

Mapping Cultural Routes in Kosovo: A case study of Prizren's multiethnic heritage

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ABSTRACT

Kosovo, a small country in the Balkan Peninsula with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, holds significant potential for the development of cultural tourism, particularly in multiethnic contexts. The city of Prizren exemplifies this potential through its historical coexistence of Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, Serbs, Roma, and other communities. This study explores the identification and mapping of cultural routes in such a multiethnic setting, emphasizing how shared heritage can contribute to sustainable tourism and intercultural understanding. The research methodology combines GIS mapping, field observations, interviews, spatial data analysis, and an in-depth examination of key cultural monuments. As Kosovo aspires to join the Council of Europe, which promotes cultural heritage through its Cultural Routes program, this research aims to support heritage preservation aligned with European values. It also contributes to Kosovo's broader European integration efforts and its engagement with transnational cultural initiatives.

KEYWORDS

cultural routes; heritage; multiethnic environment; Prizren; Kosovo

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1. Introduction

Cultural routes are a relatively new cultural phenomenon that contributes to the creation of new forms of cultural heritage (Majdoub 2010). According to Majdoub (2010), cultural routes are not only physical journeys through specific territories and local or national identities, but also mental journeys filled with values, meanings, and expectations – ultimately forming a tourist product. These routes vary in scale, ranging from local to intercontinental (Terzić and Bjeljic 2016), and often represent points of cultural encounter, emphasizing the contributions of different peoples and transmitting values such as solidarity, freedom, tolerance, and multiethnic integration (Genovese 2016). They reflect the historical interactions between people motivated by economic, religious, or cultural reasons and thus serve as a shared heritage of human history (Carreno 2003).

Cultural routes are more than physical paths; they represent symbolic values and often become tourist attractions in areas where they occur. As tourism products, they are subject to selective evaluation, aimed at attracting European and international interest (Cojocariu 2015). Their appeal is even greater in historically rich, multiethnic cities. They also have the potential to enhance cultural experiences by integrating heritage values, architectural types and functions, and historical periods (Balcan et al. 2024). Cultural heritage sites and buildings are assessed based on their unique values and tourism potential (Balcan et al. 2024).

Even countries with rich histories face challenges in attracting tourists. One effective strategy for promoting tourism is the creation of cultural routes, which support regional or national economic and tourist development (Božić and Tomić 2015). Cultural routes have also proven effective in fostering sustainable and inclusive tourism (Trono 2024). As complex cultural products, they can enrich national identity and elevate local heritage into globally recognized phenomena (Trono 2024).

The Council of Europe launched the Cultural Routes Program in 1980 to promote a shared European heritage. Some member states have integrated these routes into their cultural policies, while other countries, including Kosovo, aspire to join the Council and apply for this program. Kosovo, a small country in the central Balkans, has a rich history shaped by its diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural communities, all of which have influenced the country's identity and social cohesion.

Prizren, often referred to as the cultural capital of Kosovo, exemplifies this heritage. It is home to a wide range of ethnic and religious communities (Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, Serbs, Roma, among others) and hosts a dense concentration of cultural monuments and religious sites linked to Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish traditions. Traditional crafts and

historical coexistence further characterize the city. This study maps cultural routes in Prizren to highlight the city's rich heritage and address related challenges, while also supporting Kosovo's aspiration to join the Council of Europe.

The paper focuses on identifying key streets in Prizren that connect major historical and cultural sites. It also explores how these routes can promote cooperation among communities, not only within Prizren but across Kosovo. In doing so, the study highlights the potential of cultural routes to become important tourist destinations, strengthening livelihoods, and supporting the well-being of local residents of all backgrounds. The article contributes to discussions on cultural heritage preservation, multicultural coexistence, and sustainable tourism in multiethnic cities, offering insights relevant to other regions facing similar challenges. It also links cultural routes with broader European integration initiatives, giving the findings both local and international relevance.

2. Cultural Routes in European and Balkan context

The concept of cultural routes has received increasing attention in academic literature, with contributions from various disciplines. Cultural routes represent a distinctive product of creative tourism, connecting attractions and destinations across one or more countries. According to the Council of Europe, a cultural route is “a cultural, educational heritage and tourism cooperation project designed to develop and promote an itinerary or series of itineraries based on a historical route, cultural figure, concept, or phenomenon of transnational importance, contributing to the understanding and appreciation of shared European values” (Interreg Central Europe 2017). This concept is both complex and multidimensional.

Until 1990, the World Heritage Convention had not recognized the protection of cultural itineraries. In 1992, however, it became possible to designate linear areas as significant transportation and communication networks (Moulin and Boniface 2001). The concept gained further recognition in 1993, when the ‘Routes of Saint James’ (Camino de Santiago) was included on the World Heritage List (Genovese 2016). To reach international consensus, the International Committee on Cultural Routes (CIIC) was founded by ICOMOS members in 1998, followed by the publication of the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes in 2008 (Lin et al. 2024). Since 2003, the category of ‘cultural route’ has also been included in the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention.

The ICOMOS Charter (2008) defines cultural routes as historical routes of human communication that served a specific and dynamic purpose. They are widely regarded as mechanisms for linking distant

places and people, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting sustainable tourism (Timothy 2018; Terzić 2014; Moulin and Boniface 2001). Sigley (2022) emphasizes the mobility of culture in the concept of "route heritage," noting that cultural expressions and exchanges evolve along historically constructed pathways. This emerging notion of route heritage is part of a broader reconsideration of what constitutes world heritage.

Berti (2015) argues that the term "route" should be understood not only in its physical sense but also as a network of natural and cultural sites linked by a common theme. Shishmanova (2015) adds that cultural routes offer a way to interpret history and culture together. Olsen et al. (2018) highlight the importance of mapping such routes to support the conservation and promotion of both tangible and intangible heritage.

Scholars have proposed different methodologies for identifying and mapping cultural routes. In multiethnic contexts, the process faces additional challenges due to varied interpretations of history, linguistic and religious differences, and past conflicts. Jansen-Verbeke (2007) explores the influence of cultural routes on tourism and local economic development. Graf (2012) emphasizes the importance of imagination and creativity in the use of cultural heritage for route development.

As of 2024, there are 48 Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, covering a wide variety of themes that illustrate European memory, history, and heritage, and support the interpretation of Europe's present-day diversity. According to the Council of Europe (2025), the development of a cultural route requires the following steps:

1. Defining a theme that represents European values and is common to several countries.
2. Identifying heritage elements, including both tangible and intangible aspects.
3. Establishing a European network with legal status that includes at least three countries.
4. Coordinating shared activities in key thematic areas.
5. Establishing a unified visual identity to ensure recognition and coherence across Europe.

Cultural heritage reflects the shared past of a society, strengthens social solidarity, and maintains continuity by preserving accumulated experiences and traditions (Akyıldız and Olğun 2020). Cultural routes are closely linked to cultural tourism. They can unite well-known and lesser-known sites under a unifying theme, thereby improving visibility, promoting conservation, and strengthening heritage management. Tourists can engage with diverse heritage landscapes and gain a comprehensive experience of local history and culture while traveling along these routes (Gražulevičiūtė 2006).

In multiethnic environments, identifying and planning cultural routes is especially complex due to differing historical narratives and cultural priorities. These tensions can lead to disagreements over which sites or themes to emphasize. Nevertheless, cultural routes offer an opportunity to foster community engagement and a shared sense of belonging among diverse ethnic groups (Pattanaro and Pistocchi 2016). Integrating cultural heritage into tourism strategies also supports local economies and reinforces intercultural dialogue and cultural identity (Šćekić et al. 2022).

In addition to conceptual and political challenges, practical obstacles also exist. These include insufficient documentation, fragmented historical records, and regional disparities that complicate the definition of route boundaries. Other pressing concerns include preserving authenticity amid tourism development, managing urbanization and landscape change, and ensuring inclusive participation of local communities. Limited financial resources, legal constraints, and the need for cross-sectoral collaboration further complicate the process. Particularly in multiethnic areas, mapping cultural routes requires careful consideration of the cultural values of each group, attention to political sensitivities, and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

The identification of a Cultural Route must consider several key factors: its specific purpose and function; the tangible and intangible heritage it encompasses; the reciprocal cultural influences that shaped it; its structural form and historical-geographic context; whether its setting is urban or rural; its environmental characteristics; its relationship with the landscape; its duration over time; and its symbolic and spiritual dimensions. Together, these elements contribute to both the designation and deeper understanding of a route's significance (ICOMOS 2008).

More research is needed to assess how cultural routes contribute to social cohesion and sustainable development in ethnically diverse regions. Cultural routes represent one type of heritage network. These networks are rarely homogeneous and often consist of localized elements that make them inherently diverse. Even small localities can serve as important "nodes" in broader routes.

In this context, the city of Prizren, with its rich cultural heritage, emerges as a key node within potential cultural routes in Kosovo. Other towns such as Peja, Gjakova, and Prishtina may also be integrated into such networks. When connected through regional and international cooperation, these sites could form part of a transnational Balkan cultural route. This network might also include cities such as Skopje (North Macedonia), Tirana and Shkodra (Albania), and Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). All of these cities, considered as nodes in this study, share similar heritage elements that reflect their layered historical, cultural, and religious identities.

3. Study area

Kosovo, the newest country in Europe, is located in the Western Balkans at the crossroads of civilizations. Throughout history, the region has been influenced by multiple cultural, religious, and political forces. It lies at the meeting point of Ancient Greek and Roman territories, served as a frontier of the Roman, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires, and is home to three major religious traditions: Islam, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism. This rich layering of civilizational influences has created a diverse cultural landscape that extends from the Illyrian period to the present (Regional Cooperation Council 2019; Ceko and Xhibo 2019).

Kosovo is a multiethnic society, home to Albanians, Serbs, Turks, Bosniaks, Roma, and other communities. Its cultural heritage is reflected in both tangible and intangible forms across many settlements. These features provide favorable conditions for the development of cultural routes. However, the field remains underexplored, with limited research and only a few projects currently underway (Krasniqi et al. 2021).

Within this context, the city of Prizren stands out as a leading candidate for the development of cultural routes. Located on the southern edge of the Dukagjini Plain at the foot of the Sharr Mountains, Prizren is a municipal and regional center whose territory borders Albania and North Macedonia. Its strategic location has historically enabled important

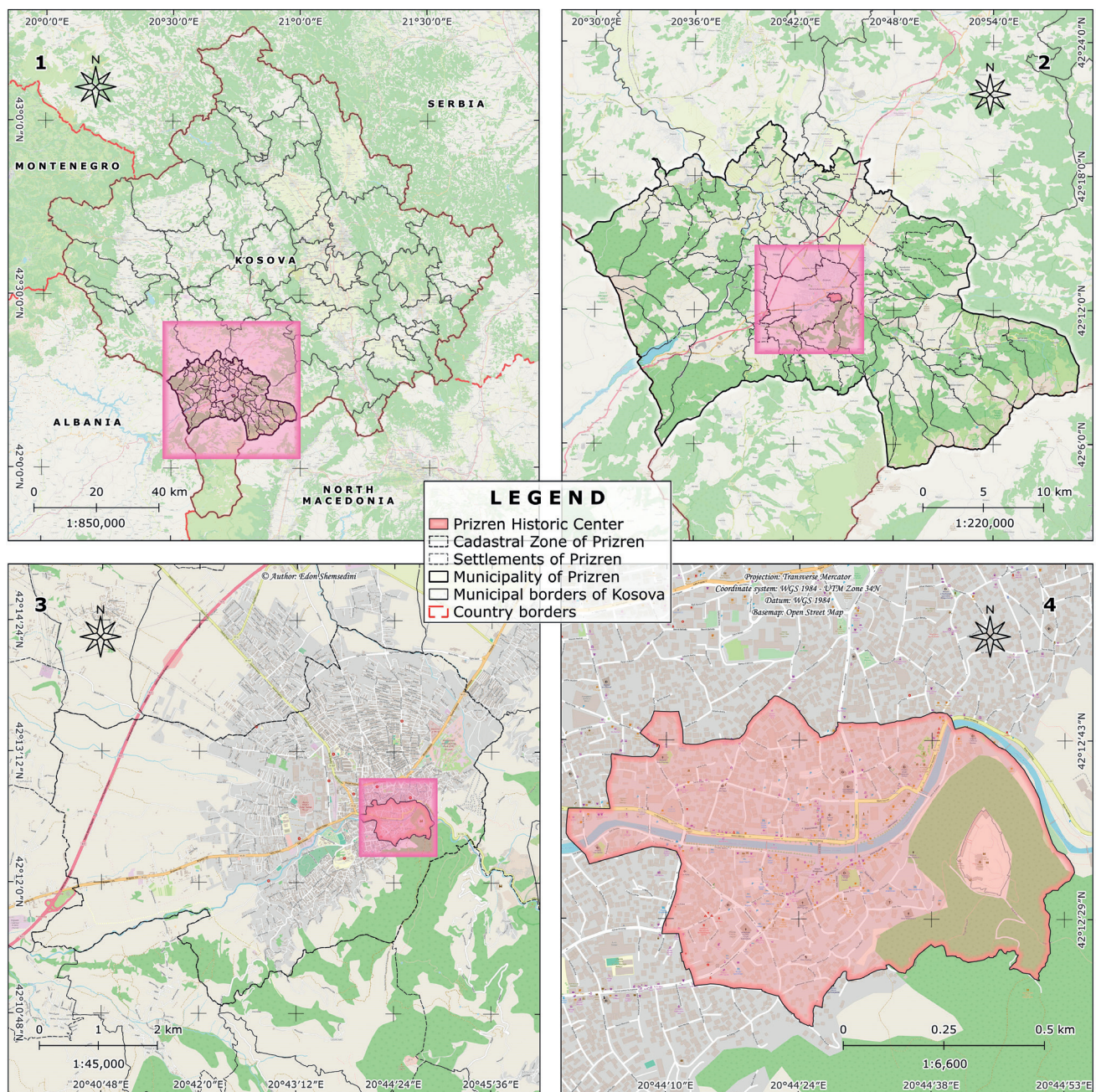


Fig. 2 Geographical location of Prizren.

communication links within Kosovo and with the wider region (KASA 2011, 2018).

Prizren is one of the oldest cities in the region and is considered among the earliest urban centers in Southeast Europe. Its Historic Centre, located at the intersection of ancient trade and travel routes, contains cultural and archaeological evidence from various eras and civilizations – including prehistoric settlements, the Dardanian civilization, and the Pre-Roman, Roman, Byzantine, Arbëror, Serbian, Ottoman, and Albanian periods (Bajčinovci and Thaçi 2016; Gülersoy 2022). Today, it remains a vibrant, living historic settlement characterized by distinctive vernacular and monumental architecture, fortifications, and engineering works, all integrated with the surrounding rivers and mountains (RROK 2020).

Fig. 1 illustrates the geographical location of the Municipality of Prizren, the Cadastral Zone of Prizren, and the Historic Centre. The Municipality spans approximately 626.98 km², the Cadastral Zone covers 29.31 km², and the Historic Centre encompasses about 0.63 km².

Prizren is widely recognized as a multiethnic and multireligious city, with Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, and others contributing to its cultural diversity. Each group brings its own historical narratives and heritage values, which can make the design of unified cultural routes challenging. Competing interpretations of history or differing priorities over landmarks and figures may lead to disagreements about which elements should be emphasized.

Modern development poses additional risks. As Prizren continues to grow, heritage sites face pressure from commercialization and tourism-driven modifications, potentially threatening their authenticity. Balancing economic development with heritage preservation remains a central challenge. Moreover, the involvement of diverse stakeholders (ethnic communities, local governments, national institutions) adds complexity to consensus-building, as these groups often have competing interests.

Given Prizren's diverse population and layered history, the development of cultural routes must be approached with sensitivity to ensure that all communities are represented. Such an inclusive approach is essential for strengthening social cohesion. At the same time, urban expansion and infrastructure development continue to pose threats to existing heritage paths, particularly in older districts.

Although Kosovo is not yet a member of the Council of Europe, it holds significant potential to contribute to the Cultural Routes program. Prizren, as one of its most culturally rich and historically layered cities, presents a compelling case for such an initiative. Its heritage, shaped by centuries of coexistence and transformation, bridges past and present and offers a foundation for meaningful, sustainable cultural tourism (Municipality of Prizren 2012; Gülersoy 2022).

4. Materials and methods

The methodology used in this study offers a well-integrated approach for identifying and mapping cultural routes in the multiethnic city of Prizren. This research is based on the analysis of various relevant documents obtained from institutional and academic sources, as well as fieldwork conducted to identify and examine significant cultural sites.

The first step involved analyzing official documents and datasets to identify potential cultural routes based on their historical and cultural significance. Key sources included: Law No. 04/L-066 on the Historic Centre of Prizren (adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo in 2012); Law No. 02/L-88 on Cultural Heritage; the Management Plan of the Historic Centre of Prizren; the List of Cultural Heritage for Temporary Protection of the Republic of Kosovo; the UNESCO Report on the Cultural Heritage of Kosovo; and other legal frameworks related to cultural heritage.

Following the document analysis, fieldwork was carried out to validate and supplement the initial findings. This included direct observations and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the field of cultural heritage. Data collection focused on specific sites and areas identified as potential segments of future cultural routes.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to allow participants the freedom to elaborate beyond the core questions. Participants included teachers, government employees, officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Prizren, heritage experts, and local residents. This purposive sample was selected based on the participants' expertise and depth of knowledge on the subject. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The fieldwork, including interviews, was conducted during December 2024.

Geographic Information System (GIS) tools played a key role in the study by enabling the creation of interactive maps that visually represent the cultural diversity of the city. GIS helped identify spatial patterns and key areas of cultural significance, supporting the categorization and visualization of proposed routes.

The identified routes were categorized based on their function and cultural value:

- Historical routes connecting sites from different historical periods.
- Religious routes linking sacred sites of different faiths, reflecting multiethnic and multireligious coexistence.
- Contemporary routes associated with traditional urban practices such as local crafts, for which Prizren is well known.

The methodology also includes an assessment of the potential for each route to attract diverse groups

of tourists, with the aim of identifying opportunities for sustainable promotion and analyzing the prospective cultural and economic impacts.

Overall, this approach is designed not only to identify and promote cultural routes in Prizren but also to serve as a replicable model for other cities in Kosovo. Furthermore, it contributes to positioning Kosovo in alignment with the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes program, supporting its aspirations for European integration.

5. Results

The 2024 population census reaffirms Prizren's status as one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse cities in Kosovo (KAS 2024). This diversity is clearly reflected in its cultural sites, reinforcing the relevance of the proposed cultural routes. The presence of multiple ethnic communities has shaped the city's architectural forms, religious monuments, cultural traditions, and urban landscape. This pluralism enhances Prizren's appeal as a destination where visitors can engage with a unique blend of cultural influences.

According to the preliminary final results of the 2024 census conducted by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the Municipality of Prizren has a total population of 147,246, of whom 76,850 reside in the urban area of the city. The data presented in Tab. 1 and Tab. 2 show the ethnic and religious composition of the municipality, respectively.

The most valuable asset of Prizren lies in the cultural values inherited from past centuries. These are reflected in its distinctive architecture, unique urban structure, and enduring folk traditions. Prizren's cultural heritage is exceptionally diverse and represents one of the most compelling intersections of identities

in Kosovo. The city has long served as a meeting point of different civilizations and cultures, whose collective contributions have shaped Prizren into a significant site of regional and global heritage value (Bajčinovci and Thaçi 2016; Gülersoy 2022). Known since antiquity, Prizren is often recognized as a unique urban center in the Balkans for its richness in cultural, civilizational, and religious heritage (Municipality of Prizren 2012).

To structure the analysis of Prizren's cultural landscape, two thematic routes were identified: the Religious Cultural Route and the Architectural Cultural Route. These routes highlight the city's multiethnic and multireligious character.

The data are presented graphically and in tabular forms. Fig. 2 is accompanied by Tab. 3 and Fig. 3 by Tab. 4, respectively. The figures contain maps in which the objects are presented with names and order numbers, as well as the hypothetical route between the objects. In the associated tables, the objects are also presented with names and order numbers as in the map, which indicates the period of construction, the status of whether it is under protection and what type of protection (permanent or temporary), the status reference number, the distances between the objects according to serial numbers and route, and the geographical coordinates. The routes in maps show just the paths that indicate the route according to a sequence of objects, but it is not necessary to be like this, but only a prefiguration to present the approximate distances between each other.

The Religious Cultural Route (Fig. 2) connects sacred sites from different faith traditions, including Islamic mosques, Orthodox and Catholic churches, and a Jewish cultural center. It illustrates Prizren's long-standing religious pluralism and the historical coexistence of its diverse communities.

The Architectural Cultural Route (Fig. 3) traces the city's urban and architectural evolution. It includes landmarks from various historical periods, such as the medieval Prizren Fortress and Kosovo's first hydroelectric plant, now repurposed as a museum. Together,

Tab. 1 Population by ethnicity in the Municipality of Prizren as of 2024.

Prizren Municipality – by ethnicity 2024		
Ethnicity	Inhabitants	Percent (%)
Albanian	114,484	77.75
Serb	202	0.14
Bosniak	18,379	12.48
Turk	9,819	6.67
Romani	2,101	1.43
Ashkali	1,260	0.86
Egyptian	117	0.08
Gorani	565	0.38
Others	235	0.16
Prefers not to answer	84	0.06
Total	147,246	100%

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS), 2024.

Tab. 2 Population by religion in the Municipality of Prizren as of 2024.

Prizren Municipality – by religion 2024		
Religion	Inhabitants	Percent (%)
Islam	142,321	96.65
Orthodox	206	0.14
Catholic	2,880	1.96
Others	438	0.30
No religious affiliation	400	0.27
Prefers not to answer	1,001	0.68
Total	147,246	100%

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS), 2024.

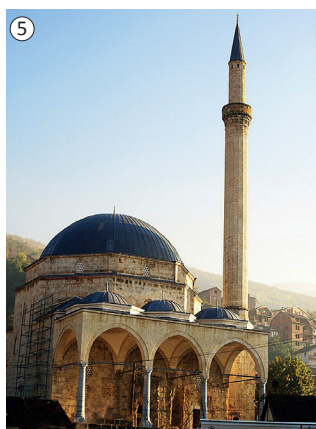
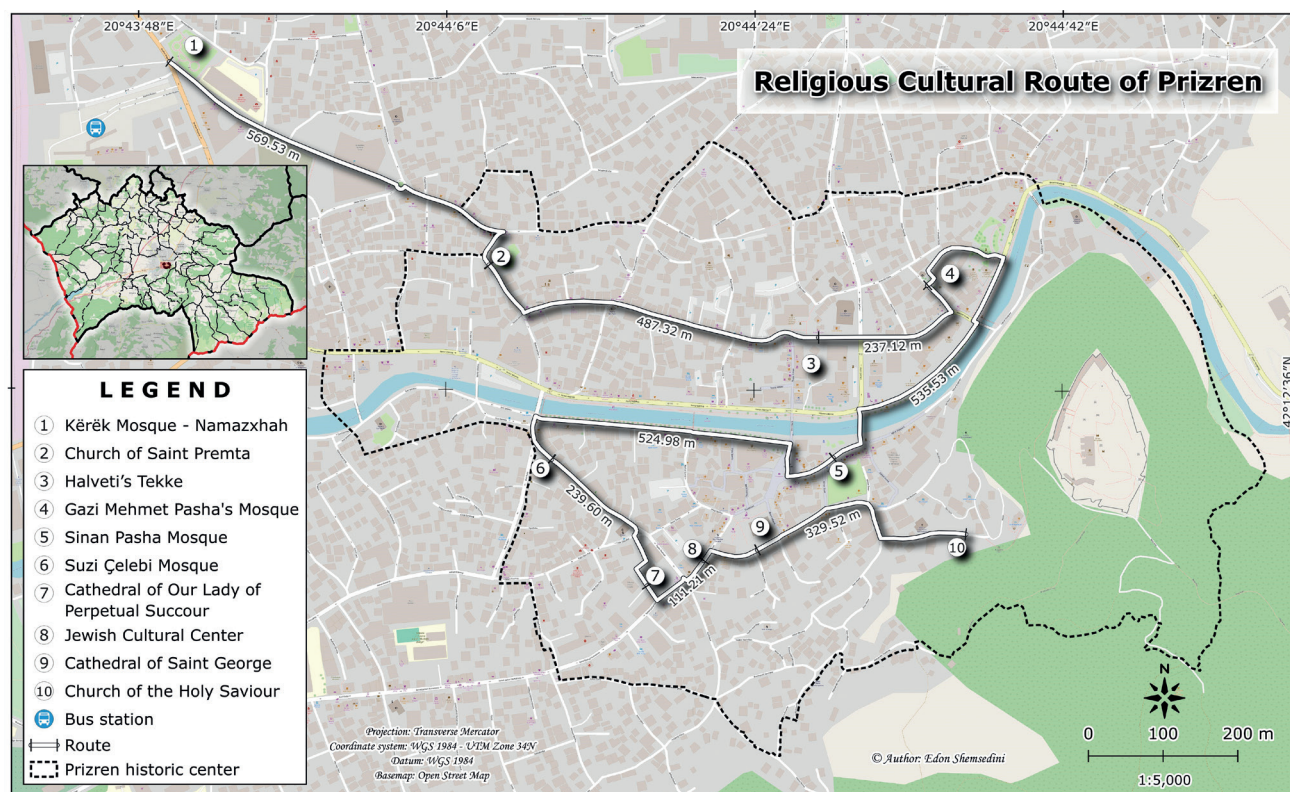


Fig. 2 Religious Cultural Route of Prizren.

Sources of images in Fig. 2: 1, 7 – Sh. Rexha; 2 – V. Vukotic; 3 – Ozoutback.com.au; 4 – B. Bytyçi; 5 – D. Spahiu; 6 – G. Behramaj; 8 – Reporteri.net; 9 – K. Novakovic; 10 – Panacomp.net.

Tab. 3 Sites of Religious Cultural Route.

N.	Name	Religion	Period	Status	Reference number	Distance by order	Coordinates
1	Kërëk Mosque – Namzxhah	Islam	1455	Permanent protection (Since 2023)	345	0.00 m	42°12'50.9"N, 20°43'51.23"E
2	Church of Saint Premta	Orthodox	Late Antiquity, Middle Ages	Permanent protection (Since 2016)	1974	569.53 m	42°12'41.8"N, 20°44'9.2"E
3	Halveti's Tekke	Tariqa (<i>part of a series on Islam</i>)	XIX Century	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	404	487.32 m	42°12'37.2"N, 20°44'27.33"E
4	Gazi Mehmet Pasha's Mosque	Islam	XVI Century	Permanent protection (Since 2024)	351	237.12 m	42°12'41.1"N, 20°44'35.44"E
5	Sinan Pasha Mosque	Islam	1594 (Middle Ages)	Permanent protection (Since 2023)	337	535.53 m	42°12'32.5"N, 20°44'28.96"E
6	Suzi Çelebi Mosque	Islam	1513	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	349	524.98 m	42°12'32.6"N, 20°44'11.54"E
7	Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour	Catholic	XIX–XX Century	Permanent protection (Since 2023)	403	239.60 m	42°12'27.9"N, 20°44'18.27"E
8	Jewish Cultural Center	Jewish	XIX–XX Century	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	4758	111.21 m	42°12'29.1"N, 20°44'20.43"E
9	Cathedral of Saint George	Orthodox	XIX Century	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	2899	81.95 m	42°12'30.1"N, 20°44'24.39"E
10	Church of the Holy Saviour	Orthodox	Middle Ages	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	2855	329.52 m	42°12'29.2"N, 20°44'35.88"E

Source: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport of Republic of Kosovo.

these routes narrate Prizren's role as a cultural and historical crossroads in the Balkans.

Mapping and analyzing these routes revealed important aspects of accessibility, conservation, and

tourism potential. Most sites are within a walkable distance, making them ideal for both guided and self-guided tours. The availability of historical and religious sites within close proximity enhances the

Tab. 4 Sites of Architectural Cultural Route.

N.	Name	Period	Status	Reference number	Distance by order	Coordinates
1	Upper City – Castle of Maidens	Middle Ages	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	2948	0 m	42°11'58.4"N, 20°45'42.89"E
2	Museum of Hydroelectricity	1926–28	Permanent protection (Since 2016)	1425	488.30 m	42°12'5.96"N, 20°45'42.91"E
3	Albanian League of Prizren	XIX Century	Permanent protection (Since 2023)	468	2437.57 m	42°12'41.2"N, 20°44'37.55"E
4	Hamam of Gazi Mehmet Pasha	1573–74	Permanent protection (Since 2016)	437	241.81 m	42°12'39.4"N, 20°44'29.33"E
5	Ethnological Museum – Shehzade's House	XIX Century	Permanent protection (Since 2023)	559	303.15 m	42°12'41.5"N, 20°44'21.37"E
6	Clock Tower – Archaeological Museum	XIX Century	Permanent protection (Since 2024)	438	346.27 m	42°12'40.6"N, 20°44'11.81"E
7	Belediye – Building of old Municipality	XIX Century	Permanent protection (Since 2024)	628	472.49 m	42°12'37.1"N, 20°44'6.67"E
8	Old Stone Bridge	Antiquity, Middle Ages	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	430	457.95 m	42°12'34.4"N, 20°44'26.21"E
9	Shatërvan Fountain	XIX Century	Temporary protection (06.10.2024–06.10.2025)	428	79.22 m	42°12'32.5"N, 20°44'25.93"E
10	Prizren Castle	Late Bronze Age, Late Antiquity, Middle Ages, till year 1912	Permanent protection (Since 2016)	1967	667.92 m	42°12'34.1"N, 20°44'44.01"E

Source: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport of Republic of Kosovo.

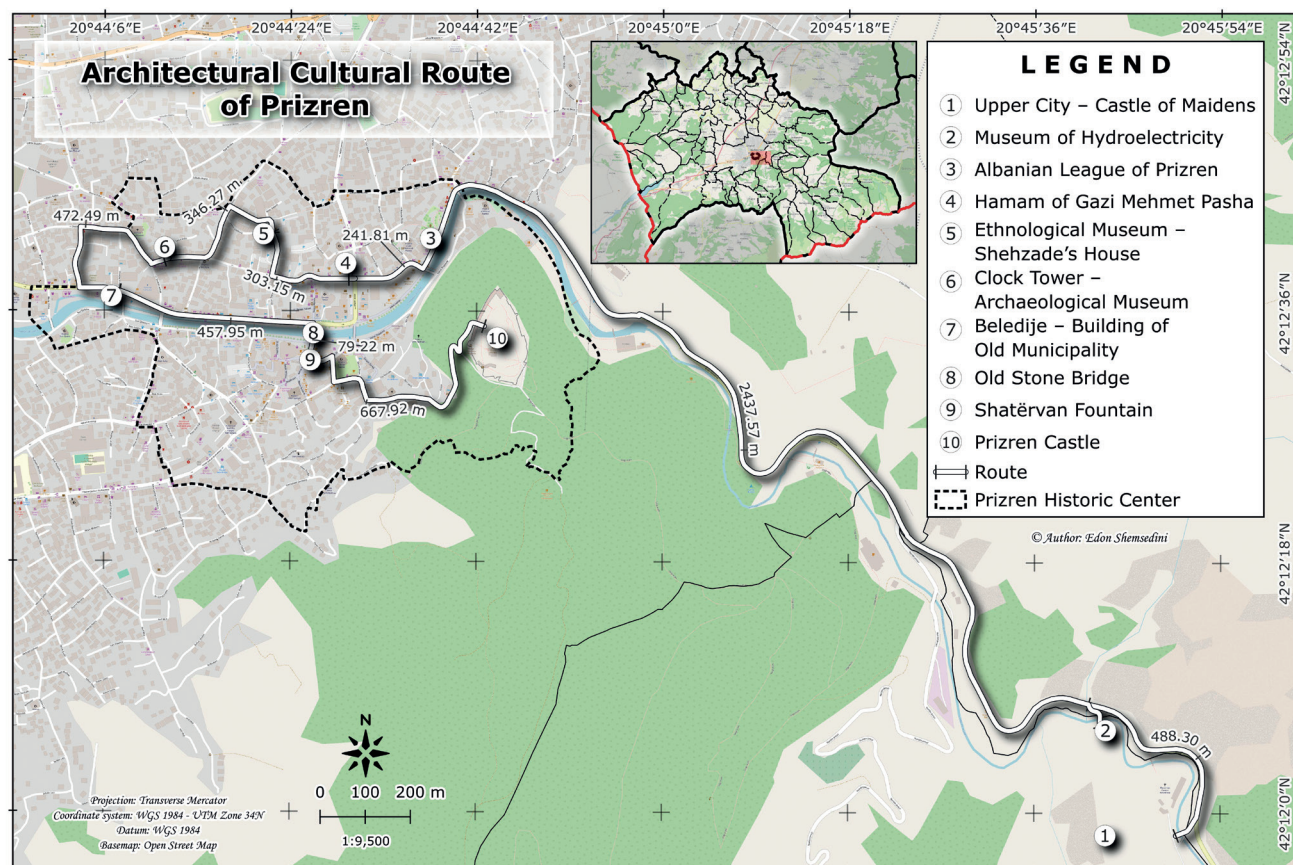


Fig. 3 Architectural Cultural Route of Prizren.

Sources of images in Fig. 3: 1 – L. Gashi; 2, 6 – Autostrada Biennale; 3, 7 – Koha.net; 4 – Cultural Bridge; 5 – Eduprizrenin.com; 8 – Trip Advisor; 9 – ObserverKult.com; 10 – Kosovosguide.wordpress.com.

appeal of cultural tourism in the city. Many of these monuments have permanent protection, as shown in Tab. 3 and Tab. 4, ensuring their preservation, but several remain under temporary protection, indicating the need for further conservation efforts. Integrating these routes into an official cultural heritage framework could facilitate access to funding for restoration projects and improve long-term heritage management. Despite the strong potential of these routes, challenges remain. Some cultural sites lack proper infrastructure, such as clear signage and visitor-friendly facilities. Promotion of these routes at the national and international levels is still limited, which means many foreign tourists are unaware of the historical wealth Prizren has to offer. Additionally, while the sites are protected by law, there is still a need for stronger institutional commitment to preservation, especially for monuments under temporary protection. Addressing these challenges would significantly enhance the visibility and sustainability of Prizren's cultural heritage.

The selection of monuments included in the Religious and Architectural Cultural Routes of Prizren was guided by several interrelated criteria, rooted in historical relevance, diversity of representation, accessibility, and their current legal protection status. These monuments were not chosen arbitrarily, but represent key landmarks that together reflect the multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural identity of the city.

6. Discussion

By addressing cultural sites related to crafts, religious practices, and Ottoman heritage, this study contributes to forming a more inclusive and substantial narrative of cultural heritage in Prizren. It presents a systematic review of key national documents, such as the lists of cultural heritage under permanent and temporary protection, and relevant scholarly literature on cultural tourism and cultural routes.

Prizren, selected as the case study, is widely recognized as the historical and cultural capital not only of Kosovo but also of the Albanian population more broadly. However, to fully appreciate the significance of Prizren's heritage and its potential cultural routes, they must be understood within a broader historical and geopolitical context that includes Kosovo and the wider Balkans.

When identifying or applying the concept of cultural routes in any context, it is crucial to recognize their multidimensional value, including historical, cultural, and social dimensions. Cultural routes should not be treated merely as tourism products but as complex narratives shaped by memory, identity, and community. Each route must be understood within its specific context, and the active involvement of local communities is essential for preserving and interpreting its meaning.

Cultural routes can also be conceived as nodes within broader transnational heritage networks. Examples of such cooperation include initiatives like Via Dinarica or the Danube Wine Route. Given Prizren's proximity to the Sharr Mountains and its rich cultural heritage, the city could potentially be integrated into the Via Dinarica route. This would align Prizren with a growing pan-Balkan initiative that is increasingly popular among international tourists with diverse interests.

The findings of this research align with the Council of Europe's vision of cultural routes as tools for promoting coexistence, intercultural dialogue, and the shared values of modern European societies. By identifying and mapping cultural routes in Prizren, this study demonstrates how local heritage can embody and promote European social and cultural values.

Prizren should not be viewed as an isolated case but as a potential node in broader cultural networks of international relevance. Its inclusion in initiatives such as the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe could serve as a platform for inclusive development. This development would involve all ethnic communities and leverage tourism to promote intercultural understanding and economic growth. These are important assets for Kosovo as it seeks deeper European integration and eventual membership in the Council of Europe.

As the paper has shown, Prizren's cultural landscape, highlighted through the Religious and Architectural Routes, illustrates how diverse civilizations, religions, and ethnic groups have collectively shaped the city's identity. The coexistence of mosques, churches, and a Jewish cultural center within a compact urban area is rare even by European standards. This strengthens Prizren's case for inclusion in transnational heritage networks. It also demonstrates that even in post-conflict contexts such as Kosovo, cultural heritage can serve as a foundation for unity, memory, and a forward-looking identity.

Prizren's story is not just about architecture or religion. It is about coexistence, plural memory, and the future of heritage in Southeastern Europe. The contribution of this study lies in its critical engagement with how heritage is interpreted, represented, and used in a multiethnic urban setting. Unlike much of the literature that focuses mainly on preservation or tourism development, this paper highlights the power dynamics embedded in heritage narratives. It asks who decides what is remembered, celebrated, or excluded.

These power dynamics are deeply relational, institutional, and symbolic. They reflect unequal relationships among state institutions, local authorities, cultural elites, and marginalized communities, each of whom exerts varying influence over heritage interpretation and management. By analyzing cultural routes in Prizren, this study reveals how heritage can either reinforce dominant historical narratives or

serve as a platform for inclusion and recognition of historically underrepresented groups.

In this sense, the paper challenges the romanticized notion of heritage as a neutral or unifying force. Instead, it argues for a more deliberate and inclusive approach to heritage curation, one that acknowledges complexity, diversity, and contested histories.

By focusing on Kosovo, a country with limited international visibility in heritage debates, this study brings attention to the overlooked richness of Balkan heritage and its role in global cultural networks. In contrast to scholarly discussions that are often centered on Western European contexts, this paper introduces a new perspective rooted in Southeastern Europe.

By referencing European initiatives such as the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes program, the ICOMOS Charters, and Via Dinarica, this work places Prizren and the Western Balkans within broader transnational heritage frameworks. This approach enhances the relevance of the study for scholars, practitioners, and institutions engaged in international heritage cooperation.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that Prizren holds significant potential for inclusion in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe. Although the identified routes are not yet officially certified, they already function as informal heritage trails that attract both local and international visitors. Formal recognition would bring important benefits in terms of cultural heritage conservation, tourism development, and economic revitalization.

Official status would strengthen protection measures and enable access to funding for the restoration and maintenance of key sites. While many monuments in Prizren are already under some level of protection, the institutional support linked to formal cultural route designation would ensure more systematic and sustainable preservation for future generations.

A structured cultural route framework would also enhance the visitor experience. Clear itineraries, historical interpretation, and interactive storytelling (through signage, digital guides, and visitor centers) would make the routes more engaging and accessible. This would position Prizren more firmly as a cultural tourism destination in the Balkans and increase its visibility at both regional and international levels.

The economic and social benefits of well-managed cultural tourism are substantial. An increase in visitors would support local businesses such as accommodations, restaurants, and traditional craft vendors, generating employment and stimulating the local economy. Moreover, involving local communities in guided tours, heritage interpretation, and cultural events would foster a stronger sense of ownership and pride in the city's diverse history.

Integrating Prizren's routes into wider international heritage networks would open doors for cross-border cooperation with similar sites in Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. Such regional collaboration could establish a shared cultural tourism circuit in the Western Balkans, strengthening Prizren's profile on the European cultural map.

Nonetheless, realizing this potential requires coordinated effort among municipal authorities, cultural institutions, and tourism stakeholders. Infrastructure improvements, targeted promotion, and stronger institutional backing will be necessary to sustain and scale the initiative. Digital promotion (such as interactive online maps, multilingual materials, and social media campaigns) can increase global awareness. Cultural festivals and events linked to the routes would further engage both residents and tourists.

With the right strategies and investments, Prizren's cultural routes can evolve from an academic proposal into a recognized and sustainable element of Europe's cultural heritage landscape. The city's unique combination of historical depth, architectural richness, and multiethnic tradition offers a compelling narrative. Integrating these routes into Kosovo's broader cultural heritage strategy would not only preserve Prizren's legacy but also create new opportunities for economic development and international cultural exchange.

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