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POSSIBILITIES FOR BULGARIA'S DEVELOPMENT AS A MULTI-ASPECT TOURIST DESTINATION

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***Abstract:** Each tourist destination has its own development potential, which can be revealed through proper planning, design, management and promotion of tourist regions. The competitiveness of a tourist destination mainly depends on the adequate positioning of its tourist superstructure, the development of adequate infrastructure, the provision of services that correspond to tourists' leisure preferences, the establishment of tourist attractions that provoke the interest of its visitors, etc. The interaction of these elements and their complex effect would contribute to the sustainable development of tourist destinations.*

***Keywords:** tourism, tourist destination, destination Bulgaria*

1. Introduction

Building and maintaining an attractive and competitive tourist destination requires the establishment of an appropriate environment that is properly planned and has the potential for future development. In Bulgaria, as in most countries around the world, the tourism industry is affected by various factors, such as migration processes, aging population, high youth unemployment rates, certain environmental changes, and global problems. These are some of the reasons why maintaining a sustainable tourist destination is quite challenging.

In order to be viable, every tourist industry must be able to adapt to changes that result from the complex interaction of various economic, social, cultural, ecological, political and legal factors. A tourist destination may gain a competitive advantage only if it is aware of and takes into account such changes.

This paper aims to present an overview of Bulgaria's position as a tourist destination, as well as to outline the opportunities for enhancement of its product range.

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1. Bulgaria's position as a tourist destination

Bulgaria has a diversified portfolio of tourist products due to its great variety of natural and anthropogenic resources. The accelerated development of the country's tourist industry and the growing interest of foreign tourists resulted in diversification of the range of tourist products. Despite these trends, our country is still perceived as a mass tourism destination mainly for recreational (sea) and mountain (ski) tourism, which generate most of the revenues in the sector. Entrepreneurs from the sector strive to develop and offer products that are in line with the requirements and expectations of the tourists and thus develop various alternative forms of tourism. Priority is given to urban cultural and historical tourism and health tourism, which attract a large percentage of foreign visitors. In 2017 Bulgaria was visited by 11596167 foreign tourists, which represents an increase of 9.35% from the previous year. Although the country's main tourist products are sea, mountain, cultural and health tourism, it offers some specialized niche tourist products as well, such as sports, urban, cruise and business tourism.

Along with the conventional recreational sea tourism, our country develops and offers yacht tourism services. Yacht tourism has a great potential for development due to the availability of a significant number of piers, ports and associated facilities. These assets have the potential to attract yet another type of tourists and thus generate more revenue in the sector. Regarding the other type of conventional tourism, the mountain tourism, Bulgaria has established itself as a preferred ski destination for a large number of foreign tourists who visit our ski resorts every year and generate a significant share of the country's revenue from this sector.

Despite its image of a mass tourism destination, Bulgaria develops and offers a number of alternative types of tourism, such as the adventure tourism, which is rapidly gaining popularity. Currently, such services are offered individually, or as specialized packages for small groups of tourists. The growing interest in alternative forms of tourism allows for diversification of the mass tourist products offered by our country and development of some less popular destinations.

Rural and ecotourism can also become more popular both among Bulgarian and foreign visitors. Trends in tourist preferences show an increasing interest in contacts with nature and historical sites and rediscovery of forgotten traditions and customs, which can unleash the full potential of rural tourism. Bulgaria has a relatively well-developed network of mountain trails and routes, well-maintained park infrastructure suitable for both hiking and recreation, and good accommodation facilities that correspond to the specific rural customs and traditions. Despite the availability of many national parks and nature reserves, the country's development of ecotourism is unsustainable.

Cultural tourism is an important factor for Bulgaria's development as a tourist destination. Our country has many cultural and historical monuments, seven of which are included in UNESCO's World Heritage List. Equally important are festival and event tourism, which are components of the cultural tourism. Our national cultural calendar includes many events which are held annually and are allocated evenly over the whole territory of the country. A disadvantage of this type of tourism is the fact that many of the events are not popular enough among foreign tourists and are attended mostly by Bulgarian citizens. This kind of tourist product has a considerable development potential because of the specific characteristics of our national traditions and customs, which can be observed

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only on the territory of Bulgaria. Some of the most interesting and impressive traditions for the foreign visitors are *koleduvane, lazaruvane, kukery, nestinarstvo*, etc.

Enotourism (wine tourism) also has a significant potential for development. Bulgaria's climate and soils are especially suitable for cultivation of various sorts of grapes and hence the production of high-quality wines. A large number of Bulgarian entrepreneurs take advantage of these characteristics and attract quite a large number of foreign and Bulgarian tourists to their wineries, which have good infrastructure and superstructure. The attractiveness of Bulgaria as an enotourism destination is enhanced through many wine-related events, such as fairs, festivals, celebrations and customs.

Regarding the development of health tourism, Bulgaria has a number of competitive advantages based on its abundance of all types of mineral water springs, which have exceptional healing properties. The sustainable development of this product in our country is a key factor for construction of many spa centers and hotels all over the country.

Despite the availability of a large number of sports facilities and its favourable climate, Bulgaria is not particularly popular among the foreign tourists as a destination for sports tourism. This is the reason why our country does not have well-developed sports tourism products. Nevertheless, in recent years such products are being developed in terms of a number of new golf courses, which are supposed to attract a new segment of tourists. Our country offers a competitive value-for-money golf tourism services compared to the other European destinations.

Another type of tourism that is important for the development of our country's tourism sector is the city tourism with its subtypes - shopping and gambling tourism, which can very well be combined with other types of tourism. The entertainment tourism products offered in urban environment are based on resources that are usually concentrated in and around the visited destination. They are usually complemented with visits to cultural and historical sites, events and festivals.

In recent years, Bulgaria has developed as a tourist destination that attracts visitors who visit the country in order to attend conventions and congresses. The favourable factors for the development of this type of tourism are the availability of international airports, good infrastructure, accommodation and catering facilities and attractive prices.

Having a rich variety of natural resources, Bulgaria has the opportunity to develop yet another type of tourism - the cruise tourism. Unfortunately, our country is still absent from the list of the European starting points for sea cruises. River cruises are offered by Dunav Tours - the only company in Bulgaria for European river cruise tourism which organizes individual and group cruises on the rivers Danube, Maine and Rhine. In terms of cruise tourism, our country's main competitors are Greece, Italy, and Turkey, where this product is extremely well-developed and thus raises the requirements for our country. Bulgaria is to reorganize its ports in such a way as to enable them to handle cruise ships and large numbers of visiting tourists.

2. Possibilities for diversification of Bulgaria's range of tourist products

Bulgaria's development as a tourist destination and the diversification of its product range can be achieved by increasing the competitiveness of the offered products and enhancing the less-competitive tourism products. Product competitiveness can be increased

by changing the destination's marketing policy in order to make its product range more popular among the foreign tourists.

The various tourist products can be developed further in the following aspects:

- Sea tourism products should be targeted to more affluent tourists by offering exclusive sea holidays.
- Some of the tourists who prefer winter ski tourism could be redirected to destinations in mountain areas such as Tsigov Chark, Malyovitsa, etc., where they can enjoy their favourable winter sports in a relaxing atmosphere, thus avoiding the concentration of visitors in the popular resorts of Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo.
- Rural and environmental tourism can be developed by renovating the infra- and superstructure of tourist sites that have the necessary resources for these types of tourism. This means that such regions should be provided with adequate water supply and energy supply systems, sewerage, transportation networks, mapped and marked tourist trails, and professional guides.
- Cultural tourism products can be diversified by restoring more cultural heritage sites, which abound in our country, improving their accessibility from the existing transportation networks, and reviving some forgotten national traditions and customs;
- Religious tourism in the country can be developed in three aspects: development of religious pilgrimage routes; offering of religious event products and visits to religious sites.¹ This means that we have to restore many religious sites, to discover and popularize some forgotten legends and rituals associated with those sites, and to provide accommodation and catering facilities in the vicinity of these religious places of interests;
- The strategic development of sports tourism requires improvement and diversification of the available sports facilities and equipment. This includes both overhauling of some of the obsolete sports facilities and construction of the new ones. This would allow this product line to develop in three aspects:
 - training sports tourism products;
 - entertaining sports tourism products;
 - event-based sports tourism products.
- In order to establish itself as a destination for congress and conference tourism, Bulgaria should advertise more effectively its relatively good congress facilities in order to attract not only Bulgarian, but also foreign business tourists.

The growing interest of foreign tourists in visiting Bulgaria in recent years is proved by the data regarding visits of foreigners to the country published regularly on the website of the National Statistics Institute (see Table 2.1. below.)²

¹ Маринов, Ст., Съвременни видове туризъм, Варна, 2011, с. 183.

² NSI <http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content>

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Table 2.1. Arrivals of visitors from abroad to Bulgaria in the period 2013-2017, by country of origin

Country of origin	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
TOTAL	9191782	9408821	9316624	10604396	11596167
of which					
EU	5362776	5431145	5243220	6208793	6867671
Austria	192298	208344	175024	204489	216986
Belgium	94735	103754	100777	119429	152739
Germany	812189	898791	826142	1003030	1046219
Greece	1105437	1100789	1024526	1157062	1272997
Denmark	70915	55924	58290	74125	67502
Ireland	18405	12739	13849	25388	31617
Spain	59972	65407	58852	63497	89155
Italy	129115	143561	143446	152078	177250
Cyprus	17785	17231	19285	22181	24969
Malta	2988	1808	2228	4868	3984
Netherlands	134683	143793	123578	147882	183755
United Kingdom	269656	256932	250038	281777	352054
Poland	283498	282105	285455	388833	424724
Portugal	6944	9825	11693	11817	17440
Romania	1465600	1439853	1499854	1743697	1943436
Slovakia	81488	81883	74770	78167	81318
Slovenia	22002	20178	22859	22591	25178
Hungary	115205	103068	102189	118805	111405
Finland	37812	32696	24914	30332	33533
France	180114	169581	171305	195571	231348
Croatia	23137	25744	23968	23464	29331
Czech Republic	171315	182948	160978	219349	209218
Sweden	39826	40259	39288	48066	56739
Other EU countries	27657	33932	29912	72295	84774
Other European countries	3047582	3067160	3105221	3378927	3601426
FYROM	429008	441107	506052	562365	583026
Norway	30768	33050	24629	46899	51142
Russia	695853	666538	493989	589844	565754
Serbia	428582	453891	501091	490668	541303
Turkey	1053046	1094985	1237841	1312895	1437276
Ukraine	379444	341524	310777	342214	388645
Switzerland	30881	36065	30842	34042	34280
Other countries	202181	241154	268019	298718	334278
Israel	101222	129961	155276	183846	209304
Canada	17082	19339	18402	17395	19113
USA	72609	79788	81979	82465	90963
Japan	11268	12066	12362	15012	14898
Rest of the world	579243	669362	700164	717958	792792

Source: NSI

The data in Table 2.1. shows that the number of visits of foreign tourists to Bulgaria was growing in the period 2013-2017. Compared to 2013, in 2017 there were 26.2% more visits to the country. The upward trend is a clear indicator of the growing interest of foreign tourists in Bulgaria as a tourist destination. According to the data reported for 2017, the largest flows of tourists who visited the country originated from our neighbouring countries, to wit, Romania, Greece and Turkey, as well as from Germany and Italy (with more than 1 reported visits.) Moreover, the country has become more attractive for tourists from Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Poland and the United Kingdom (between 300 000 and 500 000 visits), as well as tourists from Israel (an increase of 108082 compared to 2013), Belgium (an increase of 58 004 visits), and the US (18 354 visits). Despite the overall positive trend, the number of visits of tourist from some countries (Denmark, Finland and Hungary) decreased during the period.

3. Conclusion

The amounts spent by Bulgaria for promoting the country as a tourist destination on the world market could be considered unsustainable over time. The country needs better planning on one hand, and overall management of its tourism resources (including grants from the EU funds for municipal projects directly related to tourism) on the other. In order to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage as a tourist destination, Bulgaria should establish an image that is universal for all target markets, and at the same time represent it as a unique destination that offers interesting, unique and unconventional sites that would stir their interest and desire to visit the country.

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MOGUĆNOSTI ZA RAZVOJ BUGARSKÉ KAO TURISTIĆKE DESTINACIJE SA VIŠE ASPEKATA

***Rezime:** Svaka turistićka destinacija ima svoj razvojni potencijal koji se može otkriti kroz pravilno planiranje, projektovanje, upravljanje i promociju turistićkih regija. Konkurentnost turistićke destinacije uglavnom zavisi od adekvatnog pozicioniranja turistićke nadgradnje, razvoja odgovarajuće infrastrukture, pružanja usluga koje odgovaraju turistićkim preferencama, uspostavljanje turistićkih atrakcija koje izazivaju interes posetilaca itd. Interakcija ovih elemenata i njihov složení efekat doprineli bi održivom razvoju turistićkih destinacija.*

Ključne reći: turizam, turistićka destinacija, Bugarska kao destinacija