# Visitor Management as a Strategy Increasing Resilience of Urban Destinations

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**Abstract:** The rapid growth of urban tourism in Slovakia highlights the need for effective visitor management to ensure sustainability and resilience. This study examines the implementation of visitor management tools in Slovak urban destinations, focusing on their role in mitigating negative tourism impacts. Using cluster analysis, cities were classified according to their life cycle stages, identifying opportunities and barriers for visitor management implementation. Data was gathered through structured questionnaires and expert interviews. The findings reveal a lack of systematic visitor management, emphasizing the need for data-driven strategies and digital innovations. The study offers policy recommendations to enhance urban tourism resilience and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Visitor Management, Urban Tourism, Destination Resilience, Sustainability, Slovakia.

**JEL Classification codes:** L83, O18, R58, Z32

## INTRODUCTION

The extremely dynamic changes that the tourism industry has experienced in recent years require an innovative approach to this changing reality. The rapidly growing tourism demand underlines the need for clear guidelines that will contribute to tourism development in line with the principles of sustainable development. Urban tourism, in particular, has emerged as one of the fastest growing and most economically significant forms of tourism (Spirou, 2008; Selby, 2012; Morrison & Maxim, 2021). Following the easing of restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of visits to urban destinations has increased significantly. According to UN Tourism research (2023), an increase of up to 58% in city visitation was recorded in 2022 compared to the previous year. Similarly, CityDNA (2023) indicates a substantial recovery of urban tourism in Europe, with cities experiencing an average growth of 79.6% in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019. In this context, visitor management is an essential tool to manage complex situations to minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the urban environment. Traditionally associated with natural destinations, visitor management has gained strategic importance for urban tourism; however, its application in Slovak cities remains underexplored. There is a pressing need for a coordinated and data-driven approach to destination management that balances the interests of tourists, local communities, and policymakers while ensuring environmental sustainability and economic resilience. This study addresses this research gap by examining the awareness,

implementation, and potential of visitor management strategies in Slovak urban destinations. Specifically, it aims to:

Analyze the extent to which visitor management tools are applied in Slovak cities.

Identify opportunities and barriers for their implementation based on the life cycle stages of urban destinations through cluster analysis.

Propose strategic measures to enhance the resilience and sustainability of urban tourism.

Visitor management should be a top priority, as high visitor volumes often negatively impact cities' environments and the resources on which tourism success is built. The current post-pandemic situation and forecasts indicating an increasing trend in visitor numbers highlight the need to focus on managed tourism development. Only a city that respects its limits and considers social inclusiveness, economic prosperity and environmental protection can be successful and attractive on the international tourism market in the long term. Ensuring sustainable tourism development is therefore a key factor in balancing economic growth, the needs of local communities and the interests of visitors, leading to more resilient destinations.

By integrating visitor management with resilience planning, this research contributes both theoretically and practically to the ongoing discourse on sustainable urban tourism. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers at the regional and national levels, supporting the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of Slovak urban destinations. Moreover, the study offers practical recommendations for tailoring visitor management strategies to cities at different stages of their tourism development cycle, ensuring a balanced and sustainable approach to urban tourism growth.

# 1  LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the challenges and dynamics of tourism development, there is an increasing need for destinations to manage their visitors with effective management approaches and adopt best practices to ensure sustainable development and competitiveness of destinations (Albrecht, 2017). Tourism can be seen as a driver of economic development of countries mainly due to its economic benefits such as income growth, employment growth as well as stimulating economic activity through increased business transactions in the destination (Matzana et al., 2022; Urbina et al., 2023). Although tourism has a positive impact on the economic development of a destination, uncontrolled and unplanned development, focused mainly on economic objectives, can be responsible for many negative effects on the destination's environment. Çolak et al. (2020) argue that as a destination gains popularity and visitor numbers increase, challenges emerge that may conflict with the principles of sustainable development.

## 1.1 Urban destinations

Cities as tourism destinations have become easily accessible to visitors because of globalization and digitalization, attracting them with their wide range of leisure options. The importance of urban destinations can be confirmed by the WTTC (2022) estimate that the largest 300 cities account for approximately 45% of the share of all international arrivals. In the case of the European continent, cities attract visitors because of their diversity, cultural richness and dynamic environments.

According to Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak (2020), urban destinations, with developed tourism, play an important role in a country's economy. The development of tourism in urban destinations is highly dependent on the development of the culture of the destination. Europe

maintains its leading position as a cultural tourism destination thanks to its efficiently developed infrastructure and diverse cultural heritage offer. It is estimated that cultural tourism accounts for 40% of European tourism (www.ec.europa.eu, 2022).

The intensive growth of tourism in destinations cannot be seen only through its positive economic consequences. Rapidly increasing visitor numbers can pose threats to destinations in relation to the principles of sustainable development. Tourism growth in destinations with rich cultural, historical or natural heritage encroaches on their indigenous environment, which may result in transforming the social, cultural and/or economic nature of the destination (Gowreesunkar & Vo-Thanh, 2020). Destinations should be wary of the various impacts of unsustainable tourism development, as a decline in quality in one area can have a significant impact on quality in other areas. Failure or delay in addressing tourism imbalances can lead to a reduction in the overall quality of the destination's product, a weakening of its image, and the migration of residents to outlying areas of the city.

## 1.2 Visitor management

Visitor management is an innovative concept for many destinations, with its tools representing the introduction of innovations in destination management. Innovation is now strategically essential for tourism planning and effective visitor management in urban destinations. According to Kvasnová and Marciš (2020), innovations, in the context of tourism destinations, represent changes aimed at introducing new and better products or services and implementing new destination management processes.

Visitor management is part of destination management, but it is not a traditional role of destination management, as it responds to recent events and current trends in consumer behaviour. Excessive tourism, as well as the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the terrorist attacks, have increased the need for more careful and systematic visitor management. Visitor management refers to all management tools and interventions that regulate the movement and behaviour of visitors in a destination, thereby influencing visitor experience and satisfaction (Albrecht, 2017).

Visitor management draws attention to places that are frequented and overcrowded and creates practices to reduce visitor pressure on attractions, influencing visitor behaviour, increasing visitor safety, while not diminishing visitor experience and satisfaction. Visitor management is effective when it is appropriately staffed with knowledge of sustainable development, the destination and its needs, and has relevant information about visitor arrivals at attractions, visitor movements, visitor needs, and the views of residents (Gajdošíková, 2020). The essence of visitor management is to deliberately regulate the number of visitors to the resort, influencing the direction of tourist flows and consumer behaviour to maintain the unique character of tourism development resources, safety, visitor experience and residents' satisfaction. When visitor management is implemented appropriately, the destination can also benefit from the economic value it brings to the destination in the form of directing visitors to paying attractions and influencing their consumption.

UNESCO recommends the following measures in its guides on ensuring sustainable tourism at World Heritage Sites: (a) limiting access of visitors; (b) dispersing visitors in space and time; (c) introducing pre-sale ticketing systems; (d) introducing price differentiation; (e) dispersing visitors at the destination; (f) offering different experiences, products and services to visitors to reduce pressure and focus on the small number of attractions that are recommended to be visited to see. The UN Tourism (2018) has also made recommendations on how to regulate visitor numbers and behaviour, given the prevalence of overtourism, particularly in urban destinations. Digitalization and innovative technologies in the tourism sector provide development actors with key data that can significantly impact destination management,

overall visitation and the sustainability of the entire sector. Analysing large amounts of data enables the identification of patterns and trends that are key to effective tourism management and strategic planning in a destination location. We conclude that visitor management based on accessing actual visitor data represents a key and innovative tool for smart and sustainable destination development.

## 1.3 Strategy increasing resilience

Strategic planning is intended to prevent uncontrolled development to avoid unhealthy growth and the negative effects that tourism can cause in a destination. Planning is therefore not intended to be a response to the adverse effects of tourism development, but to prevent them. Sustainability is, in general, about providing for and meeting both present and future needs. However, the concept of sustainable development does not consider the sudden changes and negative phenomena faced by tourism businesses and destinations. For tourism development to be sustainable, businesses and destinations need to be able to adapt or transform in response to negative situations and crises when necessary (Heslinga, 2022). Resilience is not an alternative to sustainability, but an essential part of sustainable tourism development (Butler, 2018; Saarinen & Gill, 2019). While sustainability refers to long-term development that balances environmental, economic, and social factors, resilience focuses on processes that enable an organization to survive and recover from negative events. Sustainable tourism development is not possible without resilient businesses and destinations, and we also understand resilience as an integral part of sustainable development (Saarinen & Gill, 2019; WTTC & ICF, 2022). Through a conscious tourism development strategy, a destination can increase its resilience and harness the potential of tourism for destination enhancement. Tourism development planning should be integrated into the destination in a way in which it blends and merges with the already existing life and environment in the destination.

## 2  METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to analyse the application of visitor management tools in Slovak urban destinations and to explore their potential for increasing the resilience and sustainability of urban destinations.

The cities listed in Figure 1 were used as the input data for the cluster analysis, which aimed to provide an up-to-date assessment of tourism development in these cities and to categorize them according to their life cycle phase. In the life cycle analysis, the initial "exploration" phase and the final "stagnation" phase were excluded. This decision was made based on the analysis of data from the studied cities, none of which exhibited characteristics corresponding to these phases. The analysis was conducted using data from the three-year period 2017–2019, focusing on the peak visitation period and excluding the impact of the pandemic. Input data for the analysis were sourced from the Slovak National Statistics Office, including average values for cumulative visitor numbers, number of overnight stays, number of accommodation establishments, accommodation revenue, and collected accommodation taxes.

**Fig. 1: Urban tourism destinations by number of visitors**
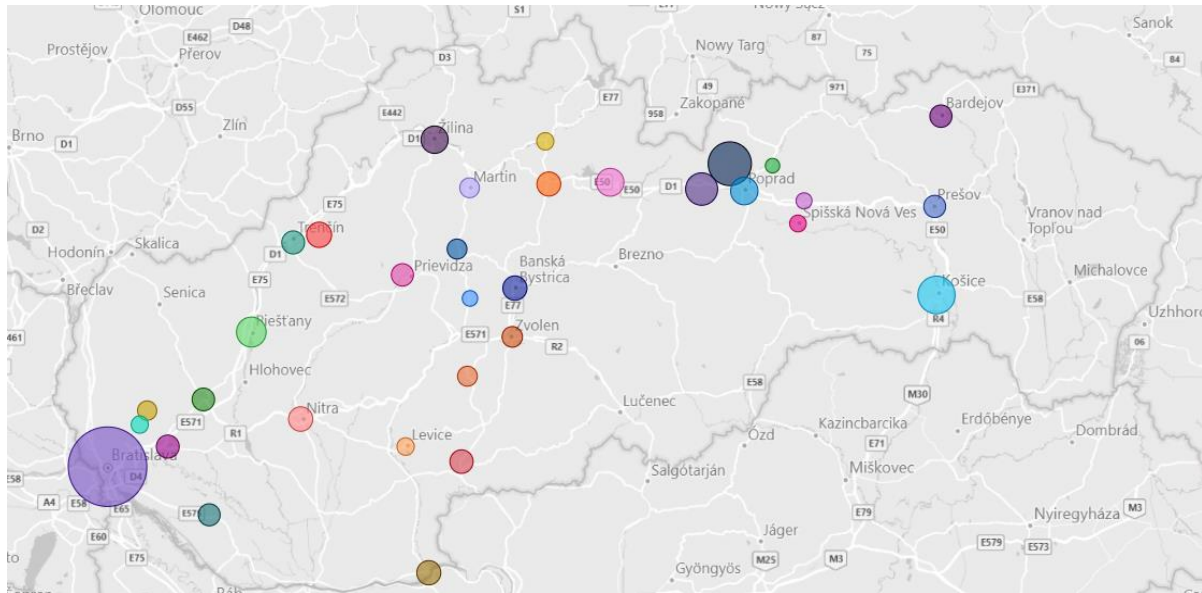


Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Note: The scores are proportional to the number of visitors in 2019.

Based on this analysis, the selected urban destinations underwent a more in-depth investigation. The goal was to examine the awareness of tourism stakeholders in these cities regarding sustainable tourism development, with particular attention to visitor management concepts. Primary data were gathered through communication with representatives from the regional tourism organizations in each selected urban destination. A structured questionnaire, consisting of 14 questions, was the main instrument for data collection. The survey was conducted between March 25 and April 15, 2024. Additionally, the national-level approach was analyzed through an interview with a representative of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Slovak Republic. This interview provided insight into the awareness of these entities regarding visitor management in cities, the current state of visitor management, and the preparedness of destinations for future challenges related to overtourism.

In the data analysis process, several mathematical and statistical methods were employed, including descriptive statistics and cluster analysis. The collected data were processed using SPSS and MS Excel, with the results presented in graphical and tabular formats. Based on these findings, the potential of the destinations for the implementation of visitor management was evaluated.

## 3  RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tourism products of Slovak destinations are attracting an increasing number of visitors eager to explore them. Nowadays, when the statistical indicators of city visitation are returning to the level of the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, we perceive the need to adapt destination management to a new approach that coordinates visitation and eliminates the negative impacts of tourism on the environment of the destination.

Sustainable tourism policy in Slovakia is shaped by the European framework to which the country has committed as an EU member state. Specifically, this framework is outlined in the document Transition pathway for tourism, which details the key actions, objectives, and conditions necessary to achieve the green and digital transformation, as well as the long-term resilience of the tourism sector (ec.europa.eu, 2022).

At the national level, a Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism to 2035 is being prepared. This strategy is intended to present measures and conditions through which we can fulfil the commitments that Slovakia has made. The main objective of the strategy is 'to reduce seasonal disparities by creating a comprehensive tourism offer through the sustainable use of the country's potential while increasing the economic growth of the regions and improving the recognition of Slovakia as an attractive and authentic destination.

## 3.1 Clustering of urban tourism destinations

As of 2024, Slovakia has 141 towns registered according to its territorial-administrative arrangement. This represents less than 5% of the total number of municipalities of 2 927 (www.minv.sk). The importance of urban tourism in Slovakia is confirmed by the statistics on the number of visitors to urban destinations in Slovakia in the analysed period 2017-2019 (Tab. 1). Data from the Slovak Statistical Office (2024) for this period show that more than 70% of visitors visit urban destinations. Despite the overall annual increase in the number of visitors in Slovakia, the share of urban destination visitation is stable. This confirms the fact that urban tourism dominates the structure of tourism in Slovakia and cities are the most preferred destinations of visitors.

**Tab. 1: Overview of the number of visitors to cities in Slovakia**

|  | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of visitors to the cities | 3 751 978 | 3 914 509 | 4 534 344 |
| Number of visitors to other destinations | 1 623 495 | 1 681 898 | 1 898 590 |
| Σ Number of visitors | 5 375 473 | 5 596 407 | 6 432 934 |

Source: Own elaboration according to Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2024)

Based on the selected criteria, we divided the cities into 3 groups using the cluster analysis method, representing the different stages of the life cycle of a destination, i.e., involvement, development and consolidation (Fig. 2). The results of the F-test show whether there are statistically significant differences between the clusters with respect to the variables studied. The p-value indicates that the observed differences are not random. In this case, all p-values are equal to zero (0.000), indicating that there are statistically significant differences between clusters for all variables examined. Consequently, it is possible to classify the cities under study into distinct life cycle stages.

The analysis focused on the destinations life cycle phases, resulting in the classification of the cities in the sample into three groups. It was found that only one city, Bratislava, was placed in the highest consolidation phase. This phase is characterized by higher visitor numbers, which may exceed the local population, as well as the gradual reaching of the destination's carrying capacity. The destinations Vysoké Tatry, Košice, Štrba, Piešťany, Trenčianske Teplice, and Turčianske Teplice were included in the development phase. The development phase is characterized by rapid tourism growth, high visitor numbers at certain times of the year, and the international significance of the destination. The remaining 26 cities were categorized into the third phase, involvement. The involvement phase is characterized by the organized development of tourism, a growing number of visitors, and the seasonality. The hierarchical arrangement of the destinations is visually represented in the dendrogram (Fig. 2), which illustrates the similarities and distances between the cities based on the analysed criteria.

**Fig. 2: Distribution of Slovak cities into stages of the life cycle of the destination**
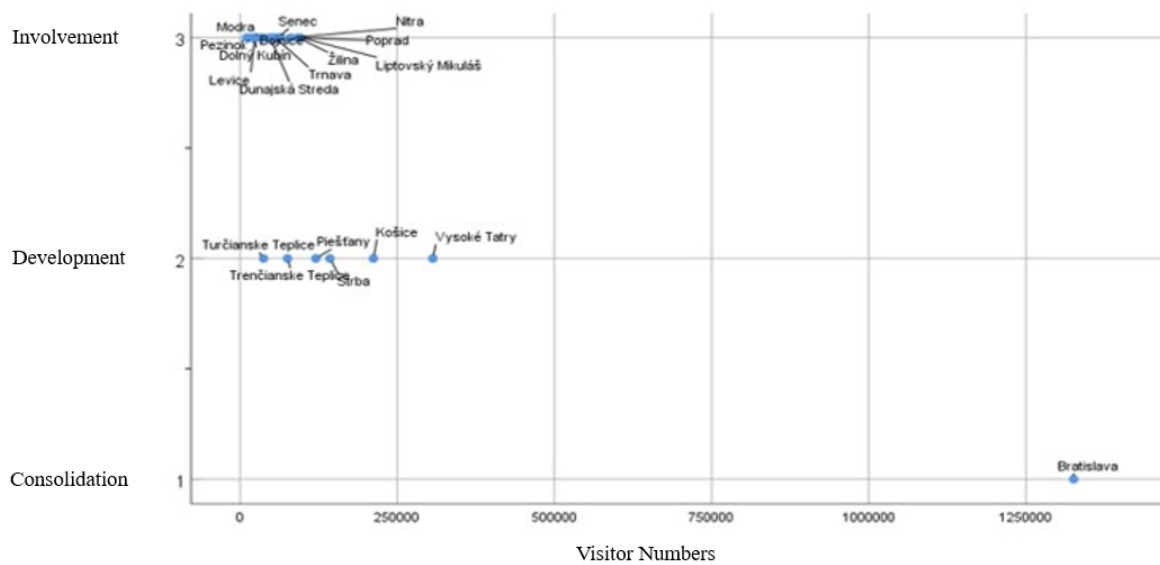


Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Dendrogram shows that destinations in the same stage of the life cycle tend to cluster closer together. Cities in the engagement stage form one compact group, distinct from cities in the development and consolidation stage. The dendrogram also visualizes the distances between clusters, indicating the degree of distinctiveness between different stages. A destination in the consolidation stage shows the largest differences compared to the other clusters, indicating its advanced state in the life cycle of the destination. The following Table 2 visualizes the final mean values, which are calculated as the average values for each variable within each stage.

**Tab. 2: Final mean values of the distribution of the life cycle stages of the destination**

| Cluster number/ Criterion | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of visitors | 1 325 653 | 149 200 | 48 299 |
| Number of overnight stays | 2 754 092 | 519 600 | 134 914 |
| Number of accommodation facilities | 220 | 60 | 33 |
| Revenue from accommodation (EUR) | 105 909 815 | 17 218 158 | 3 099 443 |
| Accommodation tax (EUR) | 4 681 955 | 596 646 | 143 002 |

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

Comparing the values between stages highlights the characteristic differences in the life cycle stages of the destinations in the research set. A life cycle analysis of urban destinations provides insight into the state of tourism development in selected cities in the pre-pandemic period. As discussed in literature review, destinations go through different phases and cycles of development over time. It is necessary to examine this evolution and the different cycles of a destination over time to ensure the continued competitiveness and sustainability of the destination's resources. If destination begin to experience adverse changes in the social and/or environmental dimension, destination management tools must be taken to ensure responsible and prosperous development of the destination. In this context, the concept of visitor management is a relevant tool.

## 3.2 Application of visitor management tools in the identified clusters

In the following section, the analysis of tourism development in Slovak destinations will be conducted. Through this analysis, a closer insight into the current state of tourism development will be provided, including its approach to sustainable development and visitor management. This approach will consider the categorization of urban destinations based on their life cycle phases.

In the consolidation phase, Bratislava is a metropolitan centre with international connections and a rich historical and cultural heritage, which makes it an attractive city for domestic and foreign tourism demand. In 2023, the city's visitor arrival rate was compared to 2019 (SOE, 2024). It can therefore be expected that in the near term, the city's visitor arrivals will exceed pre-pandemic levels. Table 3 presents an overview of the specific measures implemented in Bratislava to support sustainable and environmentally responsible tourism development.

**Tab. 3: Activities of the City of Bratislava in relation to sustainable tourism development**

| Activity | Impact on the destination |
|---|---|
| Low-emission transport options | Reduced traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions |
| Cycling offer | Diversification of tourism |
| Product Bratislava Card | Promotion of cultural and historical facilities |
| Promotion of lesser-known attractions in the city | Dispersion of visitors outside the city centre |
| Promotion of natural and rural sites | Dispersion of visitors outside the city centre |
| Support for local entrepreneurs and craftsmen | Local economic development |

Source: Own elaboration (2024)

During the primary research, it was determined through a representative of the Bratislava Tourist Board that visitor management tools are currently utilized only minimally in Bratislava, and the concept is not explicitly incorporated into its tourism-related activities.

A common characteristic of the cities classified in the development phase is their recognition of the importance of sustainable development, with environmental, social, and cultural aspects integrated into their tourism development strategies. Signs of overtourism have been identified in each of these destinations at certain times of the year. Additionally, all cities promote off-season travel and implement measures to mitigate seasonal fluctuations in visitor arrivals. While the concept of visitor management is regarded as a useful tool, its systematic implementation has not yet been undertaken. However, some visitor management tools are already being applied in practice. Respondents were asked to identify activities that would be relevant for their city's future tourism development strategy. The responses are summarized in Table 4.

**Tab. 4: Overview of current and prospective activities in cities in the "development" stage**

| Current activities | Prospective activities |
|---|---|
| promoting off-season travel<br>strengthening of the tourism infrastructure<br>promotion of lesser-known sites<br>mobile app with information | regulation of car traffic<br>electronic reservation systems<br>tracking the movement of visitors<br>analysis of visitor behaviour data<br>mobile app with information |

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

The application of visitor management tools in the destinations classified in the involvement phase was subsequently examined. In these destinations, tourism development represents a key sector for both the local and regional economy. The concept of sustainable tourism development is well understood across all analysed destinations, and measures are actively being developed to ensure the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector. However, all destinations in this phase experience significant fluctuations in visitor arrivals throughout the year. Awareness of visitor management and its associated tools was identified in only one-third of the destinations.

## CONCLUSION

Currently, the state of tourism development in Slovak destinations is not as critical as in other European destinations, as evidenced by the predominance of the early phases in their life cycle. However, for Slovak destinations to become competitive, sustainable and resilient destination in line with the EU vision and the strategy of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, the issue of visitor management needs to be given adequate attention. Proactive visitor management is a key to avoid future negative impacts and to support the long-term sustainability and attractiveness of Slovakia's urban destinations. Slovakia's urban destinations should not rely on traditional destination management practices. On the contrary, they should adapt their management activities to new possibilities and methods that are focused on current and future priorities and specific needs of tourism development in Slovakia.

It is considered essential to create the conditions for a comprehensive digitisation of the tourism sector, including its services and infrastructure. A key priority should be to ensure access to up-to-date and accurate data on visitor arrivals to individual cities. This approach will enable the effective identification and assessment of visitor arrivals at destination points in real-time, which is essential for taking specific measures to regulate or promote tourism. The digitisation of the tourism sector should be complemented by a visitor management policy that ensures that tourism development is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. This policy should include a comprehensive assessment of the current situation of tourism development, including the setting of carrying capacity for each destination.

In this study, a cluster analysis was performed, through which the urban destinations in Slovakia were divided into three life cycle phases. Based on the results of this division, the possibilities for better implementation of visitor management instruments, in accordance with the actual needs of the destination, are reflected upon in the following section (Table 5).

**Tab. 5: Visitor management instruments according to the life cycle phase**

| Life cycle phase | Proposed measures |
|---|---|
| Consolidation | Improving visitor registration through smart sensors and GPS data |
| | Using big data and analytics to understand visitor behavior |
| | Implementing digital tools for trend analysis (e.g. Google Trends) |
| | Improving marketing communication based on analytical results |
| | Expanding the range of attractions to promote an even distribution of visitors |
| Development | Modernisation of infrastructure (accessibility, public spaces, information systems) |
| | Creating attractive products and promoting off-season travel |
| | Regulating car traffic and building emergency car parks |
| | Strengthening public transport capacity and links between attractions |
| | Targeted marketing communication to differentiate from competing destinations |
| Involvement | Intelligent visitor tracking systems (sensors, GPS data) |
| | Predicting trends and identifying problem areas in tourism |
| | Effective traffic management based on analytical results |
| | Improving the quality of public transport and infrastructure |
| | Promotion of lesser-known attractions to distract visitors |

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

The successful implementation of visitor management is closely linked to the individual characteristics and significance of a given destination. As the research has shown, there is currently no city in Slovakia that pays systematic attention to the concept of visitor management and systematically implements its measures. To improve this situation, we have developed a series of proposals and measures (Fig. 3). Some of these suggestions could be applicable in all destinations, regardless of their phase of the destination life cycle. At the same time, it is important to note that the extent of implementation of these measures will depend on the individual conditions and needs of each city. The proposed measures are aligned with the principles of sustainable tourism development and should therefore contribute to sustainable tourism development in addition to better visitor management.

**Fig. 3: Proposed visitor management measures in urban destinations**
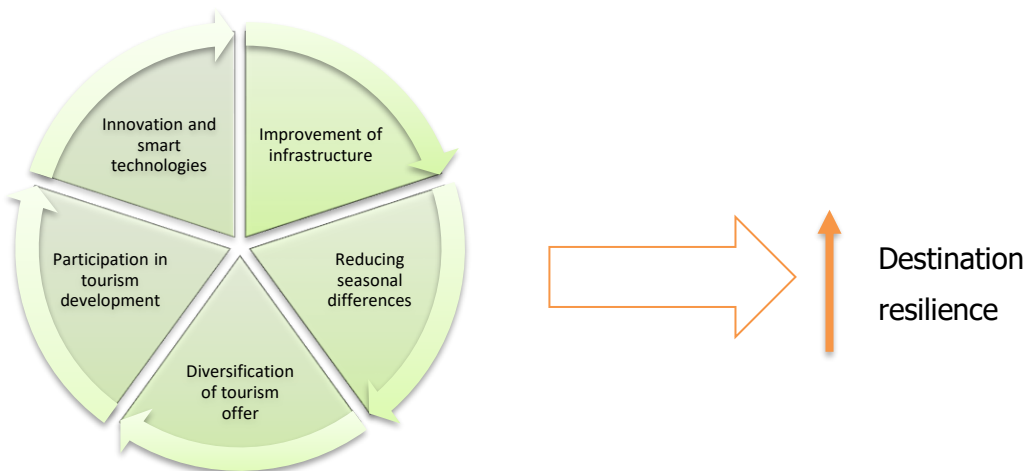


Source: Own elaboration, 2024

At the same time, there is a need to raise awareness among visitors about local rules and recommendations for promoting responsible behaviour in Slovak destinations. The implementation of these measures at the national level will enable more effective management and optimisation of visitor arrivals, which will contribute to a sustainable and balanced development of tourism in Slovakia. In this way, we can achieve a harmonious link between the increased competitiveness of destinations and the protection of their natural and cultural heritage, thus ensuring their resilience. Effective dissemination of visitor management awareness is a key element for ensuring sustainable tourism development. This process involves not only informing the public and stakeholders about the importance and benefits of managed tourism development but also ensuring their active participation in achieving the set objectives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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