

DEVELOPMENT OF BUSINESS EVENTS IN DESTINATION KOŠICE BASED ON COOPERATION WITH THE SLANSKÉ HILLS REGION

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Abstract

The article summarizes the successful cooperation between neighboring Destination management organisations and the destinations of Košice and Prešov, whose main goal is to develop sustainable tourism in the Slanské Hills sub-destination and at the same time expand Košice's offer as a destination for business events. The connection and development of nature and incentive tourism with the congress segment strengthens the competitiveness of the region.

Key words: MICE, incentive activities, geological area, unique experiences, marketing, overtourismus

Introduction

The phenomenon of overtourism in the Košice and Prešov Regions does not constitute a uniform problem of evenly distributed excessive visitor pressure, as observed in destinations that dominate global tourism flows. Rather, it represents a structural phenomenon of selective overcrowding in a limited number of localities, occurring alongside the persistent long-term underutilisation of the majority of the territory. This constitutes a spatial asymmetry of tourist demand, with direct implications for the quality of the visitor experience, the integrity of natural and cultural heritage, and the effectiveness of regional tourism development.

Overtourism refers to a condition in which the number of visitors to a given destination exceeds its carrying capacity, ecological, infrastructural, or social, resulting in a deterioration of residents' quality of life, damage to natural and cultural heritage, and, paradoxically, a decline in the quality of the experience for tourists themselves (UNWTO, 2018).

The most pronounced example of this concentration is the High Tatras, where transport, environmental, and infrastructural pressures converge, with traffic congestion and trail overcrowding during peak seasons negatively affecting both biodiversity and visitor experience. Experts and regional stakeholders consistently identify the redistribution of visitor flows towards alternative destinations as a key measure in sustainable destination management.

The core challenge facing both regions lies not in the absolute volume of visitor arrivals, but in the uneven spatial distribution of tourist flows. Demand remains concentrated on a narrow set of iconic destinations, principally the High Tatras, Slovak Paradise, and Spiš Castle, while territories with considerable natural and cultural-historical potential, such as the Slanské Hills, the Čergov Mountains, the Vihorlat Hills, and the Šariš region, remain largely peripheral to both domestic and international visitors. This is further compounded by the dominance of day-trippers, who do not utilise local accommodation or catering facilities, thereby minimising the economic contribution of their visit to local communities.

In this context, a key finding is the potential for linking the urban cultural environment of Košice with the natural and cultural assets of the wider region, and in particular the sub-destination of the Slanské Hills. To date, the Slanské Hills have not been formally defined as a distinct tourism sub-destination, and this extensive territory encompasses as many as 89 municipal units across the Košice and Prešov Regions. Tourism stakeholders have long identified a persistent absence of systematic support, coordinated activity, effective inter-institutional cooperation, and coherent marketing communication within this area.

Tourism, and in particular its MICE segment (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions), also referred to as business events, represents a significant instrument of economic development for both the city and the region. In comparison with leisure tourism, it generates higher added value, longer average length of stay, and a greater utilisation of local services. The Košice destination possesses both the prerequisites and the infrastructure necessary for the development of business events. Analytical outputs indicate, however, that the destination's potential remains underexploited, particularly with regard to the diversification of the tourism offer and the more effective integration of the city with its wider regional surroundings. A fragmentation of the tourism product and an insufficient productisation of incentive and post-congress activities have been identified, which is further reflected in the relatively short average length of stay among visitors.

In response to this identified need, a cooperative initiative was established in 2025 by three destination management organisations (hereafter DMOs): Visit Košice, Región Šariš, and Horný Zemplín. This initiative opened a professional dialogue with territorial stakeholders and subject-matter experts.

Materials and methods

This article builds upon existing strategic, analytical, and marketing documents produced by Visit Košice DMO, as well as on the findings of market research studies aimed at assessing the readiness of the Košice destination to host business events for both domestic and international clients. The analysis presented in this article draws primarily on a qualitative case study derived from the operational practice of Visit Košice DMO, and on specialist strategic studies and action plans developed through collaboration between DMOs and the Technical University of Košice.

Results

Visit Košice DMO has been actively engaged in the development of business events within the city of Košice since 2024. Together with Bratislava and the High Tatras, Košice ranks among the principal areas in which business events is currently expanding. The city possesses several key prerequisites for the development of the MICE segment and for attracting international business events clients. It benefits from a strong cultural identity, a rich portfolio of urban and regional attractions, a high standard of supporting services, and a favourable geographical position within Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, however, the destination faces challenges typical of secondary MICE destinations — a fragmented tourism offer, limited capacity for large-scale events, and the absence of a unified strategic framework.

In response to a published call for cooperative projects issued by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Slovak Republic, a joint project was submitted in 2025 by three cooperating DMOs with the aim of supporting the development of business events and incentive tourism offerings. The project was successfully completed and resulted in the production of several significant documents authored by both domestic and international experts, assessing the development potential of the Košice destination in the field of business events, and of the Slanské Hills sub-destination as a rich and largely undiscovered area with considerable potential for the development of leisure and incentive offerings in support of the broader growth of business events. One of the first activities undertaken within the cooperative project was a survey examining international perceptions of Košice as a potential destination for the organisation of business events. Among the positive findings regarding the perception of Slovakia, culture and nature emerged as key differentiating factors described as a *clear distinction from major congress cities*, thereby confirming the strategic rationale for focusing on the development of the Slanské Hills sub-destination, an area that remains comparatively lesser-known alongside the iconic cultural and natural attractions of eastern Slovakia.

The Slanské Hills constitute a volcanic mountain range in eastern Slovakia, extending from Prešov to the border with Hungary and forming part of the Carpathian volcanic arc. The area is of particular appeal due to its natural attractions, most notably the only geyser in Slovakia, as well as its technical and historical landmarks, including the Opal Mines, the only such mines in Europe, complemented by a dense network of hiking trails.

One of the key outputs produced in 2025 is the Action Plan for the Development of the Slanské Hills sub-Destination. The Action Plan serves as an operational strategic instrument for the systematic development of the sub-destination, with the overarching objective of transforming the area into an attractive and sustainable tourism destination. The plan is structured around two complementary pillars — tourism infrastructure development and product and service development. It identifies priority areas for intervention aimed at enhancing the attractiveness of the territory, improving accessibility, and diversifying the tourism offer across different visitor segments.

In the area of tourism infrastructure development, the document analyses the existing network of hiking and cycling trails, categorised by difficulty and functional significance, and identifies the need for their extension and interconnection through several new sections. A separate area of concern is the insufficiency of accommodation and catering facilities, compounded by the low digital visibility of existing establishments. Proposed measures include the development of a central booking portal, the opening of mountain huts through partnership arrangements, the introduction of self-service refreshment facilities, and support for new gastronomic outlets, including seasonal formats.

With regard to transport infrastructure, the document addresses the improvement of access roads and parking facilities, and proposes the integration of cycling with public transport through increased bicycle capacity, the introduction of cycle buses, and the digitalisation of reservation systems.

In the area of product and service development, the document proposes the creation of four thematic tourism routes integrating the natural, historical, and cultural assets of the territory. These products are oriented towards geotourism, industrial heritage, and cultural-historical interpretation (including concepts such as the Nostalgic Geotour, Salt Road, Wealth of the Earth, and Land of Extinct Volcanoes) and are designed to address the needs of diverse visitor segments. The development strategy further encompasses the creation of new attractions, including recreational facilities, visually distinctive photo points, and innovative experiential and educational elements. Additional emphasis is placed on event development and support for local producers, building on existing initiatives and introducing new concepts oriented towards health and wellbeing tourism, educational experiences, and cultural and artistic events set within the natural environment.

From a MICE and incentive tourism perspective, the current situation represents a significant underutilised potential. Conference and incentive participants possess both the time and financial capacity for supplementary activities, and research consistently indicates a growing preference for experiential and authentic engagement among the higher-income, higher-education profiles characteristic of this segment. International visitors tend to perceive Košice as a discovery destination offering authentic experiences beyond mainstream tourist circuits — a competitive advantage that nonetheless demands high standards of interpretation and service. This reinforces the strategic case for developing thematically coherent products that communicate the narrative connection between Košice and the Slanské Hills, rather than presenting isolated attractions.

Visitors increasingly expect a curated destination narrative rather than a catalogue of sights, a trend of particular relevance for incentive programmes, where memorability and team cohesion are primary objectives (Kršák, 2025). Full implementation of the Action Plan is expected to enhance the competitiveness of the Slanské Hills relative to other Slovak regions and adjacent cross-border destinations.

Discussion

Business event organisers typically favour destinations with international air connectivity and diversified service infrastructure — criteria that Košice, as the regional centre of eastern Slovakia, fully satisfies. A key comparative advantage lies in its proximity to the Slanské Hills sub-destination, where transfer distances from the city centre are comparable to those routinely undertaken within larger European congress cities, effectively extending the destination perimeter without additional logistical burden.

This gives rise to a complementary model in which Košice provides the congress infrastructure while the Slanské Hills contribute authentic incentive potential, enhancing the destination's differentiation in the business events market. The MICE segment requires short transfers, a compelling narrative, and a curated programme scenario, together these constitute a marketable product rather than a mere service offering, and a destination capable of delivering all three can compete effectively regardless of its international profile. This synergistic model also carries direct economic implications, as extended lengths of stay and increased overnight visits generate multiplier effects of particular relevance for eastern Slovakia, a region characterised by structural economic disparities relative to the western part of the country.

Conclusion

The deliberate diversification of tourist flows towards less-visited yet attractive localities in the immediate vicinity of Košice and Prešov represents not merely a marketing objective, but also an instrument of spatially balanced and environmentally responsible tourism development in the region. The Košice and Prešov Regions face a specific form of uneven tourism development, in which visitor demand is concentrated on a limited number of iconic destinations while extensive territories with considerable potential remain chronically underutilised. In this context, the Slanské Hills sub-destination constitutes a strategic development opportunity, a territory of authentic natural, cultural, and historical value situated in immediate proximity to the established MICE centre of Košice.

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Souhrn

Článek se zabývá územní asymetrií turistické poptávky v Košickém a Prešovském kraji, kde se návštěvnost soustřeďuje na úzký okruh ikonických lokalit (Vysoké Tatry, Slovenský ráj, Spišský hrad), zatímco rozsáhlá území s vysokým přírodním a kulturně-historickým potenciálem zůstávají nevyužitá. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována subdestinační oblasti Slanské vrchy, která navzdory svému potenciálu dosud chyběla jako samostatně definovaná a koordinovaně propagovaná destinace. Vychází z případové studie spolupracujících organizací Visit Košice, Región Šariš a Horný Zemplín, které v roce 2025 realizovaly projekt zaměřený na rozvoj business events a incentívni nabídky. Jeho výstupem je Akční plán rozvoje subdestinační oblasti Slanské vrchy, který pokrývá turistickou infrastrukturu, rozvoj produktů a dopravní dostupnost. Výsledky poukazují na synergický potenciál propojení Košic jako zavedeného centra MICE se Slanskými vrchy jako přírodním a zážitkovým zázemím. Diverzifikace turistického toku do méně známých lokalit tak představuje nástroj nejen marketingového, ale i environmentálně odpovědného rozvoje cestovního ruchu na východním Slovensku.

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