

Kosovo tourism in the shadow of geopolitical change

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ABSTRACT

This article employs a mixed-method approach – combining a literature review, descriptive statistical analysis, correlation testing, and the GIS for data visualization – to analyze the effects of geopolitical changes and political instability on tourism in Kosovo. Given Kosovo's goal of establishing tourism as a leading economic sector, the aim of this article is to determine whether and to what extent geopolitical factors influence its development. Despite persistent regional tensions and limited international recognition, Kosovo's tourism has remained resilient and shown gradual growth, primarily driven by diaspora and regional visitors. The findings reveal no statistically significant correlation between annual geopolitical events and tourist arrivals, indicating that the tourism industry has adapted to low-level instability. The study highlights a potential for sustained tourism growth in Kosovo in the future.

KEYWORDS

geopolitics; tourism development; Kosovo; political instability; post-conflict recovery

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1. Introduction

Global security environment is facing social, economic and environmental issues such as transnational crime, extremist groups, cyber security, energy security, climate changes, environmental pollution, and the spread of infectious diseases.

Theoretical approaches within this topic in general deal with the interdependence of security and tourist arrivals, impact of terrorism on tourism, the recovery of tourist destinations after post-terrorist attacks, the role of the rule of law in tourism countries, etc. In that aspect paper of Yan and Yungang (2024) gives a critical review of the emerging field of *tourism geopolitics*. These authors advocate that tourism and geopolitics are intrinsically interwoven but are not sufficiently theorized. Their main idea is that tourism influences and it is the result of geopolitical processes. According to their opinion a deeper integration of tourism and political geography through interdisciplinary frameworks is necessary.

Hall's stand (2017) is that geopolitics has not been a significant topic in tourism studies, but nevertheless critical shift in geopolitics in relation to tourism happened. He highlights the issue of identity, which is increasingly under pressure of programmed developments influence, neoliberal policies and the growing market. In addition to this topic, critical geopolitical perspectives are also related to security and tourism as well as hospitality. Tourism and hospitality have emerged in critical geopolitics although it has not had a significant influence on the literature that appears in tourism journals. These issues are significant for the relationships between geopolitics and tourism because they reflect the ways in which research debates are shaped by geopolitical forces (Hall 2017, 9).

In that symbiosis of geopolitics and tourism, tourists choose locations and destinations characterized by economic, political and social security. In fact, tourists are more willing to pay more to be sure that they are visiting a safe destination. Albeit geopolitical risks are reduced they can be harmful to tourism as an economic sector and overall economic growth and development in the short, medium and long term. Kosovo is one of many countries characterized by numerous political, social and economic turbulences. The most important are the bilateral disputes between Kosovo and Serbia that affect regional destabilization. All this has a negative impact on security in the country. Meantime, the possibility of a military attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Kosovo is small, primarily due to the presence of NATO (KFOR) and the increase in the protective capacities of the Kosovo Security Forces. Nevertheless, the global and regional security environment requires such a threat to be constantly assessed and considered (Kosovo Security Strategy 2022–2027). Limited effect when considering geopolitical situation

in Kosovo is that Kosovo is not universally recognized as a sovereign state (not a UN member). Kosovo international legitimacy was contested from the moment of its birth (Surroi 2011). This fact has impact on tourism through visa restrictions for some travelers, while flight and travel infrastructure are limited due to the lack of airspace access or international aviation agreements and travel advisories from countries that don't recognize Kosovo may discourage visits. As for perception, many tourists are uncertain about safety, legality, or entry conditions. As a result, tourism grows more through diaspora, niche travelers, and regional tourism than mainstream global flows. Besides, due to its young statehood and conflict-related damage, Kosovo has limited infrastructure, which impacts tourism.

Yet there are advantages of geopolitical position of Kosovo in Europe as EU helps develop infrastructure and promote Kosovo abroad. The European integration process is crucial for Kosovo's political stability, economic prosperity, and social development (Tare 2023). Positive is Kosovo's aspiration for EU membership and involvement in EU-facilitated negotiations which plays a stabilizing role (The EU and Kosovo 2021). They include rich cultural heritage, such as UNESCO-listed medieval monasteries and Ottoman-era architecture, excellent opportunities for cross-border cooperation with Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro, which all can influence adventure and historical tourism, but dark tourism too. Considering the close connection between geopolitical events and tourism, and their intertwining, the aim of this paper is to determine whether and to what extent geopolitical factors influence tourism development.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Is Kosovo still perceived as an unsafe tourist destination even 15 years after its independence?
2. Are the positive geopolitical events most important for Kosovo's rise as tourist destination?
3. Why is Kosovo lagging behind in the development of tourism capacities and the number of foreign tourists compared to neighbouring countries?

2. Theoretical framework

This paper analysis broader context of interconnection of geopolitical situation and tourism development in The Republic of Kosovo (later in the text only Kosovo). It will take into consideration geopolitical threats which have a great impact on security perception of a tourist destination, in this case Kosovo. Most published papers dealing with this topic are in the focus of interest of scientists concentrating on tourism or interconnection of tourism and politics, while not many (geo)political papers tackle this issue. Tourism in many countries contributes to rising aggregate

domestic prosperity and creating new job opportunities, especially where conventional economic activities are in decline (Kürşad Özlen and Poturak 2013).

There are challenges to developing tourism in a transitional context, particularly when transition is in the background of conflicts and wars as it is confronted with political instability (Reka 2017). Post-war, countries attempt to (re)create an image, but the effects of war on a country reiterate to the international community a sense of fear, and one would likely not imagine these countries as desirable tourist destinations (Wise 2011). Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia make a good example due to their simultaneous histories of conflict (Wise 2011) and comparison because of similarities with Kosovo.

As in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia, tourism in Kosovo suffered due to the war events. Kürşad Özlen and Poturak (2013) stated that even though as Bosnia and Herzegovina has an exceptional tourism potential, tourism image has not been built in a way that would be recognizable on the international tourism market. It is the same case with Kosovo. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it took several years (after the end of the war in 1995) for tourism to recover, hampered by ethnic tensions and the slow normalization of relations. Bosnia still struggles with fragmented governance but has growing eco- and adventure tourism. Through tourism projects it appears easier to address the lack of trust as the "politics" behind tourism are natural resources. Building up trust between people is the most important segment in developing tourism (Causevic 2010).

Although it has no direct border with Kosovo, the instability in the region which resulted in NATO bombing of Serbia (in 1999) at the time influenced the Croatian economy to a large extent, tourism in particular. The conflict captured international attention. The following tourist season, 2000, in which the Kosovo–Serbia conflict ceased and 12 months after the NATO bombing, the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays not only surpassed the level of 1999, but overshot the level of 1998, resulting in an annual increase in overnight stays amounting up to 12.057 mil. (Tkalec and Žilić 2017). Therefore, tourism recovery in Croatia proceeded much faster, which was the consequence of the construction of infrastructure (a modern highway connecting Croatia, but also other neighboring countries with the coast), integration processes, primarily Croatia's gradual rapprochement with the EU, and stronger economic growth. Croatian tourism benefited a lot when joining EU in 2013 and since then it has completely recovered.

Kosovo, similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina, experienced a decline in tourism immediately after the war due to ethnic violence and tensions, and it took several years for tourism to take off. One of the causes of tourism decline was certainly insufficient infrastructure, both transport and tourist. Nowadays, EU-mediated dialogue has helped boost perception and

tourism growth in Kosovo. Growth after 2014 likely reflects better infrastructure, marketing, and diaspora-driven visits. Many post-conflict countries first see a rise in tourism from diaspora returning or adventure/historical tourists. In Kosovo, there is a significant diaspora from Germany, Switzerland, and Nordic countries (Salopiata 2023). Many early tourists were returnees. Similar situation is recorded in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Croatia.

Yet, the fact is that the unresolved question of Kosovo's status has considerable repercussions for the stability of Kosovo itself, and of the Western Balkans as a whole: as long as Kosovo's international legitimacy as a state is in question, its borders are not inviolable, which carries the risk of future armed conflicts that would affect the entire region. According to Gelbman (2022) border disputes and weapon rattling cause concern. Many tourists assess risk by proximity – as long as the main tourist sites are unaffected, tourism may continue.

As for political protests and unrest, there is usually mild to moderate drop, depending on the scale and media coverage. That means the media often play a key role in today's conflicts and become their integral part (Riznaj 2018). In Kosovo they likely had limited impact due to their scale and geographic focus. In this context, perception plays the key role because protests in tourist areas are more damaging than unrest in peripheral zones.

2.1 Some general thoughts on political instability and safety as geopolitical factors

According to Iaquinto et al. (2024) *tourism-geopolitics* interconnections, underscore how tourism and global politics are deeply intertwined. Their opinion is that travel as well as consumption, become expressions of geopolitical negotiation. Today events as simple as pop stars concerts (like Taylor Swift) can cause diplomatic tensions and raise questions about economic sovereignty, competition and soft power. In such cases tourism can become geopolitical instrument that shapes diplomatic relations, imaginative geographies, as well as identities.

Therefore the world has become more integrated and interdependent than ever before, and research shows that a tourism crisis in one region can have serious consequences on other locations. Due to the so-called *spillover effect*, tourist destinations can be negatively affected by adverse events in nearby areas, so it is logical for tourists to choose safer destinations (Bayar et al. 2023).

One of the forms of geopolitical risks are political factors which are predominant in a certain country. Political factors consist of the laws, regulations and governmental policies that facilitate or hinder direct marketing and influence tourism industry so they can create advantages and opportunities for it (Singh 2020).

For example, terrorism or the occurrence of corruption can strongly affect tourism sector. Corruption is a constant in every society and despite that, there is very little research focused on the interconnection between corruption and tourism. Higher levels of the rule of law can influence tourism through several aspects, such as institutional quality, enforcement of contracts, property rights protection, and the reliability of courts and the police (Gozgor et al. 2019 in Bayar et al. 2023). In Kosovo, political interferences and corruption in judiciary institutions and other public administrations have been condemned by the people and international organization rapporteurs for obstructing political progress (Reka 2017).

In addition to the corruption mentioned above, tourism in many countries declines when faced with various political instabilities that hinder its development. That means the political instability and war can increase the perception of risk at a destination and generate negative publicity, resulting in an inevitable decrease in tourist arrivals. Perceptions of risk can influence tourist decisions, and tourist destinations can be seriously affected. Policymakers in countries with strong tourism need to be aware of how such political instability is experienced (Ryu 2005).

In the contemporary political period, but also in the past two and a half decades, we have witnessed the resurgence of state power to enclose territories, (re)impose borders, and restrict the movement of certain categories of people (Scuzzarello and Kinnvall 2013 in Bianchi et al. 2020). Borders are no longer open. They are often closed depending on the situation and who wants to cross them. That way they become an additional factor in the interrelationship between geopolitics and tourism (Bianchi et al. 2020). Terrorist acts have accelerated this decision.

Terrorism is one of the biggest threats for tourism. An important fact for the international terrorism is that the actors (and/or sponsors) of a terrorist act are of a different nationality than of the country where they operate, therefore the identification of victims according to their nationality is one of the criteria for this kind of terrorism (Liu and Pratt 2017).

Tourism can be used as a tool for political and ideological goals and on the other hand, can be molded by political purpose, but the manipulation of tourism may result in disadvantage to it (Ryu 2005). (Geo) political environment impacts tourism industry in any country no matter the size. Whether this industry is large or small, political factors will always have an impact on it (Singh 2020). For example, the political implications of tourism mobilities between national territories demand deeper attention. Terrorism is in addition one of the most significant and constant geopolitical risks for tourism.

In Europe terrorism has been a constant threat for European citizens for more than a decade. Terrorism and political instability are the most feared risks for tourists (Seabra et al. 2019). According to the Europol

report from 2023 "terrorism continued to pose a serious threat to EU Member States". Terrorism was still a major threat in 2022. At that time, around 28 terrorist attacks (completed, failed, or attempted) were carried out in Europe (according to the Europol report) and 380 people were arrested. Regarding the threat of terrorism in Europe, according to the Europol report from 2024, 426 people were arrested for terrorist crimes. The majority of these were related to jihadist terrorism (334). Most of them were carried out in Spain, France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy. There were likewise attacks related to leftist and anarchist activities (a total of 30) and ethno-nationalist and separatist activities (25). 120 terrorist actions were carried out in 2023, which is more than in 2022 (Europol 2024).

On the other hand, according to *Global Safety Report* from 2024, on a global level, people felt safer in 2023 than they did a decade ago. Regionally, at least seven in 10 people felt safe in Western Europe. Scores on the *Law and order index* are highly related to traditional development indicators, including global income, health, food security and homicide metrics. The index score for the world in 2023 was 81 out of a possible 100 – and in Kosovo 91! (Gallup 2024).

There is a clear connection between terrorism and tourism i.e. terrorism effects tourism in the most negative way. The perceived risk of terrorism will influence tourists' decision-making, regardless of their country of origin or their cultural background (Seabra et al. 2019). These changes in tourists' decision-making are largely due to the so-called memory effect. The memory effect refers to any feeling, anxiety or panic that leads individuals to change their usual behaviour (Shin 2017 in Seabra et al. 2019).

Covid-19 pandemic was yet another instability factor on geopolitical and global level. In their text Lučev and Zorko (2023) point out that the pandemic showed the vulnerability of the globalized world and once more emphasized the importance of borders and territories. In these new circumstances they become symbols of security redo. Through the concept of "geopolitics of fear", the ways in which spaces are marked as safe or unsafe are analyzed, which also affected tourist patterns.

3. Materials and methods

Analyzing relations between geopolitics and tourism, the Republic of Kosovo is a good example given that it is a state with numerous geopolitical challenges. In this research, in order to determine the perception of Kosovo as a tourist destination, more recent political-geographical events that could directly affect the stronger development of tourism were analyzed. This study employs a mixed-method approach combining a literature review, descriptive statistical analysis, and correlation testing. Basis for the literature overview were papers in *Web of Science Core Collection*

published by the authors who wrote on similar issues. A search was conducted to find out how the topic relating geopolitics and tourism in Kosovo is represented in scientific literature. In order to find out how many publications have been written, three key words were chosen according to the topic in the WoS databases (Web of Science Core Collection, Citation Index, Current Contents Connect, Data Citation Index etc.). The key words were geopolitics, tourism and Kosovo. According to the obtained results there are only 2 matching documents i.e., two publications selected from all databases. Both were in the categories Geography, Hospitality, Leisure, Sport&Tourism. The second search that was conducted included the same keywords, but this time in the category Title. No publications with the specified keywords were found in that search. This means that the problem is under-researched.

Analyzing literature it is obvious that political geographers in general discuss broader geopolitical issues, for example how the state tries to use tourism as a type of soft power to facilitate or prevent (cross-border) tourist mobility, thereby mediating interstate relations (An, Dittmer 2023).

As for data collection, statistical data on the international tourist arrivals in Kosovo from 2008 to 2023 were obtained from the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS), Eurostat, and the OECD. Each year in this period was associated with a major geopolitical development that potentially affected tourism flows. This resulted in the table which synthesizes the temporal alignment between key geopolitical events and annual tourist arrivals, serving as the empirical foundation for the correlation analysis discussed in the results section.

Data analysis was based on geopolitical events which marked the chosen period and to quantify these dynamics, each geopolitical event was classified as follows:

- Positive (+1): periods of political stability, normalization agreements, or EU-facilitated dialogue, periods without ethnic tensions, political agreements, etc.
- Negative (-1): incidents of border unrest, violent clashes, ethnic conflicts, attacks on peacekeeping missions, diplomatic tensions etc. or
- Neutral (0): years with mixed developments or external disruptions (e.g., COVID pandemic).

Therefore, each year is scored qualitatively (based on the event type), and then the scores are quantitatively correlated with the number of tourists in order to see how stability/instability affects tourism flows. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient is applied to assess the relationship between geopolitical event scores and annual tourist arrivals. In this case the pandemic years (2019–2020) are excluded. The used method bridges qualitative and quantitative analysis because it converts complex political contexts into analyzable data. Besides, it shows how tourism responds to shifts in political stability over time and reflects the tinged post-conflict society like Kosovo. There, even the smallest progress or tensions can strongly influence perception.

4. Some tourist indicators for Kosovo and other Western Balkans countries

In the period after the war in Kosovo, tourism had an important place in economic activation of the country.

Tab. 1 Number of foreign and local visitors in Kosovo according to region between 2008 and 2023 (in percentage).

Year	Gjakovë	Gjilan	Mitrovicë	Pejë	Prizren	Prishtinë	Ferizaj	Total
2023	14.08	34.44	21.49	22.75	24.19	11.75	22.87	18.23
2022	5.70	13.22	17.21	10.95	16.73	12.78	18.29	13.51
2021	5.14	9.95	16.82	10.73	12.50	8.99	10.94	10.42
2020	1.73	2.33	7.50	6.14	4.75	3.73	1.79	4.36
2019	8.64	7.24	8.67	9.63	8.93	8.20	5.50	8.42
2018	15.70	7.32	7.78	11.11	8.50	7.63	5.67	8.83
2017	14.66	5.05	5.28	8.48	7.31	7.21	5.51	7.37
2016	17.48	5.62	3.95	9.03	7.75	7.32	4.20	7.55
2015	2.45	1.39	1.24	3.21	2.64	5.96	2.83	4.09
2014	2.23	1.32	1.45	1.71	1.40	5.16	1.93	3.16
2013	1.64	1.46	1.60	0.98	1.31	4.60	2.68	2.80
2012	1.73	1.65	1.58	1.12	1.01	4.59	4.56	2.90
2011	1.77	1.92	1.45	0.98	0.88	3.12	3.26	2.12
2010	2.20	1.68	1.59	1.23	0.76	3.29	4.54	2.32
2009	2.42	2.73	1.36	1.23	0.75	3.85	4.80	2.61
2008	2.45	2.68	1.03	0.73	0.59	1.81	0.63	1.30

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistic, Tourism and Hotels – Yearly indicators, 2008–2023.

Today participation of the tourist economy in GDP is currently estimated to be 6–7%, while in the 1970–1999 period, it rated from 1.9 up to 2.3%. The growth of the tourist economy in the GDP results is the sharp decline in economic activity in social and public sectors of the economy. As already mentioned, the largest importance and relevance to the development of tourism in Kosovo stands in political, economic and security reasons (Nimani and Zeqiraj 2019).

Kosovo offers good opportunities for several types of tourism such as winter tourism, cultural tourism, hiking, recreational sports etc. as well as excellent potential for mountain tourism (the mountain of Prokletija and Shar Mountain). But it is noticed that the hotels are concentrated in the areas that have nothing to offer in terms of tourism, urban centers and the most important infrastructure, such as roads (Džogović and Koteski 2018). Kosovo has a road network consisting of 630 km of main roads. In addition, there are two highways: Prishtina – Hani and Elezit, which connects Kosovo with North Macedonia; and Prishtina–Morina, which connects Kosovo with Albania (Kosovo Tourism Strategy 2024–2030).

Meanwhile, geopolitical events mentioned above haven't had much influence on tourism in Kosovo in the last 15 years. According to numbers (Tab. 1), in 2023 there was a significant increase in tourist

arrivals in comparison to 2008 with some exceptions for the years 2011, 2013 and 2017 as well as pandemic years 2019 and 2020. In 2023, in comparison to 2008 there was half a million (577 192) tourist more.

The regions that dominate with the most accommodation units are Prishtina, Peja and Prizren. The rate of utilization in accommodation capacities, according to the KAS, is around 12–15%, except for the period 2019–2021 where, due to the pandemic, this rate dropped significantly (Kosovo Tourism Strategy 2024–2030).

The fact is that the number of foreign tourists (Fig. 1, Fig. 2) is the largest in the most attractive cities/regions like Prishtine, Prizren and Gjakove which can offer much more as tourist destinations than some other cities in Kosovo. Prishtine is the most visited due to the fact it is the capital city and the center of economy, culture and international presence. It has constant rise of tourist arrivals with the highest share of tourists in recent years (2021–2023). Furthermore, the presence of about half a million people living in the municipality of Pristina provides a great opportunity to develop local production and farmer-to-consumer marketing (Sallahu 2022). Prizren is one of the historically most popular destinations with a steady growth up to 24.19% in 2023. It's known for its historic and cultural value, which aligns with its increasing

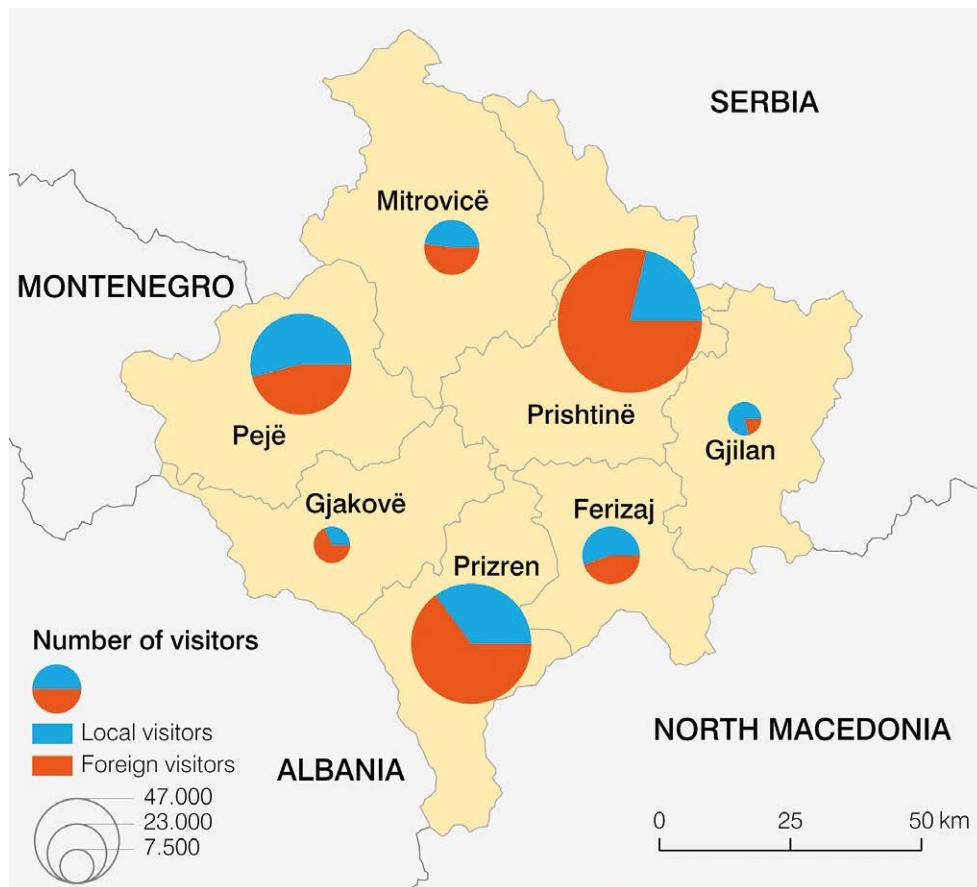


Fig. 1 Number of foreign and domestic visitors in Kosovo by region in 2023.

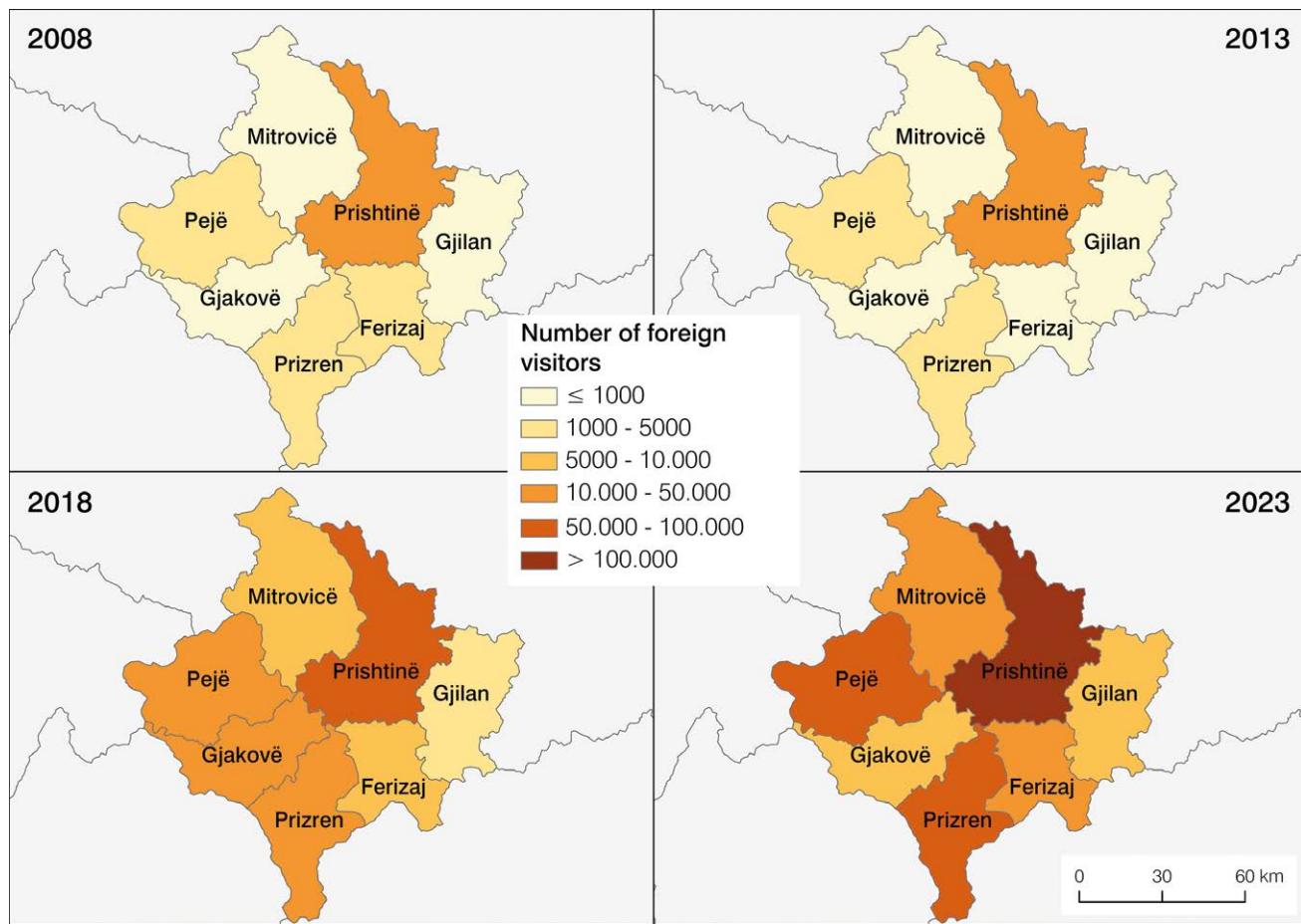


Fig. 2 Number of foreign visitors in Kosovo by region in 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2023.

popularity (KEA European Affairs 2020). On the other hand, in certain regions, this number is often much smaller in comparison to local visitors. This is the case in Gjilan, Mitrovicë, Ferizaj and Peje. Regions such as Gjilan and Mitrovicë show more fluctuations in the average stays, typically having lower averages compared to Prizren and Peja. These fluctuations could be due to less developed tourism infrastructure or fewer high-profile tourist attractions. Yet, these regions present opportunities for growth through targeted tourism development and marketing strategies (Torres et al. 2024). Nonetheless, Gjilan has lately had a significant growth, which may reflect new tourism initiatives, or border-related transit tourism, while Ferizaj has also had a consistent rise, especially after 2020, which could signal stronger regional tourism development, possibly including natural attractions or retail/tourism hubs. Peje had a gradual increase from 0.73% (2008) to 22.75% (2023) which is likely tied to Accursed Mountain and adventure tourism. All in all, Kosovo's regional tourism has diversified significantly since 2008. The overall average percentages per region increased over time, reflecting a significant growth in total tourism post-2015 (especially after the pandemic decline in 2020).

It is necessary to compare Kosovo with other Western Balkans countries, in the aspect of tourism too. (Western) Balkans is a competitive destination both for its residents and the rest of the visitors. A growth trend in all volume numbers of tourists and their overnights is showcased until the 2019 pandemic outburst, as a progression and from 2019–2021 the volume number diminished due to COVID-19 and movement restrictions (Baratsas 2024). Between 2020 and 2021 all the Western Balkans recorded a sharp increase in the number of non-resident tourists (Tab. 2) arriving at hotels and similar establishments. Kosovo, as all other countries recorded more than 100% rise. A trend of growth of the number of arrivals by 113% in Kosovo happened between 2020 and 2021. The number of non-residents arrivals had been growing from year to year. The sharp falls in arrivals from 2019 to 2020, a direct effect of the Covid-19 pandemic through the restrictions imposed on travelling and accommodation of tourists and other travelers, can be clearly seen for Kosovo. Accordingly, there was a sharp fall in tourist arrivals in Kosovo (−52%) (Eurostat 2024). Tourism in the region has generally continued a positive post-pandemic recovery, with limited impact by Russian and Ukrainian

Tab. 2 Number of arrivals of non-residents staying in hotels and similar accommodation establishments, 2008–2021 (thousands).

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EU-27	206 852	194 613	208 787	224 365	229 789	:	251 284	265 146	275 486	295 898	306 924	316 383	83 261	112 146
MN	492	437	471	499	533	581	557	595	669	795	913	:	:	:
NM	214	220	231	301	324	373	392	456	489	601	674	725	115	284
A	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	691	736	281	656
S ⁽¹⁾	561	567	618	683	707	767	880	1013	1147	1336	1514	:	392	776
BH ⁽²⁾	315	304	359	386	424	510	511	640	731	870	994	1139	189	485
K ^(3,4)	25	36	34	30	49	50	61	79	164	162	193	177	85	181

MN – Montenegro; NM – North Macedonia, A – Albania, S – Serbia, BH – Bosnia and Herzegovina, K – Kosovo; (:) not available; ⁽¹⁾ 2012: break in series; ⁽²⁾ Tourism and municipality licensed accommodation establishments; Data supplied by and under the responsibility if the national authorities; ⁽³⁾ 2016: break in series; 2021 provisional.

Source: Eurostat (2020): Statistics on tourism for the enlargement countries 2020 edition, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020; Eurostat (online data code:tour_occ_arnat) and Eurostat collection.

tourists over 2021 and 2022. Specifically, tourism has continued to increase since COVID-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, but not so much in Albania and Kosovo. Moreover, the post-pandemic recovery was marked by a divergence of performance between the more manufacturing-oriented economies (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia) and the relatively more services-oriented and tourism-dependent economies (Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo) (OECD 2024).

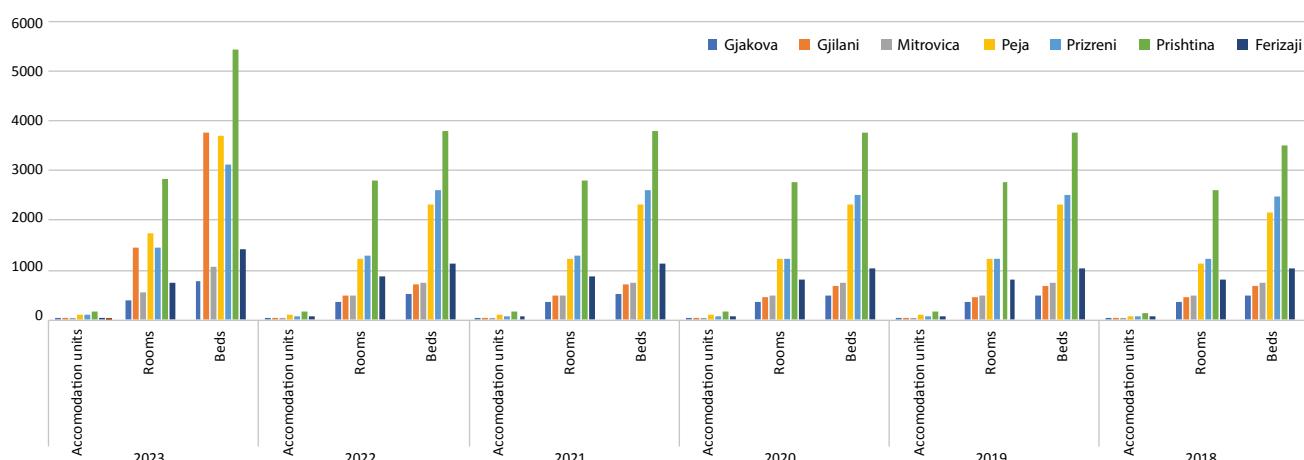
According to data, between 2008–2011, during the immediate aftermath of Kosovo's declaration of independence and ongoing tensions tourism numbers increased slightly or remained stable. This suggests that political instability and violence had a short-term negative impact on tourism. Between 2012 and 2015, as Serbia and Kosovo began EU-mediated dialogue and signed normalization agreements, tourism numbers rebounded strongly. As for border tensions (2011, 2017), they led to localized and mild tourism declines but didn't prevent long-term growth.

Serbia had the largest number of arrivals of non-residents staying in hotels and similar

accommodation establishments, around 1.5 million, followed by Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo, through all the years had convincingly the lowest numbers. These figures can be compared with a total of 306.9 million arrivals of non-residents at hotels and similar accommodation establishments in the EU-27 in 2018. Unfortunately, there is no data available for Albania for that period, only after 2018. In that context, Albania had the second-best results in the period from 2019 to 2021, just after Serbia.

Kosovo can offer tourism in the mountain regions, in addition to sites of historical and cultural interest, thus offering a wide range of tourism types. But the relative capacity of bed places is at a lower level in Kosovo. In comparison to other Western Balkan countries, Kosovo has the smallest number of beds, but it grew over the analyzed period (between 2018 and 2023). The largest increase in the number of beds is mostly recorded in the capital Prishtina, followed by Prizreni and Peja (Fig. 3).

When analyzing some other countries in the Western Balkans in the period from 2011 to 2021, the largest capacity of bed places in hotels and similar

**Fig. 3** Hotel capacities in Kosovo by region, 2018–2023.

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistic, Tourism and Hotels – Yearly indicators, 2008–2023.

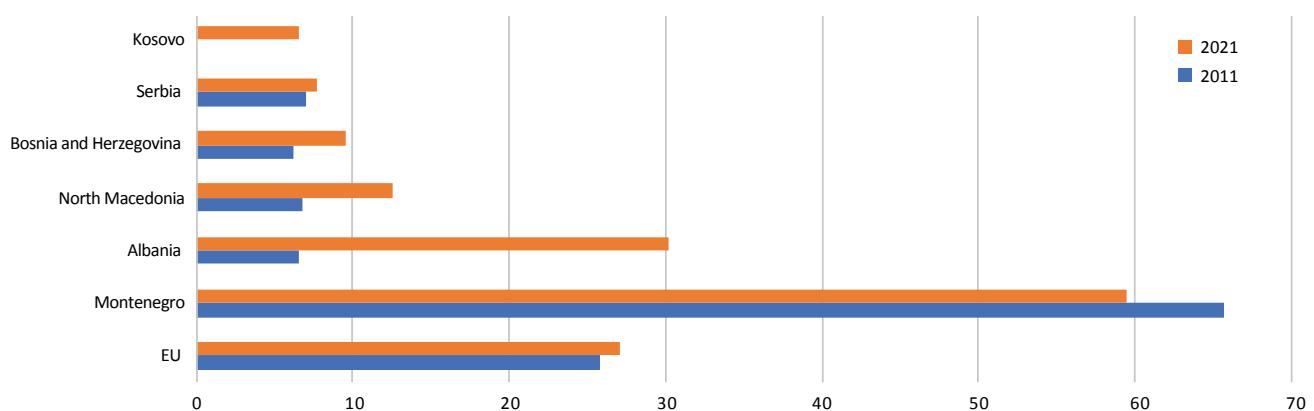


Fig. 4 Bed place capacity in hotels and similar establishments in Western Balkans and EU, 2011 and 2021 (bed places per thousand inhabitants).

*Data for Kosovo available from 2016.

Source: Eurostat (online data codes: tour_cap_nat and demo_gind) and Eurostat data collection.

establishments for example in 2021, was found in Albania with 85 000 bed places, and the second highest in Serbia (53 000). The capacity of bed places was at the similar level in Bosnia and Herzegovina (33 000) and North Macedonia (24 000), with Kosovo at around half of this level (less than 12 000). North Macedonia was the only country to experience an increase in the number of bed places for each year of this period. All the other countries experienced years in which the number of bed places declined, particularly in the early years of this period. The number of bed places offered especially decreased compared to the previous year in both 2012 and 2013 in Albania; the same applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2012 (Fig. 4) (Eurostat 2023).

The next category of data shows how many tourist beds there were per square kilometer in the period 2008–2018, in the Western Balkan countries (Tab. 3), which additionally shows the tourist density in the analyzed countries, as well as the level of development of Kosovo's tourism (in this selected segment) for this period. Data for Albania, unfortunately, is not available for this period.

According to the obtained data, although the number of tourist beds is not available for a large part of the analyzed period, it is evident that from 2016 to 2021, Kosovo was one of the leading countries in

the Western Balkans in terms of the density of tourist beds per square kilometer, just after Montenegro (between 2.5 and 3 beds per km²). Still, these are modest capacities, with a mix of hotels (47%) and motels (36%), which means that Kosovo's accommodation capacity is comparatively lower than its neighbors, indicating potential for development in its tourism infrastructure.

According to Kosovo Tourism Strategy 2024–2030, the register of accommodation capacities on the territory of Kosovo contains 490 units, which are functional and carry out hotel activities in the country. The country's strategic focus on enhancing its tourism sector could lead to growth in accommodation offerings which can influence number in overnight stays in the coming years in comparison to current data (Fig. 5).

We can conclude based on the presented data, that the economy of Kosovo could be much more oriented towards tourism in the future, which is necessary for its further development. It should be oriented towards the launch of well-known tourist centers, especially those in the process of privatization. Strategic planning for the development of tourism in Kosovo should be focused on macroeconomic stability, and the reduction of unemployment, but generally promoting economic development (Nimani, Zeqiraj, 2019).

Tab. 3 Number of tourist beds per km in Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries from 2008 to 2018.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Montenegro	2,96	3,04	2,46	2,53	2,53	2,38	2,46	2,31	2,53	2,60	2,60
N. Macedonia	0,42	0,46	0,50	0,54	0,58	0,62	0,66	0,70	0,77	0,81	0,89
Albania	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:
Serbia	0,65	0,67	0,72	0,69	0,65	0,72	0,69	0,67	0,67	0,67	0,68
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0,42	0,44	0,46	0,41	0,44	0,44	0,50	0,52	0,60	0,64	0,66
Kosovo	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	:	1,00	1,00	1,00

Source: Eurostat (online data code: tour_cap_nat).

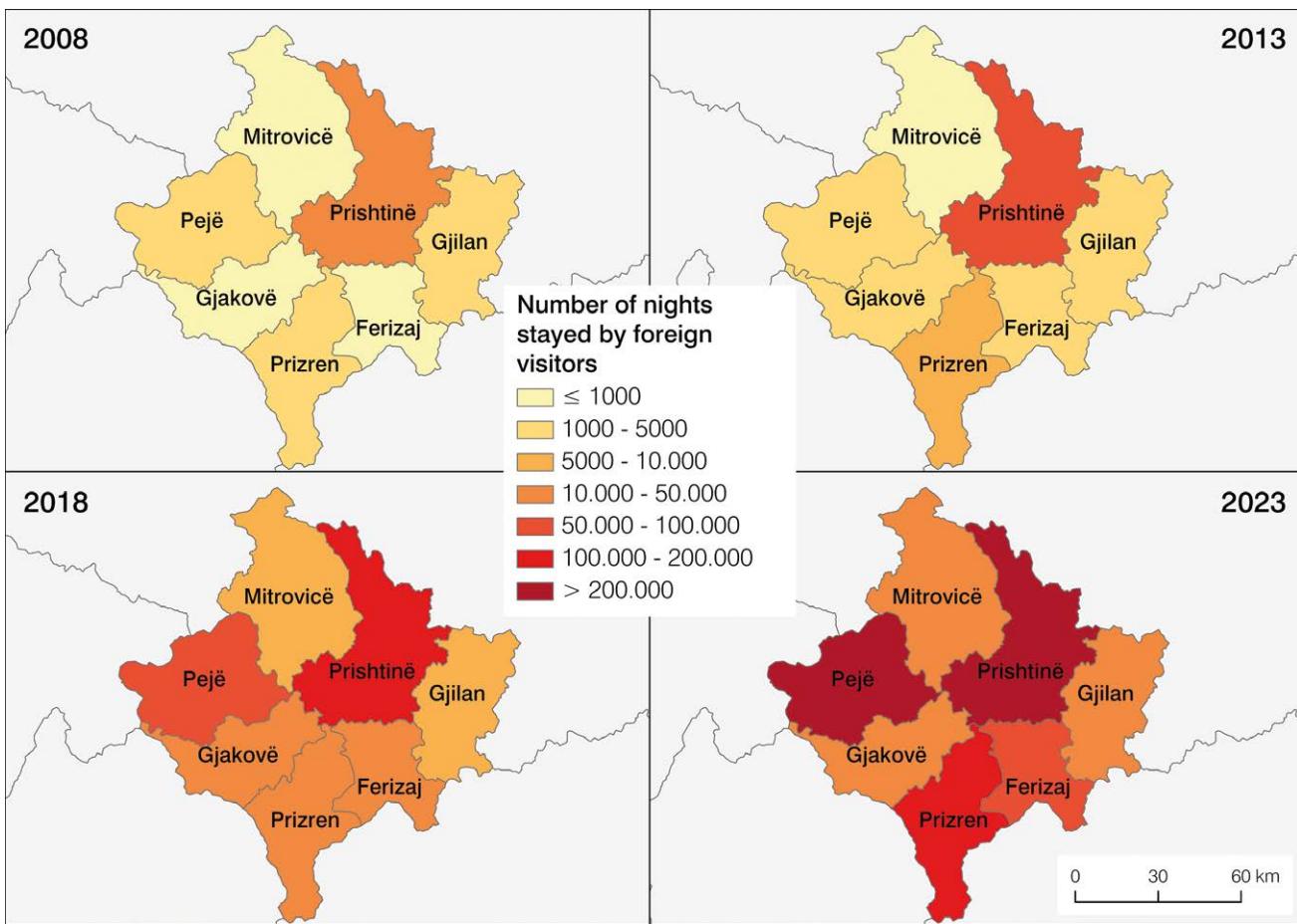


Fig. 5 Number of overnight stays of foreign visitors by region in Kosovo in 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2023.

5. Data analysis and discussion

This chapter provides an overview of the most important geopolitical events during the period from 2008 to 2023 in Kosovo and the number of foreign tourist arrivals for every year (Tab. 4). Each geopolitical event was marked as negative (-1), positive (+1) or neutral (0) so that at the end they could be summarized for each year. The method assumes that geopolitical stability functions as a key determinant of tourist behavior. The purpose of classifying geopolitical events qualitatively is to translate complex political developments into measurable indicators that can be analyzed in relation to tourism dynamics. Tourism demand, especially in politically sensitive regions such as Kosovo, is highly dependent on perceptions of safety, stability, and international recognition. Since statistical indicators of stability (like conflict index which takes into consideration four indicators – deadliness, danger to civilians, geographic diffusion, and the number of armed groups. or travel warnings) may not exist for every year, we have applied a qualitative event scoring system. It captures the *direction and intensity* of political conditions. This classification provides a standarized ordinal scale that enables correlation testing between *geopolitical context* and *tourist arrivals*. That way, we can get an overview of geopolitical climate

for that year. For the purpose of establishing correlation Pearson Correlation Coefficient is used. Thus, we should be able to get interconnection between these events and, on the other hand, decrease/increase of tourist visits which can be the result of those geopolitical events (except in the years of COVID pandemic), if this interconnection exists.

The table evidently shows that the number of tourist arrivals has varied significantly from year to year. The average number of tourist arrivals in the last 15 years has been 135,099 tourists per year. Tourism responses are often lagged and nonlinear, shaped by perception, media framing, and cumulative change rather than single events. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, which is a major geopolitical milestone, but tourism did not increase in 2009, even stayed stagnant. This can be explained by uncertainty (travelers, especially international ones, need time to adjust to a new geopolitical reality), and violence and protests in 2008 (Mitrovica clashes) which neutralized the potential excitement of independence. That was an event which didn't show immediate impact.

In the period 2010–2011 there was a gradual decline as a result of the buildup border tensions, NATO clashes, and Serbia's pushback (2010: -1,936 tourists, 2011: -4,033 tourists). Even the most violent incidents occurred in mid to late 2011, the decline

Tab. 4 Most important geopolitical events and tourist visits in Kosovo between 2008 and 2023.

Year	Key geopolitical events	No. of tourists / Index (vs. previous year)	Rationale
2008	Feb 12th: Serbia condemned Kosovo's upcoming declaration of independence as a "terrorist act". Feb 17th: Kosovo declared independence. Jun 15th: Kosovo Constitution entered into force.	36,318	Independence caused regional instability and Serbian condemnation (-1)
2009	Jan 21st: Establishment of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). Serbia protested. Apr 6th: EU Rule of Law Mission opened HQ in Pristina. Aug 25th: Clashes between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians in Mitrovica; protests in Pristina damaged 24 EULEX vehicles.	36,318* / 26.88	Unrest outweighed institutional progress (-1)
2010	Strategy for integration of northern Kosovo. Apr 19th: NATO transferred border control to Kosovo Police. May 30th: Belgrade-organized elections in Mitrovica led to conflict. Dec 12th: First general elections, followed by fraud allegations. Council of Europe report accused PM Thaçi of organized crime and organ trafficking. Oct 29th: KFOR announced troop reduction from 10,000 to 5,000.	34,382 / 25.44	Political and ethnic tensions prevalent (-1)
2011	Apr–Sep: Severe border tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Jul 27th: NATO took control of border crossings. Jul 28th: Violence along Kosovo–Serbia border. Aug, Sept, Oct: Multiple violent clashes between Kosovo Serbs and NATO forces. Nov 28th: KFOR soldiers injured during protest clashes.	30,349 / 22.47	Severe unrest with NATO involvement (-1)
2012	Apr 8th: Bomb attack in Mitrovica condemned by UNMIK. Jul 17th: Russia convened meeting on Kosovo–Serbia violence. Sep 25th: Serbia showed good will for constructive negotiation process. Oct 19th: First prime minister-level talks between Kosovo and Serbia since 2008. Nov 27th: Steps toward normalization of relations.	48,790 / 36.11	Clear diplomatic progress despite isolated incidents (+1)
2013	Jan 17th: Continued EU-facilitated dialogue. "Interim agreements" on tariffs. March: Positive developments related to high-level political dialogue. Apr 19th: "First Agreement on Principles Governing Normalization of Relations." Jun: Progress in political dialogue. Ongoing challenges in northern Kosovo.	50,074 / 37.06	Breakthrough normalization year (+1)
2014	<i>No major geopolitical events recorded.</i>	61,313 / 45.38	Stable period – conducive to tourism (+1)
2015	Aug: Continued Belgrade–Pristina dialogue. Approval of constitutional changes enabling a Special War Crimes Court.	79,238 / 58.65	Continued normalization; legal progress (+1)
2016	Jun: UNMIK no longer administered the territory. Nov: Political tensions over Community of Serbian Municipalities formation.	163,987 / 121.38	Rising tensions overshadowed otherwise calm period (-1)
2017	Feb: Heightened tension between Belgrade and Prishtina over the course of past several months. May–Nov: Renewed nationalist rhetoric and loss of trust. Nov: US reaffirmed UNMIK had fulfilled its mandate.	162,234 / 120.08	Instability and rhetoric intensified (-1)
2018	Feb: Continued tensions over Special Court repeal . May: Positive developments over border demarcation. Nov 14th: Talks of territorial exchanges. Dec: Kosovo expanded Security Forces' jurisdiction.	192,761 / 142.68	Mixed year – modestly positive due to progress (+1/borderline)
2019	COVID-19 pandemic: <i>No major geopolitical developments recorded.</i>	177,358 / 131.28	Excluded from correlation due to pandemic (0)
2020	COVID-19 pandemic. Apr: Government collapse amid pandemic response.	85,215 / 63.07	Pandemic distortion – not representative (0)
2021	Oct: Tensions in northern Kosovo and along the Serbia–Kosovo border.	212,843 / 157.54	Northern Kosovo conflict returned (-1)
2022	Apr: Improving relations; attacks on police in northern Kosovo. Oct: Continued EU-facilitated dialogue. License plate dispute renewed tensions.	297,588 / 220.27	Balance between normalization and clashes (0/mixed)
2023	Feb: Agreement on proposal for normalization of relations. Apr, May: Tensions in northern Kosovo. Jun: NATO deployed 700 additional troops amid escalating tensions. Sep: Further escalation in Northern Kosovo.	357,717 / 264.78	Escalation dominated the year despite early progress (-1)

* Probable statistical error (Kosovo Agency of Statistics).

Source: Security Council Report (2024), Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Tourism and Hotels –Yearly indicators, 2008–2023.

started earlier, suggesting anticipation of instability or consistent negative news builds over time or tourism declines in expectation of further deterioration. It could be said that border disputes cause concern, but often don't deter tourism nationwide unless they escalate into open conflict.

Between 2012–2013 normalization talks and the first visible political cooperation started between Serbia and Kosovo which brought hope. The result was a sharp rise in tourism in 2012 (+18,441), continuing in 2013. Much of the positive diplomatic momentum began in the late 2011, but tourist numbers rebounded a year later. Time was necessary to build the confidence. No major conflict events occurring between 2014–2016, improved by EU dialogue, and easing UN involvement led to a surge in arrivals +11,239 (2014), +17,925 (2015), and a major leap of +82,996 in 2016. Even though political tension existed in 2016, it didn't reduce tourism. This shows that minor tensions don't always reverse positive momentum once perception stabilizes.

In the last years (2022–2023) despite escalating tensions, including NATO deployments, tourism increased significantly: +84,745 in 2022 and +60,129 in 2023. By now, Kosovo had developed a more stable tourism infrastructure, reputation, and repeat traveler base (diaspora, regionals). There's a "conflict fatigue" effect and unless a major war breaks out, tourists no longer overreact to low-level tensions.

If we calculate Pearson coefficient for all mentioned geopolitical events for the whole period from 2008 to 2023, and if we exclude COVID period (years 2019 and 2020), since it is not in the category of geopolitical events, the results are as follows: the Pearson correlation coefficient between the net geopolitical event score and tourist arrivals is approximately 0.039, with a p-value of 0.899. Correlation ($r = 0.039$) in this case indicates an extremely weak positive correlation, practically no linear relationship between geopolitical events (as scored here) and tourist arrivals. P-value (0.899) is not statistically significant, meaning there's no evidence of a meaningful linear relationship between net geopolitical event scores and tourist arrivals in this data set.

Besides, we can test the correlation separately for positive events (like diplomatic agreements and stability measures) versus tourist arrivals and negative events (conflicts, restrictions, weapon rattling) versus tourist arrivals. In case of positive events results show correlation (r) -0.450 and P-value 0.123. This shows a moderate negative correlation, but it's not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

In case of negative events correlation (r) is -0.239 and P-value 0.431. This is a weak negative correlation, and it's far from being statistically significant. Therefore, we can't confidently say that negative events affect tourist numbers either.

In addition we can conclude, that tourist arrivals rarely react instantaneously to geopolitical changes.

Perceptions of safety, infrastructure readiness, and media narratives evolve gradually. Consequently, the impact of a protest, border clash, or a diplomatic breakthrough may influence travel decisions not in the same year but with a lag of 1 or more years.

Based on the provided data, the expected relationship between geopolitical events and tourism growth in Kosovo is complex but shows a general trend of resilience and eventual growth despite instability.

Tourism in Kosovo is one of the most important service industries and it was in a major crisis due to the Covid pandemic. This was the first big crisis in tourism sector after postwar period. Nevertheless, Kosovo's economic rebound moderated significantly in 2022 due to the fallout from Russia's war against Ukraine on energy prices and inflation, as well as a decline in investments and remittances (EU Commission, 2023). Kosovo's tourism trajectory shares both similarities and differences with other post-conflict destinations, such as Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (assome non-European post-war countries). Development of tourism, can be based on preserved environment, cultural heritage and religious tourism. In addition, Kosovo could also become a potential destination of dark tourism or thanatourism. Considering that Kosovo is a country with war experience (1998–1999), some of the locations could develop the tourist offer of this type of tourism. The war in Kosovo left behind permanent consequences, namely the general destruction of settlements, ethnic cleansing, forced deportations, mass graves, etc. All of them remain recorded in people's memories, but equally in the landscape. Some of the potential locations that could be included in the offer, i.e., which could initiate development of dark tourism are war museums, memorial sites and those places that can be connected to heritage tourism at the same time.

Some of the monuments that already have symbolic and memorial meanings are the Adem Jashari Memorial complex in Prekaz (dedicated to the commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army and his family), the Heroinat monument in Pristina (dedicated to all women victims of sexual violence during the war) and the Rečak Memorial at the site of the 1999 massacre. All of them commemorate pivotal moments of violence, resistance, and loss (Security Council Report 2024; Kosovo Agency of Statistics 2023). Mitrovica, as a divided city, is still a symbol of ethnic tension and intolerance. In addition, it should be mentioned that there are museums and exhibitions dedicated to the Kosovo Liberation Army and the creation of the state itself.

Therefore, the inclusion of Kosovo in the development of dark tourism is very complex, because it is still partially contested politically and ethnically divided – which prevents visits to certain locations that could become initiators of dark tourism. However, if Kosovo persists with dark tourism development

it could strengthen the local economy in some local communities and regions and create new “post-conflict regions” based on branding. Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Vukovar, Sarajevo, Srebrenica) have already successfully done this. The implementation of dark tourism requires a tourism strategy that would be agreed upon by all actors, i.e., collaboration between the conflicting parties without further exploitation of war trauma. Whilst the commodification of trauma raises ethical concerns, dark tourism can both foster education, commemoration, and reconciliation when approached inclusively and sensitively (Light 2017).

Year after year, except for 2010, when a significant drop in the number of arrivals was recorded, as in the years related to the COVID pandemic, Kosovo has recorded an increase in the number of both foreign and domestic tourists. In 15 years, this number has increased by more than half a million, despite the fact that the number of accommodation capacities (both hotels and other accommodation units) has remained the same or is decreasing slightly. The Kosovo Tourism Strategy for 2024–2030 is also targeted, thereby demonstrating its seriousness and intention to make tourism one of the largest economic sectors in the country.

6. Conclusions

Analyzing geopolitics from a tourism perspective is still an under-researched topic. Geopolitical processes such as political insecurity, military coups, terrorism, war, nation building, territorial disputes, ethnic cleansing, global health crisis and so on, have a deep impact on tourism development.

Kosovo in the context of generalization effect that potential tourist considers the entire region unsafe, is still perceived as insecure destination. There are numerous reports on clashes between Kosovars and Serbs which are covered by the media and broadcasted in the world. Constant political and geopolitical instability generally and most seriously threatens tourism development. Qualitative classification of geopolitical events related to tourism in Kosovo into *positive* and *negative* categories provided results which showed how political (in)stability influences tourism development – in this case offering insights into the interdependence of political normalization and economic resilience.

In the context of laid research goals, the conclusion is following:

1) Ethnic tensions, organized crime and potential terrorist attacks are just some of the most common reasons related to geopolitical instability and Kosovo's unattractiveness as a tourist destination (at least at the beginning). Terrorism and violent attacks severely influence tourism, but in Kosovo their influence was short termed. For

example, Mitrovica bombing in 2011 contributed to drop in tourism, but in 2012 situation was significantly better. According to the results, tourism was more sensitive to violent or terrorism-linked events (e.g., 2008–2011) than to border disputes or institutional issues. After 2012, even with recurring border clashes, growth continued, suggesting that tourists perceive the country as increasingly stable or that conflict zones are avoidable.

- 2) According to data, period between 2008 and 2011 was most critical for tourism in Kosovo since tourism numbers stagnated or declined, but this effect was not a longlasting one. In the following years, between 2012 and 2015, although tensions remained, tourism numbers improved significantly as the result of positive geopolitical events. After 2016 despite recurring tensions tourism consistently increased in most years. The sharp rise is possibly tied to improved infrastructure or new recognition of Kosovo as a destination. During 2017 a slight decline during renewed tensions appeared, but significant growth is recorded between 2021 and 2023, reaching 357,717 by 2023. This shows that the longer-term tourism trend is upward. In the short term, political instability and violence in Kosovo negatively affect tourism, while in the long term, political dialogue, normalization efforts, and gradual stability are strongly correlated with significant tourism growth.
- 3) Kosovo, compared to the other Western Balkan countries, has the lowest number of tourist beds, especially compared to Albania and Montenegro. Moreover, tourism is a significant contributor to the services sector in Montenegro and Albania. Tourism's direct contribution to the GDP in these countries is almost 9%, while its indirect contribution is estimated at over 20%, which is not the case in Kosovo. But this is to be expected, since these are Mediterranean countries which base their tourist offer on a different type of tourism. But, Kosovo still lags behind after Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. The situation is better when analyzing the number of tourist beds per 1000 inhabitants, where Kosovo has a similar situation to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Conclusion is that Kosovo's post-conflict tourism growth is on par with or slightly slower than other post-conflict nations, especially those with greater international recognition, stronger infrastructure, or EU connection.

Kosovo's geopolitical uniqueness creates a dual reality. On the one hand, conflict legacy, political issues and tensions restrict rapid tourism expansion. Though its distinct culture, strategic location, and gradual normalization position it for steady, resilient, and niche-driven tourism growth. Future research should explore tourists' perception data and some other models to better demonstrate lagged effects between geopolitical events and tourism behavior.

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