The phenomenon of ethno villages in Bosnian rural tourism

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Abstract

Due to its diverse cultural heritage and rich natural resources, Bosnia is lately becoming more popular among foreign visitors. Currently, many tourists are increasingly focusing on outdoor and rural tourism. To be able to fulfill their needs in terms of accommodation and activities, during the last several years many ethno villages are built throughout the country. The design of such artificial ethno villages often borders on kitsch and does not represent authentic architectural styles of the region. Some of them, as introduced in this paper, tend more towards mass tourism and luxury accommodation offers that are in contradiction to the idea of ecological ethno villages. On the other hand, many villages in the country are partly or entirely abandoned due to the population displacement into cities. This paper aims to compare the touristic offer and quality of the newly constructed ethno villages as a new form of rural tourism with existing, vernacular villages in the country. The research is a comparison study, also addressed by the analytical-historical method with the auxiliary method of the case study which incorporated recordings of site conditions. The focus of this research is the village Idbar and its prospects that offer a solid base for further development of ecological ethno tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which could potentially become one of the leading branches of rural tourism in the country.

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1. Introduction

Bosnia's natural beauty, advantageous geographical location, welcoming and hospitable nature of its people, rich cultural and historical heritage, as well as gastronomy offerings, attracted a lot of tourists in the past several years. Nonetheless, the development of rural tourism and expansion of the touristic offers often result in construction interventions within the natural setting. This trend from the beginning of the 2000s is ongoing and is displayed through the establishment of so-called ethno villages that tend to represent the way of living in rural areas in the pre-industrial period through architecture and different artefacts used by peasants. These are mostly privately financed projects that often cover large areas and are essentially not representing a realistic picture of the village life, but rather evoking some romantic feelings about it. Čiča and Mlinar argued that "conceptualization and implementation of those projects is frequently conducted without preliminary consultations with any competent institution and profession, including conservators. A caveat should therefore be expressed that the implementation of these projects as well as their tourist-oriented presentation can be



ethnologically inapt" [1]. Rural tourism, agro-tourism, and village tourism are expressions used as synonyms by experts and developers [2]. Rural tourism is only one form of tourism among many others such as city tourism, cultural heritage and religious tourism, health and spa tourism, sea tourism, ski and mountain tourism, etc. This form of tourism covers different features such as farming and selling of home-made and hand-made products, accommodation, outdoor activities, village lifestyle experience, architectural heritage, etc. [3]. This form of tourism has become more popular in recent times due to the quite busy and stressful way of life in polluted and crowded cities. Therefore, people wish to spend their free time in nature, away from noise and pollution, reconnecting with a traditional lifestyle and experiencing a real change to their usual routines and activities. Rural tourism is an important branch of the economy that should contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas. Rural areas are defined by Lukić as areas that:

- are presently or were formerly dominated by land use in an extensive manner, especially through agriculture and forestry;
- are dominated by small settlements of a lower degree of centrality with a visible connection between the built and the natural landscape and which the majority of the local population considers as rural;
- those that foster a lifestyle that rests on a cohesive identity based on respect for the environment and our own lives as part of a whole [4].

In 1986 the European Council defined rural tourism as 'a form of tourism which encompasses all activities in the rural area.' They do not limit those activities to agro-tourism or farm tourism but suggest further potential activities such as hiking, horse riding, participating in different domestic activities with the local population as well as other leisure and fitness activities [5]. The main aim of the rural tourism is to provide better living conditions for people living in the countryside and in this way prevent the eviction of young people from the villages. To ensure this socio-economical balance local communities need the support from local and state authorities and other non-governmental institutions who will all work together on the sustainable development of rural areas and maintenance of rural heritage.

2. Critical analysis of the existing ethnic tourism offers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia has great potential to further tourism development. In recent years, tourists are increasingly interested in visiting the country. In 2019, 1.640.717 tourist arrivals were recorded which is an increase of 12 % compared to the year 2018 [6]. Since Bosnia and Herzegovina has a very short exit to the Adriatic Sea, the focus is set on its green mountain areas and the potential development of outdoor, adventure and rural tourism. The noteworthy mountains of Bosnia and Herzegovina keep hidden treasures such as medieval tombstones (stećak) and isolated villages with vernacular architecture. One such village is Lukomir, located 50 km southwest of Sarajevo at 1,495 meters above sea level on mountain Bjelašnica. It is the highest populated area in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is accessible only from the end of April to early November. In addition to Lukomir, there are many other villages across the country that have preserved their authenticity, natural environment, healthy food and traditional crafts which have the potential for further development of rural and ethno tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These villages and rural areas with their optimal altitude, dense forests, meadows, watercourses with lakes and abysses, caves, rock massifs, and high air quality generally provide tourists with exceptional conditions for hiking, hunting, fishing, caving, skiing and picking of mushrooms and healing plants. However, the potential of such genuine places is still not recognized sufficiently so that people tend to build artificial ethno villages that imitate the particular architectural style and traditional way of living. Instead of that, a better solution would be, for the visitors and for the local community, to offer accommodation inside the authentic village where the visitors could experience the traditional lifestyle firsthand, participate in making local products, learn hand-crafting skills or just participate in leisure and fitness activities. This trend of the establishment of so-called ethno villages is spread across the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the neighboring countries Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. The idea of the ethno or ethnic village is to preserve the cultural heritage of a particular ethnic group through the architecture, display of handcrafts, tasting of national cuisine, and the content of activities in which guests can participate in. Unlike ethno villages that have

the purpose to preserve the architectural and cultural legacy of a certain region and to educate the visitors, the newly built ethno villages are established purely for touristic purposes and economic gain. The educational ethno villages are designed and operated by professionals (ethnologists, historians, architects, etc.) and are in a way open-air museums. The tourist-oriented version of ethno villages are investments and designs of private enthusiasts often without professional advising and aiming less to have educational character but serving more as leisure places. Such ethno villages are scattered across the country and usually placed near water features with a beautiful natural landscape. Besides the accommodation and homemade food specialties they also offer a multitude of different sport and recreational activities. All ethno villages are private investments, created by enthusiastic individuals from that region who help to grow the local economy because they employ local inhabitants, sell and use their products for food preparation in their restaurants. However, some ethno villages are more oriented towards mass tourism and bigger profit so that the initial idea of experiencing quiet, relaxing holiday away from crowded places in interaction with nature and local people is lost. Herceg ethno village in Hercegovina near to the town of Međugorje and ethno village Stanišići near Bijeljina would be such examples. Herceg ethno village Figure 1 presents a luxurious type of ethno tourism and therefore conflicts with the principles of rural ethno tourism. The complex was built in 2008 and consists of a hotel with a swimming pool and over 50 stone buildings with different functions such as lodgings, a museum, a chapel, stables, and shops that sell traditional products. The guests can choose between classy rooms in stone houses, hotel rooms or apartments. The complex offers the possibilities for the organization of conferences and different ceremonies (weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, etc.). This type of ethno village is more oriented towards group tourism and a greater number of guests. It is a convenient place to stay for the Catholic pilgrims who come to Međugorje since it is nearby and has a big number of rooms to rent, but it does not offer any traditional activities that could bring visitors closer to the way of life in this region. Another commercialized ethno village is Stanišići near Bijeljina Figure 2 in the northeastern part of the country. It offers different accommodation facilities, as well as a restaurant, stables and barns, a museum, water mills and the monastery of St. Nicholas, which also serves wedding ceremonies. This village should represent the traditions of orthodox ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, the whole village is eclectic containing some original structures like watermills and many replicas such as a small train station, a hotel, a monastery, and houses. The architecture is a mix of traditional wooden houses with steep slate roofs and German Romanesque revival stone structures, picturesque stone bridges over fish ponds, etc. Overall, it is more a romantic project of the ethno village than a realistic interpretation of the past. The touristic offer is a mix between luxury wellness and spa, sports activities, riding school, carriage rides, and sledding.



Figure 1. Herceg ethno village (Source: https://www.etno-herceg.com/en/about-us-herceg-ethno-village-medjugorje.html)



Figure 2. Ethno village Stanišići near Bijeljina (Source: https://www.etno-selo.com/en/)

Only the ethno village Stanišići in Bijeljina, has annually nearly 800,000 guests from all over Europe including the region itself. This village has become the biggest tourist attraction of northeastern Bosnia and this phenomenon shows us that ethno villages are becoming popularized and are turning more towards busy rural holiday resorts.

Even at the first sight these and similar villages might see attractive and can have quite appealing touristic offers, the problem in their establishment is much deeper than just their construction within (often) untouched natural setting. What is more concerning is their distortion of the image of vernacular architecture and village life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These ethno villages romanticize the past and evoke feelings of nostalgia through the architectural forms based on copy, forgery, and fiction or a combination of those [7]. Sometimes, the creators of these villages led by their enthusiasm and hope for the imminent financial regain of their investment exaggerate in the design and equipment of these villages, moving them further away from the authenticity and much closer to kitsch.

Ethno villages are one option in contribution to the development of rural tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this scheme, an enthusiastic individual invests in the construction of the ethno village desiring to share traditions and customs with a large number of visitors. Opposite to that solution would be another model, more sustainable, original and truly traditional in terms of architecture and the way of life which would include already existing villages. There are numerous villages in Bosnia and Herzegovina that are completely or partly abandoned, yet villages that have preserved nature and authentic traditional architecture. Investing in those villages could offer a solution of keeping the remaining inhabitants there, offering them employment opportunities on-site and at the same time preserving these villages from decay. One such village with solid potential for further touristic development is Idbar in Hercegovina, near Konjic which will be the case study of this research.

3. Case study: Idbar village

Idbar is a village located in Konjic Municipality, on the banks of the river Baščica which flows into the Jablaničko Lake in the north. Geographically considered, Idbar is located in a valley, surrounded by high mountains. It has a rich flora and fauna, including many medicinal herbs. The largest natural treasure of Idbar is water, with over 100 springs of freshwater in the surrounding area. Wells are locally known as healing and therapeutic Idbar is a village that is longitudinally developed with the length reaching eight kilometers and the widest region being three kilometers. It consists of several smaller hamlets that were named after surnames of the families living there: Bukvići, Bajramovići, Ćosići, Kasali, Nuhići, Raići, and Božići Figure 3.

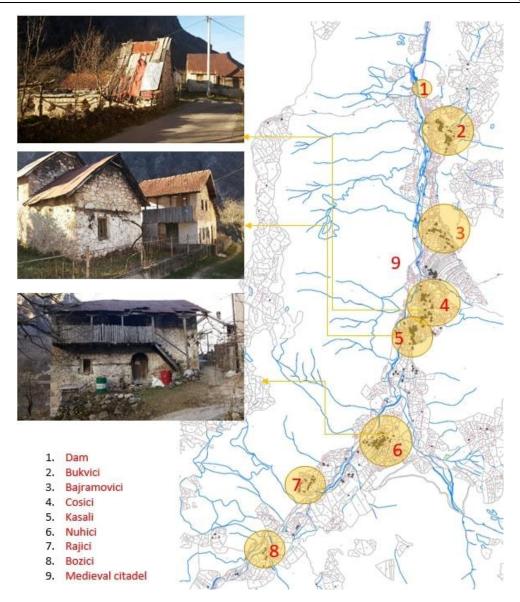


Figure 3. Structure of the village Idbar with its hamlets (Source: Author)

The village area starts from the dam built in 1954 to prevent the accumulation of materials into the nearby lake. Some of the earliest traces of the village date from the medieval period. Marking the long existence of the village are the remains of medieval citadels and ancient roads. The spread of Islamic-oriental influences by Ottoman Empire, favorable climate conditions, and configuration of the terrain in this region have impacted development as well. This is reflected in the use of courtyards that were enclosed by the houses in hamlets, the position of the house and its elements, interventions that allowed tenants to perform religious practices such as ablution, etc. (Author, 2020) Buildings were constructed from the local materials, stone and timber. Categories of the buildings that can be found in Idbar are cottages, usually built on the mountains used by shepherds, single-story houses with storage space or room in the attic, multiple story houses Figure 4, and economic buildings – storages and barns Figure 5.

The cottages represented the most basic and modest form of structures and were developed in several different types, in regard to constructive materials builders used. Cottages were wooden or made from a combination of wood and stone, sometimes covered with vegetal roofs [8]. Single-story houses were very widespread in the hilly regions and were built during the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. Differences in this type of houses were in spatial organization, building materials, or shape of the roof. In some cases, single-story houses had a room in the attic, called *čardak*. The position of *čardak* was conditioned by the slope on which the house was constructed; research showed it could be built in the front part of the house, above the room, or in the back

part of the house. Room in the attics was usually intended for the newly married couple [8]. Spatial organization of multiple story houses included a room with a heart, and story space above it, integrated into the attic. Smoke from the open heart was passing through this story room, conserving it. The storage units were constructed on the rock or built on the stone base. This was a protection measure from the floods and animals, such as snakes and mice The stone base unit was additionally secured by placing a burdock on it. Storage units had several different sections and were built close to residential houses. All of the houses in Idbar were constructed of local stone or in combination of stone and wood. Elevations are covered in white lime which, united with the surrounding greenery, give the unique visual effect of design unity. Houses corresponded to the terrain configuration and were positioned in a way to have maximum sunlight gain. They were built from local biodegradable materials, therefore, do not leave an ecological footprint. The plan for development of rural tourism in Idbar presented in this paper is based on the adaptive reuse of all vacant units, including dwelling and economic units. At the current state, all these building typologies have a different level of preservation and some of them have been destroyed. The remaining, abandoned buildings can be adapted for the purpose of tourism development in this area.



Figure 4. Multiple-story house in the hamlet Nuhići. (Source: Author)



Figure 5. Storages and barns in the hamlets Kasali and Nuhići.(Source: Author)

3.1. The touristic potential of Idbar village

After 1868, when the road connecting Sarajevo and Mostar was constructed, the town of Konjic and its nearby region became widely popular for visitors. The new government, established after the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia in 1878, recognized the opportunities for tourism development and immediately started to act upon it. Orders to examine the possible touristic assortments were sent to nature lovers, officers, clerks, and different experts. With enormous beauty and rich flora and fauna, the mountains in the Konjic region became the most important part of its tourism. After examining the natural configuration of Ivan-sedlo, the Austro-Hungarian government established a Meteorological station. Using information gained from this station, the government evaluated that the region of Konjic has climate conditions that suit the development of mountaineering, hunting, fishing, and recreational and health tourism [9].

Most of the Konjic Municipality is rural. In the process of defining the system of populated settlements in this municipality, the Spatial Plan defined three hierarchical categories: primary, secondary and tertiary centers. Konjic, defined as the only primary center of Municipality, provides services of administrative and logistic support to the development of tourism, education, culture, where the strengthening of primarily center should be following strategic goals of Municipality [10]. According to the Spatial plan, there are three secondary centers (bigger villages) and numerous tertiary centers (smaller villages) characterized by the low level of urbanization among which is also the village Idbar. The Spatial plan developed by the Municipality of Konjic [10] listed in total 23 villages categorized as tertiary centers with significant infrastructural and housing funds. As a result, rural development can be considered as a priority element in the development of Konjic Municipality. Developing tertiary centers is a process of establishing rural tourism based on suitable touristic assortments, positively influencing economic development and preventing further emigrations of the population simultaneously. Development of rural tourism in these mostly abandoned areas is substantiated with the facts that ethno tourism is nowadays a popular branch, the existing infrastructure cuts the costs and becomes more appealing for investors [11]. Existing vernacular villages are more authentic and with a good promotion can positively impact the entire community. However, developing 23 villages for touristic assortments is a longterm project, and the Spatial plan recognized the need to first analyze and define villages with the highest potential for further development. This research emphasizes the potential of the village Idbar for the purpose of tourism development. The village Idbar is partly populated with many abandoned buildings that could be renovated or adapted as lodgings, workshops, restaurants, etc. Figure 6.

Currently, visitors can stay overnight in the village, but the number of beds is limited and the lodging offer is not well advertised. The accommodation is arranged through personal connections and is mostly used by hikers on their way to the mountain Prenj. The infrastructure (road, electricity, and water/sewage) exists in the village, but it should be improved and updated. This genuine mountain village has a very good base for the development of ethno and nature-based tourism due to its natural richness, fertile land, relatively good infrastructure, and preserved architectural heritage. The visitors would have the opportunity to experience the village life firsthand while staying in traditional houses, eating locally grown food, farming on the surrounding land, learning about local customs, but also having the opportunity for relaxation and other outdoor activities. This tourist assortment would engage the inhabitants of Idbar, increasing their income and strengthening the economy of the region. These measures would help to prevent the youth from immigrating to the cities. This village has the potential of fulfilling all the parameters of sustainable ethno tourism with the strategic help of the local government and investors. A better understanding of the current state and potentials of the village Idbar resulted from the detailed SWOT analysis (Table 1).

3.2. Idbar village reuse proposal

The village reuse proposal is based on the spatial configuration and its relation with the context which was concluded through the SWOT analysis and the on-site analysis. It includes adaptive reuse of already existing building units, and will focus on three of the biggest hamlets: Ćosići, Kasali, and Nuhići Figure 7.



Figure 6. Village Idbar occupancy map for the hamlets Cosici, Kasali, and Nuhici. (Source: Author)

Every hamlet will have guest apartments in various sizes, depending on the houses' space, and common-use units to serve as restaurants with kitchens, educational and workshop rooms, playground areas, and storages. Being placed close to nearby Jablaničko Lake, famous for rafting and swimming, the village can also become a spot to further enhance this touristic attraction by providing guest apartments to visitors that enjoy these activities. Furthermore, the village is already connected with several biking and mountaineering tours passing through, and can host fans of these sport arts, providing places to rest, eat, and sleep.

The first zone represents the hamlet Ćosići which is the closest one to be reached when arriving to the village Idbar. Since this hamlet has six residential and eight economic building units that are vacant, all of these can be adapted and reused. The proximity of the river Baščica and agricultural land can be utilized for developing an eco-agricultural touristic spot. Furthermore, this hamlet is a home to two of the oldest houses in the village. One of them is completely built on the rock and can be adapted into museum spaces that will present the rich history of the site. A medieval ruin which is located across the river can be included in the educational program and linked with the museums. The second zone is the hamlet Kasali, with the greatest and the most scattered longitudinal development. The first part of the hamlet Kasali has nine occupied houses surrounded by fifteen barns and storages. Since most of the residents in this hamlet do not have regular employment, the development of tourism can help them secure economic stability without leaving the village. Fifteen barns surrounded by open fields can be reused to serve in the development of farm-based tourism. The second cluster of houses in

the hamlet Kasali has eleven vacant building units that can be adapted to utilize guest apartments and spaces of common use, such as restaurants or shared kitchens.

The most distant hamlet Nuhići is placed on the hilltops of the village and represents the third zone of touristic development. It is located on the way to the mountain Prenj that is a popular touristic location for mountaineers from all over the region. As it has ten vacant houses, all of them can be turned into guest apartments and rented to tourists that enjoy hiking and the close proximity of the forests.

The improvement of the touristic assortment of the village Idbar proposes the reuse of already existing vacant buildings in compliance with heritage protection aiming to develop and enhance rural tourism in the region. The proposed reuse plan is fulfilling all the demands and goals already introduced in the Spatial plan of Konjic Municipality. The reuse of village Idbar can serve as an example and pilot project for other vacant villages in the Municipality and in the country.

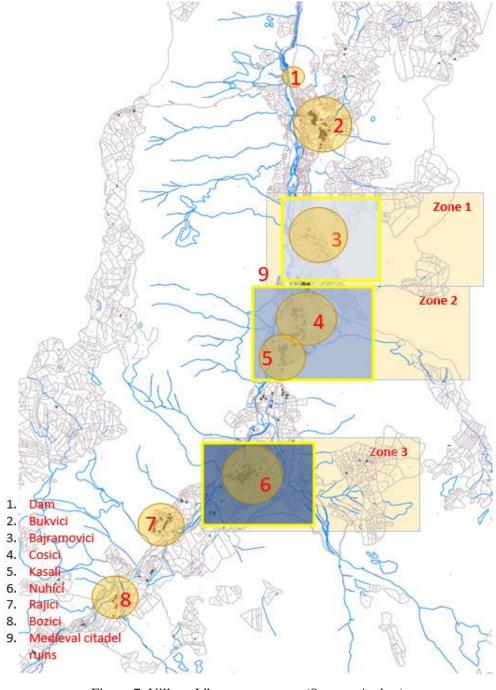


Figure 7. Village Idbar reuse zones. (Source: Author)

Table 1. SWOT analysis for the village Idbar (Source: Author)

INTERNAL FACTORS		EXTERNAL FACTORS	
STREWGTHS (+)	WEAKNESSES (-)	орроктимте (+)	THREATS (-)
Even though currently mostly abandoned, the village is included into the Strategic development plan of Koniic Municipality.	Inappropriate structural transformation of some buildings in hamlets;	Existence of many natural resources such as mountains and springs that are and can be	Deterioration of historical buildings;
Existing infrastructure and buildings can attract investors for further sustainable development; Due to existence of different hamlets, Idbar	Poor connection with the nearby town due to insufficient public transport; Due to the rural decline most of the infrastructure and buildings are in poor	Possibilities of developing eco and rural tourism Presence of vacant historical buildings that can	water management or waste systems for vernacular houses; Presence of active landfill;
Most of the empty buildings can be adapted	condition; Vernacular houses lack basic services like	be adapted and reused	touristic assortment can be detrimental to rural character;
and reused; Idbar has autochthonic areas with well- preserved rural character;	kitchen and toilets; New developments are detrimental for rural character;	Since rufal tourism is becoming more popular, village Idbar can become a pilot project for all other vernacular villages;	Closeness to recently constructed ecovillage <i>Raj u tgig</i> might affect the number of future tourists in Idbar;
Archaeological sites are present;	Parking and open space areas are not clearly defined;	Availability of EU funds supporting sustainable forms of tourism;	Lack of the good traffic connection with nearby historic town Konjic;
Municipality of Konjic;		Possibilities of developing rural tourism by using historic buildings;	Necessity of defining revitalization
Built environment is made out of local materials and therefore enhance sustainability;	The location of the village and sites inside it is not signalized in an appropriate way;	Branding and export of locally produced goods;	guidenness for existing structures, otherwise the historical heritage could be deteriorated;
Building techniques and customs in Idbar are unique; Natural surrounding is ideal for various	Economic and touristic potentials are not used to its best due to the lack of specific management plan;	Developing recreational, eco-friendly and sports tourism;	Rural tourism cannot be developed if the locals' lack the initiative or are against it;
outdoor activities (mountains and Jablaničko Lake in the vicinity); The region is already very attractive and	Economic problems are creating demographic transformations;	New job opportunities can be created in the field of agriculture and tourism; caused by visitors. Caused by visitors.	The existing near-by tourist sites are not equipped to avoid potential damages caused by visitors.
inviting to tourists; The population of Idbar is small and residents are close to one another, which results in closer community relations;		one of the major branches for strengthening the economy, as it can be included in touristic assortment. Eco-agriculture due to the fertile land and favorable climate.	

4. Conclusion

Tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the fastest-growing branches of the economy. The number of tourists is increasing every year. Ethno and nature-based tourism are becoming a lot more popular. However, the country is not using the potential of the genuine traditional villages that are partly or entirely abandoned as a base for further tourism development. Instead, private investors build so-called ethno villages that should evoke romantic feelings of past village life very often built in architectural styles not appropriate for this region. Additionally, the touristic offer itself is far from genuine village life, represented through sports courts, spa facilities, luxurious accommodation, etc. Those ethno villages do not respond to the idea of sustainable tourism development and sometimes tend to grow towards mass tourism such as Ethno village Međugorje or Ethno village Stanišići. On the other hand, there are lot of vacant or partly-vacant villages such as Idbar, near Konjic that naturally offer a good base for further development of tourism in that area because of its natural surrounding beauty, existing authentic buildings and infrastructure, etc.

This potential should be recognized by the local governments and introduced to potential investors. The municipality of Konjic has recognized the potential of its 23 villages that are listed in the Spatial Plan and has foreseen them as a base for the future development of the Konjic region, focusing on the design of one pilot project (village Idbar) to serve as a model to further interventions.

This research was focused on the reuse of village Idbar, and explored the possibilities in developing rural tourism. Idbar's natural and built heritage will be integrated into the concept that aims to create new or further develop already existing touristic assortment. The project proposes the reuse of vacant buildings that can be rented to guests, or used as restaurants, community centers, etc. Since it grows around the local community, as a result, it can strengthen the local economy, prevent emigrations of young people, and improve the overall quality of life.

However, due to the lack of financial resources, this project is still on hold, but with detailed analysis and project proposals for each village, they can be adapted for ecologic ethno tourism one by one. Reviving Idbar and similar villages across Bosnia and Herzegovina would attract more tourists who want to experience genuine village life. However, the offer would be limited so that mass tourism can be prevented, and so that the local population, along with the local government, could appropriately benefit from it. Additionally, such projects would help to retain the valuable architectural and cultural heritage of the country. New concepts that would preserve the authenticity of villages such as Idbar can be flexible and can combine different methods of heritage preservation (conservation, restoration, and reconstruction with adaptation, revitalization, and rehabilitation) being advantageous for all parties involved including the users of those facilities.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

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