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## THE TOURISM REGIONS IN BULGARIA – CONCEPTS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** Bulgaria's recent experience as tourism country raised the question about the importance of its tourism regions, and the effectiveness of marketing and advertising strategies. Very weak results were achieved about the "new" tourism region planning. The priority based in 2007 NTA (National Tourism Agency) – the regulator which is controlling the tourism policies in Bulgaria, defined the plan for contemporary needs about tourism planning of regions and the usage of that regions for observation, planning and tourism development. It is also about the marketing and advertising activities of the internal and external markets, moreover creating the suitable organizing structures and coordinating of advertising and its tourism policies which is separated in regions is needed. Those policies in tourism must be in regulation and stimulation.

*Key words:* new opportunities, tourism destination, tourism regions, sustainable tourism development.

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and contributes a significant part of the economies of many countries. A well developed and maintained tourism sector could provide employment opportunities, attract foreign investments and encourage social and intercultural exchange. Nevertheless, tourism could be the cause of environmental problems and have negative effects on the local community if it is not monitored or properly accounted for (<http://www.bblf.bg/projects.php?sub=14>). Bulgaria as a tourism country has unexhausted limit of resources that can be positioned of the markets of cultural tourism, rural tourism, eco tourism, spa and wellness tourism, recreational tourism, hunting tourism, congress and event tourism and so on. The big question and challenge which stands in front of that is: would it be equal with the world tendencies of tourism industry with the help of organized and consolidated subjects by regions? The speed is important because in this way precise and practice projects could be realized, and some initiatives would take regional tourism marks. The first things which can be based on the existing plans of the regions would make the strategic, planning and development of those destinations possible in the range of European Tourism Destination – Bulgaria.

The former experience of Bulgaria as a tourist country raises the question about the significance of the tourism regions for the efficiency of the marketing and advertisement activities initiated by her. The bad results reached are in the sphere of the 'new' tourism zoning. As its priority in this direction in 2007 the National Tourism

Agency (NTA) – the institution carrying out the state policy for tourism in Bulgaria determined the development of tourism zoning responding to the contemporary necessity and the usage of tourism regions for observation, planning and directing of the tourism development, fulfilling the marketing and advertisement activity of the internal and external market, the forming of appropriate organizational structures, the coordination of supply and the applying of the regionally differentiated state politics of stimulation and regulation.

## 1. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

If we track down the history of forming the tourism regions in Bulgaria we find out about 15 different schemes for forming regions. The prevailing part of them however, does not include the whole territory of the country and the borders of the particular regions. They propose hierarchy of the regional units (for example region-subregion) and are limited to the complete development only of the highest levels and outline a small amount of regions of the highest level. It also makes an impression that some of the schemes of tourism zoning conform to the municipal division of the country at the time of its realization (Bachvarov, 1997, 43-50; Vodenska, 2002, 38-45; Rakadjiska, 100–104).

After 1989-the so called year of passage these schemes were forgotten or “abandoned” because of a number of reasons of conjuncture nature. The sequences of this act however came out to be disastrous for Bulgarian tourism. At present time the tourism industry still develops chaotically, bringing the filling of unknown capital and unplanned building. As a particularly negative aspect should be alienated the keeping of monostructure character of tourism supply, staking on traditional formulas for mass tourism - ‘mountain, snow, ski’ and ‘sea, sun, beach’. The lack of wholesome strategic frame is another negative aspect. Such one was not created until 2006 for the period until 2009 upon a project financed by EU. At the moment another strategic document is being drawn up titled ‘National strategic for development of sustainable tourism in Bulgaria’. In this document for the first time at stage of development certain continuity with the transient prepared documents of MTA can be noticed. A step in the right direction which has to be considered as background of the contradictions in the tourism industry, the business organizations and branch associations.

The continuity on that point is exactly about tourism zoning. NTA accepts the definition of ‘tourism region’ written in the “National strategy for development and sustainable tourism”. As such is pondered each territorial unity of natural and socioeconomic objects and activities with emphasized tourism character.

The fundamental purpose, function and objective of the tourism zoning of Bulgaria is associated to the opportunities which reveal in direction of regional marketing and advertisement based on differentiation among the separate regions, aiming presentation at the international markets and reaching high levels of distinguishment among the end users. The perspectives of incentives of partnerships at regional level, assistance to forming and function of regional tourism organizations for

managing the tourism regions, for observation and analysis of territory development of tourism are also significant.

The scheme of tourism zoning proposed by NTA is based on 13 criteria (<http://www.tourism.government.bg/files/statistics/>):

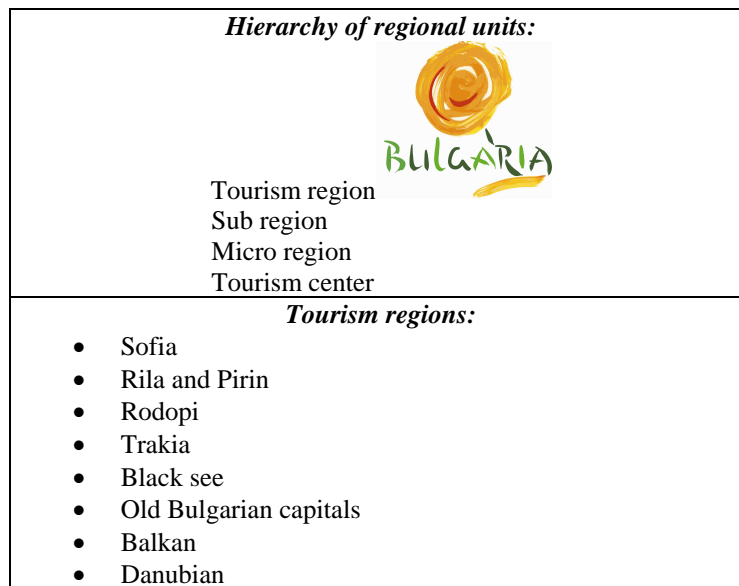
- Geographical location;
- Natural, socioeconomic and cultural specialty;
- Resource potential (existing attractions or opportunities for their development);
- Regional identity (specific set of natural, cultural and social characteristics which create a sense of regional identity);
- Transport accessibility and transport links between the different parts of the region;
- Accommodation base (capacity, structure);
- Availability of or opportunities for effective creation of the services necessary (hotel, restaurant, medicine, communicational, information services and so on...);
- Technical, social and tourism infrastructure;
- Tourist flow (volume, structure characteristics, spatial behavior);
- Suitable combining spatial between the attractions (the resources), the transportation centers and axes and available or potential services;
- Opportunity for presenting as integral destinations (products);
- Area scope of the existing organizational structures (regional and local companies and associations);
- Labor resources (including every-day labor traveling);

The combination they set up the concept of the tourism region as an entire unit which doesn't overlap other units and which provides offering of a complex tourism product (a product mix). In this sense the separate regions are consequently remarkable with relative similarity of the natural and socioeconomic conditions, resource potential, product structure, contemporary type and level of development, the problems of development or most generally – with regional identity. In the best case they should also be distinguished for intensive functional relations between their separate parts especially to the regard of movement of tourist flow.

It is accepted that for the necessities of the tourism zoning in Bulgaria the tourism regions should be conformed with the municipal division (one municipality should be divided between two regions) and to give an account of the territory scope of the already created and approved voluntary regional tourism associations. The tourism regional units of the same rank have to be commensurate in order a high enough rate of compatibility between them to be ensured in the observation and analysis of the tourism development. In delineating the tourism regions and especially in defining their specialization a unified classification and terminology about tourism products and tourism types is being accepted and subsequently applied.

For the necessities of Bulgarian tourism and according to the administrative-territorial division and the physical and geographical specialties of the country the experts in the NTA admit that it is appropriate that eight tourism regions be declared (fig. 1).

**Figure 1:** Tourism Regions in Bulgaria



In the territory of some of them several subregions can be distinguished. They are:

1. Sofia – with two subregions: 1.Sofia city and 2.Sofia region;
2. Rila-Pirin – with two subregions: 1. Rila and 2. Pirin;
3. Rodopi – with two subregions: 1. East and 2. West Rodopi;
4. Trakia – with four subregions: 1. Trakia; 2. Srednogorie; 3. The underbalkan fields; 4. Sakar;
5. Blacksea with two subregions: 1. North Black sea and Dobrudzha and 2. South Black sea area and Strandzha;
6. Old Bulgarian capitals- with two subregions: 1. Ludogorie and 2. Former Bulgarian capitals;
7. The regions of Balkan and
8. The Donau are without subregions.

The geographically and territorially determined tourism regions differentiate on the basis of a particular specialization. It is also set in the frameworks document and has the following characteristic:

**Table 1:** Specialization of tourism regions

Tourism Regions	Exemplary product specialization
Sofia	<b>Basic:</b> Congress and Festive tourism; <b>Complementary:</b> Cultural-Cognitive; SPA and Balneological; Winter ski-tourism; Ecotourism; Adventure tourism;
Rila-Pirin	<b>Basic:</b> Ecotourism; Winter ski-tourism; <b>Complementary:</b> Folklore, monastery and wine; SPA and Balneological; Rural tourism; Adventure tourism;
Rodopi	<b>Basic:</b> Rural tourism; <b>Complementary:</b> Ecotourism; Cultural-Cognitive; Winter ski- tourism; SPA and Balneological; Adventure tourism;
Trakia	<b>Basic:</b> Cultural-Cognitive; <b>Complementary:</b> SPA and Balneological; Wine and Gourmey; Festive tourism;
Black sea	<b>Basic:</b> Recreational; <b>Complementary:</b> Sea cruise and Yachting tourism; Festive; Cultural-Cognitive; Extreme sports;
Old Bulgarian capitals	<b>Basic:</b> Cultural-Cognitive; <b>Complementary:</b> Ecotourism;
Balkan	<b>Basic:</b> Adventure; Ecotourism; <b>Complementary:</b> Rural tourism; SPA and Balneological; Cultural- Cognitive;
Danubian	<b>Basic:</b> Cultural-Historical tourism; <b>Complementary:</b> River Cruise tourism; Ornitological; Wine tourism; Adventure;

## 2. GOVERNMENTAL POLICY AND RESPOCIBILITY

The NTA has the basic responsibility for developing tourism zoning of Bulgaria as a tourism destination. The determined tourism regions cover 100% of the territory of the country but final border lines and names have not been fixed yet because of the ongoing debates between the interested countries until the finalization of the process. In forming the tourism regions is used the approach of volunteer participation and joining of the interested parties in a certain territory which meets the criteria for determining tourism regions.

The structure of management of tourism regions delegates the major management functions of the regional tourism organizations. The latter will be created as associations in the sense of law about juridical persons with no business objective, with the right of business activity with a basic purpose to popularize, advertise and market the region. The ultimate goal of creating the RTO is optimization, coordination and subsequence of the endeavour for development of tourism and its promoting in long-term plan in a particular region which in the end would lead to:

- competitive and sustainably developing tourism industry;
- increasing of the well-being of the local population and improving the quality of living;

As a result a clearly distinguishable image and emotional connection of the end user and the region / blending will be achieved as well as a subsequent thematical work-out. Its positioning at the international and internal market will be facilitated as a unified brand (reserved brand) carrying in itself the characteristic of 'uniqueness' and 'difference' from all other regions in Bulgaria. Minimizing the effect of 'dispercing' and the effort of the branch and the interest of the end user is also important as well as concentrating the potential of the region and integrating the efforts and the interests of the business. An improvement in the coordination in the market activities is expected at a regional level and at a national and international level. On the territory of the European Unity Bulgaria can achieve some competitive advantages as a tourist country just on the basis of clearly distinguishable tourism products. So far the lack of territory recognizability is an impediment for that, inspite there are big opportunities. The rich cultural and historical heritage of the country, the preserved nature can be key elements for forming the product policy of each of the eight tourism regions. Such an orientation is completely in the spirit of the conception for sustainable development of the contemporary world thus it goes beyond the massovization of the mountain and sea resorts. On the territory of the country unique attractions still can be observed which will be preserved for future generations exactly by tourism.

### 3. REGIONAL IDENTIFICATION AND SPECIALIZATION

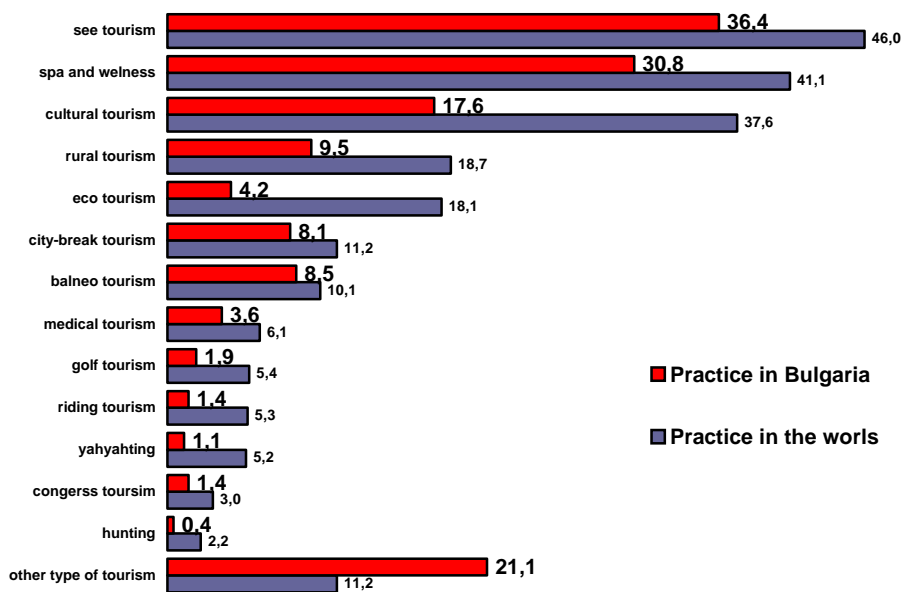
In trying to make out the regional territory the following eight national tourism products can be proposed (Stankova, 2009):

**Table 2:** Proposed tourist products

Tourism Regions	Tourists Products
Sofia	Sightseeing tour with historical and educational characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>Boijana church (UNESCO World Heritage), the town of Sofia - National Historical Museum, the town of Sofia – Antic town of Pautalia, the town of Kustendil – Medieval fortress Krakra, the town of Pernik</i>
Rila-Pirin	Sightseeing tour with cultural, historical and ethnological characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>Rila monastery (UNESCO World Heritage), in Rila mountain – the town Melnik (the smallest town in Bulgaria) – Rojen monastery, near Melnik – historical villages of Lesten and Kovatsevitza</i>
Rodopi	Sightseeing tour with cultural, historical and ethnological characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>The town of Kardjali – Tatul and Perpericon (with the famous ancient Temple of Orpheus) – the town of Zlatograd – Momchilovtzi</i>
Trakia	Sightseeing tour with historical and educational characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>the town of Asenovgrad – Bachkovo monastery – the town of Plovdiv – the town of Hisarija</i>
Black sea	Sightseeing tour with historical and educational characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>The town of Varna – Nesebar – Sozopol – the villages of Bulgari and Kostî</i>
Old Bulgarian capitals	Sightseeing tour with historical and educational characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>The old Bulgarian capitals – Veliko Turnovo (Tsarevetz) – Pliska – (Patleina) – Preslav</i>
Balkan	Sightseeing tour with cultural, historical and ethnological characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>the towns of Koprivitsa – Gabrovo – open air museum of Etara – Trjavna</i>
Danubian	Sightseeing tour with educational characteristics following the itinerary of: <i>the towns of Vidin – Svishtov – Nikopol – Russe – Silistra</i>

Dominant tourism regions as well as regions for which tourism is not inherent and also for urban and rural environment orientate themselves towards specializing in the sphere of cultural tourism. But having in mind that social and economical benefit from the purposive stimulation of tourism activities is at being. Especially in agricultural regions the European committee for example warns about a risk of equalization of the general public tourism policies and financial programs in the ambition for drawing more and more potential consumers. In the committee's report concerning not giving an account of the potential contradictions between tourism development and cultural heritage presentation it is pointed out that tourism is highly competitive dynamic business field based on the principles of the market and dominated by the information, dissemination and advertisement techniques. As a result a high risk of achieving relatively low levels of economic return, especially concerning the narrowly specialized markets can be noticed. At the moment Bulgaria is not one of them and maintains potentially high levels of market growth at the backgrounds of the forms of tourism practiced in the world (fig. 2).

**Figure 2:** Forms of tourism, practiced in Bulgaria and in the world (in %)



## CONCLUSION

Tourism, a hugely competitive industry, is an important part of GDP and GDP growth in Bulgaria (the tourism Industry in Bulgaria currently accounts for some 18% of the GDP) and because of that sustainable development is essential but can only be achieved through clear socially and environmental responsible policies and a proper approach to all aspects of tourism development. From the data presented it can be seen



that Bulgaria as a country developing tourism has unexhausting resource and can be positioned in the market of cultural tourism, rural tourism, ecotourism, balneal and spa tourism, hunting tourism, congress tourism, etc...For each one of the markets shown on the figure in the planned by NTA tourism regions can be asserted that opportunities for development exist. The promptness with which they can make certain practical initiatives in order to turn out regional tourism brands is also significant. After undertaking these first steps and on the basis existing regional plans for the tourism development a strategic planning and development by the so created tourism destinations in the frame of the European tourism destination Bulgaria will be possible.

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