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## **Regionalization of tourism in Bulgaria – outcomes and implications**

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**Abstract:** Tourism zoning plays an important role in the sustainable development of tourism in Bulgaria as a tool for a differentiated policy at a regional level. It aims to create possibilities for competitive national and regional tourist product based on the available resources of a given area in order to increase its attractiveness and openness. This paper discussed the tourism industry in the context of regionalization and emphasizes the role of zoning for tourism management. A brief retrospection of the tourism zoning theory in Bulgaria is made and the need to establish destination management organizations is examined. The Concept for tourism zoning of Bulgaria supports the regional tourism policy which is tailored to the territorial specifics of different parts of the country. Through implementing effective regional marketing, it makes tourist regions recognizable for potential tourists and successfully promotes them both on domestic and international markets.

**Keywords:** regionalization, tourist zoning, tourist region, destination management.

## **Introduction**

Regionalization is a natural consequence of the political, economic, administrative and cultural development of a particular territory. Regionalization of the geographical area is considered an objective process resulting from its natural, historical and socio-economic material filling and development (Krastev, 2013). There are different models of regional tourist structure in the world and this is conditioned by the choice of criteria in the process of tourist regionalization. On the other hand, zoning is a particular type of classification that allows to analyse the differences and to create regional development programs.

Tourism zoning plays an important role in tourism management. The regional structure of the world's tourism is formed as a result of territorial differences (Levkov, 2015). The regionalization can also be considered as a territorial classification according to certain criteria (relief, climatic, production, demographic) and indicators (for relief: height, slope, exposure; climate: temperatures, precipitation; production: labor, production; demographic: population, urbanization) that are similar to a given territory (Markov, I, Apostolov, N., 2008). Furthermore tourism corresponds with the European spatial development policy which aims at achieving economic and social cohesion, conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage and more balanced competitiveness of the European territory (SPESP, 2016). It is internationally considered as an industry with a significant impact on the state and regional economies (Klamár, Kolesárová, 2015; Davchev, 2017).

The paper made a brief retrospection of the tourism zoning theory in Bulgaria and examined the need to establish destination management organizations. The achievement of high efficiency of national marketing is related to the creation of regional tourist products and coordination and management of tourism at the regional level. Tourism management organizations can contribute to the objectives of tourism zoning by developing and implementing tourism development strategies, product strategies for tourist areas, etc.

## **Material and methods**

The paper discussed the role of tourist regions in the context of the approved Concept for Tourism Zoning of Bulgaria making a brief retrospection of the topic so far. The main research focus is on the role and significance of destination management organizations (DMOs) for tourism development. By supporting the successful presentation of a destination and its better positioning on increasingly competitive tourist markets, the destination management organizations contribute to regional development through improving community partnership and bringing long-term economic benefits. A combined research methodology, processing and analysis of information were applied in the study. The main research methods are a classic empirical approach, statistical methods, descriptive and comparative analysis.

## **Results and discussion**

Different taxonomic units are used in tourism zoning such as tourism region, tourism area, tourism zone, tourism destination, etc. The tourism region is the most commonly used term and tourism sub region is usually used a lower-class concept. A tourism region is a geographical area that has common characteristics. These

regions are often designed by the governmental organizations for the needs of statistical reporting, including tourism purposes.

In Bulgaria, the problems of tourist zoning were put in place in the 1960s in response to the need to reorganization of tourism structure and activities. The first attempts at tourism zoning place an emphasis on the resource approach where the tourist area is considered as a territory with used or potential tourist resources. Subsequently, the researches became more complex by combining resource, sectorial and socio-geographic approaches. In the sectorial approach, the tourist region is a sector of economical geography and tourism is a specialized sector. And according to the socio-geographic approach, tourism is seen not as an economic sector, but as a human activity and a form of recreation (Concept for Tourism Zoning of Bulgaria, 2015)

M. Bachvarov (1970) outlines the boundaries of four tourist areas (Black sea; Sofia region; Central region and Rila and Rhodopes mountains) using specific taxonomic system: a tourist site, a core, a micro-region, a sub-region, and a region.

By the end of the 1980s, over 10 tourist zoning schemes with national coverage had been developed. Some of them are predominantly academic (Lozanov, Bachvarov, Dinev, etc., Vodenska, Slavev, Evrev) and other have a territorial-spatial orientation (Institute for Regional Spatial Planning 1961, 1968, 1975, 1982). The new tourism zoning schemes are tailored to the modern needs of decentralized management, marketing and advertising of tourist destinations. In most cases they apply a combined approach that takes into account the available resources but also the developed tourist products and attractions as well as the existing tourism organizations. An important point in many of the new tourist regions is to focus not only on natural but also on cultural resources and attractions, which is related to the increased role of cultural tourism in modern tourism development (Grigorova, 2016).

The concept of tourism zoning in Bulgaria by Prof. Dinev (1974) is the first scientifically-based detailed tourism zoning where the territory of the country is divided into seven major tourist regions and 15 tourist regions in the country (Markov, Apostolov, 2008).

M. Vodenska offered five regions, dividing them into advanced and perspective, which classification is according to the concentration of the material base of tourism and conducting integrated tourist zoning.

After 1990 the spatial coordination of tourism activity was carried out at different levels (municipal, regional and state policy level). I. Markov and N. Dimov (2007) offered four micro-regions - West, East, North and South, including additional segments such as total resource potential, transport infrastructure, comparative development advantages, formation of tourist market centers, etc. According to the authors, the proposed scheme makes it possible to define additional benefits of regional tourism products and increase their competitiveness on international tourist markets (Markov, Dimov, 2008, p. 446).

2008 State Tourism Agency defined 8 tourist regions which covered the whole territory of the country: Danube, Old Bulgarian capitals, Stara Planina (Balkan mountain range), Sofia region, Thracian region, Rila-Pirin, Rhodope and the Black Sea.

In the Strategic Plan for the Development of Cultural Tourism in Bulgaria (2007-2009) 13 local cultural systems (loci) were identified: Greater Sofia; The Valley of the Kings; The Renaissance town; On the banks of the Danube; Heart of stone;

The old capitals; On the shores of the Black Sea; Strandja mountain; The Sword and the Cross; Plovdiv and the Roman Empire; The Rhodope Gate; Great mountains; The petrified forest.

Tourist regions are for the first time included in the new Tourism Act in 2013. According to the Tourism Act the Minister of Tourism carries out the state policy in the field of tourism, as: "develops and approves the concept of tourism zoning of the country" by defining the objectives of the tourist regions. The territory of the country is divided into separate territories - tourist regions, in order to form regional tourist products and to implement regional marketing and advertising. The tourist regions cover the whole territory of the country and they are in compliance with the municipal administrative boundaries and the territory of a municipality cannot be divided between two regions as well as cannot belong to two different regions (Tourism Act, 2013).

In 2015 Ministry of Tourism (MT) approved the Concept for tourism zoning of Bulgaria. The country is divided into nine tourist regions: the Danube, Stara Planina (Old Mountain range), Sofia, Trakia (Thrace), Rose Valley, Rila- Pirin, the Rhodopes, Varna Black Sea and Burgas Black Sea. For each region MT offers basic and advanced specialization. The main specialization combines two types of tourism that highlight the uniqueness of the area and the advanced one includes additional tourism forms for which the area has resources and / or potential for development.

In the new tourist zoning, the leading requirements and criteria have been used in defining the tourist regions. They are considered as a significant part of the territory of the country in order to develop unique tourist products owing to the combination of the different socio-economic, cultural and natural conditions. Tourist regions are subject to their own marketing and advertising, managed by authorities of united tourism organizations and municipalities, supported and supervised by the state. It aims to create homogeneous regions to achieve uniqueness and identity that determine the choice of tourists. The geographic environment and the features of the historical development as well as the established relations in the sphere of tourism, including the territorial scope of naturally formed spatial tourist formations, are taken into account (Marinov et.al., 2016).

Tourism zoning plays an important role in the sustainable development of tourism in Bulgaria as a tool for differentiated policy in the regions, which at the same time enables to increase the competitiveness of the tourist product at national level. The Concept for tourism zoning of Bulgaria aims to develop competitive tourism by implementing a regional tourism policy tailored to the territorial specificities and specifics of different parts of the country and by implementing effective regional marketing to make tourist regions recognizable for potential tourists and to successfully promote them both on the domestic and international markets. Among the main benefits of tourism zoning are the creation of destination management organization at regional level and better use of available resources for a complex and competitive tourist product. The regionalization of national marketing will allow the supply of various tourist products to meet the expectations of a large part of the market segment. More efficient reach of potential outgoing tourist markets is possible through its own recognizable brand for both domestic and inbound tourists. A state support is provided for the tourist regions that will replace the inefficient fragmented presentation of individual municipalities or organizations and will contribute to the promotion of each region as a tourist destination.

The achievement of high efficiency of national marketing is related to the creation of regional tourist products and to the coordination and management of tourism at the regional level. Tourism management organizations can contribute to the objectives of tourism zoning by developing and implementing tourism development strategies, product strategies for tourist regions, etc. In Bulgaria, the organization for management of tourist regions are legal entities that are established and registered under the Tourism Act and their main functions are defined as follows: marketing and development of regional tourist products. The provisions of the Tourism Act define the future regions as marketing tourist regions and their management is related to the carrying out of activities in three main directions: creation of regional tourist products; implementing regional marketing and advertising; and coordination and management of tourism at the regional level. Members in organization of tourist region management can be tourist associations registered in the National Tourist Register, municipal and regional administrations, scientific organizations, institutes and schools in the field of tourism, associations of consumers and other institutions and organizations (Tourism Act, 2016, SG. 75 of 27 September 2016). The law also describes the main activities of these organizations that can be grouped in two main directions at this early planning stage: achievable and unachievable in terms of availability or lack of resources and funding. The development and implementation of a marketing strategy, along with the development of a logo of the tourist region, should include a sequence of activities to achieve an effective and realistic program. Firstly, long-term goals that directly affect market segmentation and marketing targeting should be identified. The choice of target market allows an efficient study of the possibilities of offering a complex product, corresponding both to the specialization of the tourist region and to the desires of the targeted segment. The process of organizing and conducting marketing research and surveys and analyzes and forecasts of tourism development is the next logical step. An analysis of the internal and external environment and the interaction between them is carried out in order to determine SWOT factors for the destination management organizations. However, it should be noted that there are no resources to carry out this activity, which implies the need for analysis at state and regional level. Conducting branding, public relations and advertising activities in the tourist regions are directly dependent on the availability of funding, but no specific resource is listed. For example, NGOs which have activities in a tourist region generate revenue for advertising on the basis of event promotion, but also state support should also be indicated. One of the main activities of the tourist management organization will be the development and implementation of a tourism development strategy and product strategies for the tourist region. The participation of a maximum number of interested stakeholders implies the quality and effectiveness of the strategy, which is based on a certain competitive advantage and is provided with the necessary resources. Once established, the strategy should be implemented with clearly defined responsibilities and subject to constant control. Destination management organizations can set up an effective system for monitoring and controlling the performance of the tourist area and make assessments and recommendations for future development.

Other DMOs activities are organizing and supporting the activities of the Tourist Information Centers (TICs) in the area and carrying out exchange of information, standards and good practices, supporting the activity of regional

governors and mayors of municipalities in the implementation of strategies and programs, realization of projects programs of the European Union and the creation and maintenance of a tourism database in the area. All of them imply significant human resources that are not currently foreseen, as well as staff with various skills and competencies.

DMOs may also engage in other business activities that assist, supplement or accompany their core business. One of the major advantages of these organizations will be their coordination activities with regard to all stakeholders in the range of tourist areas and support the creation of an appropriate environment for tourism development. Conducting training and improving the quality of tourism services is also a key element of their work.

The need to diversify the management and marketing activities of a given tourist area can be assisted by DMOs, in particular their contribution to promoting, providing information, capacity building, promoting entrepreneurship and implementing projects, especially for exchange of good practices and transfer of innovation. Sustainable development of the regions is linked to the balanced interaction between urban and rural areas by promoting the sectors with the best development potential based on available resources and market realities (Arabska, E. 2017).

### **Conclusions**

The competitiveness of tourism and its continuous development plays a key role in providing a dynamic and sustainable growth of the sector. To achieve this goal the understanding of global-local connection need to be increased. On the one hand, at a local aspect tourism sector has significant potential for development of entrepreneurship, since a large part of tourism businesses are small and medium, on the other hand – at global level tourism integrates the visitors' expectation, local communities' benefits and environment conservation (Grigorova, Shopova, 2017).

Tourist region (destination) management organizations are dynamic networks that contribute to the development of tourism at national level when they function effectively. The uniqueness of such organizations is that they combine a local business and society that well know and have a personal attitude towards the tourist region. Decentralization of destination management organization' operational management and the strong public-private partnerships support the practical implementation of the concept for tourism zoning. Another strong point in favour of setting up a tourist region management organization is more efficient collection and analysis of data, which will allow tourists to be profiled, targeting specific markets and generating more tourism revenue for the tourist region.

The main concerns are related to the possibility of failure to plan at a regional level and a failure to decentralize tourist marketing. The main reasons for this may be the lack of financial, material and human resources, as well as the inability to effectively organization restructure. Another disadvantage is the power of these organizations in the formation and actual implementation of tourism policies and the achievement of coherence between national, regional and local interests. The insufficient cooperation of public and private sectors appears to be the weak segment as well. It is highly advisable for Bulgaria to support marketing and planning in tourist regions through detailed industry research, full digitization of tourism resorces and

assets, full accountability of tourism and satellite businesses, and sequence in planning and developing strategies and policies (Ministry of tourism, 2015).

Tourist region's management organizations have a strategic role in destination marketing by effectively reaching current and potential tourist markets. The analysis of the proposed regional zoning schemes confirms that the outline of tourist regions is easier and less controversial in territories where the concentration of tourism activities and infrastructure is higher than the average for the country (Levkov, Velikov, 2015). At the moment the established tourism zoning that supports the management and branding of tourist regions is realized slowly and without any visible effect on the development regional tourist products. The recognition of tourist regions is weak on the international tourist market and incomprehensible to the domestic one. There is only one registered tourist region – Rhodopes and two other are in process of registration. The process of establishing such organizations has already begun, and only time will show how successful a decade of experience outside the country can be adapted and implemented in Bulgaria. This is the natural way of developing tourism by regionalizing the tourist product and increasing its competitiveness on the world market.

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