as emergency procedures.

Conclusion

Recreational hiking routes in Serbia have the potential to become a recognizable tourism product within the niche of active outdoor tourism. A prerequisite for this is integration of existing resources and activities through a specific strategy and a national digital platform, which would provide a solid basis for further development of both domestic and international markets, in accordance with European standards and principles of sustainable development.

Based on the conducted analysis, the following key strategic recommendations have been formulated to enhance the positioning of hiking routes in Serbia:

1. Standardization and certification – implementing a national system for route marking and categorization, aligned with ERA (European Ramblers' Association) standards.
2. Education of hiking guides and sectoral professionalization - development of an accredited training program through cooperation between academic institutions and Mountaineering Organization of Serbia (PSS).
3. Digitization and centralized promotion - development of a unified platform Hiking Routes of Serbia with interactive maps, updated GPS data and promotional content.
4. Establishment of PPP (Public-Private Partnerships) - involvement of local governments, specialized travel agencies/ companies and the NGO sector in the maintenance and development of hiking routes.
5. International cooperation and branding - strengthening the connection with the ERA and positioning Serbia within the European network of hiking



corridors as a destination for authentic and sustainable hiking tourism.

The validity of the data was ensured through the selection of relevant participants and a clearly defined questionnaire structure covered all aspects of the research problem. However, the research has certain limitations, including:

- a small sample size (29 respondents)
- the predominance of mountaineering associations representatives compared to other stakeholder groups
- lack of in-depth interviews as a supplementary data collection method

It would also be beneficial to conduct a comparative analysis with countries from the region that already have more developed systems for the strategic positioning of hiking routes, such as Slovenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Romania or Greece. Such a comparative analysis, would help identify best practices that could be adapted to the domestic context.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in applying strategic positioning concepts to sustainable tourism products, while its practical value is reflected in the formulation of actionable recommendations for policy-makers and tourism stakeholders. By integrating natural assets, community involvement, and modern marketing tools, Serbia can strengthen its presence on the European hiking map and position itself as a recognizable example of sustainable destination development.

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Primljeno / Submitted: 13.04.2026.

Prihvaćeno / Accepted: 28.05.2026.