

Local Action Plan

Municipality Pärmet

BACID

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1. Introduction

In the frame of the BACID supported project "Increasing the Development and Implementation Capacities of Community led Projects of Pogradec and Permet Municipality", EuroVienna has visited Përmet and has - together with the local population - set up a Local Action Plan for the city. Input was given by city representatives and local stakeholders in two workshops. Further input from the local population has been collected during personal discussions and conversations in the streets, in restaurants and in shops. Last but not least, additional information has been gathered via Internet research and targeted questions to the city representatives.

Within the following pages, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats will be summarized, development goals in terms of economic, ecologic and social development will be defined and indicators for measuring the success will be proposed. Best practices from different European Regions will make the potential of certain projects and measures more tangible.

Furthermore, a suggestion for upcoming first steps will be provided, starting with the so-called "quick- wins" and a list of potential cooperation partners for future projects.

2. Characteristics

Përmet is a city in south Albania with approximately 6.000 inhabitants in the main town and around 10.600 in the whole city area (Bashkia), located next to the Greek border in the Vjosë valley.

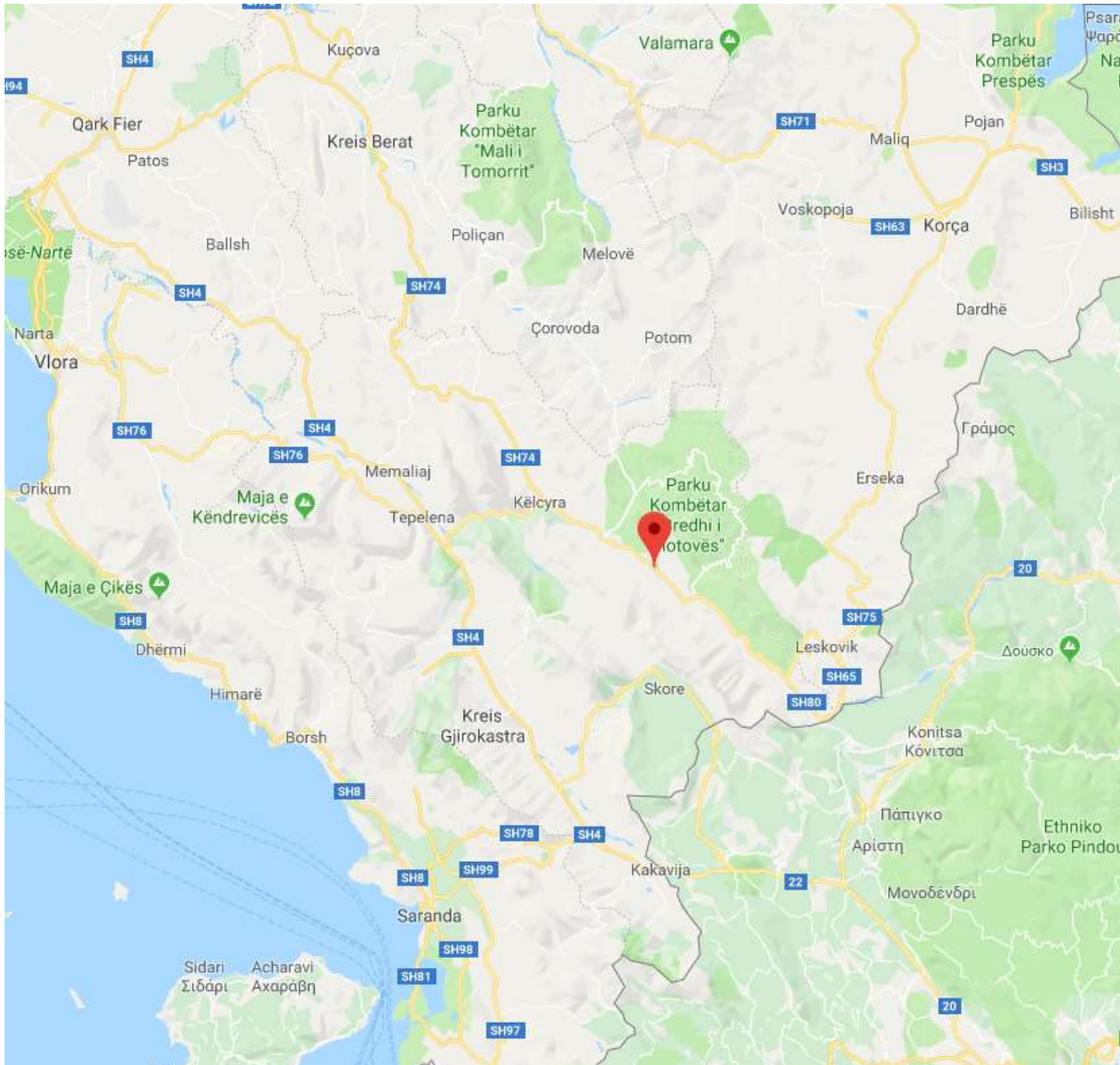


Illustration 1: Location of Përmet (maps.google.com)

The town itself is located at an altitude of only 245 meters above sea level, but embedded in a scenic mountainous area with roads winding up to altitudes of more than 1.000 meters above sea level.

Since 2015, the municipality includes numerous small towns which used to be self-governed. As a consequence, the total Area of Përmet sums up to more than 600 km².

The city is connected with the rest of Albania, Greece and North Macedonia via streets only. It has to be said, that the roads to the capital Tirana are in relatively good conditions (approx. 4 hours travel time; 240 km), whereas the streets to Greece and to the northeastern part of the country (Leskovik, Barmash, Borova, Erseka, Mollas, Kamenice, Korca) are in very bad shape. A car ride from Përmet to Korça takes more than 3 hours for 130 km only.



Picture 1: Road to Leskovik (Martin Marek, EuroVienna, 2019)



Picture 2: Road to Leskovik 2 (Martin Marek, EuroVienna, 2019)

The road to the Greek border looks similar at the beginning, but has faced extended renovations in the past three years between Çarsovë and the Greek border. Therefore, more and more locals use that road, to drive to Leskovik, even though it is a detour of 5 km.

Concerning public transport, there are different public bus lines crossing Përmet. A train connection does not exist, the closest railway station is located in Vlorë (120 km).

Noteworthy is the fact, that the Greek tourist location Corfu is only around 145 km from Përmet, showing, that with functioning transport systems, traffic infrastructure and professional marketing, it should be possible to bring unknown Përmet on the touristic map.

The city's population has traditionally a mixed ethnic background, relevant conflicts between the ethnic groups are not known.

The city center appears to be tidied up and ready for visitors. According to employees of the municipality in Përmet, some parts of the city centre have recently been renovated (see Picture 3, Picture 4 and Picture 5). If however, one leaves the main square, social and infrastructural problems

become visible. The town is dominated by the river Vjosë and a giant rock formation called "Gur I Qytetit" next to it. A big park allows relaxation with nice views to these main sights.



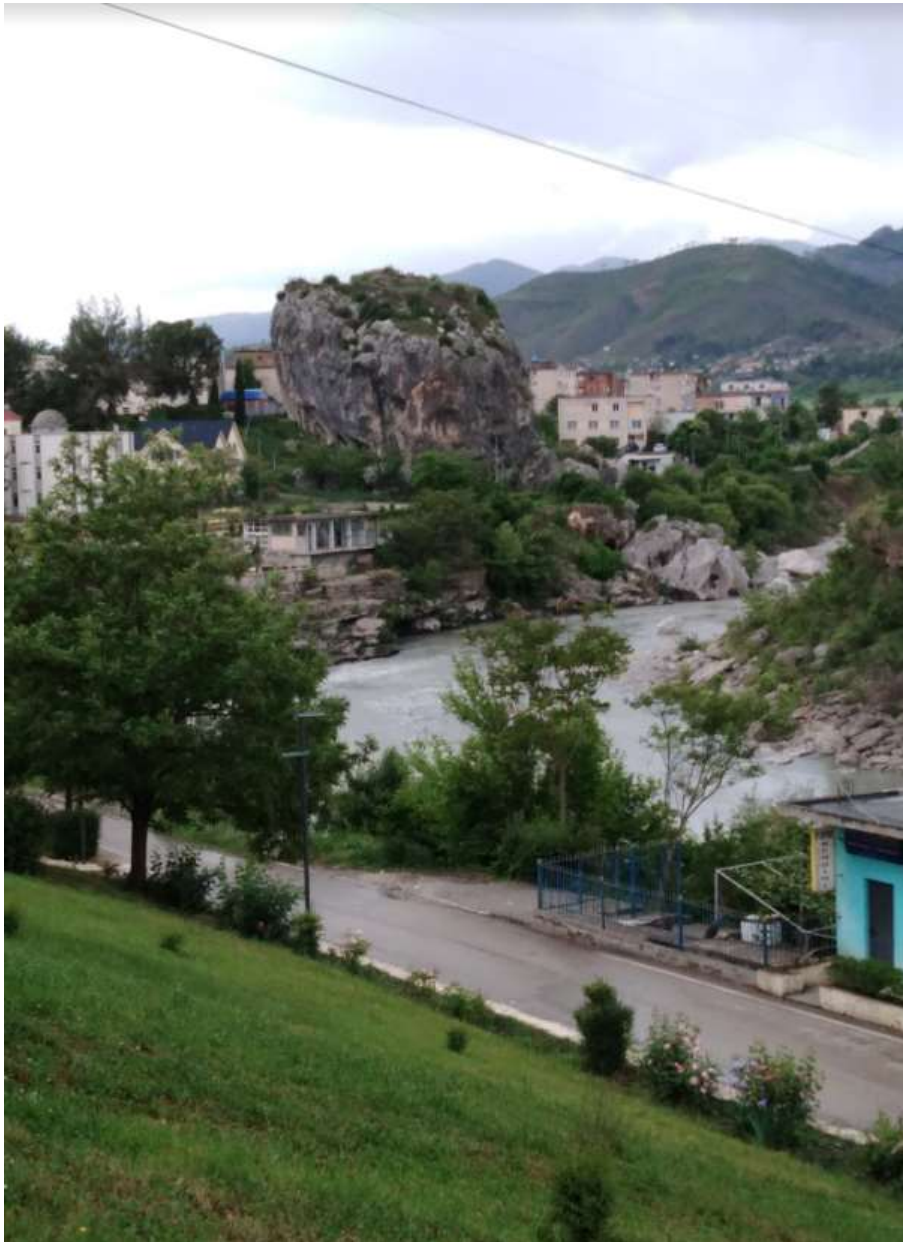
Picture 3: Përmet - City centre (Martin Marek, EuroVienna, 2019)



Picture 4: Përmet - City centre (Martin Marek, EuroVienna, 2019)



Picture 5: Përmet - City centre (Martin Marek, EuroVienna, 2019)



Picture 6: Përmet (Michael Gansch, EuroVienna, 2019)

In the town centre are several small grocery shops, restaurants and bars to be found. Also two larger hotels providing accommodation can be found additionally to the smaller guest houses. Some of the buildings in the center have been renovated, others appear somewhat outdated.

3. SWOT - Analysis

Embedded in a beautiful mountainous landscape, Përmet does have lots of potentials, especially when it comes to tourism development. However, so far, the city does not yet create enough profit out of that. The town uses the claim: "We have everything except the sea!", which does describe the situation relatively well.

Many restaurants use the term "slow food", since Përmet has a wide variety of local specialties such as wine, herbs, fruits, honey and various products out of them. The most famous products are Roses and Glicko - a special food compote technique with walnuts as its main ingredient.

Some of the hotels and guest houses already offer some guided tours to the nearby national park. The "Funky Guest House" for example also has a small shop - in - shop solution for local products.

On the other side, there is little touristic infrastructure. There are no skiing areas in the mountains, no mountain bike trails including signposting and maps. The national park has no significant budget and hardly any professional guides. At the same time, guides from bigger cities are coming with foreign tourists to show them the region, which means also, that there is only little value created in Përmet. Same is true for guided bike tours.

In the town, there is no touristic souvenir corner where one could buy local products such as Gliko, wine or handicrafts. It is also almost impossible to buy postcards. The online presence of the municipality is rather weak.

When talking to the stakeholders, it becomes visible, that most of them are already offering all kinds of services such as horseback riding tours, and renting of rooms within private accommodations, but those offers are not, or hardly visible on the internet. The Wikipedia entry in English language for Përmet is quiet basic. Most of the relevant touristic information about the city and its products is missing.

Even more dramatic is the fact that if someone does not seek specific information about Përmet, but wants to do a hiking or biking vacation in southern Albania or the surrounding region, will not find any information about Përmet. The towns suggested most are nearby Gjirokaster and Berat.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Beautiful landscape</p> <p>Clean and friendly town centre</p> <p>Accommodation of decent quality in the centre</p> <p>Traditional / original accommodations in the natural outskirts</p> <p>National park</p> <p>Regional products / slow food</p> <p>No mass touristic infrastructure / attraction</p>	<p>Road infrastructure missing</p> <p>Public transport connections missing</p> <p>Touristic infrastructure missing</p> <p>Touristic cooperation, packaging missing</p> <p>Touristic promotion missing</p> <p>Almost no revenue of activities for the municipality</p> <p>Local products mainly to buy directly at producer</p> <p>Weak foreign language skills of B2C staff</p> <p>Online presence weak</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>Set- up of touristic cooperations</p> <p>Touristic packaging</p> <p>Touristic marketing</p> <p>Online visibility</p> <p>National park services</p> <p>Outdoor tourism</p> <p>Freeriding</p> <p>Mountain biking</p> <p>Trekking</p> <p>Rafting</p> <p>Nature tourism</p> <p>Historic thermal bath "Banja"</p> <p>Short distance to Greece</p> <p>Returning natives</p> <p>Cultural heritage</p> <p>Winter tourism (snow shoe hiking, ski touring, etc.)</p> <p>Attracting individual travelers</p> <p>Development of sustainable tourism</p>	<p>Dependency on foreign investors</p> <p>"Envy culture" instead of "cooperative culture"</p> <p>Municipality vs. local stakeholders</p> <p>Income only for non-regional tour operators</p> <p>Products become exchangeable</p> <p>Hydro-energy plants on the Vjosë river</p> <p>"New" cheaply build architecture</p> <p>Attraction of non-sustainable mass tourism with low added value for the region</p>

Table 1: SWOT Analysis - Përmet

4. Economic Development

The region is marked by agriculture and associated branches. Also tourism plays an important role. When talking about agriculture, most enterprises are small, family-run entities. Shepherds taking care of sheep and goats next to the streets are no rarity. Some of the farmers have specialized on certain products such as cheese, honey, conserved vegetables, and different spreads. The city is however mostly known for its wines, its roses and Glicko (fruits conserved in a sweet honey based liquid). In Albania, Përmet is known as "The city of Roses". That is an asset which is not yet being used. There are hardly any roses to be seen in the town, there are no festivities like a yearly rose event etc.



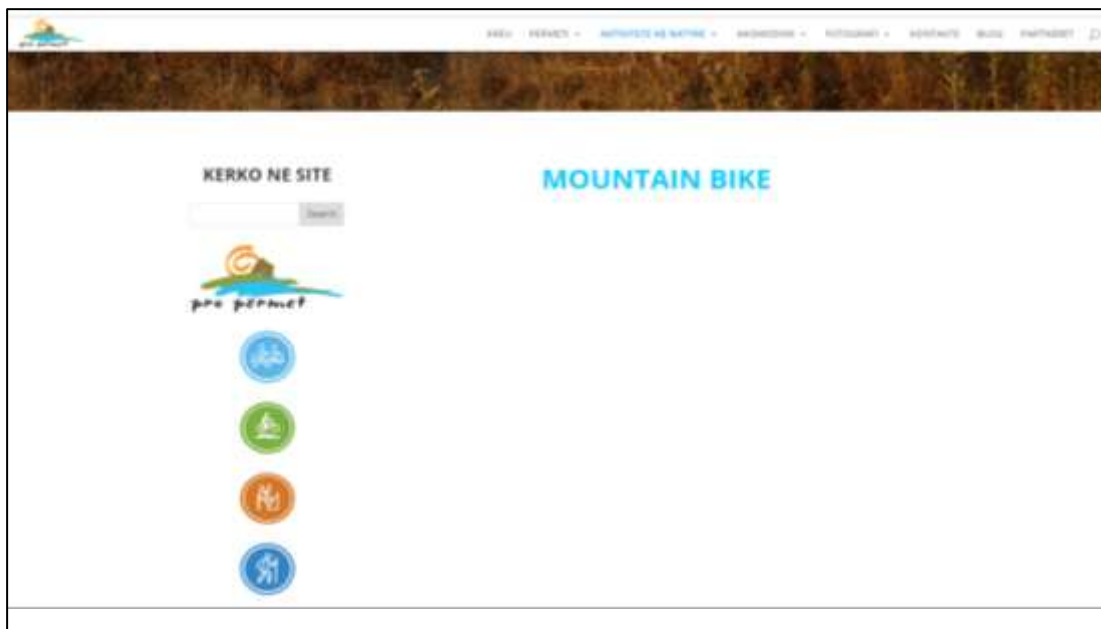
Picture 7: A flock of sheep (Michael Gansch, EuroVienna 2019)

In the city center, besides others, three grocery stores located directly next to each other and hardly to distinguish can be found. In fact these shops are even difficult to recognise when walking by. Furthermore, several restaurants, accommodations and smaller shops selling miscellaneous goods or bakeries can be found. It is the desire of the local population to increase tourism, but many of the

tour operators guiding hike and bike guests are coming from Tirana. As a consequence, only little revenue remains in the region.

In the talks with the owners of private guest houses, it became evident, that the local inhabitant do not yet recognize the value of the traditional stone build houses they offer to guests. It is common way of thinking, that tourists mainly prefer newly built hotels and guest houses with relaxation features and permanent wireless internet connection. But when looking at those guest houses, it becomes visible, that the buildings are still very authentic, nicely built and located in beautiful surroundings. The market for tourists seeking exactly that is big enough to be a potential target market for Përmet. There is a strong opportunity to develop specialised offerings for the attraction of sustainable tourism.

Furthermore, there are no souvenir shops selling handcrafted utensils, postcards, toys or food specialties from the region. The tourist information is located in one of the administrative buildings of the municipality, but it is not clearly marked from the street side to be an info point. The maps provided are being set-up professionally, but they are not user friendly. The internet presence is semiprofessionally managed. When looking for Përmet in the search engines, Wikipedia and Tripadvisor come first followed by booking.com. In order to come to the suggestion for the touristic webpage, one has to move to page two to find the Përmet subpage of Albania.al. That page then provides no useful information and leads you to visitpermet.org. That website does not show up on the first seven pages of the Google search and opening it, only an Albanian language version appears. Switching to another language was not possible. When clicking on Mountain Bike Activities, an almost empty page appears.



Picture 8: Example for www.visitpermet.org (Screenshot EuroVienna, 2019)

Public platforms like Wikipedia are not actively filled with contents. As a consequence, the main touristic sites like the thermal spring is not even mentioned in the German and English version. The French adaptation only includes a two sentence chapter.

The list of potentials for improvements is much longer than the ones described above. Therefore, a cooperation with one, or more touristic regions of similar characteristics which are successfully using mountains, rivers, traditional buildings and local products would be extremely important for the Përmet region.

Since the potential for (sustainable) tourism is noteworthy and the awareness for the potentials of increased tourism does exist already, it is logical to implement first actions in the professionalization of tourism services and to set up something similar to a Destination Management system. But at the same time, one has to think of the next steps, in order to avoid mistakes other regions in similar situations have done already.

More precisely speaking, future partners of Përmet should make sure to also point out the importance of multi-sectoral economies in order to avoid dependencies on just one branch such as tourism or agriculture. Negative examples can be seen all over the Alps (cf. Werner Bätzing, Die Alpen - Geschichte und Zukunft einer europäischen Kulturlandschaft, C.H.Beck, Munich 4th edition 2015).

Especially the focus on agriculture could be problematic in an increasing globalized market and it would be a big mistake to move away from extensive agriculture as it is being practiced right now. Therefore, specialization on local products and on services consumed by tourists can be an opportunity for the farmers as well as circular economy and trade cooperation with the local shops, restaurants and guest houses.

As suggested already before a strong focus should be laid on the development of sustainable- and / or eco-tourism including related services and products. The target groups which are attracted by these offerings possess an above the average purchasing power. These travellers are looking for authentic services, products, landscapes, etc. which must be considered when developing tailored offerings. Certain lack of infrastructure or must-haves in mass tourism (e.g. high speed internet, mini-bars in hotel rooms, new flat screen with 100+ different TV channels, swimming pools, etc.) are not needed but have to be "explained" either by stories or the total experience a certain guest will experience. Social media channels can be used to transport the sustainable image of the Përmet region. It is quiet easy to post photos and stories in certain online channels. A professional (local) graphic designer and photographer can be hired to develop CI guidelines and create authentic photos suitable for online media publishing.

5. Ecologic Development

The ecological situation in Përmet is promising. Besides the very naturally kept landscapes in the outskirts, including the National Park Hotova Dangell, the extensive agricultural usage of the cultural landscape has to be mentioned positively. The mountains lack noteworthy infrastructure such as skiing lifts, even though snow covered peaks until May would allow skiing in the region. But waste and litter definitely is a problem - especially outside the town centre. At the same time it has to be pointed out, that a local NGO has implemented actions already to combat littering. That includes awareness raising campaigns with kids, waste collections and the installation of dustbins at more frequented places. That makes the town of Përmet look much cleaner compared to the towns and cities one has to pass when coming from Tirana.

It is important to mention that ski lifts demand massive investments which are not available and probably not needed. In any case they are not ecological sustainable. In the Alpine region more and more people are spending their spare time with ski touring. Besides local rental of ski tour equipment no infrastructure is needed. Another form of discovering the nature during winter time is snow shoe hiking. In any case it is very important to mention that the authors of this document did neither have a chance to visit the mountains around Përmet nor possess the knowledge to assess the suitability of the mountains with regard to ski touring and / or snow shoe hiking. This has to be done by experts prior to any development of these ecological friendly and sustainable touristic offerings.

That NGO needs to be supported in future actions, awareness needs to get further increased and all stakeholders aiming at preserving the nature and biodiversity in the region need to be included in any planning processes dealing with new touristic products and services.

The National Park can and should serve as a regional competence centre on ecological and educational topics linked to tourism and awareness raising.

Therefore, cooperation for capacity building with institutions such as the Austrian National Parks or the Alpine Associations Alpenverein, Naturfreunde and Touristenklub would be recommended. At the same time political support from the Albanian Government has to be provided too.

A topic of special complexity and importance is the protection of the Vjosë- river, which is considered to be the last wild river of the Balkans. Currently, that status is threatened by plans of building a power plant. Numerous nature protection organizations in Europe are trying to lobby against that project. Needless to say, that it would be a great ecologic loss, if that wild river would get industrialized.

6. Social Development

Of all of the topics discussed in Përmet, social topics have been named the least, even though one NGO with focus on social projects for disadvantaged children was present in the stakeholder workshop, that topic has not been covered by any of the other persons.

However, when talking to people on the streets, a fear of depopulation can be identified. Many young people moving to Tirana or other cities like Durrës and only few of them are moving back. At the same time, the example of Avenir Deliu, the owner of the Funky Guest House at the main square, shows the potential that lies in getting back those young people. He uses his experiences from his time in Great Britain to run a professional tourism business including horseback riding days, transfers or something simple as a shop-in-shop solution for selling local products.

That means, that the young people do not see many perspectives in Përmet, which makes them move away. That will become a problem for the region. Therefore, job opportunities have to be created to have people moving back.

Until that situation has been achieved, contact with the diaspora should be kept active and alive. Meaning, that a special programme could invite former residents into a volunteer support club for Përmet (Friends of Përmet). These people could help in doing small jobs such as translation of touristic materials and filling websites such as Wikipedia with information. Some of those people might want to become local tour guides or National Park Rangers on duty for some 10 or 20 days per year. In all these actions also locals with difficulties finding jobs can be included.

Whatever tasks and activities there will be found, using the former locals will increase the overall awareness for the region and the people will become regional ambassadors. Furthermore ties to the region will remain vital.

7. Outlook

Based on the previously mentioned facts and findings, a set of first steps is being proposed. Since budgets are small it has been tried to suggest mainly measures, which are less dependent on financial contributions, but on personal, administrative efforts. The measures should also be mainly implementable on local level with local resources. However, in some cases external support from stakeholders such as the federal government might be necessary.

Generally, the need for external funds is evident. EuroVienna is therefore scanning the possibilities, hoping to find a possibility to implement some of the steps with external assistance. To do so, a 3-year project including some of the suggested cooperation partners would be needed in order to get a development on the way.

Step 1: Web- visibility city and region

Find local citizens which are capable of speaking English, German, French and Italian and find one person who is able to set up and modify a Wikipedia entry. Establish one text which really gives an in-depth information about Përmet and have it translated into those languages. Add some high quality pictures taken from a (semi-)professional photographer and give it to the person who is able to modify the Wikipedia entries. The authors of this document were able to have a look at some photographs taken in an around Përmet and were on exhibition in a meeting room in the "Qendra Kulturore Multifunkionale" building. These photos are very well suited to be used online.



Picture 9: Photos on exhibition in Përmet in the "Qendra Kulturore Multifunkionale" building (Martin Marek, EuroVienna, 2019)

Texts, photos etc. could also be used for Përmet's own website, Facebook page etc. Make sure that you are visible in Google. Therefore, you have to create content which for example explains the city, nature, services, etc. People in general like to read stories. For most people it is much easier to remember and visualise stories than raw facts and figures (e.g. story telling concept). Therefore it may be a good solution to conduct interviews with older citizens who may know interesting stories from in and around Përmet. These stories can be published online and linked on a virtual map to real places.

To create high-quality content, journalists and/or travel bloggers can be invited to visit and stay in Përmet for some days. The municipality together with the touristic stakeholders could jointly come up for the costs of accommodation and some extra services such as guided tours. That would cause little costs but it would create awareness for the region.

Besides travel bloggers, the Magazines "National Geographic" and "Lonely Places" are renowned magazines that could be interested in visiting. National Geographic is being issued in 37 languages including the ones of the relevant markets Germany including Austria, Italy and France. But also Slovenia, Serbia, Russia and Czech Republic have their own mutations of the magazine.

Lonely planet is more specialized on tourist guides and tour books, but also have a high number of followers on social media, where they constantly issue stories and information.

Step 2: Web- based platforms enterprises

Especially for the private guest houses in the rural areas, it may be a good solution to list their offerings on some relevant direct-booking online platforms. The following non-exhaustive list shows some of the major platforms:

- <https://www.homeaway.co.uk/> HomeAway company product; UK market
- <https://www.fewo-direkt.de/> HomeAway company product; DE market
- <https://www.ferienwohnung.de/> DE market
- <https://www.booking.com/> International booking platform
- <https://www.airbnb.com/> International booking platform

It is important to mention that some of these platforms may charge fees in order to publish information or when used for booking an accommodation. Furthermore, it is important to consider different platforms for different touristic market segments or target groups (e.g. targeting German travellers, British travellers, etc.).

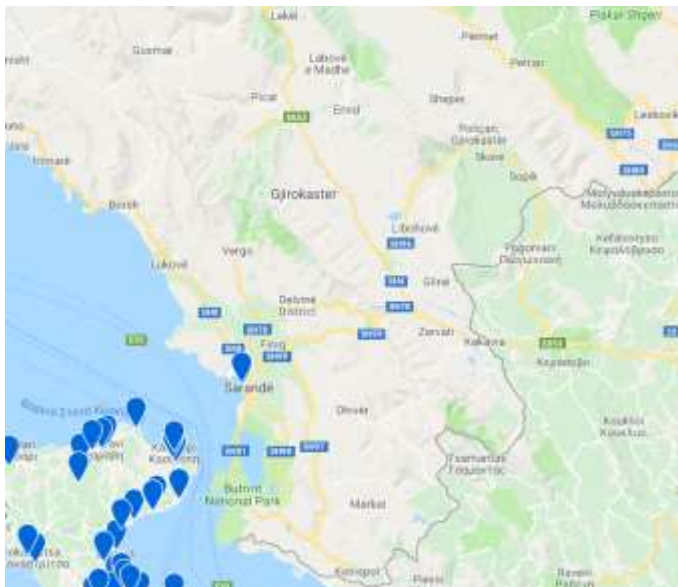


Illustration 2: Available accommodations - Southern part of Albania - HomeAway platform. (Screenshot EuroVienna, 2019)

It is crucial to have good reviews by guests who stayed in your accommodation in the various platforms. See Illustration 3 for an example of an accommodation near Përmet which received an above average review from its guests.



Illustration 3: Screenshot of Booking.com platform (Screenshot EuroVienna, 2019)

Step 3: Internal Cooperation

Local stakeholders have to start to cooperate on a permanent basis. The products of the local producers could be sold in restaurants and guest houses (shop in shop solutions) and the accommodators could provide packages with a visit to local producers, maybe with a tasting of Glicko or local red wine etc. The Funky Guest House already offers horseback tours in cooperation with the owners' cousin who runs a farm. Both have realized the mutual benefit of this particular cooperation.

If local stakeholders start to cooperate, they can cross sell each other. Meaning, if the Funky Guest House still has free seats at the horseback riding, those seats can be filled with guests from other guest houses and vice versa. Furthermore, the local producers are usually very authentic locals who would be ideal for providing guided tours at their production, but also in the nature. The only problem here is the language barrier in case of international guests.

The city of Përmet will have to take over the lead part in the cooperation - at least at the beginning until the group defines its own leaders. In any way, the city will have to be part of the system, since it is also the tourism info desk for the region.

Step 4: External Cooperation

There are several institutions who could be helpful cooperation partners. Some of them can also serve as best-practice examples how other regions in Europe dealt with declining population and weak touristic offerings:

- **www.weltweitwandern.at**
 - A non- profit tour operator with focus on fair and sustainable hiking tours over several days
 - They do provide tours crossing Pöramt already!
 - www.weltweitwandern.at
- **Alpine Associations**
 - Alpine associations can help in setting up guided tours, providing trainings for hiking guides, mountainbike guides, etc.
 - Naturefriends have associations and projects all over the world
 - www.naturfreunde.at
 - Alpenverein
 - www.alpenverein.at
- **Nationalparks Austria**
 - Is the umbrella organization of all Austrian National Parks. They could provide knowledge transfer for creating benefits out of the currently rather unused Hotova-Dangell National Park
 - Measures can include: organizational issues, development of guided tours, pedagogic approaches and techniques, training of park rangers.
 - <https://www.nationalparksaustria.at/en/pages/default.aspx>
- **Urlaub am Bauernhof (Farm holidays Austria)**
 - Is the umbrella organization of farm- holiday providers in Austria. They could provide knowledge transfer in terms of customer preferences, package creation etc.
 - <https://www.farmholidays.com/>
- **Bergsteigerdörfer**
 - Belong to the Austrian Alpenverein. It is a cooperation of mountainous towns which try to establish sustainable nature tourism. The participation is for free, but a criteria- set needs to be fulfilled.
 - <https://eng.bergsteigerdoerfer.org/>

- **Österreichs Wanderdörfer**
 - Is a special- interest marketing platform with own quality criteria for regions and accommodators. If money allows it, a certification with their very own quality criteria- set (Wandergütesiegel) could be envisaged.
 - <https://www.wanderdoerfer.at/>
- **Tourism Regions with similar products and potentials**
 - Mostviertel Tourismus is covering the alpine south and the prospering north known for its local foods such as Dirndl (cornel cherry, Thana), Birnenmost (pear-cider) and wine. They have invented events and cooperations to promote the region and its stakeholders. That could be a potential partner region for future cooperation actions.
 - <https://www.mostviertel.at/en>

Step 5: Make the regional specialities visible and available

When trying to purchase regional specialities, one has to drive to the producer. Only the funky guest house provides some local specialities for sale and a local bakery offers some typical sweet dishes. Local specialities and handcrafts have to be for sale in the centre. It could be done by the tourist office - but better would be an integration in the hotels, restaurants, bakeries, shops and guest houses.

Step 6: Create your USP

Define what makes Përmet special compared to the other south Albanian counties. What is the reason for going there? The wine? The roses? The Gliko? Or something different?

When knowing your USP, define your main touristic products. From an outside opinion, the region should focus on 2 contrary topics: exquisite local dishes and wild nature adventure. With those two topics, touristic products can be developed (e.g. wine tasting in the National Park), marketing slogans can be established.

8. Conclusions

Përmet bears lots of potentials - especially in the field of tourism. Therefore, it will be important to professionalise the touristic community in the city. That does included the municipality itself. The main issue is the lack of communication and cooperation between the local stakeholders and the lack of permanent, high-quality communication to potential visitors (internet visibility). In order to overcome those burdens, EuroVienna is currently in talks with the named potential cooperation partners in order to help Përmet take the next step(s). As a consequence, a follow-up project with a cooperation partner out of the institutions named in chapter 7, step 4 is considered as helpful and necessary. Ideally, the next actions should include visits to the stakeholders, to directly see, what could be improved - but also to take the fear of the hosts, that the rooms could not fit "western European expectations".

Ideally, the stakeholders could make a visit to 1-2 regions which have been in comparable situations, in order to directly see how they developed new products, services and improved their quality and income. Also a cooperation project in a programme such as Interreg Adrion would be recommended, since it would allow to work on touristic products and promotional materials together with partners from Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, Greece and additionally with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Alternatively, the programme Interreg Balkan- Mediterranean with the countries Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Cyprus could be considered.