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Identifying tourism potentials in Republic of Macedonia through regional approach

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Abstract

Tourism development is closely related with competitiveness and attractiveness of tourist destinations. Therefore, identification of tourism potentials is in close relation with the need of achieving destination competitiveness on tourist market. The results of conducted research lead to findings that indicate to a strong basis for future development of tourism in Republic of Macedonia with identified potentials and possibilities for future actions, mainly related with promotion of tourist products within the regions, respect of principles for sustainable development, protection of natural environment, urgency of defined policy, priorities and activities. Identification of tourism potentials and achievement of competitiveness in tourism sector is more complicated due to the heterogeneous character of tourism. Therefore there is a real need of serious approach towards this issue in the case of the Republic of Macedonia.

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Key words: tourism, tourism, potentials, Republic of Macedonia, regional approach

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present results from conducted analysis towards using the potentials for tourism development within the identified regions in the country. Analysis of current situation in tourism sector is starting point of paper’s research. The contribution of conducted analysis is to gather information, share experience and, to consider implications for future approaches. Thus, the main intention is to emphasize the advantage of such approach for increasing awareness of existing potentials for tourism development in the Republic of Macedonia. Consolidated findings and conclusions will serve in identifying strengths or weaknesses in tourism sector, as starting basis for future actions.

Similar to other sectors of Macedonian economy, tourism is facing with the ongoing changes related mostly to economic and social changes in the country and the region, after the occurred situation in Balkan within last two decades. Such changes need constant adjustment to contemporary trends and changes on international level. In terms of tourism there is a higher need of paying attention to competitive destinations to the countries from the region. Having in mind the presence of neighbouring countries with sea outlet (Bulgaria, Albania and Greece), main actions should be considered towards the increase of country’s competitiveness in the region.

Current tourism development in the country is due to inappropriate balance between existing tourist potentials and developmental effects. An existence of such potentials can give positive results, whether within the region or broader. In this respect, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development in the Republic of Macedonia (2009-2030) and Strategy for Regional Development (2009-2019) as strategic documents should be consulted for tourism development where particular attention should be directed to regional level in tourism planning, and in accordance with sustainable development pillars. In addition, recently revised National Strategy for Tourism (2009-2013) gives recommendations for tourism development of the country and proposes identifying and selecting 5 strategic clusters as a framework to Macedonian tourism development: rural tourism, mountain tourism and nature activities, wine tourism and gastronomy, cultural tourism and lake tourism.

2. Tourism sector current situation

Identification of tourism potentials is not an easy task, whether on national, regional or local level. It demands active participation of stakeholders from all sectors directly or indirectly involved to and connected with tourism. Therefore analysis of current situation of tourism sector in this paper is conducted with aim to have a basis for future research activities. The author inputs her knowledge in this filed as result of long period of years of research and contribution through consultancy, projects, lecturing, and professional development.

The research indicates on following findings:

- Although identified as part of the economy with potentials in many government’ official documents (PEP 2007-2009; NDP 2007-2009), conducted analysis of tourism indicate that it is still not a sector of the economy that has significant contribution in GDP (1.8 %), higher participation in job creation (3.2%) and development of destinations and regions.

- The Republic of Macedonia is still not recognizable tourist destination on the international tourist market. Although, the number of international tourist arrivals record continuous increase within the last 5 years, and within the period 2006-2010 it was estimated for 29.3% (Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office, 2011), within the structure by country of origin, most of them are those coming from the neighboring countries (Bulgaria, Serbia, Albania and Greece). Exception is the case with Netherlands and Poland tourists that for first time these last 2 years visit Macedonia,
resulted to organized promotion of the country on selected tourist markets. Activities towards raising awareness about R. Macedonia as tourist destination within broader frames show good results, but there is a lack of consistent and well designed promotion on the wider international tourist market. Promotional films about Macedonia as tourist destination on international tourism market are prepared by Tourism Department (Ministry of Economy of the R. Macedonia, 2011) with presentation on Travel Channel and CNN. But still, participation of the country on different types of tourist forums is moderate, as well as promotion of the tourist resorts and potentials through the Macedonian diplomatic service.

- There are eight regions with potentials for tourist development, defined within the Strategy for Regional Development (Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Macedonia 2009-2019), according to the presence of different natural and cultural attractions. But current situation indicates on the lack of identified types of tourism as priorities for regions’ tourism development. Priorities should be a basis for creation of competitive tourist offer and would enable regional linking and creation of competitive regions.

- The variety of natural and cultural attractions in the country is strong potential for defining target-oriented tourist offer of the Republic of Macedonia. Analysis indicates a lack of defined tourist products, both on international and domestic markets. The tourist offer is spontaneously created by the suppliers of the tourist services, without guidelines and support from the policy makers. As a result, the tourist offer mostly includes basic tourist products, while more attractive services and tourist arrangements are not developed. Findings show the necessity for improvement of the situation in this sector, mainly related to defining and establishment of national priorities for future tourism development in the country, both for domestic and foreign tourism.

- Accommodation capacities in the Republic of Macedonia have a good basis in the lake and ski resorts, but there is need for creation and further increase of the accommodation capacities in other areas (hotels, motels, camping sites, and private accommodation).

- Current infrastructure, signalization and accommodation facilities are not sufficient for development of competitive tourism. This especially applies to development of certain types of tourism, such as rural tourism, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, etc. The situation is especially alarming with road and other infrastructure (water, electricity, waste management) in distant areas with tourist potential, but also there is need for further infrastructure investment in the recognized tourist destinations. In addition, there is a lack and even absence of proper tourist signalization.

- The lack of horizontal and vertical co-ordination at national and local level, and especially the lack of appropriate human resources lead to weaknesses in institutional structure of tourism sector. Also, insufficient and improper co-ordination of numerous stakeholders in the sector is identified, and results with not well defined tourist offer and weak promotion of the country on the international market.

- Current level of tourist services’ quality is not competitive. In addition to the very limited tourist offer, low quality of services implies unfavourable tourist image of the country, in spite of the abundant natural and cultural beauty. In this respect, there is lack of professional managerial and other staff in the tourist facilities, as well as lack of awareness campaigns focused on all citizens’ efforts for provision of clean and healthy tourist environment.

3. Regional approach in identifying tourism potentials

Identification of tourism potentials is in close relation with the need of achieving destination competitiveness on tourist market. Many debates are undertaken about the question of competitiveness and many authors discuss on this issue. Ul Haque (1995) argues that the international debate has been centered on two questions: whether a country’s competitiveness has clear meaning, and whether anything
can or should be done about it (Luiz Gustavo Medeiros Barbosa, 2008). In addition, identification of tourism potentials and assessment of competitiveness in tourism sector is more complicated due to the heterogeneous character of tourism. Crouch & Ritchie (1999) underlined that it occurs because of the analysts’ perspective and focus of their interest which is related to their respective areas of research.

When discussing about identifying tourism potentials in Macedonia, the most frequent question is whether it should be within national, regional or local dimensions. During the last period very little attention was given to this issue by policy makers, mainly as result of absence Tourism Strategy that was revised last year 2010, as guideline to future activities and measures. The other reason is recent definition and establishment of regions as basis for future development of the country within different sectors. Therefore, tourist offer was mainly spontaneously created without guidelines and support from the policy makers. As result, competitive advantages for tourism development are not enough utilized for tourist offer creation that leads to weak competitive market positioning. In recent, the situation is on the way of improvement, but still many steps towards should be done. Very positive is the adoption of National Strategy for Sustainable Development (National Strategy for Sustainable Development in the Republic of Macedonia, 2009-2030) and Strategy for Regional Development (Strategy for Regional Development of the Republic of Macedonia 2009-2019) as strategic documents that should be consulted for any actions related to tourism development.

The analysis on current situation of tourism sector should also be considered. For that purpose this analysis was basis for deriving the country’s identified and debated strengths and, provide a ground for further approach to the problem by identifying tourism potentials in different regions. As evaluation method, SWOT analysis demands further, deeper theoretical and applied research. Therefore, Kreiner & Wall approach with three-level SWOT analysis was a challenge for conducting the analysis to tourism sector in Macedonia (N. Collins-Kreiner & G. Wall, 2007). The analysis is conducted to national level, and then to the regional level. The site level will be a subject to research and further discussions of the author. Presented findings from conducted analysis in the paper are consolidated findings of author’s research in this field.

Analysis results indicate the following strengths: favorable geographical position; Macedonia as still uncovered destination on international tourist market; combination of Mediterranean and continental climate and geomorphologic elements; abundance and diversification of conserved cultural attractions from different periods (archaeological cites, monasteries, churches, mosques etc.); tradition, folklore and hospitality of the people; areas with their originality and undisturbed nature; an existence of tourist regions and traditional production of food.

But opposite to identified strengths, the following represent weaknesses for Macedonian tourism: competitive destinations in the region (sea outlet), insufficient/undeveloped infrastructure and accessibility to tourist destinations, improper and lack of signalization (roads, destinations, cites), lack of awareness for eco environment, weak image of tourist destinations and Macedonia as tourist destination on international tourist market, insufficient governments’ support for continuity of development directions of tourism, the functioning of institutional network, insufficient use of potentials for tourist development, insufficient development of rural, spa, cultural and transit tourism.

Identified strengths and weaknesses were stimulus for identifying country’s tourism opportunities through use of funds for developing tourism, high interest on international market for cultural, religious, rural, and eco tourism, regional and cross border cooperation, regional supervenes through regional network, and international appreciation of Macedonia as a tourist destination. But, on the other side, prices of competitors, turbulent/unstable region (economically and politically), high competitive destinations in the region with sea outlet and regional competition particularly of the neighbors are seen as threats for Macedonian tourism.

Conducted analysis of tourism on national level was a basis for further regional analysis and evaluation of tourism potentials included the following defined regions: Skopje Region, North-East Region, East Region, Vardar Region, Pelagonija Region, South-West Region, Polog Region.
A situation analysis of the regions included identification of existing strengths for tourism development. The analysis of tourism potentials within differentiated regions in Macedonia states that the basic assumptions for development of tourism are based on the huge variety of the natural values and attractiveness and the cultural heritage, social and economic development of regions, transport communications and accessibility of regions. However, it should be stressed that although the potentials for tourism are evident, the number of existing types of tourism is moderate within the regions.

Therefore, future activities should be directed towards identifying synergies between different sectors as basis for developing tourism within the regions. Author’s research and identification of these synergies indicates that the strongest basis is within the following relation among sectors: Tourism – Environment – Agriculture – Forestry – Transport and infrastructure – SME’s.

Because of the rich cultural heritage within all regions, there is high potential for development of cultural tourism. Rich and diverse traditional architecture and craftsmanship products, diversity of sites, and the hospitality of people are main prerequisite for its development. Cultural tourism has a well established and visible basis particular in Lake Ohrid and Lake Prespa regions within the South-West region, and Skopje Region.

The variety of traditional products, and in particular organic farming products, naturally form the basis of rural tourism, such as wine route and gourmet tourism. A huge variety of traditionally high quality agriculture and forest products are potential for developing agro-tourism. These potentials are mainly identified in Pelagonija, Vardar, South-east and East Region.

Existence of many geothermal sources suitable for different uses can be used for development of spa, wellness and selfness tourism, the later being considered a major trigger for prosperity in some regions of Macedonia, particularly in South-west, North-east, East and South-east region.

Rural tourism with branded products is an indicator of high quality regional sustainable development. Renovation of traditional rural architecture along with thermal insulation and utilization of renewable energies for individual and high quality tourism is a major job creating machine utilizing the potential of labor with construction experience. Rehabilitation and upgrading of existing main roads and building transport infrastructure is one of the conditions in order to activate the regional sustainable development potentials for tourism. The presence of ski resorts in Polog, Pelagonija, and East Region, with conditions for developing sport, recreational, adventure and hunting activities along with ski tourism are good potentials for developing mountain tourism in these regions.

Identified potentials (table 1) should be taken into consideration of the regions’ possibilities for developing certain types of tourism but, with obligatory attention of their sustainability within following:
- Potentials for tourism and recreational activities in mountain areas by undertaking the following: marking ski runs at the mountains where possibilities prevail; building cable-cars and ski-lifts; defining, establishing and equipping sites for view points; establishing mountain and alpine trails; establishing education-recreational trails; organizing and equipping cites for bird/animal watching; establishing center for logistics in the mountains and hunting activities; opening centers for presentation of the mountain tourist values; determining locations for mountain lodges, hunting lodges and other kinds of shelters and catering capacities.
- Potentials for initiating transit tourism: locate tourist information centers; equipping the infrastructural contents for the visitors’ stay; location of catering and accomodation capacities on most significant and most frequent roads; horticultural arranging of the areas; appropriate sanitary and hygienic facilities; gift shops.
- Eco-tourism activities: measures and activities for maximum protection of areas; defining and differentiating eco-tourist units in the region; establishing education-recreational trails; encouraging activities for surviving in nature; encouraging organic food production
- Activities towards promotion of speleo tourism: providing access to caves; arranging information tables in front of caves for educational-cultural activities; arranging and equipping the caves for visit; animation
of the area through illumination and audio effects; encouraging travel agencies’ activities for creation of speleological tourist offer; providing speleological guide service and service for facilitating the stay.

Table 1: Identified regions’ tourism potentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Tourism potentials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skopje Region</td>
<td>Cultural, speleo, transit, recreational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-east Region</td>
<td>Transit, cultural, eco, spa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Region</td>
<td>Eco, cultural, rural, hunting, mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-east Region</td>
<td>Eco, rural, mountain, lake, spa, transit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vardar Region</td>
<td>Transit, cultural, wine, rural, fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pelagonija Region</td>
<td>Mountain, cultural, lake, agro, eco, rural, hunting, fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-west Region</td>
<td>Cultural, lake, mountain, eco, rural, speleo, fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polog Region</td>
<td>Mountain, cultural, lake, eco, rural, hunting, fishing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s

- Water activities: swimming activities within arranged beach areas; walking paths by the coasts; water sports; green areas protection; fishing activities; determination of spots for fishing activities; sport-recreational and entertainment programs.
- Activities for development of spa tourism: arranging the spa areas and surrounding; modernization of spa infrastructure; equipping spas with modern medicine diagnostics and other amenities; arranging areas for health-recreational activities (walking paths, open swimming pools); including programs for dietetics, relaxation, beauty treatments etc.
- Activities for developing rural tourism: organizing seminars, lectures and meetings with citizens for the benefitting of development of the rural tourism; arranging and equipping the area for tourist offer; encouraging enrichment the live-stock fund in size and variety; establishing programs (agro-farming-
entertainment) and activities during the period of stay of tourists; providing infrastructural facilities of the area for visit.

- **Activities for promoting cultural heritage for tourism:** tourist valorization of monuments of culture and arranging the areas around them; protection of sites from danger of devastation (pot-hunters, thefts, etc); intensifying the cultural-research activities; revitalization of cultural heritage; definition and establishing of heritage trails.

Findings indicate that, the natural and cultural heritage of regions represent excellent basis for tourism development. The next important step is to develop certain types of tourism. It’s with close relation to facilitating conditions for tourism development in different regions. These tasks are on policy makers, professionals, private sectors, research institutions and all other stakeholders who see opportunity and can contribute in developing tourism within a region. As Vanhove states (2010), each region needs a developmental strategy as a central point of strategy thinking, where for tourism five dimensions should draw attention: tourism as a basic activity, the comparative advantages of tourism, economic disadvantages of tourism, incidental costs of tourism and, tourism as a strategy for regional development. These dimensions should be considered when planning, tourism as one of opportunities for region’s development.

### 3. Conclusion

Many developing countries search for opportunities in development of different sectors. Among, very often is tourism that is seen as an option for increasing economy of the countries and their regions. Identification of tourism potentials in Macedonia is closely related to its increased competitive position on tourist market, since it is still not recognizable tourist destination within broader international frames. Therefore, discussions about identifying tourism potentials are towards country’s improved market positioning. During the last period very little attention was given to this issue by policy makers, mainly as result of absence of defined policy for tourism development. Tourist offer was mainly spontaneously created without guidelines and support from the policy makers. As result, competitive advantages for tourism development are not enough utilized for tourist offer creation that leads to weak competitive market positioning.

Analyses of potentials included identification of existing strengths for tourism development within the regions, and indicate that the basic assumptions for tourism are closely related to the existence of natural values and attractiveness, cultural heritage, social and economic development of regions, transport communications and accessibility of regions.

Findings can give answers to the questions related to recent tourism development, country’s present position on tourist market and our vision where do we want to go? Although, rather small continental country, Macedonia has excellent conditions to foster tourism development. The existence of potentials in regions should be a basis for tourism, by implementing activities related to identification and promotion of certain types of tourism.

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