

Article

Reframing Overtourism in Transitioning Western Balkan Destinations: Does Destination Context Matter?

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Abstract

This paper explores overtourism in the transitioning states of the Western Balkans through an exploratory qualitative multiple-case study. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through 120 semi-structured interviews with key local stakeholders, including residents, tourism employees, and institutional representatives from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia. The study examines the socio-economic, ecological, and political dimensions of overtourism across urban, cultural, religious, festival, and protected natural destinations. Thematic analysis revealed that excessive tourist inflows are primarily driven by uncontrolled tourism growth, weak institutional capacity, and limited community participation in destination governance. Issues such as gentrification, festival commercialisation, and increasing pressure on protected areas highlight significant differences between destinations with effective management systems and those lacking strategic governance. The study introduces the concept of political-institutional vulnerability as a key factor amplifying overtourism in post-socialist societies and proposes policy recommendations focused on inclusive governance, equitable distribution of tourism benefits, and alignment with sustainable development principles. By linking global debates with the specific realities of transition economies, the study provides an analytical framework for understanding overtourism in the Western Balkans and offers a foundation for comparative research in other transitional regions.

Keywords: overtourism; Western Balkans; countries in transition; tourism management; community participation; political-institutional vulnerability



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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of overtourism has gained popularity as one of the most actively researched problems in the field of tourism, in the case of sustainable development of the destination [1]. The negative impacts of overtourism put more and more strains on local populations, the environment and the cultural authenticity of the destinations and cause tensions between visitors and citizens [2,3]. In accordance with international sustainable tourism guidelines, urban social and spatial problems need to be addressed along with sustainable solutions that prioritize social investment and focus attention on designing and maintaining a sustainable world through social investment [3,4]. Being a multilateral and multipronged phenomenon, overtourism involves physical overloading of destinations, destruction of resources, and worsening of the residents' quality of life [5,6].

Despite the fact that the topic is becoming broader to explore, the majority of the existing approaches continue to target primarily quantitative measures and economic considerations, whereas the voices of the local stakeholders, who live and work in the destinations discussed in the context of overtourism, are frequently diminished. However, to implement sustainable policies, it is important to learn the perspectives of the socio-psychological dimensions, such as the attitude of local residents, tourism workers, and related institutions [7–9]. Doubts are also raised regarding the question bluntly, whether contemporary tourism governance does a sufficient job of responding to the challenges of overtourism, due to recurrent governance failures in terms of planning and control [10,11].

The high degree of seasonality, as well as the spatial clustering of the movement of tourists, which is particularly high in national parks, on the list of UNESCO sites, or destinations of religious nature, necessitates the adoption of a complex solution, which would involve not only the analysis of the application scenarios of visitors but also the opinions of those people who directly feel the influence of their actions [12,13]. Though there are places that are seeking to reinvent tourism development strategies in the post-pandemic context, the problems of sustainability are still persistent [14,15].

With the outlined problems as the background, the present paper pursues the goal to discuss the vision of local stakeholders on the effects of overtourism in various countries in the Southeast of Europe, such as the perspectives on Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It utilizes a qualitative study based on the interviews of the employees of tourism organizations, national park administrations, local guides, representatives of religious establishments, and people who live in the chosen destinations. It lays emphasis on the realization of their daily life and their issues, as well as the possible methods to make the sustainable destination management better. Accordingly, the overarching research question guiding this study is: How do the perceived drivers, consequences, and management challenges of overtourism vary across destination contexts defined by their spatial-functional characteristics, seasonality, infrastructure and resource capacity, and governance conditions in transitioning Western Balkan economies? In line with the study's objective, to identify specific forms, causes, and consequences of overtourism in the post-socialist and politically heterogeneous context of the Western Balkans, the research is guided by the following questions:

R.Q.1. How do local stakeholders perceive the impacts of overtourism across different types of destinations?

R.Q.2. What challenges and conflicts emerge in overtourism management according to local stakeholders?

R.Q.3. Which strategies do local communities and stakeholders view as relevant for sustainably managing tourism pressure?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Phenomenon of Overtourism*

Overtourism has become a prominent concept in contemporary tourism research, yet its meaning remains contested because it is used to describe a range of social, environmental, spatial, and infrastructural pressures associated with intensive tourism development. Milano et al. [16] frame overtourism as an evolving phenomenon that extends beyond excessive visitor numbers and reflects broader tensions generated by tourism growth. More recent research has also explored technology-based responses to tourism pressure, illustrating how the debate has expanded from diagnosis toward possible management interventions [17]. At the same time, developments in tourism marketing and demand segmentation demonstrate that tourism flows are increasingly shaped by differentiated visitor markets and targeted strategies, which further complicates the relationship between tourism growth and destination pressure [18]. In heritage destinations, these pressures are particularly significant because tourism development must be reconciled with the preservation and adaptive management of culturally sensitive spaces [19].

A central conceptual problem is that overtourism cannot be reduced to a simple imbalance between visitor numbers and destination capacity. Nilsson [20] argues for a contextualized understanding of overtourism in which tourism pressure is embedded in broader spatial and urban dynamics, while Sæþórsdóttir and Wendt [21] demonstrate how the debate has evolved from the more narrowly defined concept of tourism carrying capacity toward the multidimensional concept of overtourism. Seyhan [22] further emphasizes the need for stronger conceptual grounding by linking overtourism to destination-level change rather than treating it merely as a quantitative excess of tourists. Taken together, these perspectives challenge interpretations based on fixed numerical thresholds: the same number or density of visitors may produce substantially different consequences depending on destination characteristics, spatial organization, resource sensitivity, and the capacity of local systems to absorb tourism pressure.

This conceptual tension is also evident in attempts to measure overtourism. Peeters et al. [23], in the European Parliament's comparative assessment, show that overtourism cannot be identified through a single universal indicator and instead requires attention to combinations of tourism intensity, density, seasonality, destination characteristics, and policy context. Bibliometric evidence likewise indicates that overtourism research has developed through several partially overlapping conceptual and methodological streams rather than around a single agreed analytical model [24]. Methodological frameworks developed for highly tourism-intensive destinations, such as Santorini, further demonstrate the value of combining multiple indicators rather than relying on visitor volume alone [25]. However, tourism pressure is also affected by changes in travel motivations and demand patterns, particularly in coastal and post-pandemic contexts [26]. Consequently, quantitative indicators are useful for identifying potential concentrations of pressure, but they do not by themselves explain why comparable levels of tourism activity become socially acceptable in one destination and problematic in another.

The limitations of a purely numerical interpretation become even clearer when overtourism is examined as a social and political process. Balliu and Zbucnea [27] show that overtourism is also constructed through competing discourses about tourism development, while Higgins-Desbiolles [28] questions approaches to sustainability that prioritize the continuation of tourism growth without sufficiently considering broader community interests. This critical perspective shifts attention from the question of how many tourists a destination can accommodate toward questions of who benefits from tourism growth, who bears its costs, and who has influence over destination development. Broader regional research on the role of interest groups in governance also demonstrates why institutional

and political structures cannot be treated as neutral background conditions [29]. These issues are especially relevant where tourism growth proceeds faster than the development of planning, monitoring, and regulatory capacity.

Technological innovation adds another layer to this debate. Digital platforms and technology-based management systems can potentially support the monitoring and redistribution of tourism activity, and tourism research has increasingly examined tools ranging from blockchain-based systems to data-driven destination management [30]. Nevertheless, the management literature reviewed by Bisht [31] indicates that sustainable responses to overtourism require a broader combination of strategies rather than reliance on a single intervention. Research on tourists' behavioural responses further shows that overtourism is not produced solely through destination characteristics but also through interactions between visitor behaviour and perceived tourism pressure [32]. Similarly, Foronda-Robles et al. [33] demonstrate the potential role of user-generated content in sustainable overtourism management. These approaches broaden the available management toolkit, but they also reinforce the need to distinguish between technological capacity and the institutional capacity to translate information into effective action.

Mihalič [34] provides an important synthesis by conceptualizing overtourism through a sustainability perspective, thereby linking visitor pressure to wider economic, environmental, and social imbalances in destination development. This approach is particularly useful because it moves the discussion beyond the assumption that tourism success can be evaluated primarily through growth-oriented indicators. At the same time, adjacent research on destination choice and trust suggests that tourism development is also mediated by behavioural and relational dimensions that cannot be captured through visitor statistics alone [35]. Even marketing-oriented interventions have been proposed as mechanisms for redistributing tourism demand in highly pressured settings, including religious attractions [36]. Such approaches illustrate the increasing diversity of overtourism responses, but they also reveal the fragmentation of the literature: measurement, visitor behaviour, marketing, technology, sustainability, and governance are often examined separately even though they operate simultaneously within destinations.

The literature therefore points to a fundamental analytical distinction between tourism intensity and overtourism. High visitor numbers, density, or seasonal concentration may create the conditions for overtourism, but they do not constitute overtourism independently of their social, environmental, spatial, and institutional consequences. More importantly, much of the established literature has developed around mature tourism destinations in which infrastructure, formal tourism statistics, planning mechanisms, and regulatory systems are comparatively well established. The transferability of these assumptions to transitioning destinations is less certain. Where seasonality is pronounced, infrastructure capacity is uneven, planning and enforcement are fragmented, or portions of tourism activity are imperfectly captured by official statistics, similar tourism volumes may generate substantially different local consequences. This unresolved relationship between measurable tourism pressure and destination-specific capacity provides the conceptual basis for examining overtourism as a context-dependent phenomenon rather than a universally measurable threshold.

2.2. Perceptions of the Local Population About Overtourism in the Transition Destinations of the Western Balkans

Research on overtourism increasingly recognizes that tourism pressure is not perceived uniformly across destinations or stakeholder groups. Weber and Eggli [37] demonstrate that the manifestation of overtourism varies across destination categories, suggesting that resident responses cannot be separated from the spatial, functional, and tourism characteristics of the places in which they occur. This is particularly relevant to the Western Balkans, where

urban heritage centres, coastal destinations, protected natural areas, festival locations, and religious destinations coexist within relatively small geographical areas but operate under markedly different seasonal, infrastructural, and governance conditions. Consequently, local perceptions should not be treated simply as reactions to visitor numbers; they reflect the interaction between tourism intensity, residents' everyday exposure to tourism, economic dependence, place attachment, and the institutional capacity of destinations to regulate tourism development.

Dubrovnik provides the most extensively documented regional example of this interaction. Vukadin et al. [38] examine the city's transition between overtourism and under-tourism and demonstrate how tourism dependence complicates attempts to fundamentally restructure the destination. More directly, Abbasian et al. [39], using interviews with local tourism employees, identify overcrowding, traffic congestion, displacement of residents, higher prices, reduced quality of life, seasonality, and cruise tourism among the principal perceived consequences and drivers of overtourism in Dubrovnik. Their findings are particularly important because tourism employees occupy a dual position: they depend economically on tourism while simultaneously experiencing its pressures as members of the local community. This challenges a simple division between "pro-tourism" tourism workers and "anti-tourism" residents and suggests that perceptions of overtourism are often ambivalent rather than uniformly negative.

This ambivalence also has implications for tourism policy. General sustainable-tourism frameworks emphasize the need to balance economic, environmental, and social objectives rather than treating tourism growth as an end in itself [40]. In the regional context, Pomianek and Kljajić [41] compare sustainable-tourism policy directions in Poland and Serbia and demonstrate the importance of aligning tourism development with changing environmental challenges, policy priorities, and stakeholder expectations. These contributions do not directly measure overtourism perceptions, but they highlight an important institutional dimension of resident attitudes: perceptions of tourism are formed not only in response to tourism impacts themselves, but also in relation to how effectively those impacts are anticipated, regulated, and distributed through destination policy.

Evidence from Croatia further illustrates this relationship between perceived benefits and costs. Miočić et al. [42], in a study of residents of Zadar, find that residents can remain relatively satisfied with tourism while simultaneously recognizing crowding, traffic pressure, price increases, and other negative consequences. The significance of this finding lies precisely in this coexistence of support and dissatisfaction: economic benefits do not necessarily neutralize concerns about everyday quality of life. Rather than interpreting resident attitudes as a binary distinction between acceptance and rejection of tourism, this tradition of research suggests that perceptions should be understood as multidimensional evaluations in which economic dependence, personal exposure, local living conditions, and perceived tourism pressure operate simultaneously.

This multidimensional interpretation is also consistent with the broader overtourism literature. Chaney and Séraphin [43], in their systematic and lexicometric review, identify management, experience, and context as three central strands of overtourism research and note the strong concentration of previous studies on negative impacts. Their synthesis is important for resident-perception research because it indicates that documenting dissatisfaction alone provides an incomplete explanation of overtourism. The analytical question is not simply whether residents perceive tourism negatively, but how those perceptions are shaped by destination context and translated, or fail to be translated, into management responses.

Individual and socio-spatial characteristics further complicate this relationship. Šenková et al. [44] demonstrate that perceptions of overtourism differ according to age in

selected European destinations, reinforcing the broader argument that tourism pressure is not interpreted identically by all individuals. However, demographic differences alone provide only a partial explanation. Purwandani and Pakan [45], drawing on the concept of local habitus in Yogyakarta, show that local responses to temporal overtourism are embedded in social relationships, cultural values, and norms of solidarity and tolerance. Their study is outside the Western Balkan context, but conceptually it demonstrates why similar tourism pressures may generate different local responses in different socio-cultural settings. Rodrigues et al. [46] reach a related conclusion from a resident-based study in Lisbon, showing that perceptions of tourism are associated with geodemographic characteristics, the concentration of local accommodation, and length of residence. Taken together, these studies move resident-attitude research beyond demographic profiling toward a more contextual interpretation in which exposure, place attachment, economic position, and local social structures shape perceptions of tourism pressure.

For the Western Balkans, however, direct comparative evidence remains limited. Danilović Hristić et al. [47] provide an important regional contribution by comparing historical Mediterranean coastal towns, including Dubrovnik and Kotor, and showing how tourism pressure interacts with heritage protection, depopulation, infrastructure, planning, and different policy approaches. Their comparison indicates that the same tourism-development trajectory can generate different outcomes depending on the timing and effectiveness of planning interventions, and that measures introduced only after saturation has occurred may be less effective than preventive approaches. This is particularly relevant for transitioning destinations, where institutional capacity and implementation may vary considerably even among destinations experiencing similar levels of tourism demand.

Taken together, the resident-attitude literature provides an important foundation for the present study but also reveals several unresolved issues. First, perceptions of overtourism are often studied within single destinations, making it difficult to determine whether observed attitudes reflect general tourism pressures or destination-specific conditions. Second, resident attitudes are frequently examined through demographic or impact-based measures, while institutional coordination, enforcement, and opportunities for meaningful participation receive less systematic attention. Third, Western Balkan evidence remains concentrated on a relatively small number of prominent coastal and heritage destinations, particularly Dubrovnik and Kotor, leaving urban, festival, religious, rural, mountain, and protected-area contexts comparatively underexplored. The present study therefore extends this literature by examining multiple categories of local stakeholders across different destination contexts and by interpreting their perceptions not only through perceived social, economic, and environmental impacts, but also through seasonality, infrastructure and resource capacity, and destination governance. These dimensions also informed the structure of the semi-structured interview protocol used in the empirical phase of the study.

2.3. Strategies for Managing Overtourism and an Overview of Previous Methodological Approaches

Management responses to overtourism encompass regulatory, spatial, technological, behavioural, and participatory approaches rather than a single set of visitor-control measures. Smart-city and destination-management approaches have explored the use of digital monitoring, visitor-flow management, and spatial redistribution of demand [48], while visitor profiling has been proposed as a means of reducing pressure through more differentiated demand-management strategies [49]. Recent smart-destination models further demonstrate the potential of artificial intelligence, real-time data, and integrated destination-management systems to support decision-making [50]. However, evidence from highly pressured destinations such as Bali and environmentally sensitive settings such

as Mount Everest demonstrates that tourism pressure cannot be addressed through technical measures alone, because environmental degradation, local social impacts, infrastructure capacity, and institutional responses interact in destination-specific ways [51,52]. More critical approaches therefore question purely growth-oriented or technically driven solutions [53], while empirical research has shown that residents' perceptions are shaped by the interaction between overtourism, local government responses, and tourist behaviour [54]. Atzori [55] similarly demonstrates that stakeholders may differ substantially in how they perceive overtourism impacts, causes, and appropriate responses, while Yrigoy et al. [56] show that overtourism itself may become embedded in stakeholder power struggles. These studies suggest that management responses cannot be separated from questions of governance, distribution of tourism benefits and costs, and the relative influence of different stakeholder groups.

Importantly, context-sensitive, indicator-based, and stakeholder-oriented approaches to tourism management substantially predate the recent use of the term "overtourism". The UNWTO Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations guidebook established a destination-specific and participatory approach to sustainability indicators, covering issues such as host-community satisfaction, seasonality, development control, natural-resource management, cultural heritage, and destination governance [57]. The UNEP-UNWTO policy framework likewise conceptualized sustainable tourism as a continuous management process requiring informed stakeholder participation, political leadership, monitoring of impacts, and preventive or corrective action [58]. At the European level, the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) was explicitly designed as a locally led management and monitoring tool through which destinations and their stakeholders can collect, interpret, and periodically reassess sustainability information [59]. Similarly, the GSTC Destination Criteria integrate sustainable management, stakeholder engagement, management of pressure and change, socio-economic wellbeing, cultural sustainability, environmental sustainability, and corresponding performance indicators [60]. It would therefore be inaccurate to characterize earlier tourism-management approaches as predominantly quantitative or concerned only with maximum visitor numbers. Rather, the current overtourism debate builds on a longer tradition in which quantitative indicators are combined with stakeholder participation, governance, monitoring, and context-specific interpretation.

The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) tradition is particularly relevant to this distinction. Unlike approaches that seek to identify a universal maximum number of visitors, LAC focuses on the degree and type of change that a destination and its stakeholders consider acceptable, together with indicators capable of signalling when those conditions are being exceeded. Jordão et al. [61], applying LAC to the historic centre of Porto, demonstrate the importance of local perceptions, participatory planning, and the involvement of stakeholders who are both affected by and involved in tourism development. Dragovich and Bajpai [62] further show how LAC and related threshold-based approaches can support adaptive management in environmentally sensitive areas by linking observable indicators with predetermined conditions that trigger management attention. More recently, Donaire et al. [63] expanded the LAC approach through scenario-based modelling in Barcelona, showing how alternative visitor profiles and tourism intensities may generate different sustainability outcomes. Taken together, these approaches shift the analytical question from how many tourists a destination can physically accommodate to what types of change are acceptable, for whom, under which conditions, and how those conditions should be monitored and reassessed over time.

Against this established methodological background, the contribution of qualitative and interpretive research lies not in replacing quantitative indicators but in explaining how measured pressures are experienced, interpreted, and contested by different stakeholder

groups. Interview-based studies of Dubrovnik [39], research on local habitus and temporal tourism pressure [45], and qualitative case evidence from Nainital [64] illustrate the value of examining locally situated meanings and responses. At the same time, technology-oriented destination-management models [50] and recent work on regional tourism collaboration in the Western Balkans [65] point toward the importance of connecting local evidence with broader governance and coordination structures. The remaining gap is therefore not the absence of qualitative, participatory, or context-sensitive approaches in tourism research, but their limited comparative application across heterogeneous destination contexts in transitioning Western Balkan economies. In particular, there remains a need to examine how stakeholder perceptions interact with seasonality, infrastructure and resource capacity, institutional coordination, and differences in the distribution of tourism benefits and costs.

In this study, political-institutional vulnerability refers to the limited capacity of public institutions to effectively regulate tourism development through strategic planning, transparent governance, stakeholder participation, and enforcement of tourism regulations. The concept encompasses institutional quality, governance effectiveness, coordination among public authorities, and the ability of local tourism administrations to respond to overtourism challenges. Weak political-institutional capacity may increase the risk that tourism pressure exceeds the environmental, social, or infrastructural capacity of a destination, particularly where monitoring, coordination, and adaptive management mechanisms are limited.

Building on these established indicator-based, participatory, and adaptive-management traditions, the framework proposed in this study does not assume that mature-destination approaches are limited to visitor numbers or carrying-capacity thresholds. Rather, it examines how the operation and effectiveness of these established principles may be conditioned by the specific characteristics of transitioning Western Balkan destinations. In such settings, strong seasonality, uneven infrastructure and resource capacity, fragmented planning and enforcement, limited institutional coordination, and tourism activity that may not be fully captured in official statistics can affect both the manifestation of tourism pressure and the capacity to monitor and manage it.

Accordingly, overtourism is conceptualized here as a context-sensitive process in which measurable tourism pressure is interpreted through the spatial-functional characteristics of the destination, temporal concentration, infrastructure and resource sensitivity, stakeholder positions, and political-institutional capacity. Within a broader destination-management cycle, rigorous data and indicators provide the basis for diagnosis; interpretative approaches help explain how pressures are experienced by different stakeholder groups; governance determines how evidence is translated into decisions; monitoring and early-warning mechanisms identify changes over time; and adaptive responses allow management measures to be reassessed as destination conditions evolve. The present study contributes primarily to the interpretative and governance-diagnostic components of this broader framework by comparing stakeholder perceptions across heterogeneous destination contexts. It does not seek to define universal thresholds or prescribe destination-specific interventions solely on the basis of interview evidence. Figure 1 summarizes this analytical positioning and its relationship with the broader process of context-sensitive overtourism management.

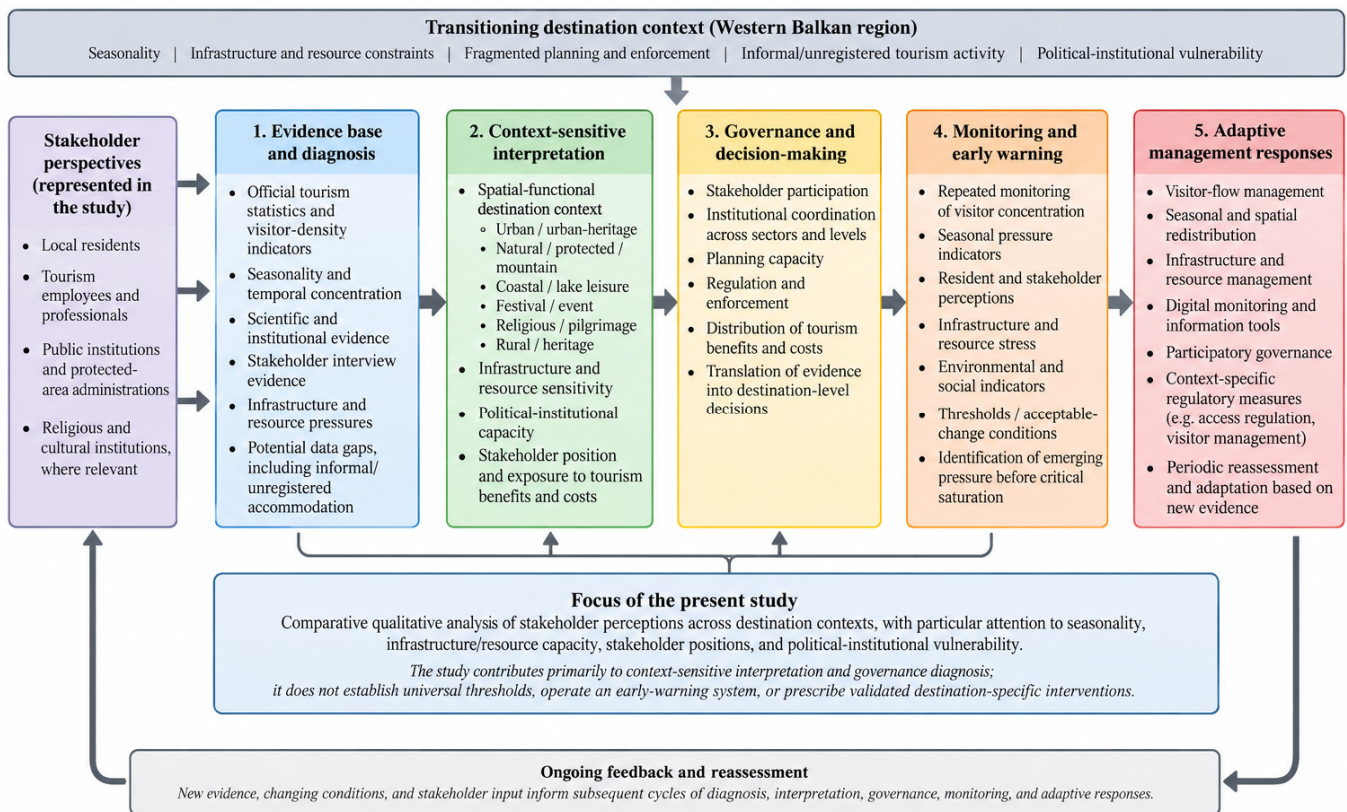


Figure 1. Context-sensitive framework for reframing overtourism in transitioning Western Balkan destinations. Source: Authors' research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Considering the objectives of this study, which sought to explore local stakeholders' perceptions of the impacts of overtourism in destinations across the Western Balkans, a qualitative research approach was adopted [66,67]. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining subjective experiences, local narratives, and socio-cultural contexts that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The study was designed as a multiple-case study, enabling the exploration of different destination types and varying manifestations of overtourism, including urban, religious, festival, and natural destinations. This design facilitates the identification of both common patterns and context-specific differences across cases and provides a basis for analytical rather than statistical generalization [68]. In the present multiple-case design, the destination constituted the unit of case comparison (17 destination cases), whereas the 120 semi-structured interviews constituted the participant-level qualitative dataset. Accordingly, references to "cases" in the comparative analysis refer to destinations, while participant-level frequencies refer to individual interviews.

The objective of the study was not to compare countries statistically but to explore recurring patterns and context-specific differences across multiple destination types in the Western Balkans. Accordingly, the cases were selected to maximize contextual diversity rather than numerical representativeness. The inclusion of multiple countries was intended to capture a broad range of destination contexts rather than to identify nationally representative patterns or conduct systematic cross-country comparisons. In this study, destination context is operationalized as the combination of the predominant spatial and tourism function of a destination and the contextual conditions through which tourism pressure is experienced and managed. At the first level, destinations were classified according to

their predominant spatial-functional tourism profile, including urban, cultural/heritage, festival/event, religious/pilgrimage, coastal or lake-based leisure, natural/protected or mountain, and rural/heritage contexts. Classification was based on the dominant tourism function, spatial setting, and protection or heritage status of each destination. At the second level, cross-case interpretation considered contextual modifiers such as seasonality, infrastructure and resource capacity, and governance and planning capacity. Where destinations combined more than one characteristic, they were treated as hybrid or borderline cases rather than forced into mutually exclusive categories. In Table 1, the first descriptor therefore indicates the predominant context, while additional descriptors retain analytically relevant secondary characteristics.

Table 1. Sensitivity analysis of case selection under alternative evidence-based selection rules.

Destination	Official Tourism Statistics	Scientific/ Institutional Evidence	Stakeholder Evidence	Primary Rule: ≥ 2 of 3	Alternative 1: Official Statistics + ≥ 1 Contextual Source	Alternative 2: Scientific/Institutional + Stakeholder Evidence
Belgrade	1	1	1	1	1	1
Novi Sad	1	0	1	1	1	0
Guča	1	1	1	1	1	1
Kopaonik	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mokra Gora	0	1	1	1	0	1
Budva	1	1	1	1	1	1
Kotor	1	1	1	1	1	1
Durmitor	1	1	1	1	1	1
Lovćen	0	1	1	1	0	1
Dubrovnik	1	1	1	1	1	1
Plitvice National Park	1	1	1	1	1	1
Rovinj	1	0	1	1	1	0
Ljubljana	1	0	1	1	1	0
Bled	1	1	1	1	1	1
Triglav National Park	1	1	1	1	1	1
Mostar	1	1	1	1	1	1
Međugorje	1	1	1	1	1	1
Evidence available/destinations retained (n)	15	14	17	17	15	14
Share of original case set (%)	88.2	82.4	100.0	100.0	88.2	82.4

Source: Authors' research.

Case selection followed a purposive, multi-source procedure rather than an expert-rating exercise. The 17 destinations were selected to maximize contextual diversity while ensuring documented evidence of substantial tourism pressure. Eligibility was assessed through triangulation of three sources: official tourism statistics, including annual visitor numbers and visitor density where available; peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports documenting tourism-related pressures; and evidence of locally experienced tourism pressure reflected in stakeholder accounts. A destination was retained when at least two of these evidence sources consistently indicated relevant overtourism-related pressures, such as seasonal overcrowding, congestion, pressure on infrastructure or natural resources, commercialization of public space, or tensions affecting residents' quality of life. The procedure was not based on numerical expert ratings, ranking rounds, or an aggregated expert score; therefore, inter-rater agreement statistics were not applicable to destination selection. The aim was not to rank destinations by overtourism intensity, but to assemble a theoretically diverse set of cases in which tourism pressure was sufficiently documented to support comparative qualitative analysis.

As an additional check on the robustness of case selection, a sensitivity analysis was conducted based on alternative combinations of the same three sources of evidence used in the basic selection procedure: official tourism statistics, previous scientific and institutional

documentation, and evidence obtained from interviews with local stakeholders. The basic procedure meant that the destination was retained when there was support from at least two of the three sources of evidence. The first alternative specification required the availability of official tourism data together with at least one contextual source, while the second alternative specification required the simultaneous support of scientific/institutional documentation and stakeholder evidence, independent of the availability of tourist density indicators. The aim of the check was not to rank destinations according to the intensity of overtourism, but to assess whether the selection of cases and the representation of the main types of destinations depend on one data source. The sensitivity analysis indicated that the case selection remained relatively stable under more restrictive evidence-based specifications. The primary rule retained all 17 destinations. Alternative 1 retained 15 destinations (88.2% of the original case set), whereas Alternative 2 retained 14 destinations (82.4%). Importantly, the main destination contexts represented in the study remained covered under both alternative specifications, suggesting that the contextual diversity of the multiple-case design was not dependent on a single source of evidence (Table 1).

The calculation of visitor density was not intended as a quantitative variable for hypothesis testing or statistical analysis. Instead, it was used solely as contextual information to characterize the intensity of tourism activity across the selected destinations and to support the interpretation of participants' perceptions of overtourism. Visitor density therefore served as a descriptive contextual indicator that complemented the qualitative findings by providing a common reference point for interpreting the different case studies.

3.2. Data Collection

The field research was conducted between June 2024 and March 2025 across selected overtourism hotspots in five Western Balkan countries. A total of 120 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key local stakeholders, including representatives of tourism organizations, national park administrations, local guides, restaurateurs, religious institutions, and permanent residents. Interviews were carried out both face-to-face and online, lasting between 30 and 60 min. A common semi-structured interview protocol was used across all stakeholder groups to ensure comparability between participants and destinations. The protocol was organized into four thematic sections. The first section addressed participants' relationship with the destination and their involvement in tourism or local community activities. The second focused on perceived tourism pressure and its effects on everyday life, the local environment, seasonality, and economic and social conditions. The third examined destination governance, institutional responses, stakeholder participation, and conflicts associated with tourism development. The fourth addressed possible strategies for managing tourism pressure, including visitor-flow management, seasonal and spatial redistribution, digital tools, institutional coordination, and greater community participation. The same core questions were used across stakeholder groups, while additional follow-up prompts were adapted to participants' roles and the specific destination context. The complete semi-structured interview protocol, including the core questions and optional follow-up prompts, is provided as Supplementary Material Table S1.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with the assistance of local tourism organizations, professional networks, public institutions, and direct contacts in the selected destinations. Table 2 shows the structure of the sample by country, destination and type of stakeholder involved in the research. Participants included local residents, employees and tourism professionals, representatives of public institutions and management of protected areas, as well as representatives of religious and cultural institutions, depending on the specific context of each destination. The distribution of participants was not equal between destinations, but reflected differences in their size, intensity of tourist

activities, dominant type of tourism and variety of local actors. This structure of the sample enabled the inclusion of different perspectives and contributed to a more complete understanding of the way in which the pressures of excessive tourism are manifested in different spatial and institutional contexts of the Western Balkans. The 17 destination cases therefore comprised five urban/urban-heritage destinations (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Dubrovnik, Ljubljana, and Mostar), five natural/protected or mountain destinations (Kopaonik, Durmitor, Lovćen, Plitvice National Park, and Triglav National Park), four coastal/lake-leisure destinations (Budva, Kotor, Rovinj, and Bled), one festival/event destination (Guča), one religious/pilgrimage destination (Međugorje), and one rural/heritage destination (Mokra Gora). The corresponding participant bases were $N = 44$, $N = 30$, $N = 30$, $N = 6$, $N = 5$, and $N = 5$, respectively, giving an overall participant sample of $N = 120$. Secondary cultural or heritage characteristics were retained descriptively in Table 2 but were not used to create overlapping categories in the cross-context tabulation.

Table 2. Distribution of interview participants by destination and stakeholders.

Country/ Destination	Predominant Destination Context	Local Residents	Tourism Employees/ Professionals *	Public Institutions/ Protected-Area Administrations	Religious/ Cultural Institutions	Total
Serbia						
Belgrade	Urban	4	4	2	0	10
Novi Sad	Urban/cultural	3	3	1	1	8
Guča	Cultural/festival	2	2	1	1	6
Kopaonik	Mountain/natural	2	3	3	0	8
Mokra Gora	Rural/cultural heritage	2	1	1	1	5
Serbia total		13	13	8	3	37
Montenegro						
Budva	Coastal/leisure	3	4	2	0	9
Kotor	Coastal/cultural heritage	3	3	2	1	9
Durmitor	Protected natural/mountain	1	2	3	0	6
Lovćen	Protected natural/cultural	1	1	2	0	4
Montenegro total		8	10	9	1	28
Croatia						
Dubrovnik	Urban/cultural heritage	4	4	2	2	12
Plitvice National Park	Protected natural	2	2	3	0	7
Rovinj	Coastal/cultural	2	2	1	1	6
Croatia total		8	8	6	3	25
Slovenia						
Ljubljana	Urban/cultural	3	2	1	1	7
Bled	Lake/leisure	2	2	2	0	6
Triglav National Park	Protected natural/mountain	1	1	3	0	5
Slovenia total		6	5	6	1	18
Bosnia and Herzegovina						
Mostar	Urban/cultural heritage	2	2	1	2	7
Međugorje	Religious/pilgrimage	1	1	1	2	5
Bosnia and Herzegovina total		3	3	2	4	12
TOTAL		38	39	31	12	120

Source: Authors' research. * Note. Tourism employees/professionals includes local guides, restaurateurs, hospitality employees and representatives of tourism organisations. Note. Destination-context categories represent predominant analytical characteristics rather than mutually exclusive destination types; hybrid labels were retained where more than one tourism function was relevant.

Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich participants with direct experience of overtourism in the selected destinations [30]. The inclusion criteria required

participants to: live or work in the destination for at least three years; be directly involved in tourism-related activities, destination management, or community life; and possess first-hand knowledge of tourism-related challenges associated with increasing visitor pressure. The selected destinations represent different tourism contexts, including urban, cultural, religious, festival, and protected natural areas, thereby capturing diverse manifestations of overtourism across the Western Balkans.

As this study adopts an exploratory qualitative multiple-case study design, the objective was not to obtain a statistically representative sample of the Western Balkan population, but rather to collect rich, context-specific insights from knowledgeable stakeholders. The target population therefore comprised local stakeholders directly affected by tourism development, rather than the general population. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with the final interviews yielding no substantially new themes. Accordingly, no statistical comparisons between countries or stakeholder groups were intended, and the findings should be interpreted as analytically rather than statistically generalizable. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the objectives of the research and provided their informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, subsequently transcribed verbatim, and coded for qualitative analysis. The geographical distribution of the study areas is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Research area. Source: Authors' research.

In Serbia, the study covered Belgrade (389.12 km²), Novi Sad (83 km²), Guča (0.55 km²), Kopaonik (121.06 km²), and Mokra Gora (47.74 km²), with a total of 37 participants distributed across these destinations (Belgrade, n = 10; Novi Sad, n = 8; Guča, n = 6; Kopaonik, n = 8; Mokra Gora, n = 5). In Montenegro, Budva (122 km²), Kotor (335 km²), Durmitor

(390 km²), and Lovćen (62.2 km²) were included, with a total of 28 participants (Budva, n = 9; Kotor, n = 9; Durmitor, n = 6; Lovćen, n = 4). In Croatia, the study included Dubrovnik (142.6 km²), Plitvice National Park (296.85 km²), and Rovinj (77.5 km²), with a total of 25 participants (Dubrovnik, n = 12; Plitvice National Park, n = 7; Rovinj, n = 6). In Slovenia, Ljubljana (274.99 km²), Bled (13.6 km²), and Triglav National Park (880 km²) were investigated, with a total of 18 participants (Ljubljana, n = 7; Bled, n = 6; Triglav National Park, n = 5). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mostar (1165.63 km²) and Međugorje (11.83 km²) were included, with a total of 12 participants (Mostar, n = 7; Međugorje, n = 5). Overall, the study included 120 participants across 17 selected destinations in five countries. The selected destinations differ significantly from each other according to their dominant spatial, tourist and functional characteristics. Belgrade, Novi Sad and Ljubljana represent primarily urban tourist destinations, while Dubrovnik, Kotor and Mostar combine urban tourism with a pronounced function of cultural and historical heritage. Guča is predominantly a festival destination, while Međugorje represents a specific example of religious and pilgrimage tourism. Kopaonik, Durmitor, Lovćen, Plitvice Lakes and Triglav are characterized by natural and protected areas, in which tourist pressures are particularly related to seasonality, the concentration of visitors and the sensitivity of the ecosystem. Budva and Rovinj have a pronounced coastal and rest tourism character, while Bled is recognizable for its intensive tourism related to the lake and alpine environment. Mokra Gora combines rural, cultural and heritage characteristics. These differences represent an important context for interpreting the results, as the manifestations of overtourism, as well as the perceptions of local stakeholders, differ depending on the type of destination, spatial organization, seasonality and dominant tourism function.

3.3. Analytical Framework and Software

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in MAXQDA 2022 (version 22.8.0), which enabled the systematic coding, organization, retrieval, and visualization of thematic patterns. The analytical procedure combined deductive and inductive approaches. Initial codes were partly informed by the theoretical framework and previous research on overtourism, while most categories emerged inductively from the interview data through an iterative analytical process.

The coding process generated numerous initial open codes, which were progressively consolidated into broader axial categories through repeated comparison of the interview transcripts. These categories were subsequently integrated into four overarching themes that captured the dominant patterns across all interviews. The four themes presented in the Section 4 represent the final synthesis of a substantially larger set of initial codes and intermediate categories identified during the iterative coding process and are illustrated with representative quotations from participants.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, strategies related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied throughout the research process [69]. Several procedures were used to enhance the rigor of the analysis. First, an independent researcher double-coded a subset of three interview transcripts, and any discrepancies were discussed until consensus on thematic classification was reached. Second, analytical reflexivity was maintained through a research diary documenting methodological decisions and potential sources of researcher bias. Third, member validation was conducted by presenting selected findings to a subset of participants to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations.

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles applicable to social science research, with particular attention to confidentiality and anonymity. All personal data were pseudonymized, interview transcripts were assigned identification

codes (e.g., Respondent 01 and Respondent 02), and any information that could enable participant identification was removed.

The analysis was informed by coding procedures commonly associated with grounded theory, particularly open, axial, and selective coding. During the first phase, open coding was used to identify relevant concepts while remaining open to themes emerging from the data rather than imposing rigid predefined categories. Frequently occurring expressions included terms such as “noise,” “crowding,” “waste,” “income,” and “lack of control.” In the second phase, axial coding was used to group the initial codes into broader thematic categories reflecting patterns and relationships in participants’ narratives, such as “disruption of everyday life,” “environmental pressure,” and “ambivalent attitudes toward tourism.” Finally, selective coding was applied to identify the central thematic dimensions of stakeholders’ experiences of overtourism and to integrate these into a coherent interpretive framework.

The iterative analytical process enabled continuous refinement of categories, comparison of findings across destinations, and preservation of the contextual specificity of each case. Repeated coding, constant comparison of interview data, and iterative refinement of categories supported the achievement of thematic saturation, as the final interviews did not generate substantially new concepts or themes. The overall coding and thematic analysis process is illustrated in Figure 3.

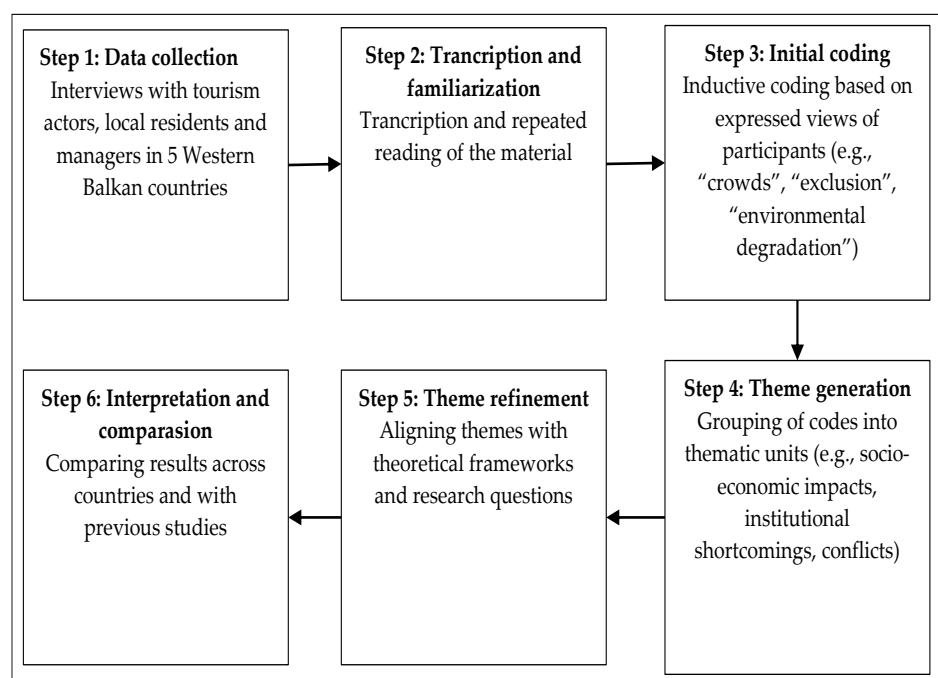


Figure 3. Data analysis process. Source: Authors’ research.

The European Parliament report on overtourism emphasizes that there is no universally accepted threshold at which overtourism begins, as tourism pressure varies considerably depending on destination characteristics, spatial scale, seasonality, infrastructure capacity, and visitor distribution [70]. Consequently, tourist density should be interpreted as a comparative indicator of spatial tourism pressure rather than as a definitive measure of overtourism. In this study, tourist density is consistently expressed as the total annual number of visitors per square kilometre (visitors/km²). Higher density values indicate a greater concentration of tourism activity and potential pressure on destination resources, although their interpretation should always consider the specific characteristics of each destination. Relatively small destinations such as Guča and Bled may experience high

visitor densities during peak tourism periods, whereas geographically larger destinations, including Triglav National Park and Belgrade, may record lower visitor density despite accommodating substantially higher total numbers of annual visitors.

The identification of the selected destinations as overtourism hotspots was based on the triangulation of three complementary sources: official tourism statistics, including annual visitor numbers and visitor density; previous scientific literature and institutional reports documenting tourism-related pressures; and qualitative evidence obtained through semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders. Destinations were included when multiple sources consistently indicated substantial tourism pressure manifested through congestion, seasonal overcrowding, environmental degradation, pressure on infrastructure, commercialization of public space, or conflicts between tourism development and residents' quality of life. Accordingly, the identification of the selected destinations should not be interpreted as a quantitative ranking of overtourism intensity, but as an evidence-based procedure for selecting contextually diverse cases for comparative qualitative analysis.

Inter-coder agreement was assessed on a subset of three interview transcripts using the final coding framework comprising 16 codes. The double-coded material generated 75 coding decisions for each code, resulting in 1200 coding decisions overall (75×16 codes). These coding decisions represent coder-level judgments regarding the application of individual codes and should not be interpreted as participant cases. All 120 interviews were included in the substantive thematic analysis; the subset was used exclusively to assess coding consistency between the two coders. Agreement was evaluated using percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa (κ). Across the 1200 coding decisions, 1102 agreements and 98 disagreements were recorded, corresponding to an overall agreement of 91.8% and Cohen's $\kappa = 0.782$. Inter-coder agreement reflects consistency between coders in applying the coding framework and should not be interpreted as agreement among participants or as evidence of homogeneity across the selected cases. Variability in participants' accounts was assessed separately through theme and code prevalence and through cross-context comparisons (Table 3).

Table 3. Inter-coder agreement for the double-coded interview subset.

Code	Agreement (%)	Cohen's κ	Disagreements (n)
Crowding and congestion	94.7	0.802	4
Loss of privacy	94.7	0.834	4
Noise and disturbance	89.3	0.770	8
Transformation of public space and place identity	89.3	0.545	8
Seasonal visitor concentration	93.3	0.845	5
Waste and pollution	85.3	0.651	11
Pressure on ecosystems and protected areas	92.0	0.827	6
Pressure on local resources	90.7	0.798	7
Tourism income and local economic benefits	97.3	0.943	2
Employment opportunities	92.0	0.807	6
Rising prices and cost of living	86.7	0.565	10
Commercialization of everyday life	84.0	0.375	12
Limited community participation	92.0	0.802	6
Weak institutional coordination	97.3	0.885	2
Insufficient enforcement	94.7	0.848	4
Need for participatory governance	96.0	0.856	3
Overall	91.8	0.782	98

Source: Authors' research. Note. Coding decisions refer to coder-level decisions within the three double-coded transcripts and not to the number of study participants. All 120 interviews were included in the thematic analysis.

As an additional procedure to assess the credibility of the qualitative interpretation, member validation (member checking) was conducted. Twenty participants were invited to review a summary of the main thematic findings, of whom 16 provided feedback. Their responses were classified according to whether the interpretation was confirmed without substantive changes, required minor contextual clarification, or required substantial modification of the thematic structure. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of participant validation of the thematic interpretation.

Member-Validation Indicator	n	%
Participants invited	20	100.0
Participants providing feedback	16	80.0
Interpretation confirmed without substantive changes	13	81.3 ¹
Minor clarification suggested	3	18.8 ¹
Major thematic revision required	0	0.0 ¹

Note.¹ Percentage calculated among the 16 participants who provided feedback. Source: Authors' research.

4. Results

Qualitative analysis identified four overarching thematic categories that synthesize participants' experiences and perceptions of overtourism across the selected destinations: everyday life and local environment, environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration, economic benefits and quality of life, and community participation and destination governance. These thematic categories capture the principal recurring patterns identified in the interview material and indicate that the perceived impacts and management challenges of overtourism vary according to the geographical, institutional, and tourism context of the destination. The results are interpreted through the destination-context framework developed in Figure 1. Rather than treating overtourism as a uniform consequence of high visitor numbers, the analysis examines how tourism pressure is filtered through four context-sensitive dimensions: the spatial-functional character of the destination, seasonality and temporal concentration, infrastructure and resource sensitivity, and governance and planning capacity. These dimensions provide the basis for interpreting cross-case differences in the four themes identified through thematic analysis. Seasonality was not conceptualized as an environmental impact in itself. Rather, seasonal visitor concentration was treated as a temporal contextual condition that participants frequently associated with increased waste and pollution, pressure on ecosystems and protected areas, and strain on local resources, particularly in natural and protected destinations. The theme was therefore labelled "environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration" to distinguish the temporal condition of seasonal concentration from the environmental and resource-related consequences with which it was associated in participants' accounts.

In urban destinations, particularly Belgrade and Dubrovnik, participants frequently associated tourism pressure with crowding, loss of privacy, transformation of public space, and changes in place identity. In natural and protected destinations, including Plitvice Lakes and Kopaonik, greater emphasis was placed on seasonal visitor concentration, waste and pollution, pressure on ecosystems and protected areas, and pressure on local resources. In cultural and festival destinations, including Guča, participants more frequently described tensions between tourism-related economic benefits and pressures on everyday life and local quality of life. Across destination types, governance-related accounts additionally highlighted limited community participation, weak institutional coordination, insufficient enforcement, and the need for more participatory approaches to destination governance.

Each overarching theme comprises a set of more specific codes reflecting recurring experiences, concerns, and attitudes identified during the coding process. Table 4 presents the structure of the identified themes and codes together with their prevalence in the analysed interviews. Code frequency is reported using two complementary indicators. The number of participants (n) represents the number of participants whose interview contained a given theme or code at least once, while the corresponding percentage indicates its prevalence relative to the total analysed sample (N = 120). The number of coded segments represents the total number of relevant transcript segments to which the respective code was assigned.

Multiple coding was permitted when a transcript segment contained more than one analytically relevant meaning. Consequently, an individual participant, as well as an individual interview segment, could be associated with multiple codes and overarching themes. The categories are therefore not mutually exclusive, and the reported percentages are not expected to sum to 100%. The frequencies are used as descriptive indicators of recurring patterns within the qualitative material rather than as a basis for statistical inference or generalization to the wider population. Accordingly, the quantitative representation of code prevalence is interpreted together with the content and context of participants' accounts, which are examined in greater depth in the subsequent thematic interpretation and illustrated through representative participant statements (Table 5).

Table 5. Thematic categories, codes, and coding frequencies.

Theme/Code	Participants Mentioning (n)	Participants Mentioning (%)	Participants Not Mentioning (n)	Participants Not Mentioning (%)	Coded Segments (n)
1. Everyday life and local environment	91	75.8	29	24.2	214
Crowding and congestion	72	60.0	48	40.0	93
Loss of privacy	48	40.0	72	60.0	54
Noise and disturbance	43	35.8	77	64.2	41
Transformation of public space and place identity	25	20.8	95	79.2	26
2. Environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration	78	65.0	42	35.0	167
Seasonal visitor concentration	61	50.8	59	49.2	68
Waste and pollution	45	37.5	75	62.5	47
Pressure on ecosystems and protected areas	37	30.8	83	69.2	38
Pressure on local resources	14	11.7	106	88.3	14
3. Economic benefits and quality of life	83	69.2	37	30.8	181
Tourism income and local economic benefits	64	53.3	56	46.7	71
Employment opportunities	43	35.8	77	64.2	46
Rising prices and cost of living	39	32.5	81	67.5	39
Commercialization of everyday life	25	20.8	95	79.2	25
4. Community participation and destination governance	74	61.7	46	38.3	149
Limited community participation	53	44.2	67	55.8	57
Weak institutional coordination	42	35.0	78	65.0	43
Insufficient enforcement	31	25.8	89	74.2	31
Need for participatory governance	18	15.0	102	85.0	18

Source: Authors' research.

The coding results indicate that the identified themes did not represent mutually isolated dimensions of the overtourism experience. Multiple coding allowed segments containing multiple analytically relevant meanings to be associated with multiple codes, resulting in overlapping frequencies of individual categories. The distribution of codes was used as a descriptive indicator of the prevalence of certain patterns in the analyzed material, while their meaning was determined by the interpretation of the context in which they appeared. Findings were then discussed according to destination type and research questions, with representative statements from participants.

In addition to the overall representation of themes and codes, the analysis is also focused on examining their distribution according to the type of destination. Such an approach allows for the observation of contextual differences in the way participants perceive and describe the consequences of excessive tourism. The destinations are, in accordance with their dominant tourist characteristics, grouped into urban, natural/protected, cultural/festival and religious destinations. The distribution of the main topics according to these categories is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Prevalence of overarching themes across predominant destination contexts.

Overarching Theme	Urban/Urban-Heritage N = 44	Natural/Protected/Mountain N = 30	Coastal/Lake Leisure N = 30	Festival/Event N = 6	Religious/Pilgrimage N = 5	Rural/Heritage N = 5	Total N = 120
Everyday life and local environment	38 (86.4%)	18 (60.0%)	25 (83.3%)	5 (83.3%)	3 (60.0%)	2 (40.0%)	91 (75.8%)
Environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration	19 (43.2%)	28 (93.3%)	23 (76.7%)	3 (50.0%)	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	78 (65.0%)
Economic benefits and quality of life	31 (70.5%)	14 (46.7%)	27 (90.0%)	6 (100.0%)	3 (60.0%)	2 (40.0%)	83 (69.2%)
Community participation and destination governance	31 (70.5%)	19 (63.3%)	17 (56.7%)	3 (50.0%)	2 (40.0%)	2 (40.0%)	74 (61.7%)

Source: Authors' research.

The results indicate a different representation of thematic patterns between types of destinations. Issues related to everyday life and the local environment were more prominent in urban contexts, whereas environmental and resource pressures associated with seasonal visitor concentration were more strongly represented in natural and protected destinations. Economic benefits and their relationship with quality of life are especially present in cultural and festival destinations. At the same time, the issues of local community participation and destination management appear in all types of destinations analyzed, which indicates the wider importance of the institutional and participative aspect of managing tourist pressures. This distribution shows that excessive tourism does not manifest itself in a unique way in all destinations, but that the character and intensity of the identified problems depend on the spatial, ecological, social and touristic context of the destination.

In order to ensure the transparency and consistency of the qualitative analysis, a code framework was developed, which systematized the initial codes into broader analytical categories and four main thematic units. Each code is associated with an operational definition that specifies which types of participant statements belong to the corresponding category. In this way, a consistent application of codes throughout the analyzed material and a clear connection between the content of the interviews, individual codes and the finally identified themes were ensured. The structure of the code frame and operational definitions of the codes used are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Code framework, thematic units and operational definitions of codes.

Main Theme	Code	Operational Definition
Everyday life and local environment	Crowding and congestion	Statements concerning visitor concentration, crowding, and difficulties in everyday mobility.
	Loss of privacy	Statements concerning the loss of privacy experienced by local residents due to the intensive presence of tourists.
	Noise and disturbance	Statements concerning noise and other disturbances affecting the everyday lives of local residents.
	Transformation of public space and place identity	Statements concerning changes in the use of public space, its adaptation to tourist consumption, and changes in local place identity.
Environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration	Seasonal visitor concentration	Statements concerning the temporal concentration of visitor pressure during particular periods and peak seasons, including accounts linking such concentration to intensified environmental, infrastructural, or resource pressure.
	Waste and pollution	Statements concerning waste, pollution, and degradation of local environments associated with tourism activities.
	Pressure on ecosystems and protected areas	Statements concerning tourism-related pressures on natural ecosystems, biodiversity, and protected areas.
	Pressure on local resources	Statements concerning increased tourism-related pressure on local infrastructure, water, public services, and other local resources.
Economic benefits and quality of life	Tourism income and local economic benefits	Statements concerning income, business opportunities, and other economic benefits associated with tourism.
	Employment opportunities	Statements concerning employment and business opportunities associated with tourism development.
	Rising prices and cost of living	Statements concerning increases in prices, housing costs, and other living expenses associated with tourism demand.
	Commercialization of everyday life	Statements concerning the adaptation of everyday life, local spaces, and activities to tourist consumption and commercial interests.
Community participation and destination governance	Limited community participation	Statements concerning insufficient involvement of local residents and other local stakeholders in tourism-development decision-making.
	Weak institutional coordination	Statements concerning insufficient coordination among institutions and other stakeholders involved in destination management.
	Insufficient enforcement	Statements concerning inadequate implementation, monitoring, or enforcement of existing regulations and measures.
	Need for participatory governance	Statements emphasizing the need for consultation, advisory bodies, and more active involvement of local communities in decision-making.

Source: Authors' research.

The geographical distribution indicates that all four overarching themes were represented across the five national subsamples, although their relative prevalence differed.

Everyday-life and local-environment concerns were particularly prominent in the Croatian subsample, whereas environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration were comparatively more visible in Montenegro. Economic benefits and quality-of-life considerations were broadly represented across Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia, while governance and participation concerns occurred across all five countries. Given the purposive sampling strategy and unequal national subsample sizes, these differences are treated as descriptive patterns within the qualitative material rather than as statistically generalizable country effects (Table 8).

Table 8. Prevalence of overarching themes by country.

Country	Participant Base (N)	Everyday Life and Local Environment n (%)	Environmental and Resource Pressures Under Seasonal Concentration n (%)	Economic Benefits and Quality of Life n (%)	Community Participation and Destination Governance n (%)
Serbia	37	27 (73.0%)	24 (64.9%)	26 (70.3%)	23 (62.2%)
Montenegro	28	21 (75.0%)	22 (78.6%)	21 (75.0%)	18 (64.3%)
Croatia	25	22 (88.0%)	17 (68.0%)	18 (72.0%)	16 (64.0%)
Slovenia	18	13 (72.2%)	10 (55.6%)	12 (66.7%)	10 (55.6%)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	12	8 (66.7%)	5 (41.7%)	6 (50.0%)	7 (58.3%)
Total	120	91 (75.8%)	78 (65.0%)	83 (69.2%)	74 (61.7%)

Source: Authors' research.

4.1. Thematic Interpretation of Overtourism Experiences and Management Responses

The four overarching themes identified through the qualitative analysis, everyday life and local environment, environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concentration, economic benefits and quality of life, and community participation and destination governance, provide the analytical framework for interpreting participants' experiences across the selected destinations. As the coding framework allowed multiple coding, these themes should not be understood as mutually exclusive dimensions. Rather, participants' accounts frequently connected social, environmental, economic, and governance-related aspects of tourism pressure. Building on the thematic and code distributions presented above, the following sections interpret these interconnected patterns in relation to the three research questions and illustrate the findings through representative participant statements.

4.1.1. Perceived Impacts of Overtourism Across Destination Types

The findings related to the first research question (RQ1) indicate that perceptions of overtourism vary according to destination type and the intensity and seasonality of visitor pressure. In urban destinations, particularly Belgrade and Dubrovnik, participants primarily associated overtourism with crowding and congestion, loss of privacy, noise and disturbance, and the transformation of public space and place identity. These patterns correspond primarily to the theme everyday life and local environment and show that tourism pressure was experienced not only through increasing visitor numbers but also through changes in residents' everyday use and perception of local space.

"Skadarlia has become a stage. It is no longer for us, but for their selfies." (resident, Belgrade)

"Dubrovnik in the summer is not our city. Tourists are everywhere, you can't go to the store normally." (resident, Dubrovnik)

A different pattern was more evident in natural and protected destinations. Here, participants placed greater emphasis on seasonal visitor concentration, waste and pollution, pressure on ecosystems and protected areas, and pressure on local resources. These codes form the core of the theme "environmental and resource pressures under seasonal concen-

tration” and indicate that, in environmentally sensitive destinations, seasonal concentration acted as a temporal condition through which waste, ecosystem pressure, and strain on local resources became particularly salient in participants’ accounts.

“On Kopaonik there is no more silence, only noise and plastic. . . and we are talking about protected zones.” (guide, Kopaonik)

Although this statement also reflects noise and disturbance, its reference to waste and protected zones illustrates how individual accounts could simultaneously relate to more than one code and thematic category.

In cultural and festival destinations, participants expressed more ambivalent perceptions. Tourism was recognized as a source of tourism income and local economic benefits and employment opportunities, while participants also referred to rising prices and cost of living and the commercialization of everyday life. These findings reflect the theme economic benefits and quality of life and demonstrate that the perceived economic advantages of tourism may coexist with social and everyday-life pressures.

“It makes money in those few days, but afterwards we clean the streets and fix everything they leave behind.” (host, Guča)

The findings related to RQ1 show that overtourism is not experienced as a uniform phenomenon. Urban destinations are particularly associated with pressures on everyday life and local space, natural and protected destinations with environmental and seasonal pressures, and cultural and festival destinations with tensions between tourism-related economic benefits and local quality of life. The findings also demonstrate why multiple coding was appropriate, as individual participant accounts frequently connected more than one dimension of overtourism.

4.1.2. Governance Challenges and Stakeholder Conflicts

The second research question (RQ2) concerns the challenges and conflicts associated with the management of tourism pressure. These findings correspond particularly closely to the fourth overarching theme, community participation and destination governance. Participants repeatedly described limited community participation, weak institutional coordination, and insufficient enforcement, while also emphasizing the need for participatory governance. Fragmented responsibilities and limited consideration of local knowledge emerged as important concerns. Participants suggested that tourism planning and destination management decisions were not always sufficiently informed by the experiences of those directly affected by tourism pressure.

“No one asks us anything. They plan from the office, and then we see how to manage.” (resident, Kotor)

This account reflects the code limited community participation and illustrates a perceived gap between formal decision-making processes and community-level experience.

Participants also referred to problems related to the implementation and enforcement of existing regulations. These concerns were particularly evident in destinations exposed to intensive visitor pressure and in environmentally sensitive areas.

“There are laws, but there is no inspection. Who controls the number of people in Plitvice National Park?” (national park employee, Plitvice Lakes)

Such statements correspond to the code insufficient enforcement and suggest that the existence of formal rules does not necessarily ensure effective management when monitoring and implementation capacities are perceived as inadequate.

A further recurring issue concerned the coordination of institutions and the position of local stakeholders within destination governance. Participants emphasized that locally

generated knowledge and proposed solutions were not always incorporated into formal decision-making processes.

“We have solutions, but no one is including us.” (cultural institution employee, Mostar)

The findings related to RQ2 therefore indicate that overtourism governance challenges extend beyond the management of visitor numbers. Limited community participation, weak institutional coordination, insufficient enforcement, and demands for more participatory governance emerge as interconnected dimensions of the institutional response to tourism pressure.

4.1.3. Stakeholder-Supported Responses to Tourism Pressure

The third research question (RQ3) examines the responses that participants considered relevant for the more sustainable management of tourism pressure. Rather than identifying a single preferred intervention, participants described a combination of regulatory, temporal, spatial, technological, and participatory responses. These proposed responses were closely connected with the problems represented by the four overarching themes.

In natural and protected destinations, proposals for regulating visitor intensity were associated with environmental and resource pressures intensified by seasonal visitor concentration, particularly pressure on sensitive ecosystems and local resources.

“Quotas should be introduced. Like in the national parks of Austria. This is how we will destroy everything.” (ecologist, Montenegro)

Reducing seasonal concentration was another recurring response. Participants suggested that tourism demand could be distributed more evenly throughout the year while simultaneously encouraging more responsible visitor behaviour.

“We need promotion in the off-season. And educated tourists, not just selfie travelers.” (guide, Triglav NP)

Participants also identified technological tools as potentially useful for the spatial redistribution of visitor flows. Digital platforms and real-time information systems were viewed as possible mechanisms for directing visitors towards less congested attractions and alternative locations.

“Imagine that there is a digital platform that directs people to lesser-known attractions...” (tourism organization representative, Novi Sad)

Finally, proposed responses were strongly connected with the theme community participation and destination governance. Participants emphasized the need for participatory governance, including stronger consultation mechanisms, advisory bodies, and more active involvement of local communities in destination-level decision-making. Such approaches were viewed as particularly relevant for reducing the perceived gap between formal destination management and locally experienced tourism pressures.

Overall, the findings related to RQ3 indicate that participants favour an integrated rather than a single-instrument response to overtourism. Visitor-flow management, reduction in seasonal concentration, spatial redistribution of demand, technological support, and stronger community participation were identified as complementary responses whose relevance depends on the specific pressures and characteristics of individual destinations.

5. Discussion

The findings generally support the conceptual model presented in Figure 1, although not all components were equally represented across the case studies. The four overarching

themes identified through the thematic analysis correspond closely to the proposed relationships between tourism pressure, environmental and social impacts, governance capacity, and stakeholder perceptions. Rather than suggesting a universal causal relationship, the findings indicate that overtourism emerges through the interaction of tourism intensity, institutional effectiveness, infrastructure capacity, seasonality, and stakeholder participation. Consequently, the conceptual model should be interpreted as a flexible analytical framework applicable to different destination contexts rather than as a deterministic model. Likewise, the visitor-density indicator was used solely to contextualize tourism intensity in the selected destinations rather than to explain participants' perceptions directly. The interviews demonstrate that perceived overtourism depends not only on visitor numbers but also on governance quality and local management capacity, reinforcing previous arguments that quantitative indicators alone cannot adequately explain overtourism.

The findings further demonstrate that overtourism in the Western Balkans is shaped by a complex interaction of economic benefits, social costs, environmental pressures, and governance challenges. This supports previous studies arguing that overtourism should not be understood merely as an excessive concentration of visitors but as the outcome of insufficient planning, weak institutional coordination, and uneven tourism development [5,14]. Rather than identifying visitor numbers as the primary cause, participants consistently emphasized deficiencies in destination management and stakeholder involvement.

Unlike much of the existing literature, which has predominantly examined large European metropolitan destinations, this study incorporates diverse destination types within the Western Balkans, including festival destinations such as Guča, protected natural areas such as Durmitor and Plitvice Lakes, urban destinations such as Belgrade and Dubrovnik, and religious destinations such as Međugorje. This broader perspective demonstrates that overtourism manifests differently across destination types and therefore requires context-specific management approaches. The findings also reinforce previous observations regarding limited community participation and the unequal distribution of tourism benefits, supporting the concept of tourist colonialism and the marginalization of local stakeholders discussed by Higgins-Desbiolles [7].

The comparison of the case studies suggests that governance capacity plays an important role in shaping stakeholders' perceptions of overtourism. The comparison of the case studies suggests that governance capacity may play an important role in shaping stakeholders' perceptions of overtourism. Participants' accounts indicate that perceived weaknesses in institutional coordination, enforcement, and community participation were frequently associated with more critical evaluations of tourism management. Although the qualitative design and the purposive, uneven distribution of participants across destinations do not support statistical comparisons between countries, these patterns are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of institutional capacity and governance quality in sustainable destination management [23,28,34].

Our findings also contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding overtourism management strategies. While Dilshan and Nakabasami (2025) [11] emphasize technological solutions as an important management instrument, the interviews in this study primarily highlighted the importance of transparent governance, stakeholder participation, and effective communication between local authorities and communities. Although one participant suggested that digital platforms could facilitate communication and destination management, this should be interpreted as an illustrative perspective rather than a general finding emerging across all interviews. Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that technological tools may complement, but cannot replace, participatory governance and institutional capacity.

Similarly, Butler and Dodds (2022) [2] argue that destination-specific carrying capacity and adaptive management are essential for mitigating overtourism. Our findings support this interpretation, particularly in protected areas such as Plitvice Lakes, where respondents emphasized the importance of balancing visitor management with effective implementation and enforcement of existing regulations rather than relying solely on visitor quotas.

The urban destinations included in this study, particularly Belgrade and Dubrovnik, illustrate challenges associated with commercialization, congestion, and changes in urban space that resemble those reported for Barcelona and other mature tourism destinations [16]. At the same time, festival destinations such as Guča reveal a more ambivalent relationship between tourism and local communities, where economic benefits coexist with concerns regarding noise, congestion, and disruption of everyday life. These findings are broadly consistent with previous studies of festival tourism, including research conducted in Edinburgh [53], highlighting the context-dependent nature of residents' perceptions.

A further contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that overtourism cannot be addressed through a single management approach. Although all case studies reflected tourism-related pressures, the dominant management challenges differed according to destination characteristics. Protected areas were primarily associated with visitor management and environmental protection, urban destinations with spatial planning and commercialization, and festival destinations with temporary infrastructure pressures and visitor behaviour. These findings suggest that overtourism policies should be adapted to the functional characteristics of individual destinations rather than relying on standardized management solutions.

Overall, this study supports the growing body of literature advocating a shift from measuring tourism success primarily through visitor numbers toward broader indicators incorporating governance quality, community well-being, environmental sustainability, and stakeholder participation. The findings further suggest that overtourism should be understood as a context-dependent governance challenge whose manifestations vary according to institutional, geographical, and socio-cultural conditions, reinforcing the need for localized and adaptive destination management strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study asked how the perceived drivers, consequences, and management challenges of overtourism vary across destination contexts in transitioning Western Balkan economies. The findings indicate that destination context matters, but not as a simple categorical effect. Rather, tourism pressure is experienced differently depending on the interaction between the spatial-functional characteristics of the destination, seasonality, infrastructure and resource sensitivity, and governance and planning capacity. The findings identify political-institutional vulnerability as a recurrent contextual condition that appears to shape how tourism pressure is experienced and managed across the selected cases. In destinations where institutional coordination, enforcement of regulations and local community participation are less developed, problems associated with excessive tourism are more pronounced and difficult to control.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study makes a significant contribution to the development of the theory of overtourism through the introduction of the concept of critical regionalization, which enables a deeper understanding of how this phenomenon manifests itself outside the Western European metropolises that have been the focus of some research so far [14,53]. Our analysis positions the Western Balkans as an important context for theoretical expan-

sion, a region that combines post-socialist transition, institutional weakness and a lack of participatory governance.

The study introduces a new analytical dimension, political-institutional vulnerability, as a key moderator between tourism pressure and negative local consequences. This insight is particularly important because it indicates that the intensity of overtourism depends not only on quantitative indicators (number of tourists) but also on qualitative factors such as transparency, rule of law and local autonomy [23,28,71,72]. In this direction, our work builds on the still-developing theoretical frameworks of social ecology [73,74], political geography [7], as well as participatory community development [61], and calls for their greater integration in analyses of tourism transformations.

Our research advances a comprehensive perspective on destination management by integrating the perceptions of local residents, tourism managers, and tourism employees. In doing so, it supports the arguments of Milano et al. (2019) [16], emphasizing that local experiences and stakeholder perspectives should be central to understanding and managing overtourism. Rather than treating tourists and residents as separate entities, the study highlights the importance of their everyday interactions and the social dynamics that shape destination sustainability.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on how tourism success should be evaluated. Instead of relying exclusively on traditional performance indicators, such as overnight stays and tourism revenue, our findings emphasize broader dimensions including social cohesion, community participation, and stakeholders' perceptions of tourism pressure. This perspective is consistent with the post-disciplinary and ethical approach proposed by Gyimóthy and Dredge (2015) [75] and the sustainability-oriented framework developed by Mihalič (2020) [34]. Accordingly, the empirical findings refine the conceptual model by highlighting political-institutional vulnerability as a central governance dimension influencing how tourism pressure is perceived and managed across destinations.

Finally, the study provides a conceptual basis for future comparative regional analyses and cross-context meta-studies, contributing to the development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding overtourism across different geographical and institutional settings.

6.2. Practical Implications

The practical use of the study has a specific value of enhancing tourist destination management under the influence of low institutional resilience and high political fragmentation, especially of interest to the decision makers in countries, e.g., Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. The findings do not provide a sufficient basis for prescribing specific destination-level interventions; rather, they identify context-sensitive management priorities that should be further validated through destination-specific monitoring, broader stakeholder deliberation, and formal planning processes. The interpretation of stakeholder perceptions should also take into account their different positions within the tourism economy. Tourism employees, entrepreneurs, and other actors who derive direct economic benefits from tourism may assess tourism pressure differently from residents or local actors who experience congestion, rising living costs, loss of privacy, or environmental pressure without receiving comparable benefits. Accordingly, the findings should not be interpreted as reflecting a homogeneous "local stakeholder" perspective. Rather, they reveal potentially divergent interests and exposure to tourism benefits and costs, which should be considered in participatory planning and destination-level decision-making. These results indicate stark processes of gentrification in the urban centres like Belgrade and Dubrovnik where there exists a subjection of the local population under the influence of commercial inter-

ests and there is a process of commercialization of cultural manifestations devoid of the actual input of local communities like what was witnessed in Guča and Mostar. In the natural attraction category, resorts such as Plitvice Lakes and Durmitor encounter the issue of overuse of resources without a plan to control the visitors and redistribute the flow of tourists.

The unique worth of the work can be seen in indicating the shortcomings of the digital solutions that are proposed without prior empowerment of local communities in terms of building up their trust and capacity. As indicated in the study, any technological intervention effort should be coupled with educational and participatory efforts since without any social foundation technological interventions are rendered ineffective. Unlike the prevailing opinions by the authors like Dilshan and Nakabasami (2025) [11], who regard technology as the primary means of alleviating overtourism, here, a model is proposed whereby digital technologies are used to supplement local engagement as a means of communication and transparency when making decisions. The results provide a foundation upon which operational terms and measures can be formulated that assesses the satisfaction and social integration of the local people which may be embedded in an extended protocol to determine the sustainability of tourism policies and the relation between economic advantage and community quality of life.

6.3. Political Implications

The findings of the study confirm that tourism management in the Western Balkans often follows neoliberal patterns in which investor interests dominate, while local communities are marginalized, which is in line with the concept of “tourist colonialism” [7,28]. The findings indicate that protected areas such as Plitvice Lakes illustrate the importance of effective governance, visitor management, and institutional capacity in addressing overtourism. However, participants also emphasized shortcomings in the implementation and enforcement of existing regulations, suggesting that formal management measures alone are insufficient without consistent institutional oversight and stakeholder involvement. On the contrary, destinations like Kotor and Zlatibor, left to market forces, record overcrowding, pollution and loss of cultural identity. In Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the process of European integration imposes the need for a mandatory assessment of the impact of large tourism projects on the environment and social cohesion. The examples of festivals in Guča and Mostar show that cultural events are often politically instrumentalized in order to legitimize the expansion of tourism, while communities lack the right to manage resources and income. Strengthening local authorities and the legal framework becomes crucial for the development of inclusive policies that treat tourism as a public good, in accordance with the European Agenda for Sustainable Tourism and the principles of territorial justice.

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contribution to understanding overtourism in the Western Balkans, this study has several limitations. The research adopts an exploratory qualitative multiple-case study design, which does not allow for statistical generalization of the findings. Rather than testing predefined variables or hypotheses, the study aimed to identify the key dimensions of overtourism and political-institutional vulnerability across selected destinations. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as providing analytical rather than statistical generalization.

Although the selected case-study destinations represent the principal tourism contexts of the region (urban, natural, cultural, religious, and festival destinations), they cannot capture the full diversity of tourism dynamics across the Western Balkans. The findings

are based on the perceptions and experiences of local stakeholders, and therefore may be influenced by subjective interpretations, social desirability bias, and differences in respondents' familiarity with tourism policies and destination governance.

The comparative analysis is inevitably influenced by differences in national governance systems, levels of institutional development, decentralization, and traditions of civic participation, which may affect both tourism management practices and stakeholder perceptions. In addition, the research was conducted during the post-pandemic recovery period, when tourism demand and destination management were still undergoing significant adjustments. Consequently, some perceptions may reflect short-term recovery processes rather than long-term structural trends. Furthermore, tourism development in the Western Balkans is strongly affected by changing political priorities and investment dynamics, meaning that the conditions described in this study may evolve over time.

The study also relies partly on official tourism statistics to contextualize visitor pressure. These data may not fully capture unregistered or informal accommodation supply, meaning that actual tourism intensity may be underestimated in some destinations. Informal accommodation was not directly quantified in the present study and should therefore be examined explicitly in future research.

Future research should build upon the exploratory findings presented here by operationalizing the identified themes into measurable variables and validating them through larger and statistically representative samples across different destination types. Mixed-method research designs integrating qualitative evidence with quantitative indicators of tourist flows, tourism pressure, and destination governance would provide a more comprehensive understanding of overtourism dynamics. In particular, future studies could employ exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modelling, or multilevel modelling to examine relationships among overtourism drivers, governance capacity, political-institutional vulnerability, and residents' perceptions. Longitudinal studies should also investigate how these relationships evolve over time, while greater attention should be devoted to micro-destinations, rural and marginalized areas, community resilience, adaptive capacity, and participatory governance. Finally, the conceptual framework developed in this study may serve as a foundation for constructing and validating multidimensional measurement scales applicable to overtourism research in transition economies.

Although the study included 120 participants across 17 destinations in five countries, the purposive and uneven distribution of participants across destinations was designed to maximize contextual diversity rather than statistical representativeness. Consequently, the study was not designed to support statistical comparisons between countries, destination types, or stakeholder groups. Cross-case differences should therefore be interpreted analytically, as context-specific patterns within the qualitative material rather than as statistically generalizable differences between national populations. Furthermore, although the study included 120 participants across 17 destinations in five countries, the purposive and uneven distribution of participants across destinations was designed to maximize contextual diversity rather than statistical representativeness. Consequently, the study was not designed to support statistical comparisons between countries, destination types, or stakeholder groups. Instead, the comparative analysis should be interpreted as an analytical comparison of recurring themes and governance patterns across different destination contexts.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/urbansci10090536/s1>, Table S1: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Used in the Study.

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