Interpretation planning as an element of the strategy for tourism development at the municipal level in Bulgaria

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To cite this article:
Negulova, E. (2026). Interpretation planning as an element of the strategy for tourism development at the municipal level in Bulgaria. Romanian Journal of Economics, 63(2), 39-54.

Abstract. Objective*: This paper examines the institutional integration of interpretive planning within municipal tourism development strategies in Bulgaria. Although municipalities possess significant natural and cultural resources and are located in proximity to major source markets, interpretive logic remains largely absent from strategic documents. The study aims to identify the structural causes of this omission and to develop a governance-oriented model for systematic integration.* ***Method****: A qualitative multiple-case research design was applied. The empirical corpus includes documentary analysis of over 20 national, regional and municipal strategic documents, 24 semi-structured interviews, four focus groups, and eight field observations conducted in two municipalities (Radomir and Berkovitsa). Data were triangulated and coded against five analytical criteria: interpretive goals, thematic coherence, media selection logic, stakeholder participation and monitoring indicators.* ***Results:*** *The analysis reveals recurring structural deficits, including the absence of explicit interpretive objectives, fragmented stakeholder initiatives, limited institutional capacity within municipal administrations, and a lack of measurable monitoring mechanisms. These deficiencies constrain destination differentiation, resource synergy and adaptive strategic management.* ***Originality****: The study proposes the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM), conceptualizing interpretive planning as a systemic governance mechanism embedded across all stages of the municipal strategic cycle. The model identifies institutional capacity as a leverage point and introduces an operational monitoring framework supporting adaptive and coordinated tourism development*

Keywords*: interpretive planning, municipal tourism governance, strategic planning, stakeholder coordination, monitoring indicators*
JEL classification*: Z32, L83, R58, H83*

1. Introduction

Tourism development at the municipal level increasingly requires integrated governance mechanisms capable of coordinating stakeholders, structuring local resources, and generating measurable strategic impact. In countries with significant natural and cultural heritage, such as Bulgaria, municipalities are formally responsible for elaborating tourism development programs and Integrated Municipal Development Plans aligned with national and regional frameworks. However, while the normative and procedural architecture of tourism governance is well established, the qualitative dimension of strategic planning-namely the structuring of meaning, thematic coherence, and engagement-based coordination-remains insufficiently institutionalized.

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Bulgarian legislation and national strategic documents define vertical coordination mechanisms and procedural requirements for tourism planning, yet interpretive planning is not embedded as a methodological standard within these frameworks. Strategic documents predominantly emphasize infrastructure development, marketing activities and event organization, while the thematic articulation of resources, the integration of stakeholder narratives and the monitoring of qualitative impact receive limited operational specification. This institutional omission creates a structural gap between resource potential and coherent strategic positioning.

International literature conceptualizes interpretation as a structured professional practice aimed at revealing meanings and relationships capable of provoking cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement (Tilden, 2007; Ham, 2016). Interpretive planning, as a systematic process integrating thematic architecture, media selection and evaluation mechanisms, extends beyond site-level communication and can function as a governance instrument linking resource valorization with strategic coordination. Despite this potential, interpretation remains marginal within municipal strategic documents in Bulgaria, where it is rarely treated as a cross-cutting structural component of the planning cycle.

This study argues that the absence of interpretive planning constitutes not merely a conceptual omission but a structural governance deficit associated with limited institutional capacity, insufficiently specified procurement criteria and the lack of qualitative monitoring mechanisms. The research focuses on two Bulgarian municipalities - Radomir and Berkovitsa - located within 40–75 km of Sofia and endowed with significant tourism resources, yet exhibiting similar patterns of strategic fragmentation.

The purpose of the paper is twofold: first, to assess the extent to which interpretive logic is integrated into municipal tourism development strategies; and second, to develop a governance-oriented model capable of embedding interpretive planning across the municipal strategic cycle. This positioning enables examination of interpretive planning not only as a cultural instrument, but as a determinant of strategic efficiency and destination competitiveness. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent is interpretive planning integrated into municipal tourism development strategies in Bulgaria?

RQ2. What institutional and procedural mechanisms explain the omission of interpretive logic in municipal strategic planning?

RQ3. How does the absence of interpretive planning affect stakeholder coordination and the measurability of tourism development outcomes?

RQ4. How can the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM) support verifiable and adaptive implementation at the municipal level?

The study applies a qualitative multiple-case design based on systematic documentary analysis and empirical data triangulation. The research follows a logic of analytical generalization by identifying recurrent structural patterns rather than aiming for statistical representativeness.

By positioning interpretive planning as a structural governance variable rather than an optional cultural add-on, the paper contributes to the literature on municipal tourism governance and offers an operational framework compatible with multi-level strategic planning systems.

2. Literature review

2.1. Municipal tourism governance and strategic coordination

Tourism governance research increasingly emphasizes the role of local authorities as coordinators of complex destination systems characterized by multi-actor interaction, resource interdependence and institutional layering (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Municipal governments are not merely administrative units but strategic orchestrators responsible for aligning public investments, private initiatives and community interests within coherent development trajectories.

Recent scholarship highlights that effective destination governance depends on institutional capacity, collaborative networks and adaptive policy mechanisms (Baggio & Cooper, 2020; Gretzel et

al., 2020; Dredge, 2022). Strategic coherence reduces coordination costs, enhances resource complementarity and strengthens destination competitiveness. Conversely, fragmented planning structures generate duplication of initiatives, weak differentiation and inefficient allocation of public resources.

From a regional economic perspective, municipal tourism strategies influence local value creation, employment multipliers and territorial branding. However, governance literature also documents persistent challenges at local level: compliance-oriented planning, procedural formalism and limited integration between vision, implementation and monitoring (Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Baggio & Cooper, 2020). While quantitative indicators such as visitor numbers and accommodation capacity are routinely monitored, qualitative dimensions-narrative coherence, engagement, behavioral impact-remain insufficiently operationalized.

This gap suggests that strategic planning at municipal level often prioritizes sectoral outputs over systemic integration of meaning and coordination mechanisms.

2.2. Interpretive planning: from site-level communication to strategic instrument

Interpretation has traditionally been conceptualized as a professional communication practice aimed at revealing meanings and relationships capable of provoking intellectual and emotional engagement (Tilden, 2007; Ham, 2016). Contemporary scholarship expands this perspective toward experiential design and behavioral influence, positioning interpretation as a mechanism for shaping visitor attitudes and supporting pro-environmental behavior (Moscardo, 2017; Staiff, Bushell & Kennedy, 2020).

Interpretive planning operationalizes this logic through a structured process that includes resource assessment, thematic architecture, media selection and evaluation mechanisms (Brochu & Merriman, 2015; National Park Service, 2014). In heritage and protected area management, interpretive planning contributes to value communication, identity construction and visitor management.

However, most interpretive research remains concentrated at the level of individual sites, museums or protected areas. Its integration into municipal strategic cycles has received limited systematic attention. As a result, interpretation is frequently treated as a cultural add-on rather than as a structural governance variable capable of influencing coordination, differentiation and monitoring processes at destination level.

2.3. Strategic planning paradigms and institutional capacity

The evolution of planning theory provides a broader analytical lens for positioning interpretive planning. Early rational–comprehensive models conceptualized planning as a linear decision-making process oriented toward optimization (Faludi, 1973). Communicative planning later reframed planning as a deliberative and participatory process rooted in shared meaning-making (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010). Contemporary strategic spatial planning integrates long-term territorial visioning, multi-level governance and adaptive management (Albrechts, 2004; Davoudi et al., 2012).

Recent public administration research further underscores the importance of institutional capacity in policy implementation. Administrative expertise, procurement standards and monitoring mechanisms significantly influence the translation of strategic documents into operational outcomes (Peters, 2018; Baggio & Cooper, 2020). Weakly specified terms of reference and limited qualitative evaluation criteria often reproduce formal compliance without substantive coordination.

Within this paradigm shift toward adaptive and capacity-based governance, interpretive planning can be reconceptualized as an operational layer linking strategic vision with stakeholder alignment and measurable engagement. Its absence may reflect not only conceptual neglect but institutional constraints embedded within local administrative systems. The operational layer of MIGM incorporates engagement dimensions structured through the 4E framework and quantified via the Potential Engagement Index (PEI), thereby embedding experiential coherence within formal governance monitoring procedures.

2.4. Interpretation, sustainability and economic value

Sustainable tourism frameworks emphasize the balance between environmental integrity, socio-cultural cohesion and economic viability (UNWTO, 2018). Interpretation contributes to sustainability by fostering place attachment, responsible behavior and community participation (Moscardo, 2017). When thematically coherent, interpretive systems can distribute visitor flows, reduce pressure on sensitive sites and enhance perceived value without proportional infrastructural expansion.

From an economic standpoint, interpretive coherence strengthens destination differentiation and brand identity, thereby supporting competitiveness in increasingly saturated tourism markets. Conversely, infrastructure-driven development lacking narrative integration may generate short-term outputs but weak long-term positioning.

Despite these recognized benefits, governance research rarely integrates interpretive planning into models of municipal strategic management. While governance literature focuses on coordination and monitoring, and interpretive literature emphasizes experiential design, few studies bridge these domains at the municipal strategic level.

2.5. Identified research gap

The reviewed literature reveals a structural disconnection. Tourism governance research stresses institutional coordination, monitoring and adaptive management, yet pays limited attention to interpretive architecture as a governance mechanism. Interpretive scholarship demonstrates the power of thematic design and engagement but rarely situates it within municipal strategic cycles and procurement structures.

This gap indicates the need for an integrative framework that conceptualizes interpretive planning not as a communication technique but as a structural governance component embedded within municipal tourism strategy design, implementation, and monitoring. By linking interpretive architecture with institutional capacity and measurable indicators, such a framework may contribute to more coherent, adaptive and economically sustainable local tourism systems.

The present study addresses this gap by empirically examining the integration of interpretive logic within municipal strategic documents and by proposing a Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM) grounded in documented structural patterns.

2.6 Experiential and engagement-based interpretive frameworks

Interpretive scholarship increasingly conceptualizes visitor experience as a multidimensional process integrating cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. The 4E framework - Engagement, Education, Emotion and Empowerment - positions interpretation as a structured mechanism through which meaning-making translates into awareness, attachment and responsible action (Ham, 2016; Falk & Dierking, 2016). Rather than reducing interpretation to informational transfer, the framework emphasizes thematic coherence, emotional resonance and participatory involvement as interdependent components of experience formation.

Within governance contexts, these experiential dimensions acquire strategic relevance. Engagement and empowerment extend beyond site-level communication and enter the domain of institutional coordination, as they influence stakeholder alignment, destination differentiation and monitoring capacity. The 4E framework therefore provides a theoretical basis for translating qualitative interpretive processes into structured planning variables capable of integration within municipal strategic systems.

3. Methodology and data

The study employs a qualitative multiple-case design aimed at examining the structural integration of interpretive planning within municipal tourism governance. The analytical logic follows the principle of analytical generalization rather than statistical representativeness, seeking to identify recurrent institutional patterns observable across comparable municipal contexts. This approach is particularly appropriate where the objective is to examine governance mechanisms embedded within

strategic planning cycles and to assess their structural configuration rather than to measure aggregate quantitative effects.

The empirical focus is placed on two Bulgarian municipalities - Radomir and Berkovitsa - selected due to their proximity to the capital city Sofia (approximately 40 and 75 kilometres respectively), their significant concentration of natural and cultural heritage resources, and the existence of formally adopted Integrated Municipal Development Plans and tourism development programmes within the current programming cycle (2020–2027). The two cases share structural similarities in administrative organisation and resource potential while operating within distinct territorial environments, which allows for comparative pattern identification under comparable governance conditions.

The documentary corpus covers the period between 2014 and 2024 and includes national, regional and municipal strategic and regulatory documents directly relevant to tourism governance. Among these are the Tourism Act of the Republic of Bulgaria (latest consolidated version as of 2024) (MT, 2024), the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2014–2030 (updated 2017/2018) (MT, 2017), the Plan for the Development of Cultural Tourism 2020–2025 (MT, 2019), the Integrated Municipal Development Plans (2021–2027) of Radomir and Berkovitsa, the corresponding municipal tourism development programmes, as well as procedural regulations and documentation related to municipal tourism advisory councils. In total, twenty-two strategic and policy documents were systematically reviewed. The selection was based on their formal regulatory authority and direct relevance to municipal tourism planning within the current strategic cycle. For reasons of analytical clarity, Table 1 presents only the key documents most directly relevant to the assessment of interpretive integration across governance levels. The complete corpus of twenty-two documents constitutes the full empirical basis of the analysis and was used in the coding process. Therefore, Table 1 should be interpreted as a synthetic representation rather than an exhaustive inventory.

Empirical data were collected between 2021 and 2024 and consist of twenty-four semi-structured interviews with municipal officials, museum professionals, tourism entrepreneurs and representatives of non-governmental organisations, four focus groups conducted within municipal strategic consultation processes, and eight structured field observations along tourism routes and cultural heritage sites. The interviews explored institutional capacity, procurement design, thematic coordination, stakeholder interaction and monitoring practices. Focus groups were used to capture collective perceptions of interpretive integration and governance barriers, while field observations provided contextual verification of thematic coherence, media selection logic and engagement-related elements in situ.

The analytical framework was constructed on the basis of established interpretive and governance standards and operationalised through five core dimensions: the presence of explicit interpretive objectives within strategic documents, the existence of thematic architecture and narrative coherence, the justification of media selection, the structuring of stakeholder participation beyond procedural consultation, and the inclusion of qualitative monitoring indicators addressing knowledge, attitudes, behavioural impact and engagement. Each document and empirical unit was coded against these dimensions using a structured coding scheme. Deductive categories derived from the analytical framework were complemented by inductive observations emerging from the cases, particularly in relation to procurement design, institutional ambiguity and administrative capacity constraints. The detailed operational structure of engagement dimensions and measurement criteria is provided in the Annexes. To operationalize engagement-based dimensions within a governance-compatible monitoring structure, the study introduces the Potential Engagement Index (PEI). Derived from the 4E framework, the index translates experiential dimensions-knowledge acquisition (education), emotional resonance (emotion), participatory involvement (engagement) and behavioural intention (empowerment)-into structured indicators applicable within municipal monitoring systems. By aggregating qualitative engagement variables into measurable components, PEI enables interpretive architecture to enter formal evaluation mechanisms. The detailed structure of the index is presented in Annex 2.

The correspondence between research questions, data sources and analytical procedures was embedded within the research design. The extent of interpretive integration was assessed primarily

through documentary analysis; institutional and procedural mechanisms were examined through interview material and advisory council documentation; the effects on stakeholder coordination and measurability were analysed through focus groups and field observations; and the development of the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM) emerged from cross-case synthesis of recurring structural patterns identified across the documentary and empirical corpus.

Methodological reliability was strengthened through triangulation of documentary, interview and observational data, the consistent application of the analytical framework to both cases, and the explicit delimitation of the temporal scope of analysis. Construct validity derives from the alignment of the analytical criteria with internationally recognised interpretive and governance standards, while internal validity is supported through cross-case pattern matching. The study advances analytical generalization by identifying structural governance mechanisms that may be transferable to comparable municipal systems operating within multi-level planning environments.

4. Research results and comments

4.1 Documentary analysis: structural configuration of strategic texts

The documentary analysis of twenty-two national, regional and municipal strategic and regulatory documents reveals a consistent structural configuration across governance levels. Although the normative architecture of tourism planning in Bulgaria is formally well-defined, interpretive logic does not appear as a methodological requirement within the examined documents.

At national level, the Tourism Act (MT, 2024) regulates institutional responsibilities, advisory bodies and procedural requirements for tourism planning, yet it does not specify interpretive objectives, thematic architecture or qualitative engagement indicators as mandatory elements of strategic documents. Similarly, the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development (2014–2030, updated 2017/2018) (MT, 2017) articulates priorities related to competitiveness, infrastructure, marketing and sustainability but does not operationalize interpretation as a structured component of destination management. The Plan for the Development of Cultural Tourism (2020–2025) (MT, 2019) emphasizes cultural routes and product diversification but remains oriented toward product aggregation rather than thematic coherence and narrative integration.

At municipal level, the Integrated Municipal Development Plans (2021–2027) and municipal tourism programmes of Radomir and Berkovitsa exhibit a comparable structural pattern. Tourism is framed predominantly in economic and infrastructural terms, focusing on accommodation capacity, promotional activities, festival calendars and site rehabilitation measures. While references to cultural and natural resources are abundant, they are descriptive rather than interpretive. Explicitly formulated interpretive objectives, clearly articulated thematic cores or structured engagement-based indicators are absent.

To systematize these findings, each document was coded against the five analytical criteria defined in Section 3: presence of interpretive objectives, thematic architecture, media selection logic, stakeholder participation beyond procedural consultation and qualitative monitoring indicators. The synthesis matrix demonstrates that across all examined documents, interpretive objectives are either absent or implicitly subsumed under marketing rhetoric; thematic architecture is not articulated; media selection is not justified through audience or sustainability logic; stakeholder participation is limited to formal consultation procedures; and monitoring systems rely exclusively on quantitative performance indicators such as visitor numbers, overnight stays or investment volume.

The absence of these dimensions across governance levels suggests that interpretive omission is not an isolated drafting oversight but a structurally reproduced feature of the strategic planning framework.

The systematic coding of national and municipal strategic documents is synthesized in Table 1, which demonstrates the absence or only implicit presence of interpretive criteria across governance levels.

As Table 1 indicates, interpretive objectives and thematic architecture are consistently absent, while participation mechanisms remain procedural and monitoring frameworks rely exclusively on quantitative indicators.

Table 1. Documentary synthesis of interpretive criteria in national and municipal strategic documents

Document	Interpretive objectives	Thematic architecture	Media selection logic	Participation beyond procedure	Qualitative monitoring indicators
Tourism Act (2024)	Absent	Absent	Absent	Procedural only	Absent
National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2014–2030 (upd. 2017/2018)	Implicit (general references to experience)	Absent	Absent	General consultation references	Quantitative only
Plan for the Development of Cultural Tourism 2020–2025	Partial (product orientation)	Absent	Fragmented	General stakeholder references	Quantitative only
IMDP Radomir 2021–2027	Absent	Absent	Absent	Formal consultation	Quantitative only
Tourism Programme Radomir 2021–2027	Absent	Absent	Absent	Procedural	Quantitative only
IMDP Berkovitsa 2021–2027	Absent	Absent	Absent	Formal consultation	Quantitative only
Tourism Programme Berkovitsa 2020–2027	Absent	Fragmented references to resources	Non-systematic	Procedural	Quantitative only

Source: Author's documentary analysis (2014–2024 corpus)

4.2 Cross-case comparison: Radomir and Berkovitsa

The cross-case analysis of Radomir and Berkovitsa confirms the documentary findings at the level of strategic implementation and local governance practice.

In Radomir, the tourism development programme prioritizes infrastructure improvement, event organization and promotional activities. Public consultation processes were conducted in accordance with procedural requirements; however, discussions did not result in the formulation of a shared thematic narrative capable of structuring resource integration. Interview data indicate that local stakeholders perceive tourism primarily as an economic opportunity linked to events and short-term visitation rather than as a coordinated system of meaning and experience. No formal mechanism exists for articulating key interpretive messages, nor are there criteria guiding the selection of communication media. Monitoring relies on quantitative indicators, without structured assessment of engagement, learning outcomes or behavioral impact.

In Berkovitsa, the resource base - particularly along the "Berkovitsa–Kom" route - demonstrates significant interpretive potential, including natural landscapes, historical sites and ethnographic collections. Field observations reveal the presence of informational panels and static exhibitions; however, these are predominantly descriptive and lack thematic integration. Media solutions appear fragmented, with limited digital integration and no overarching narrative architecture linking the individual sites. Interviews with municipal representatives and museum professionals highlight constraints related to expertise, procurement design and budget allocation. Although stakeholder networks are present, their interaction is not structured around a shared interpretive framework.

The empirical assessment is supported by both documentary evidence and field-based observations. Strategic documents in both municipalities refer to tourism development through general formulations such as "promotion of cultural heritage" and "development of tourism infrastructure", without specifying thematic narratives or key interpretive messages. Field observations in Berkovitsa confirm the predominance of descriptive informational panels lacking

narrative coherence, while interview data indicate the absence of formal criteria guiding media selection and interpretive design. These empirical findings provide the evidentiary basis for the comparative assessment presented in Table 2. The criteria × case comparison matrix indicates that both municipalities exhibit absence or weak articulation of interpretive objectives, limited thematic coherence, non-systematic media selection and exclusively quantitative monitoring systems. Differences between the cases relate primarily to resource configuration rather than governance structure; the structural omission of interpretive logic remains consistent.

These findings support the argument that interpretive absence is not attributable to resource scarcity or geographical disadvantage. Both municipalities are located in proximity to Sofia and possess considerable heritage assets. The observed pattern instead reflects governance configuration and institutional design.

The cross-case structural comparison is summarized in Table 2. Despite differences in resource configuration, both municipalities display analogous patterns of interpretive omission and reliance on quantitative monitoring systems.

Table 2. Cross-case structural comparison: Radomir and Berkovitsa

Criterion	**Radomir**	**Berkovitsa**
Explicit interpretive objectives	Absent in strategic and program documents	Absent in strategic and program documents
Thematic architecture	Not articulated; resources listed descriptively	Not articulated; fragmented site-level narratives
Media selection logic	No structured criteria; infrastructure-oriented	Informational panels and static exhibitions; no integrated media logic
Stakeholder coordination	Formal consultation without narrative integration	Stakeholder presence without thematic alignment
Qualitative monitoring	Quantitative performance indicators only	Quantitative performance indicators only

Source: Author's documentary analysis (2014–2024 corpus)

The convergence of findings across cases strengthens the analytical generalization of the identified governance pattern.

4.3 Institutional mechanisms underlying omission

The empirical material points to three interrelated institutional mechanisms contributing to the systemic omission of interpretive planning: procedural formalism, procurement design constraints and limited institutional capacity.

First, strategic planning processes are characterized by procedural compliance. Municipalities fulfil formal requirements for document adoption and public consultation; however, the substantive content of these processes remains oriented toward infrastructure and promotional aggregation rather than thematic integration. Advisory councils function primarily as procedural validators rather than as substantive filters shaping narrative architecture or engagement logic.

Second, procurement procedures for strategic documents rarely include explicit interpretive criteria. Terms of reference focus on analytical diagnosis, SWOT frameworks and action plans without specifying requirements related to thematic coherence, media selection logic or qualitative monitoring systems. Consequently, contractors are not institutionally incentivized to integrate interpretive architecture into strategic outputs.

Third, interviews indicate limited institutional capacity regarding interpretive expertise within municipal administrations. Interpretation is often perceived as a cultural or museological function rather than as a strategic governance instrument. This perception reinforces the reproduction of infrastructure-driven planning models and limits cross-sectoral coordination.

These mechanisms collectively generate a self-reinforcing governance configuration in which interpretive planning remains peripheral despite recognized resource potential.

4.4 Implications for strategic coherence and measurability

The structural absence of interpretive logic has observable implications for strategic coherence, stakeholder coordination and measurability of outcomes.

From a coordination perspective, the lack of thematic architecture limits the alignment of public, private and civic initiatives within a shared narrative framework. Stakeholder actions remain project-based and fragmented, reducing the potential for resource clustering and complementary value creation. Without a unifying interpretive core, tourism strategies risk evolving into collections of discrete interventions rather than integrated development systems.

From a monitoring perspective, the exclusive reliance on quantitative indicators constrains adaptive management. While visitor numbers and investment metrics provide useful economic information, they do not capture qualitative dimensions such as knowledge acquisition, attitudinal change or behavioral adaptation-factors closely linked to sustainability and long-term competitiveness. The absence of such indicators limits the capacity of municipal administrations to demonstrate impact beyond infrastructural outputs.

From a strategic positioning perspective, destinations lacking narrative coherence face challenges in differentiation within competitive tourism markets. Infrastructure improvements alone do not generate distinctive identity; thematic articulation and experiential integration constitute key components of place branding and value perception.

The convergence of documentary analysis, cross-case comparison and empirical interviews thus substantiates the claim that interpretive omission represents a structural governance feature rather than an isolated administrative choice. This empirical configuration provides the analytical foundation for conceptualizing interpretive planning as a systemic governance layer embedded within municipal strategic cycles.

4.5 The Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM)

The empirical configuration identified across documentary and case-based analysis indicates that the omission of interpretive planning is not accidental but structurally embedded within municipal strategic cycles. The recurrence of absent thematic architecture, procedural participation mechanisms and exclusively quantitative monitoring systems suggests a governance configuration in which meaning-making and engagement remain external to formal planning logic.

The Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM) emerges from this structural diagnosis as an analytically grounded governance framework designed to embed interpretive architecture within the strategic cycle rather than append it at project level.

Figure 1 visualizes the layered configuration of MIGM within the municipal strategic planning framework. The model is structured across three interdependent layers: structural interpretive integration, operational implementation mechanisms and institutional capacity consolidation. The vertical alignment illustrates how interpretive logic is embedded across the strategic cycle rather than positioned as a peripheral communication activity. The horizontal adaptive feedback loop reflects the need for iterative updating and monitoring, addressing the structural absence of qualitative indicators identified in the empirical analysis.

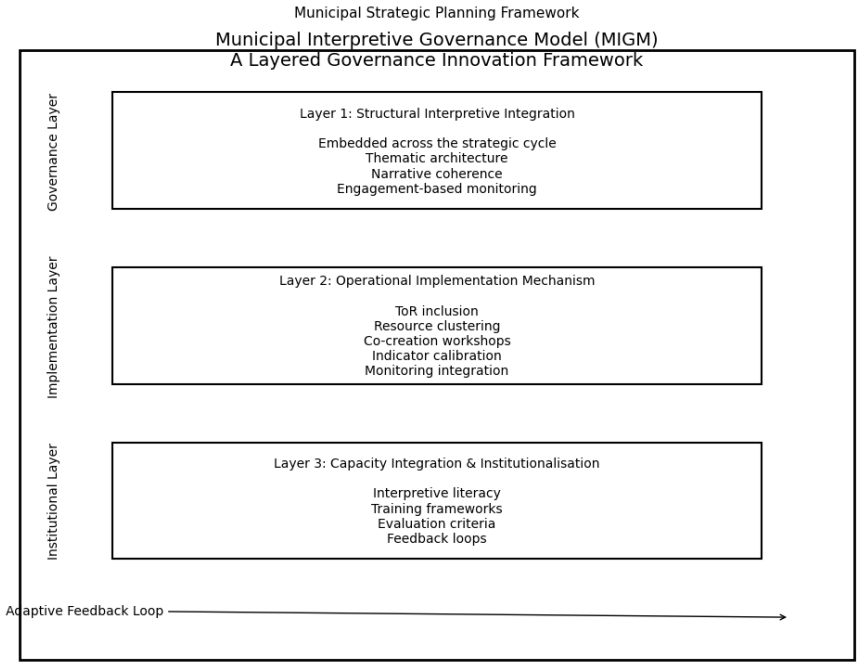
The visual representation emphasizes that MIGM does not introduce parallel planning instruments. Instead, it reorganizes existing governance relationships by integrating thematic architecture, engagement-based monitoring and institutional capacity within established strategic procedures.

The model conceptualizes interpretive planning as a systemic layer operating across three interdependent dimensions: structural integration within strategic documents, operational translation through administrative mechanisms, and institutional capacity consolidation.

At the structural level, MIGM introduces explicit interpretive objectives, thematic architecture and engagement-based monitoring indicators as core components of municipal tourism strategies. This reconfiguration transforms interpretive logic from an optional communication practice into a strategic planning variable. The operationalization of engagement-based dimensions is further

elaborated through the 4E framework and the Potential Engagement Index (PEI), presented in Annex 1 and Annex 2.

Figure 1. The Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM)



Source: Author's elaboration based on empirical findings (2021–2024)

At the operational level, the model integrates interpretive criteria into procurement procedures, terms of reference and stakeholder coordination mechanisms. By embedding thematic coherence and qualitative indicators within administrative processes, the model reduces fragmentation and enhances alignment between strategic vision and implementation instruments.

At the institutional level, MIGM addresses the capacity deficit identified in both cases. The model presupposes the institutionalization of interpretive literacy within municipal administrations, including training, standardized templates and evaluation procedures. In this sense, interpretive integration becomes a governance capability rather than an external consultancy input.

The analytical significance of MIGM lies not in introducing new planning instruments but in reorganizing the structural relationships between vision, coordination and monitoring within existing municipal frameworks. By linking thematic architecture with measurable engagement variables, the model enables qualitative dimensions of tourism development to operate within strategic accountability system.

The model thus constitutes a systemic governance innovation derived from documented structural patterns rather than a prescriptive normative addition. Its layered architecture allows compatibility with multi-level planning systems and offers a transferable configuration for municipalities operating under comparable institutional conditions.

5. Discussion and policy implications

5.1 Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates on local tourism governance and strategic coherence. While previous research has emphasized collaborative networks and adaptive

management (Baggio & Cooper, 2020; Dredge, 2022), the present analysis demonstrates that the absence of thematic and interpretive integration constitutes a structural limitation within municipal strategic planning.

The empirical evidence suggests that fragmentation in tourism development is not merely the result of resource constraints, but of governance design. When interpretive logic is not embedded within the strategic architecture, tourism strategies tend to evolve as collections of sectoral initiatives rather than coordinated systems of meaning and action. This observation extends existing governance literature by introducing interpretive integration as a structural governance variable.

Furthermore, while participatory planning models stress stakeholder inclusion, the results indicate that procedural consultation alone does not ensure thematic alignment. The integration of interpretive architecture within participation processes may enhance coherence and reduce project-level fragmentation. In this respect, MIGM complements existing adaptive governance frameworks by operationalizing qualitative engagement variables within municipal planning systems.

The study also contributes to interpretive planning scholarship by extending interpretive logic from site-level application to governance-level integration. This shift from communication practice to strategic architecture represents a conceptual broadening of interpretive planning within public administration contexts. The annexed operational matrices illustrate how interpretive architecture can be translated into measurable governance components.

5.2 Policy implications

The findings suggest several policy-relevant implications for municipal tourism governance within multi-level planning systems.

First, methodological guidelines for municipal strategic planning may benefit from the inclusion of interpretive criteria within terms of reference and evaluation standards. Such integration would provide clarity for contracting authorities and reduce institutional uncertainty during procurement processes.

Second, capacity-building initiatives targeted at municipal administrations could enhance interpretive literacy and strengthen their ability to coordinate thematic architecture and qualitative monitoring systems. Institutionalizing interpretive competence may reduce fragmentation and improve cross-sectoral coordination.

Third, the integration of qualitative engagement-based indicators within monitoring frameworks may enable adaptive updating of strategic documents, improving long-term responsiveness to changing socio-economic conditions.

Given the structural similarities of municipal governance frameworks across the European Union, the model's layered architecture offers potential applicability beyond the national context examined in this study.

5.3 Contribution and limitations

This study makes three principal contributions. First, it introduces interpretive planning as a structural governance component within municipal tourism strategy design. Second, it develops and conceptualizes MIGM as a systemic governance innovation grounded in empirical case analysis. Third, it articulates a transferable layered architecture linking interpretive integration, operational mechanisms and institutional capacity.

The study is subject to limitations. The empirical base is derived from two municipalities, which supports analytical but not statistical generalization. Further comparative research across diverse administrative contexts would strengthen validation of the model. Additionally, longitudinal implementation studies would provide insight into measurable long-term impacts.

6. Conclusions

This study set out to examine whether the limited presence of interpretive planning within municipal tourism development strategies in Bulgaria reflects an incidental omission or a structurally embedded governance pattern.

In relation to RQ1, the analysis demonstrates that interpretive planning is not systematically integrated into municipal tourism development strategies. Documentary review of national and municipal strategic documents reveals the absence of explicit interpretive objectives, articulated thematic architecture, structured media selection logic and qualitative engagement-based monitoring indicators. The omission is consistent across governance levels and is reproduced within both examined municipalities. Interpretation appears, at best, implicitly embedded within marketing rhetoric rather than operationalized as a strategic planning component.

In relation to RQ2, the findings indicate that the omission of interpretive logic is primarily explained by institutional and procedural mechanisms rather than by resource scarcity. Three interrelated factors were identified: procedural formalism in strategic planning processes, the absence of interpretive criteria within procurement terms of reference, and limited institutional capacity regarding interpretive expertise within municipal administrations. Advisory councils function predominantly as procedural validators rather than substantive filters shaping thematic coherence and engagement architecture. These mechanisms collectively reproduce infrastructure-oriented planning models while under-specifying qualitative coordination instruments.

In relation to RQ3, the study shows that the absence of interpretive planning has tangible consequences for stakeholder coordination and measurability of tourism outcomes. Without thematic architecture, public, private and civic initiatives remain fragmented and project-based, limiting resource complementarity and destination differentiation. Furthermore, the exclusive reliance on quantitative indicators-such as visitor numbers and investment volumes-constrains adaptive management. Qualitative dimensions related to knowledge acquisition, emotional attachment and behavioral change remain unmeasured, thereby restricting the administration's capacity to demonstrate impact beyond infrastructural outputs.

In relation to RQ4, the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM) is proposed as a governance-compatible framework for embedding interpretive planning within the municipal strategic cycle. Rather than introducing parallel instruments, MIGM reorganizes existing planning procedures by integrating explicit interpretive objectives, thematic architecture, engagement-based monitoring indicators and institutional capacity-building mechanisms. Through the incorporation of the 4E framework and the Potential Engagement Index (PEI), qualitative experiential variables are translated into structured monitoring components compatible with formal accountability systems.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in bridging interpretive planning scholarship and municipal governance theory by repositioning interpretation from a site-level communication practice to a structural strategic variable. The governance contribution consists in identifying procurement design and institutional capacity as leverage points for qualitative integration within existing multi-level planning systems.

The study remains subject to limitations inherent in qualitative case research. The empirical base is restricted to two municipalities, supporting analytical rather than statistical generalization. Future research may extend the comparative scope and examine longitudinal implementation of interpretive integration, including quantitative assessment of engagement-based indicators.

Despite these limitations, the findings demonstrate that interpretive planning constitutes a structurally significant component of municipal tourism governance. Embedding thematic coherence and engagement-based monitoring within established planning procedures offers a feasible pathway toward more coherent, adaptive and economically sustainable local tourism systems.

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Annex 1. Operationalization of the 4E Framework

The 4E framework-Engagement, Education, Emotion and Empowerment-serves as the theoretical foundation for structuring qualitative interpretive dimensions within the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM). In the present study, the framework is not applied as a site-level communication tool, but as a governance-compatible architecture enabling the translation of experiential variables into strategic planning components.

Within MIGM, the four dimensions are embedded across the operational and monitoring layers as follows:

1. Engagement

Engagement refers to the degree of active cognitive and participatory involvement of visitors and stakeholders. At governance level, engagement is operationalized through mechanisms encouraging interactive formats, stakeholder co-creation processes and participatory interpretive design. In monitoring terms, engagement may be assessed through indicators such as participation rates, interactive media usage, and stakeholder involvement metrics.

2. Education

Education denotes structured knowledge acquisition linked to thematic coherence. Within the strategic framework, this dimension translates into clearly articulated interpretive objectives aligned with municipal development priorities. Monitoring variables may include post-visit knowledge recall, thematic recognition rates, and educational program integration within local institutions.

3. Emotion

Emotion captures affective resonance and place attachment generated through interpretive narratives. At governance level, this dimension influences destination differentiation and identity consolidation. Operational indicators may include visitor satisfaction levels, narrative recall, emotional response scales and qualitative feedback patterns.

4. Empowerment

Empowerment refers to behavioral intention and responsible action stimulated through interpretive messaging. In municipal governance contexts, empowerment relates to sustainable behavior, civic pride and stakeholder commitment. Measurement may include observed behavioral change, reduction in environmental impacts in interpreted zones, and growth in local participation networks.

By structuring these dimensions within a coherent operational matrix, the 4E framework enables qualitative experience components to be systematically embedded within municipal planning instruments. This structured alignment facilitates the derivation of measurable engagement indicators, further aggregated within the Potential Engagement Index (PEI) presented in Annex 2.

Annex 2. Potential Engagement Index (PEI)

1. Engagement (E_1)

Indicators may include:

- participation rates in interpretive activities;
- interactive media usage levels;
- stakeholder involvement frequency;
- co-creation initiatives within interpretive projects.

2. Education (E_2)

Indicators may include:

- thematic recognition rates;
- post-visit knowledge recall;
- integration of interpretive themes within educational programs;
- alignment between strategic objectives and interpretive messaging.

3. Emotion (E_3)

Indicators may include:

- visitor satisfaction indices;
- narrative recall strength;
- qualitative feedback reflecting emotional attachment;
- identity association metrics.

4. Empowerment (E_4)

Indicators may include:

- observed responsible behavior in interpreted zones;
- reduction of environmental or heritage-related incidents;
- growth in local volunteer or partnership participation;
- behavioral intention measures.

Aggregation Logic

The PEI is calculated as a composite index:

$$\mathbf{PEI = w_1E_1 + w_2E_2 + w_3E_3 + w_4E_4}$$

where E_1–E_4 represent the aggregated scores of the four engagement dimensions.

Weights may be assigned through a minimal procedure including: (1) identification of strategic priorities at municipal level; (2) ranking of the relative importance of engagement dimensions (Engagement, Education, Emotion, Empowerment); and (3) normalization of weights to ensure comparability. The weighting process may be based on expert judgment, stakeholder consultation, or policy priorities, depending on the governance context.

This approach ensures both methodological transparency and flexibility, allowing municipalities to adapt the index to their specific development objectives.

Governance integration

Within MIGM, PEI operates at the monitoring layer. It provides an evaluative mechanism linking thematic architecture with measurable outcomes, thereby reducing fragmentation between strategic narrative design and performance assessment. By aggregating experiential dimensions into structured variables, the index enhances accountability without expanding administrative complexity.

The flexibility of PEI allows adaptation across municipalities operating under similar multi-level governance constraints, supporting analytical generalization while preserving contextual sensitivity.

Table A2. Structural architecture of the Potential Engagement Index (PEI)

Dimension	Conceptual focus	Illustrative indicators	Measurement method	Governance relevance
Engagement (E_1)	Active cognitive and participatory involvement	Participation rate in interpretive activities; frequency of stakeholder co-creation initiatives; interactive media usage levels	Administrative data; digital analytics; participation records	Strengthens stakeholder coordination and network density
Education (E_2)	Knowledge acquisition and thematic recognition	Post-visit knowledge recall; recognition of key themes; integration of themes in educational programs	Surveys; structured interviews; institutional	Enhances strategic coherence and narrative

Dimension	Conceptual focus	Illustrative indicators	Measurement method	Governance relevance
			reporting	alignment
Emotion (E_3)	Affective attachment and identity resonance	Visitor satisfaction index; qualitative narrative recall; emotional response scales	Surveys; feedback analysis; sentiment analysis	Supports destination differentiation and identity consolidation
Empowerment (E_4)	Behavioral intention and responsible action	Reduction in environmental incidents; volunteer participation growth; behavioral intention measures	Observation data; municipal reports; longitudinal tracking	Links interpretive messaging with sustainability outcomes

Source: Author's elaboration based on the 4E framework and governance integration model.

The indicator structure presented above illustrates how experiential dimensions can be translated into governance-compatible variables without imposing uniform metrics. Municipal administrations retain flexibility in selecting context-specific indicators while preserving conceptual consistency across the 4E dimensions.

Annex 3. Interpretive planning matrix

The matrix below illustrates how thematic architecture, engagement dimensions and monitoring variables can be aligned within the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model (MIGM). The example is conceptual and serves to demonstrate structural coherence rather than to prescribe standardized content.

Table A3. Illustrative alignment of thematic architecture, engagement dimensions and monitoring structure

Strategic resource	Core theme	4E dimension emphasis	Interpretive mechanism	Monitoring variable (PEI Dimension)
Natural heritage landscape	Human–nature interdependence	Emotion (E_3); Empowerment (E_4)	Guided eco-interpretation; thematic panels; digital storytelling	Visitor satisfaction index (E_3); responsible behavior indicators (E_4)
Cultural heritage institution	Historical continuity and identity	Education (E_2); Engagement (E_1)	Thematic exhibitions; participatory workshops	Knowledge recall rate (E_2); participation frequency (E_1)
Historical site	Defensive heritage and regional memory	Emotion (E_3); Education (E_2)	Narrative-based guided tours; immersive media	Narrative recognition metrics (E_2); satisfaction index (E_3)
Intangible cultural practice	Community continuity and living traditions	Engagement (E_1); Empowerment (E_4)	Community-led interpretation; live events	Stakeholder involvement rate (E_1); volunteer participation growth (E_4)

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis within the Municipal Interpretive Governance Model.

The matrix demonstrates the structural logic of interpretive integration within municipal strategic planning. Thematic architecture is positioned as the organizing principle, while the 4E framework structures experiential dimensions and PEI operationalize monitoring variables. This layered alignment ensures that narrative design, stakeholder coordination and evaluative mechanisms function as mutually reinforcing components rather than isolated planning elements.