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DIGITAL NOMAD DESTINATIONS - PILOT ASSESSMENT AND VALIDATION ROADMAP

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Abstract

Digital nomadism creates opportunities for destinations beyond major urban centres, but practical readiness tools remain limited. This paper develops a literature-derived instrument with 13 factors across five dimensions and pilots it through supply-side stakeholder self-assessment in four Serbian destinations, providing a diagnostic readiness profile and directions for further validation.

Key Words: *Digital nomads, destination readiness, multicriteria assessment, tourism development, validation roadmap*

JEL classification: *Z32, R11, O18, O33, L83*

Introduction

Recent advances in information technologies and the rapid normalization of remote work have reshaped how and where work can be performed, a shift accelerated during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital nomadism has gained visibility as one manifestation of this broader transformation, combining location-independent work with sustained mobility and temporary residence across multiple destinations (Hannonen et al., 2023). Digital nomads rely on digital connectivity as they relocate between destinations and often seek a balance among productivity, quality of life, and travel experiences (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021). Mobility in this context is not limited to geographical relocation, but also includes administrative mobility, temporal flexibility, and content-related freedom in work arrangements, which helps explain why destination choice

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depends on a bundle of enabling conditions rather than on a single attribute (Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020). From a destination perspective, these longer and more embedded stays can generate local expenditure, extend visitor presence beyond short-term tourism patterns, and support knowledge transfer, with potential implications for local and regional development (Lazarević-Moravčević, 2024).

In Serbia, digital nomads are currently attracted primarily to major urban centers, Belgrade and Novi Sad, while smaller destinations remain less systematically assessed in terms of their readiness to host this segment and to support comparable local decision-making. Recent evidence for Serbia suggests that attracting digital nomads has measurable tourism potential and may support diversification of local tourism supply beyond the primary urban hubs (Lazarević-Moravčević & Domazet, 2025). Against this backdrop, a practical assessment tool is needed to help local stakeholders identify strengths and bottlenecks and to prioritize destination-level actions under limited data availability.

The paper proposes a multicriteria assessment instrument for digital nomad destination readiness. Its feasibility is assessed only through a pilot supply-side stakeholder self-assessment across four destination types (urban, rural, spa, and mountain), offering a literature-grounded approach to diagnosing readiness and supporting evidence-informed prioritization.

Literature Review

Digital nomads' destination choice reflects both work-enabling conditions and lived experience, including connectivity, affordability, safety, social integration and liveability (Hannonen et al., 2023; Bozzi, 2024), with implications for local and regional development (Lazarević-Moravčević, 2024; Lazarević-Moravčević, et al., 2024). Visa and national administrative frameworks are excluded because they exceed destination-level action. Relevant factors are grouped into five dimensions: digital infrastructure and working conditions; natural and cultural capital; health and administrative benefits; community and social networks; and functional benefits.

Digital infrastructure and working conditions

Fast and stable internet is widely reported as a non-substitutable prerequisite for location-independent work and a primary screening

criterion in destination choice (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Gillet, 2021). Co-working/co-living options and Wi-Fi in cafes support productivity and routine formation and also serve as social anchors that facilitate integration and community building (Zhou et al., 2024).

Natural and cultural capital

Natural beauty, tranquillity, climate, and preserved heritage are linked to wellbeing, concentration, and sustained work–life balance and can differentiate destinations with otherwise similar functional conditions (Lacárcel et al., 2024). Local traditions, festivals, and perceived authenticity frequently appear in narratives of destination readiness and contribute to place identity and everyday experience during longer stays (Özgen Çiğdemli et al., 2024). Recreation, sports, and entertainment support sustainable routines and wellbeing and may carry different salience across nomad subgroups (Mira et al., 2024; Bassiouny & Wilkesmann, 2023; Eban, 2025).

Health and administrative benefits

Access to health services matters for longer stays because it reduces perceived health risks and supports destination viability, particularly in the post-pandemic context (Mira et al., 2024). Administrative availability and accommodation logistics are treated as destination-level enabling conditions capturing local responsiveness and practical ease of arranging everyday needs and longer-stay accommodation, rather than national regulatory design (Bozzi, 2024).

Community and social networks

Nomad community and support networks reduce uncertainty, provide informal support, and mitigate isolation, thereby strengthening satisfaction and retention (Mira et al., 2024; Bozzi, 2024). Organized social activities and professional networking connect nomads to local and trans-local opportunities and increasingly form part of destination positioning and readiness signaling (Zhou et al., 2024; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Gillet, 2021).

Functional benefits

Affordable, high-quality accommodation is consistently emphasized because it determines the feasibility of longer stays and must often meet

basic workability criteria (Mira et al., 2024; Bassyiouny & Wilkesmann, 2023). Cost of living, mobility, and transport costs shape everyday liveability and act as a filter in destination choice for budget-sensitive long-stay decisions (Bozzi, 2024). Cooperation with local entrepreneurs and startups may increase the readiness of entrepreneurial and project-oriented nomads by providing opportunities for collaboration, knowledge transfer, and innovation spillovers (Ünal, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024; Lazarević-Moravčević et al., 2024; Lazarević-Moravčević, 2024). Language, cultural compatibility, and navigation influence practical ease of daily life and informational clarity, supporting comfort and functional integration during temporary residence (Mira et al., 2024).

Conceptual framework, criteria and scoring model

The assessment of destination readiness for digital nomads applies a literature-derived, criteria-based framework developed for this study and conceptually aligned with multicriteria destination evaluation approaches (Celotto et al., 2015; Mariati et al., 2023). The framework specifies 13 factors that capture key conditions shaping digital nomads' destination choices and destination-level readiness, organized into five dimensions (Table 1). At this stage of development, the framework is used as a rating and profiling instrument rather than a fully validated measurement model. Each factor is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very poor, 7 = excellent), and the pilot assigns equal weights to all factors to minimize arbitrariness and emphasize the feasibility, comparability, and interpretability of destination profiles.

The final destination readiness score is calculated as an equally weighted sum of the factor ratings, using the following formula: $\text{Total score} = \sum (\text{factor score} \times (1/13) \times 10)$. Each rating (factor score) is given on a 1 to 7 Likert scale; the same weight coefficient (1/13) is applied to every factor, and multiplication by 10 scales the result to a 0 to 70 range. For example, if a destination has a rating of 6 for the factor "Fast and stable internet connection," the contribution of that factor is calculated as $6 \times (1/13) \times 10 \approx 4.62$ points. The sum of the thirteen equal contributions equals the destination's total readiness score. This procedure enables a comparable, numerically transparent evaluation of different locations while maintaining the pilot's emphasis on factor- and dimension-level profiling.

The proposed instrument provides a structured framework for translating literature-based determinants into a comparable destination profile and an

overall readiness score. In this pilot stage, equal weighting is used to demonstrate feasibility and transparency rather than to claim definitive rankings of factor importance. The following section tests the instrument across four destination types to identify strengths, weaknesses, and validation needs.

Pilot assessment and discussion

Data were collected in September-October 2025. Online questionnaires in MS Forms were completed by representatives of local tourism organizations in Tršić (rural), Sokobanja (spa), Užice (city), and Divčibare (mountain). They were selected to test the instrument across different destination types. Local tourism organization representatives were selected for their operational knowledge of destination supply, infrastructure and development priorities. Their responses should therefore be interpreted as a stakeholder-based assessment of local readiness, not as digital nomads' views. Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale, the extent to which the destination meets the quality of each attribute. Table 1 presents the results.

Given the equal weighting of all factors in the pilot, the overall destination score is simply a rescaled average of the 13 ratings. Therefore, the total score should not be interpreted as a definitive ranking based on empirically established importance weights. The main value of the results lies in the factor-level profiles, which reveal each destination's strengths and bottlenecks and indicate where targeted improvements would most effectively increase readiness.

Sokobanja achieves the highest overall score due to strong ratings across several work-enabling and stay-supporting factors, including internet connectivity, co-working/co-living and Wi-Fi availability, recreation, health services, and accommodation quality. At the same time, very low ratings for cost of living, mobility, and transport costs suggest affordability may be a constraint on longer stays. The pilot, therefore, suggests that cost-related factors may act as binding constraints even when infrastructure and service conditions are otherwise favorable.

Tršić performs solidly on natural and cultural capital, with relatively good ratings for health services, administrative availability, and accommodation logistics. Its strongest assets lie in natural beauty, heritage, and authenticity, supporting a destination profile centered on

tranquillity and distinctive local culture. However, weak scores for co-working/co-living, nomad communities, support networks and social and professional networking suggest that readiness is constrained less by tourism attractiveness than by the lack of work-oriented social and spatial infrastructure. Tršić, therefore, appears better suited to self-sufficient nomads seeking quieter settings than to those relying on stronger community and co-working ecosystems.

Table 1: *Pilot self-assessment results by factor for selected destinations*

Factors	Tršić	Sokobanja	Užice	Divčibare
1.1 Fast and stable internet connection	5* 3.85**	7 5.38	6 4.62	7 5.38
1.2 Co-working/co-living, Wi-Fi in cafes	2 1.54	6 4.62	2 1.54	4 3.08
2.1 Natural beauty, peace, climate, preserved heritage	7 5.38	7 5.38	7 5.38	7 5.38
2.2 Local tradition, festivals, authentic culture	6 4.62	6 4.62	6 4.62	3 2.31
2.3 Recreation, sports and entertainment	6 4.62	7 5.38	6 4.62	5 3.85
3.1 Availability of health services	6 4.62	7 5.38	7 5.38	3 2.31
3.2 Administrative availability and accommodation logistics	6 4.62	6 4.62	4 3.08	7 5.38
4.1 Nomad community and support network	2 1.54	3 2.31	2 1.54	1 0.77
4.2 Social activities and professional networking	2 1.54	2 1.54	2 1.54	2 1.54
5.1 Affordable and quality accommodation	6 4.62	7 5.38	2 1.54	7 5.38
5.2 Cost of living, mobility and transport costs	5 3.85	1 0.77	4 3.08	6 4.62
5.3 Cooperation with local entrepreneurs/startups	2 1.54	3 2.31	2 1.54	1 0.77
5.4 Language, cultural compatibility, navigation	5 3.85	6 4.62	6 4.62	5 3.85
Total score	46.19	52.31	43.10	44.62

* rating

**equal-weight score contributions

Source: *Authors' calculations*

Divčibare displays a balanced profile, combining strong natural capital, high internet ratings, good accommodation, and favorable cost-of-living and mobility conditions. Such a mix suggests strong potential for longer stays, particularly among budget-conscious nomads drawn to outdoor and nature-based lifestyles. However, weak scores for nomad community, support networks, and cooperation with local entrepreneurs/startups indicate that readiness remains more closely tied to physical and environmental assets than to organized ecosystem features that support professional and social integration.

Užice benefits from strong natural and cultural attributes and high availability of health services, but its overall score is reduced by low ratings for co-working/co-living and, most notably, affordable and quality accommodation. These weaknesses point to two key constraints on longer stays: limited housing suitability and an insufficient work-supporting environment beyond private accommodation. Although the surrounding assets and services are relatively strong, the profile suggests the destination is only partially prepared for longer-stay digital nomads.

Across the four destinations, the lowest ratings cluster around community formation, organized social and professional networking, and cooperation with local entrepreneurs/startups. These recurring weaknesses suggest that soft infrastructure and ecosystem development are cross-cutting priorities. The pilot also shows that readiness is multi-bottlenecked: natural and cultural assets or connectivity do not ensure high readiness if accommodation, affordability, or community integration remains weak. Equal weighting therefore supports profile-based diagnosis rather than ranking.

Conclusion and validation roadmap

The study develops a literature-derived 7-point instrument for assessing local digital-nomad readiness through 13 factors across five dimensions. Piloted in four Serbian destinations, it produces policy-relevant profiles rather than definitive rankings. The main contribution is a diagnostic framework for identifying destination-specific strengths, weaknesses, and intervention priorities.

Readiness depends on the interaction between hard enabling conditions, such as connectivity, accommodation, affordability and basic services, and soft ecosystem conditions related to community, networking and local collaboration. This is consistent with evidence that digital nomads

value both work-enabling infrastructure and social contact, co-working, quality of life and reduced isolation (Mira et al., 2024; Lacárcel et al., 2024). Further refinement should test whether hard and soft factors require differentiated weights.

The main limitation in pilot testing is reliance only on stakeholder-based assessment rather than evidence from digital nomads. The findings capture the supply-side perception of local tourism organizations, not nomads' actual preferences, experiences or satisfaction. The small number of destinations and equal weighting further limit the use of the total score as a ranking. Results should therefore be treated as diagnostic and exploratory, with further validation based on demand-side data and expert-based weighting. Further research should strengthen the methodology by moving from the current literature-based pilot toward a more robust measurement model. A useful next step would be to validate the factor structure and weighting logic through expert-based procedures, combining pairwise comparisons within the Analytic Hierarchy Process with iterative Delphi rounds, and then to reduce self-assessment bias by triangulating the present supply-side instrument with a demand-side survey applied to the same grid (Ramos et al., 2024; Laifa & Benhassine, 2023). Where appropriate data are available, the refined framework could then be complemented by entropy-based weighting and TOPSIS ranking, followed by sensitivity testing across alternative weighting scenarios to assess the stability of the results (Zhang et al., 2011; Ramos et al., 2024).

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