




# Sustainable Sports Tourism in Serbia: Insights from the DEPART Project

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## Abstract

Sports tourism, combining leisure travel with spectating or participating in sporting activities, is a rapidly growing industry with substantial economic, social, and cultural impacts. Vojvodina, an autonomous province in northern Serbia, offers significant potential for the development of sports tourism, however, it faces challenges such as limited strategic coordination and underutilized resources. This paper examines two practices that are a part of the Europe DEPART (DEVELOPMENT of a sustAinable spoRTs Tourism in Europe) initiative and demonstrate sustainable approaches to sports tourism in Serbia: the Tour de Fruška and EuroVelo 6 Danube Bicycle Route in Serbia. Both practices highlight the importance of connecting natural and cultural assets, fostering healthy lifestyles, and promoting environmentally and socially sustainable tourism practices. The paper concludes that building on these successes can help Vojvodina enhance its sports tourism offerings, strengthen stakeholder cooperation, and support long-term regional development.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism · sports tourism · sustainable development · DEPART · Cycling

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## Introduction

Sports tourism is one of the fastest growing forms of special tourism internationally (Alexandris & Kaplanidou, 2014) and has been rapidly growing since the late 1990s. The growing popularity of sports tourism is frequently explained by the intersection of sport as a global social phenomenon and tourism as a leading global industry. Sports tourism is both an economic and a social phenomenon at the intersection of sports and tourism, both of which are increasingly challenged by the need for sustainable development. The relationship between active lifestyles and travel for sports generate significant economic and social effects worldwide, while also playing a crucial role in supporting the long-term sustainability of destinations. As such, it is also important to examine how sports tourism develops and functions at the regional level, where local resources, infrastructure, and cultural traditions shape specific forms of sport-related travel.

One such region is Vojvodina, an autonomous province in northern Serbia. Current tourism strategies in Vojvodina prioritize attracting international visitors to support and diversify the regional economy, drawing on the region's rich historical heritage and cultural assets to create appealing opportunities for potential tourists (Mulec & Wise, 2013). However, with its several rivers (e.g. Danube, Tisa, Sava), mountains (e.g. Fruška Gora), lakes (e.g. Palić), and nature reserves, Vojvodina also offers considerable potential for the development of sports tourism.

Unfortunately, that potential has not been reached yet. A study from 2025 conducted a series of interviews with stakeholders in sports tourism from Serbia, as well as a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of Vojvodina for sustainable sports tourism. The results showed that inefficient implementation of development strategies, a lack of coordination among stakeholders, and limited financial and human resources have slowed down the progress of sports tourism development. They also suggest that investing in strategic management, clearly differentiating the regional brand, and improving cooperation between the public and private sectors is necessary for further progress (Matić et al., 2025). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present and discuss two potential projects that could contribute to the sustainable development of sports tourism in Vojvodina: EuroVelo 6 and the Tour de Fruška. By analyzing their objectives and potential impacts, the paper aims to illustrate how these initiatives can support regional development while

promoting environmentally and socially responsible tourism practices.

## Method

A sample of good practices (N=2) includes sustainable sports tourism practices: EuroVelo 6 Danube bicycle route in Serbia and Tour de Fruška. The evaluated practices were selected using an analytical approach, taking into account that the practices contain components of active mobility, eco-tourism and sustainability, contribute to the economy and represent relevant sports tourism products. Event characteristics such as: location, type of active mobility, type of event, goals, key activities, number of participants, economic, environmental and social impact, budget, key stakeholders were considered. The process of verification of good practices went through several steps: 1) preparation and fill a form of template of good practices, 2) an internal evaluation process, 3) submission to the Interreg Europe platform, and 4) final verification by Interreg Europe evaluators.

## Results & Discussion

### *EuroVelo 6 Danube Bicycle Route in Serbia*

The DEPART (DEvelopment of a sustAinable spoRts Tourism in Europe) project could play an important role in supporting the sustainable development of sports tourism in Vojvodina by strengthening regional policy frameworks. As earlier mentioned, previous researches found that inefficient implementation of development strategies, limited coordination among stakeholders, and insufficient financial and human resources are key barriers in current development of Vojvodina's sports tourism practices (Matić et al., 2025).

DEPART addresses these issues by guiding knowledge exchange between European regions with successful sports tourism policies, offering concrete examples of good practices that can be adapted to the local context. The project also emphasizes capacity building for local authorities, tourism organizations, and private sector actors, providing tools for strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-based decision-making.

One notable example supported by DEPART is the Thessaloniki Monuments Run, a running event that combines sport with cultural heritage by guiding participants through historically significant sites in the city, showing how local culture can be implemented in sports activities in a way that benefits both visitors and communities (Interreg Europe, 2025). In Vojvodina, a similar initiative

could be adapted along existing urban and natural trails, connecting historic towns and cultural landmarks, such as the Petrovaradin Fortress in Novi Sad, the medieval town of Sremski Karlovci, and scenic sites along the Danube and Tisa rivers. Such a route could form the basis for multi-day running, walking, or mixed-sport events that combine physical activity with cultural exploration, offering participants a unique way to experience the region's heritage while simultaneously boosting local tourism.

There has already been a recent success of DEPART's initiatives in Serbia with the "EuroVelo 6 Danube Bicycle Route", a project developed and promoted under DEPART's framework in cooperation with national and regional partners. EuroVelo 6 is part of a wider trans-European cycling network that aims to promote sustainable tourism, cross-border mobility, and regional development through long-distance cycling routes across Europe. EuroVelo 6, in particular, connects the Atlantic coast to the Black Sea, positioning Serbia as a key link in this international cycling corridor.

EuroVelo 6 Serbia is divided into three routes: the red route passes through peaceful landscapes along the Danube, including nature reserves and riverbanks, the purple route offers scenic detours off the main road, and the green route follows paved roads with multiple cycling options. The route has successfully attracted over 20,000 cyclists annually, and increased visitor engagement with local communities (*EuroVelo 6 Danube Bicycle Route in Serbia*).

#### *Tour de Fruška*

Tour de Fruška is a multi-day cycling event held in Vrdnik and the surrounding Fruška Gora mountain. It's concentrated around three main areas: sports, tourism, and economy. The sports element involves different types of cycling activities including MTB Marathon, E-Bike Grand Prize of Vrdnik, Trail races, races for children, and others. The tourism aspect consists of cultural events, stands of tourist organizations from all parts of Vojvodina, and getting to know the local landmarks. And the economy part involves the presence of local entrepreneurs at Night Bazaars where regional goods and specialties are sold. This event structure aligns well with the need for more coordinated event management and resource utilization identified by Matic et al. (2025).

The first Tour de Fruška was held in 2022, and the event has gained major popularity ever since, attracting a large audience of all ages, as well as a

number of sponsorships, becoming possibly the biggest sports tourism event held in Vojvodina. Building on this success, Tour de Fruška could inspire the creation of additional sports tourism events across Vojvodina, encouraging the development of similar cycling, running, or multi-sport initiatives that take advantage of the region's natural landscapes and cultural sites. Expanding the network of trails, creating themed routes, and organizing seasonal or community-focused events could also attract diverse participants.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, sports tourism represents a growing industry combining sports and travel, offering both economic and social benefits while promoting healthy lifestyles. Vojvodina, with its rich natural landscapes and cultural heritage, has potential for the development of sports tourism, however, it is limited by lack of strategic organizing and underutilized resources. Initiatives like the DEPART project, including good sustainable practices of sports tourism like the EuroVelo 6 Danube Bicycle Route and Tour de Fruška, represent well-structured projects that could enhance, inspire, and further develop sports tourism in Vojvodina.

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