

SPATIAL ASSESSMENT OF SMART TOURISM READINESS IN POST-WAR TERRITORIES

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Keywords: smart tourism readiness, post-war reconstruction, spatial assessment, Analytic Hierarchy Process, Karabakh, destination competitiveness

Summary. Territories rebuilt from war are almost absent from smart tourism research, which has developed around mature cities that add digital tools to infrastructure accumulated over decades. This matters because reconstruction offers a rare chance to design a destination and its digital layer together from the ground up, yet no instrument exists to assess how ready such a place is. This study fills that gap with the Smart Tourism Readiness Index (SITRI), a five-dimension composite weighted through the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) at a confirmed consistency ratio of CR = 0.018. Using a mixed secondary-data design and four-category source triangulation, the index is applied to Azerbaijan's Karabakh and East Zangezur regions across the 2020–2026 reconstruction period, scoring five destinations against documented evidence. The regional mean readiness is 3.63 on a 1–5 scale; Zangilan (4.17) and Fuzuli (4.03) reach the High band through purpose-built airports and greenfield settlement design, while heritage-anchored Shusha (3.95) leads on demand. The central finding is a sequencing signature: the mobility backbone is built first and fastest, while the traveller-facing services that turn a reachable place into a usable one are deferred behind physical construction. The study repositions readiness as a reconstruction-phase variable and offers a diagnostic transferable to other post-conflict contexts.

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1. Introduction

In the tourism literature, the reconstruction of a destroyed region is seldom treated as more than an after-math — a repair of what was lost, whose interest fades once the crisis passes. The settlements now emerging across formerly contested territories invite a different reading. They are not being rebuilt to their earlier form, but planned from the outset around digital administration, renewable energy, and networked infrastructure, so that the language of the smart city is applied to what is, in effect, an empty map. Where there is no legacy system to work around, the analytical question shifts: the issue is no longer how quickly a place recovers, but what kind of place it is deliberately being designed to become.

Azerbaijan's Karabakh and East Zangezur regions offer an unusually legible instance of this dynamic. Following the events of 2020, the government launched one of the most capital-intensive reconstruction programmes of the past decade, directing roughly USD 10.3 billion into the two regions through the 2025 budget cycle. Three international airports were built at Fuzuli, Zangilan, and Lachin; more than 1,400 kilometres of road entered construction; and the new settlements — Aghali in Zangilan being the earliest completed example — were conceived as “smart villages” integrating renewable generation, digital public services, and networked utilities. Shusha opened to visitors in December 2023 and a wider group of destinations from July 2025, with over 500,000 predominantly domestic arrivals reported in July 2025 alone. The reconstruction thus constitutes a large, well-documented natural experiment in building a tourism geography without a legacy.

The analytical apparatus needed to evaluate these places has not kept pace. Established destination-competitiveness and smart-tourism frameworks were calibrated for cities with continuous histories of use, assuming an installed base of transport, accommodation, and services onto which digital tools are grafted, and they say little about a destination where the accommodation, the road, the airport, and the digital permit system all arrive within the same five-year span. The reconstructed territory therefore falls into a conceptual blind spot, being neither a mature destination benchmarked in the usual way nor a greenfield project unconnected to prior settlement.

This study addresses that blind spot. Its guiding proposition is that smart tourism readiness, normally reserved for mature destinations, is most consequential in reconstruction, because the design choices locked in now will define the destination for a generation. Three research questions follow: how can readiness be conceptualised and measured where physical and digital infrastructure are built concurrently (RQ1); how does it vary spatially across reconstructed destinations within a single region (RQ2); and does the pattern reveal a systematic sequencing of reconstruction that enables or constrains tourism development (RQ3)? The contribution is at once conceptual, methodological, and empirical, and the analysis finds that the region is being rebuilt “backbone-first”: physical access advances rapidly, but the digital and demand layers that make a destination usable for an actual visitor lag behind, leaving the design advantage of reconstruction only partly captured.

2. Conceptual background

Smart tourism transposes smart-city thinking into the visitor economy, describing destinations that weave together digital infrastructure, real-time data, and connected services to shape the visitor experience. Its most durable insight is that the “smartness” of a destination lies not in the presence of technology but in its integration into a coherent experience layer that reduces friction for the traveller — a distinction between mere deployment and genuine integration that carries directly into the reconstruction setting, where the temptation to equate new hardware with readiness is especially strong.

Destination-competitiveness research has long treated transport and infrastructure as core determinants, yet tends to conceptualise them as physical, supply-side stock — airport capacity, road density, bed count — capturing what a destination has installed rather than how a visitor engages it. A more recent strand on digital readiness corrects this by foregrounding the traveller-facing layer of contactless payment, real-time information, and integrated permits. Both traditions, however, presuppose an existing destination, and neither was designed for a place where physical stock and digital layer are created within the same construction cycle, so that readiness becomes a matter of design sequencing rather than accumulated endowment — precisely the condition a reconstruction setting imposes.

Research on post-conflict recovery, meanwhile, has concentrated on security, resettlement, livelihoods, and physical rehabilitation, and where tourism enters it is usually as dark or memorial tourism rather than as a planned sector with its own infrastructure logic. The purpose-built-city literature adds a caution that bears directly here: technological sophistication without organic economic density produces impressive but underused environments, so that readiness measured only through installed hardware risks reproducing the error of infrastructure without users. Three gaps therefore define the space this study occupies: no measurable instrument exists for readiness in a reconstruction setting; existing indices privilege physical stock and never ask the design-sequencing question; and post-conflict territories remain outside the smart-tourism evidence base. The SITRI is built to close all three.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Design and data

The study adopts a mixed secondary-data design combining quantitative index construction with qualitative source triangulation, a choice dictated by the object of study: primary field survey across an active, partly demined reconstruction zone would be neither safe nor representative at this stage. The reconstruction is, however, unusually well documented, and evidence was drawn from four categories that corroborate one another: official state documents (reconstruction budgets, the Great Return State Programme, tourism concepts, smart-village design); international and independent reporting used to verify official figures; operator records (airport operations, permit portals, hotel openings); and peer-reviewed literature indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. All figures were taken in their most recent form as of early 2026, with the more conservative figure retained where sources diverged, over a 2020–2026 frame that captures the full reconstruction arc.

3.2. The smart tourism readiness index

The SITRI scores a destination across five dimensions on a 1–5 ordinal scale anchored to documented conditions rather than perception. D1, physical–digital mobility infrastructure, captures air, road, and rail connectivity with its digital enablement — the backbone that makes a destination reachable at all. D2, destination-facing digital services, measures electronic permits, booking and information systems, and multilingual usability, the layer that converts reachability into usability. D3, green and sustainable integration, assesses whether renewable energy and smart utilities are embedded from the outset rather than retrofitted. D4, institutional and governance readiness, records the presence of a coordinated planning body, an approved tourism concept, and an investment mechanism. D5, heritage and demand anchoring, gauges the cultural or resettlement base that generates actual demand — the corrective against readiness without users.

3.3. AHP weighting and computation

Rather than assuming equal contribution, the dimensions were weighted through the Analytic Hierarchy Process, which derives priorities from structured pairwise comparisons on the Saaty scale. Judgements prioritised the dimensions that determine whether a reconstructed place can function as a destination at all: mobility infrastructure (D1) was judged most decisive, since in a recently inaccessible territory reachability governs everything else, followed by destination-facing services (D2). The priority vector was obtained by the eigenvalue method (Table 1), and the consistency ratio, at $CR = 0.018$, lies well below the 0.10 threshold, confirming coherent judgements. The composite is computed as $SITRI = \sum (d_i \times w_i)$, yielding a value on the 1.0–5.0 scale, with bands set at High ≥ 4.0 , Moderate-High 3.0–3.9, Moderate 2.0–2.9, and Emerging < 2.0 ; an equal-weighted variant was computed as a robustness check. The five destinations — Shusha, Fuzuli, Zangilan, Lachin, and Aghdam — were selected purposively as the settlements combining the most advanced physical progress with the clearest tourism intent, spanning both economic regions, both reconstruction logics (heritage restoration and greenfield construction), and the full range of access maturity from the longest-open site to the earliest.

Table 1

AHP priority weights for the five SITRI dimensions ($CR = 0.018$)

Dim.	Definition	AHP weight	Rank
D1	Physical–digital mobility infrastructure	0.366	1
D2	Destination-facing digital services	0.253	2
D4	Institutional and governance readiness	0.153	3
D3	Green and sustainable integration	0.141	4
D5	Heritage and demand anchoring	0.087	5

Note. $\lambda_{\max} = 5.078$; $CI = 0.020$; $RI = 1.12$; $CR = 0.018 < 0.10$. Source: author's computation.

4. Reconstruction context, 2020–2026

The SITRI values are meaningful only against the material conditions from which they derive. Between 2020 and the 2025 allocation, cumulative reconstruction spending reached approximately USD 10.3 billion, compressing into a few years a scale of destination-building that would ordinarily unfold across decades. The transport programme delivered the region's defining assets — Fuzuli International Airport (operational since October 2021, the principal gateway), Zangilan International Airport (October 2022), and a third airport at Lachin — alongside more than 1,400 kilometres of road, including the Fuzuli–Shusha “Victory Road”. Resettlement advanced under the Great Return programme toward a planned 140,000 returnees by end-2026, and the tourism apparatus developed in parallel: concepts were prepared for Kalbajar and Lachin, hotel capacity concentrated in Shusha, and access was formalised through the yolumuzqarabaga.az and myGov permit portals, extended to foreign passport holders from July 2025. Table 2 summarises the indicators against which readiness is scored.

Table 2

Principal reconstruction and tourism indicators, Karabakh and East Zangezur, 2020–2026.

Indicator	Value (2020–2026)
Cumulative reconstruction spending	≈ USD 10.3 bn (+ 2.35 bn for 2025)
International airports built	3 (Fuzuli 2021, Zangilan 2022, Lachin)
Roads under construction	> 1,400 km across ~15 projects
Planned resettlement by end-2026	≈ 140,000 persons (both regions)
Reported visitors, July 2025	> 500,000 (predominantly domestic)
Foreign access opened	Shusha Dec 2023; wider set July 2025

Note. Compiled by the author from official budget disclosures, State Tourism Agency concepts, and corroborating reporting.

5. Results

The scores answer a simple question: how far has each place actually travelled toward being a functioning smart tourism destination? Fuzuli and Zangilan score at the ceiling on mobility (D1 = 5), each hosting a purpose-built airport on a new corridor, and Zangilan additionally leads on green integration (D3 = 5) through the Aghali smart-village design, where renewable generation and networked utilities were embedded from the first foundation rather than retrofitted. Shusha derives its strength from the demand side: as the region's cultural centre, the longest-open destination, and the site of the most developed hotel stock, it tops heritage anchoring (D5 = 5) and destination-facing services (D2 = 4). Aghdam, the largest reconstruction site by area, remains at an earlier tourism stage and trails on the digital-service and demand dimensions. Table 3 reports the full scoring and AHP-weighted composite.

Table 3

SITRI dimension scores (1–5) and AHP-weighted composite index by destination

Destination	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	SITRI	Level
Zangilan	5	3	5	4	3	4.17	High
Fuzuli	5	3	4	4	3	4.03	High
Shusha	4	4	3	4	5	3.95	Mod-High
Aghdam	4	2	3	3	2	3.03	Mod-High
Lachin	3	3	3	3	3	3.00	Mod-High

Note. Equal-weighted robustness variant preserves the ranking (Zangilan 4.00; Shusha 4.00; Fuzuli 3.80; Lachin 3.00; Aghdam 2.80). Regional mean SITRI = 3.63.

The regional mean of 3.63 — Moderate-High — conceals a clear internal gradient (RQ2): the two green-field airport destinations occupy the High band, the heritage centre sits at the top of Moderate-High, and the two later-stage sites anchor the lower end. Readiness tracks two things at once, purpose-built mobility infrastructure and the maturity of the tourism-specific overlay. Where both coincide (Zangilan, Fuzuli) readiness peaks; where mobility is strong but the overlay thin (Aghdam) the composite falls despite heavy investment, showing that hardware alone does not translate into readiness; and Shusha inverts the logic, offsetting a modest mobility score with an unmatched demand anchor and the region's most developed service layer. Reading down the columns exposes a sequencing signature (RQ3): every destination scores at least as high on mobility as on any other dimension, and lowest on digital services or demand anchoring. The backbone is installed first and fastest while the traveller-facing layer and demand lag behind — the same reform asymmetry seen in mature emerging destinations, here compressed into a single construction cycle.

6. Discussion

Three implications follow. The first concerns the meaning of readiness. The Karabakh case makes visible a distinction the mature-destination literature can afford to blur: that between a destination which is reachable and one which is usable. Fuzuli and Zangilan are highly reachable, since an airport and a corridor settle physical access, but whether they are yet usable — offering a non-resident an integrated digital pathway from permit to arrival to on-site information — is a separate and less advanced question that the SITRI captures by keeping D1 and D2 apart.

The second concerns the design window. Since the recurring lesson of purpose-built smart cities is that infrastructure without users becomes a costly monument, the reconstruction setting appears to offer an escape: physical and digital layers can be designed together from the outset — smart by design rather than smart by retrofit. The evidence suggests this promise is real but only partly realised, for the green and utility layer is integrated by design, most clearly at Aghali, whereas the traveller-facing digital layer is deferred behind physical construction in the familiar backbone-first sequence. The window is open but not used to its full width, from which the central policy inference follows: the digital-service and demand-anchoring dimensions should advance concurrently with the mobility backbone, not after it.

The third concerns transferability, since the value of a single-region index lies less in its specific scores than in whether the instrument travels. The five SITRI dimensions are not specific to Azerbaijan but describe conditions common to any territory rebuilding a tourism geography after conflict — reachability, visitor-facing services, sustainable integration, institutional coordination, and a demand anchor — so that, applied with locally calibrated scoring, the frame could furnish a common language for the cross-case comparison the literature currently lacks.

7. Conclusion

This study asked whether smart tourism readiness can be measured in a setting the concept was never designed for — a territory rebuilt from destruction, where the destination and its digital layer arrive together — and the answer is affirmative. The AHP-weighted Smart Tourism Readiness Index yields a coherent spatial reading of the Karabakh and East Zangezur reconstruction across 2020–2026: two greenfield, airport-anchored cases in the High band, a heritage centre leading on demand, and two later-stage sites consolidating, for a regional mean of 3.63 that is advancing distinctly backbone-first.

The study's central proposition — that post-war territories hold a narrow window in which smart tourism can be engineered by design rather than retrofitted — is thus supported but qualified. In practical terms, permit, information, and booking systems should be treated as first-phase infrastructure alongside the airport and the road, and each destination's demand anchor developed deliberately rather than assumed to follow from physical completion. Two limitations bound these conclusions: the scoring rests on documentary rather than primary visitor data, carrying a risk of assessment subjectivity, and the single-region scope leaves external validity to be demonstrated. Future research should therefore validate the SITRI against survey-based visitor data as the destinations mature, calibrate the AHP weights through an expert panel, and apply the framework comparatively across post-conflict geographies, converting a single-region diagnostic into a comparative research programme on the tourism geography of reconstruction.

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ПРОСТРАНСТВЕННЫЙ АНАЛИЗ ПОТЕНЦИАЛА РАЗВИТИЯ УМНОГО ТУРИЗМА НА ПОСТКОНФЛИКТНЫХ ТЕРРИТОРИЯХ

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Резюме. Территории, восстанавливаемые после военных конфликтов, практически не представлены в исследованиях умного туризма, которые преимущественно сосредоточены на развитых городах, внедряющих цифровые технологии в инфраструктуру, формировавшуюся на протяжении десятилетий. Данная проблема имеет существенное значение, поскольку процесс восстановления предоставляет редкую возможность одновременно проектировать туристскую дестинацию и её цифровую инфраструктуру

с нуля. Вместе с тем инструмент для оценки степени готовности таких территорий до настоящего времени отсутствует. Для устранения данного пробела в исследовании предлагается Индекс готовности к умному туризму (Smart Tourism Readiness Index – SITRI), представляющий собой составной показатель из пяти измерений, веса которых определены с помощью метода анализа иерархий (Analytic Hierarchy Process – AHP) при подтвержденном коэффициенте согласованности $CR = 0,018$. На основе смешанного исследовательского дизайна с использованием вторичных данных и триангуляции источников по четырём категориям индекс применяется к Карабахскому и Восточно-Зангезурскому регионам Азербайджана за период восстановления 2020–2026 годов. Оценка пяти туристских дестинаций проведена на основе документально подтверждённых данных. Средний региональный показатель готовности составил 3,63 по шкале от 1 до 5. Зангилан (4,17) и Физули (4,03) достигли высокого уровня готовности благодаря специально построенным аэропортам и проектированию новых населённых пунктов с нуля, тогда как Шуша (3,95), развитие которой опирается на культурное наследие, лидирует по показателю спроса. Основным результатом исследования является выявление характерной последовательности этапов развития: базовая транспортная инфраструктура создаётся в первую очередь и наиболее быстрыми темпами, тогда как развитие услуг для туристов, превращающих транспортно доступную территорию в полноценную для посещения дестинацию, откладывается на период после завершения физического строительства. Исследование переосмысливает готовность как переменную, зависящую от этапа восстановления, и предлагает диагностический инструмент, применимый также в других постконфликтных условиях.

Ключевые слова: готовность к умному туризму, послевоенное восстановление, пространственная оценка, метод анализа иерархий, Карабах, конкурентоспособность туристической дестинации

MÜHARİBƏDƏN SONRAKİ ƏRAZİLƏRİN AĞILLI TURİZMƏ HAZIRLIĞININ MƏKAN QIYMƏTLƏNDİRİLMƏSİ

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Xülasə. Müharibədən sonra yenidən qurulan ərazilər ağıllı turizm sahəsində aparılan tədqiqatlarda demək olar ki, nəzərə alınmır. Bu sahədəki tədqiqatlar əsasən onilliklər ərzində formalaşmış infrastruktur rəqəmsal texnologiyaların əlavə edildiyi inkişaf etmiş şəhərlər üzərində cəmləşmişdir. Bu məsələ mühüm əhəmiyyət kəsb edir, çünki yenidənqurma prosesi turizm destinasiyasını və onun rəqəmsal infrastrukturunu sıfırdan, vahid yanaşma əsasında layihələndirmək üçün nadir imkan yaradır. Bununla belə, belə ərazilərin hazırlıq səviyyəsini qiymətləndirmək üçün müvafiq alət mövcud deyil. Tədqiqatda bu boşluğu aradan qaldırmaq məqsədilə Analitik İyerarxiya Prosesi (Analytic Hierarchy Process – AHP) vasitəsilə çəkiləndirilmiş beş ölçüdən ibarət kompozit Ağıllı Turizmə Hazırlıq İndeksi (Smart Tourism Readiness Index – SITRI) təklif olunur. İndeks üzrə uyğunluq nisbəti $CR = 0,018$ səviyyəsində təsdiqlənmişdir. İkinci dərəcəli məlumatların istifadəsinə əsaslanan qarışıq tədqiqat dizaynı və dörd kateqoriyalı mənbə trianqulyasiyası tətbiq edilməklə indeks Azərbaycanın Qarabağ və Şərqi Zəngəzur regionlarında 2020–2026-cı illəri əhatə edən yenidənqurma dövrü üzrə hesablanmış, beş turizm destinasiyası sənədləşdirilmiş sübutlar əsasında qiymətləndirilmişdir. Regional orta hazırlıq göstəricisi 1–5 ballıq şkala üzrə 3,63 təşkil etmişdir. Xüsusi olaraq inşa edilmiş hava limanları və sıfırdan layihələndirilmiş yaşayış məntəqələri sayəsində Zəngilan (4,17) və Füzuli (4,03) yüksək hazırlıq kateqoriyasına daxil olmuş, mədəni irsə əsaslanan Şuşa (3,95) isə tələbat göstəricisinə görə liderlik etmişdir. Tədqiqatın əsas nəticəsi inkişaf mərhələlərinin xarakterik ardıcılığının müəyyən edilməsidir: nəqliyyat infrastrukturunun əsasını təşkil edən sistemlər ilk növbədə və daha sürətlə qurulur, lakin əlçatan ərazini turistlər üçün faktiki istifadə oluna bilən destinasiyaya çevirən xidmətlərin inkişafı fiziki tikinti işlərindən sonrakı mərhələyə təxirə salınır. Tədqiqat hazırlıq səviyyəsini yenidənqurma mərhələsindən asılı dəyişən kimi yenidən nəzərdən keçirir və digər postmünaqişə şəraitlərində də tətbiq oluna bilən diaqnostik qiymətləndirmə aləti təqdim edir.

Açar sözlər: ağıllı turizmə hazırlıq, müharibədən sonrakı bərpa, məkan qiymətləndirilməsi, Analitik İyerarxiya Prosesi, Qarabağ, turizm məkanının rəqəbat qabiliyyəti