

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR MOUNTAIN TOURIST TERRITORIES IN BULGARIA AFTER THE CRISIS PERIOD³

In the study, we propose a model for the sustainable development of the Bulgarian mountain tourism resorts. The model is developed based on the limitation of the seasonality in their supply and overcoming the results of the pandemic. The winter tourism is the second most competitive and meaningful type of tourism in Bulgaria after the recreational sea tourism. The country has significant natural resources in the mountainous territory, however, the quality of tourism supply in the mountain regions is significantly restricted due to the seasonality factor. The problems have deepened after the closure of the biggest winter resort in the country, Bansko, at the beginning of 2020 due to the pandemic crisis. In the current situation, not only seasonality is a limiting factor for the development of tourism. This requires the use of various research techniques to provide new solutions for the organisation of the tourism process. In the publication, we have used quantitative and qualitative methods, induction, deduction, expert and consumer studies, brainstorming, logic methods, modelling and idealisation to identify the causes of the problems in tourism and find adequate solutions to deal with them. The purpose is to find opportunities for extending the season and overcoming the decline of journeys and visits of mountain resorts. The proposed method does not cover all the possibilities for mountain regions development in Bulgaria but is a relevant solution for the current situation. It can be used as a possibility for sustainable development in other tourism resorts limited by seasonality or crisis.

Keywords: seasonality; extension of the tourist season; consequences of seasonality; strategies for limiting the seasonality; crisis; sustainable development

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Introduction

Tourism is a sector that has been strongly affected by the processes, happening in the last decades. A big part of those processes has a positive influence on its development, for

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example the appearance of new entertainment activities or healing methods. As we witnessed, the other side can be deadly to the current reality related to the travel limitations on a world scale as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of tourism statistic data, there has never been a similar drastic drop in journeys and income from tourism. The data shows that it was almost 70% down in 2000. However, the current experience tells us that the sector overcomes very quickly after any upheavals that have ever occurred in human history. Most probably, the current situation will develop in the same way. Nevertheless, the situation in Bulgaria remains worrisome. Despite all efforts to save tourism businesses through intensive marketing activities to attract domestic tourists and a targeted government policy of subsidising the sector, many of them barely survive.

The sustainable development of destinations has been a topic of interest to experts for decades. In the study, we look at seasonality and the decreased number of travels as a result of the crisis. Taken as factors, they both are restricting the sustainable development of the industry. We do not discuss the term sustainable development in the theoretical meaning because its concept is the subject of many scientific researches. However, we accept that sustainable tourism development requires management not only of human, physical and financial capital, but also of environmental assets that are not substitutable, are not unlimited and without which the application of others would lose its meaning. Sustainable tourism should seek to benefit from natural resources in a way that meets human needs while preserving the natural balance in the environment. These needs must be able to be satisfied in the future in the way we satisfy them today. Sustainable tourism evolves on the basis of harmony between resource use and conservation through the integration of the local community. In all definitions of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, the issue of preserving the ecological balance is a main subject (Velikova, 2019).

In the literature sources so far, the seasonality in tourism is pointed as a problem due to many reasons. Today, however, the crisis is a reason to look at seasonality not as such a big problem because seasonal tourism companies can afford to have a weaker season. The nature of the job and its cyclical nature is a reason for the fast adaptability of all its aspects that offer seasonal tourism services. Despite all of this, the goal of tourism entrepreneurs is prolonging and rethinking the tourist services as a result of the contemporary phenomenon as well as traditional activities.

In the present study, we define possibilities for extending the tourist season for one of the competitive and promising tourist products development in Bulgaria. The opportunities for extending the summer tourist season have been researched on a world scale; this is the reason that focuses on prolonging the winter tourist season. The perspectives for the summer season are very favourable as a result of global warming. In comparing to it, the winter season is expected to be really harmed by the climate changes. Winter tourism becomes a priority and important sector for the development of Bulgarian tourism, on whose statement depends the competitiveness and the economy's growth. Also, the mountain territories occupy most of the territory of the country, which is a prerequisite for intensive progress of tourism not only in the limited coastline along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.

This is the reason why the object of the research in this publication are the mountainous areas in Bulgaria. The subject is the measures for their sustainable development by overcoming the

seasonal effects and the drastic decline in tourist holidays as a result of the crisis. The increase of tourist visits in mountain resorts in Bulgaria on a year-round basis must be carried out sustainably, as one of the advantages of seasonality in tourism is precisely the regenerative capacity of resources during the weaker season.

The relevance of the research problem is defined by the fact that tourism is one of the most significant sectors of the Bulgarian economy. Finding solutions for overcoming seasonality will contribute to increasing its economic significance. The current statements were confirmed even in the world economic crisis that we were already faced in 2020. Because of travel limitations, a lot of people lost their jobs and the closing of functioning tourist sites led to troubles in other sectors of the economy. The multiplier effect of tourism in other sectors of the economy is a prerequisite for the serious effects of the crisis everywhere.

In order to create a model for sustainable development of the mountains resorts in Bulgaria, we try to solve the following research problems:

- analysis of the state of Bulgarian tourism,
- defining the advantages and disadvantages of the seasonality and finding strategies for overcoming it,
- research of consumer opinion on the preferences for extending the stay and the reasons for revisiting the winter tourist resorts in Bulgaria through a questionnaire developed on the basis of interviews with experts,
- presenting a model for sustainable development of Bulgarian mountain resorts and defining the trends in their development after the COVID-19 crisis.

In this way, we define different possibilities for prolonging the season in the mountain regions, the most significant of which are offering year round, alternative types of tourism and the organisation of events relevant to the tourism demand.

The search for new models of supply in tourism will have a special value after the current crisis is over. A lot of the problems can be prevented if they are pledged in the planning stage. The sustainable planning is going to lead to a sustainable development of the resorts, which is a main goal for the development of society after the conference in Rio in 1992 (Velikova, 2020). Planning is the basis for achieving sustainable development in the long run.

In the contemporary conditions for achieving sustainability, we need to rethink the tourism planning, operation and the perception we have of it as a process. As part of this process, many of the interested sides, represented by locals, the municipality, the tourism industry and the environment, must work together for achieving their common goals. The systematic and integrative strategic planning, based on joint cooperation, can be turned into the foundation of defining the goals and the sustainable management of tourism.

The research goal of the authors is to propose a model on the bases of which the mountain tourism territories can be developed sustainably while overcoming the problems related to global warming, pandemic situations, seasons and climate effects and territory limitations. The created model is relevant and applicable to the Bulgarian mountain resorts and would contribute to increasing their economic efficiency.

Problem Statement and Literature Review

Tourism is a very important part of the economy in Bulgaria, with significant benefits towards the gross domestic product (GDP) and employment in the country. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the contribution of tourism to the GDP is 11.7% of the economy, workers in the sector are 346 800 (11% of the employment), 8 370.3 million leva are being made from travels which represent 12.3% of the total export of the country (WTTC, 2019).

Researchers argue, that since the dawn of Bulgaria's transition to a market economy in the early 1990s of the 20th century, tourism, along with agriculture, is one of the sectors which could and should be relied upon for the prosperity of the Bulgarian nation in its transition to a market economy and beyond (Dimitrov at all., 2018). The tourism in Bulgaria is a big part of the GDP and the most developed is the summer recreational tourism practised on the Bulgarian Black sea coast. The second significant type of tourism is the winter one which is also facing serious problems due to global warming and today's challenges with the pandemic situation. The available mountain tourist resorts in Bulgaria risk losing their traditional appearance of ski destinations which leads to a rethinking of their product concept. These changes must be based on existing potential and customer preferences. This is the reason for the inclusion of basic methods of research and consumer research in the current study.

Analysis of the Bulgarian mountain tourist product

Tourism in Bulgaria can be traced back to the end of the XIX century when beaches and beach infrastructure around the city of Varna have been built, the creation of Borovets mountain resort and the foundation of the Bulgarian tourist union. International tourism marks incensement in the 1960s when Bulgaria appears on the international market as a typical destination offering sun, sand and sea (Vodenska, Gösling, 2017). In the following years, tourism is making its way to becoming an important part of the Bulgarian economy.

The development of modern, global tourism, the introduction of new technologies, providing opportunities for virtual travel and the emergence of new and unique destinations, affect the overall culture of the individual, contribute to the formation of aesthetic attitude, sense, taste for beauty and appropriate and at the same time it is one of the new directions in the competition to attract as many visitors as possible. Planning and construction of contemporary tourist destinations require a focus on innovations and keeping up with trends that are present in the industry.

Bulgarian mountains as morphological structures cover about 48% of the country's territory (Mikhailov, 1989), and mountainous areas over 600 m occupy about 28% of its territory. Three national parks are established on the mountain territories – the Pirin, Central Balkan and Rila (Hristova, 2018). The middle and high mountains (above 1000 m) represent around 12.5% of Bulgarian territory. In the main mountains of the country – Rila, Pirin, Vitosha and West Rodopa the regions with an altitude above 1000 m are between 60 to 70% (Evrev, 1987). Due to their big territorial scope, the mountain regions are the main “territorial

reserve” for expanding the tourist absorption in the natural environment after the sea coast. Their surface is around 10 times bigger than the Black sea municipalities and their tourist capacity is 50% bigger than that of the Black sea coast (Evrev, 1999). The presence of this important resource is a premise for developing and offering many diverse types of tourism which can be practised there. However, the sustainable development of mountain areas is important. According to Wang et al. (2019), moving towards sustainability is a societal challenge that involves national and international legislation, urban and regional development, transport and other sectors, and that equally involves engagement with local and individual ways of life, and, especially in an increasingly urban world, positive choices to promote more ethical consumerism.

When compared with the seaside another important advantage of the mountain regions is the possibility of year-round (or at least dual season) usage. Seasonality is recognised as one of the main problems of Bulgarian tourism. In the past years, more than 40% of the overnight stays were made during only two months (July and August) and around 70% in four months (June- September). At the same time, the durability of the season with favourable climate conditions in the mountain regions is 8-9 months in a year (Marinov, Asenova, 2016). The larger area of the mountains in Bulgaria and the possibility to use them for a longer period of time became a prerequisite for their inclusion in this publication.

Despite all of this the seasonality in the country is well defined, it is connected with sea tourism and the winter season still cannot outline itself as a strong season and it still fails to bring significant visitations. Overcoming seasonality, according to the authors, is also a step in the sustainable planning and development of the Bulgarian mountain destinations. This is also supported by Dunets et al. (2019), which state that the sustainable development of tourism ensures the unity of the three components: development of tourism in conjunction with the main environmental processes; economic sustainability is achieved by the role of tourism as one of the ways to develop the local economy through balanced resource management; socio-cultural sustainability allows increasing employment and incomes of the population, preserve historical and cultural monuments, strengthen local identity and the established way of life.

Bulgarian mountains have perfect conditions for tourism. However, there are few functioning resorts that welcome international tourists. The most famous ones are Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo. The other mountain resorts are small, not well known and poorly developed, with significant potential for the development of alternative types of tourism. The economic improvement of mountain areas in the future can be based on their potential to offer activities other than winter sports.

Positive and negative consequences of seasonality

The consequences of seasonality still cannot be put under the same denominator. They can be positive and negative, but the ratio between them is strongly defined and the burden of the negative impacts is definitely bigger. Because of this reason, we are also going to stick to the dominant position that seasonality is a limiting factor for tourism and the economy, and thus, we need to seek opportunities for overcoming it. Besides that, as Bogomilova (2020) points

out, unexpected situations force countries, companies and individuals to be in different situations and uncertain environment, which are accompanied by different obstacles and are characterised by complexity and dynamism; hence they need a systematisation.

In the train of seasonality in tourism, two very distinctive differences are being formed when talking about the usage of the material and technical base. We observe the accumulation of huge tourist masses in a short period of time and the unusability of the sites and facilities during the rest of the year. Thus the resources are largely worn out. During the high season, the facilities logically are ageing. But even during the off-season, there is depreciation, which requires constant investment of funds for renovation, repairs and maintenance (Velikova, 2020a).

The results for the seasonality of the transport services are essentially the same as for the material and technical base. The high usage of transportation services, during the main season, influences the depreciation of the vehicles. The costs for it is high during the pre-season and the inactive season, when transportation is used less frequently, some are not being used at all (which leads to additional losses) and they barely bring any profits.

Seasonality affects all sides of the tourist process. The fluidity of workers, the interrupted working process during the year lead to worse coordination between the different links of the personnel and thus worsens the overall services provided. It is not always possible to form a good team and that often leads to problems in management and inhibits the activities. The absence of constant contact between people, the lack of match process of characters and the way of work suggests that, a little time is needed for synchronisation between different personalities. Each season is turned into a new beginning and the whole cycle of the employment process starts from the begging. The short work period, the difference in characters and the specifics of the job themselves add to the complex organisation of services (Lee et al., 2008). The problem of employment leads to population migration and other negative economic consequences (Mintchev, 2016). The assessments of return migration in Bulgaria are based on sample surveys attesting the increase of the relative share of households having a return migrant. Nevertheless, the capacity of the local labour market to attract migrants back into the country can be evaluated as humble (Mintchev, Boshnakov, 2018).

To a certain degree, seasonality also influences the quality of the tourist product. A tourist site that is influenced by seasonality cannot be very competitive. Its good quality is achieved gradually, step by step, through uninterrupted analysis of received data, the disadvantages and measures required for their removal. This is a process of constant upgrades until it finally reaches its highest point. There is a tear in the process when talking about seasonal tourism. Each season is a new start, so it is impossible that in a month, the level of tourists generated will be the same one as it is with congress or business tourism, which are categorised with constant development (Baum, Lundtorp, 2001).

The main concern about seasonality is focused on the effective planning and the usage of the resources in the pre-season and off-season. The high season also needs special care since the sites and the facilities can become overflowing with tourists, who can lead to problems in service quality and tourist satisfaction.

Seasonality is considered as a global problem for the tourist industry and the main negative result of it, is the profit reduction of businesses since the local entrepreneurs, especially the owners of accommodation facilities, suffer during the pre-season and the off-season when the demand for products and services declines or completely disappears (Velikova, 2020a).

Most commonly, the negative effect of seasonality in tourism is related to the economic influences from inefficient utilisation of resources by the tourist companies. The negative economic outcomes are related to: receiving of seasonal income; low return on capital investments; problems with accumulation of annual fixed costs; difficulty to attract investors; lack of capacity in the active season; insufficient use of facilities and resources in the off-season (Baum, Lundtorp, 2001).

Positive effects and advantages of seasonality also exist. The time out of the main seasons is a chance for recovery of the destinations and their resources. Maintenance and renovations of buildings, landmarks, facilities and marketing are typical activities for the periods of pre-season and off-season. During those times, the host territories have the opportunity to be relieved from the tension that has been built during the high season, to recover completely and keep their identity of a traditional functioning model of their social and ecological environments.

From economy point of view during the off-season, the conditions of buildings and facilities is being stabilised or can improve. Seasonality allows employment of students and housewives, and part-time working opportunities as an extra income for the locals, etc. In terms of natural environment, the chance for resource and biodiverse recovery, at the tourist destinations, is present. Depending on the degree of sensitivity of the community to the ecology and its dependence on the preservation of the attractiveness of the tourist destination, there are positive effects of seasonality, the most important being the conservation of biodiversity and natural species (Velikova, 2019a).

The positive socio-cultural consequences for the community are that the local people can go back to their everyday life, they can use the commodities and the facilities and are stress free. The initiatives to attract more visitors during the pre- and off-season at the tourist destinations are a favourable perspective for the active participation of the local communities in the strategies fulfilment of extending the tourist season (Hartmann, 1986).

All of the above mentioned imposes a rethinking of strategies for tourist product offerings in the seasonal tourism destinations and the search for opportunities for overcoming seasonality. As a conclusion of the analyses, we can utter that the negative consequences dominate; hence the seasonality in tourism is viewed as macroeconomic loss – mainly because of the seasonal employment characteristics. To overcome it, it is necessary to achieve equally common distributed visits to the tourist place over time. This can be accomplished through impacting on the seasonality factors – stimulating travels during the off- and pre-season, diversity of the types and forms of tourism in the destination, increment of the quality and the assortment of the offered services.

Strategies for seasonality restrictions

The strategies that are typical for overcoming seasonality in tourist destinations are classified mainly by geographical placements and the effects of the climate (the weather seasons). The potentiality for extending the tourist season or the establishment of a second one depends mainly of the destination and the competitiveness. Although seasonality will not disappear completely, there are few ways of evenly spread visits all year-round during the high and low season of travels.

Three successful strategies are applicable and we can use them for reducing the negative seasonality results: increasing tourist demand during the off-season, reduction and redistribution of tourist seeking during the high season (Corluka, 2014). The success and the constructiveness of strategies and policies, have to be related to the geographical (specific spatial characteristics of location) and to the socio-economic patterns of destinations (Cannas, 2012).

The approach for increasing the tourist gest during the low season can be accomplished in several basic ways. On a company level, few common sets of tactics exist, as well as on a destination level, are being used. In those plans are included the following:

- Differentiated pricing;
- Differentiated attractions (change of the product mix);
- Market diversification;
- Selective forms of tourism;
- State support/ facilitation (Lee et al., 2008).

Modified pricing can include offers for group reservations on promotional prices (for example, for retired people) and seasonal or promotional pricing (for example, discount) in the off-season, while the higher price is offered during the active season (Corluka, 2019). Price diversifications are a significant factor, and income is particularly important. Economic growth is associated with this reduction in concentration, while times of crisis increase it. Economic crises do not just reduce the level of annual demand, but also increase seasonal concentration (Turrión-Prats, Duro, 2018).

The purpose of the differentiated attractions (change of product mix) is to popularise the tourist products based on their seasonal characteristics. To a large extent, this strategy is close to the concept of event tourism as a tool for overcoming seasonality.

Market diversification consists of:

- Intensified marketing campaigns to attract different target markets during the inactive tourist seasons (multi-segment approach).
- New or alternative sources of demand of already existing products and sites, for example, middle-aged people (retirees), business tourists and visitors that prefer short vacations (weekend tourism) because those groups are most capable and ready to travel during the mid-season (the wings of the season/ March-June and September-November).

- Need to determine the optimal combination of segments (Corluka, 2019).

The other strategy is related to reducing the tourist demand during the high season. From an environmental point of view, extreme tourism seasonality increases the pressure on ecosystems due to the peaks in tourist arrivals (Koenig, Bischoff, 2005). This can be necessary if the number of tourists exceeds the destination's capacity, which can lead to lower satisfaction of the visitors and receiving lower services during their stay (crowded streets, lines for attractions, etc.). Similar measures are needed, especially when the negative consequences significantly exceed the positive ones. Systematic demand fluctuations are considered as a problem, which has to be counteracting in order to reduce and modify the effects. Lower quality standards and services in the peak months and overcrowding at beaches, mountains and airports, can be considered as social and personal costs of seasonality (Bar On, 1975 in Cannas, 2012). The strategies for surmounting this problem include increasing prices for all tourist places, facilities and attractions during the active season. That way, a big part of the tourists in the destination would prefer to vacation during the off-season in the years to follow, due to bad characteristics of the active season, which consist of overcrowding of streets, sites and attractions and high prices (Corluka, 2019).

The redistribution of tourist demand includes, on the one hand, the shift of peak demand to the period of weak demand and, on the other hand, the spatial distribution of demand during the peak period. It can be achieved in several ways.

The spatial redistribution of tourist demand during the peak period can also reduce the negative impact of overcrowding in destinations. Strategies include techniques for managing visitors to the places and more efficient transport measures, such as developing and publishing alternative routes to tourist objects or promoting alternative transport options to avoid congestion, accidents, incidents, etc. (Corluka, 2019). The boundaries between demand and supply-side strategies appear blurry. For example, the events and festivals are strategies that aim to attract demand, but, at the same time, these aim to provide services and organisation in supply patterns. In fact, these future plans can require increasing the number of the service and facilities, or providing new services (Cannas, 2012).

Optional ways for overcoming seasonality in tourism are well-known techniques applied and established over the years in tourism practice. However, a complete solution to the problem has not yet been found. Mountain tourist areas continue to operate in great dependence on seasonality and climate change.

Research Methodology

In the present study, the Bulgarian mountain resorts are included with the availability of offering and practising tourism. A set of methods was used to achieve the main goal of the article. In the first place, expert analysis based on data, observation and personal experience is applied. This made it possible to determine the basic structure of the study and the main sequence of its conduct. The research methods are based on scientific principles and basic achievements of the economic theory, global regionalism and modelling of economic processes that take place in the field of research and tourism. The methodological basis of

the research includes the methods of abstraction, dialectics, logic, structural and systematic approach to analysis, expert and questionnaire research and modelling. The main research thesis is related to the statement that the organisation and holding of events relevant to the territory and consumer interest is a necessary condition for extending the tourist stay, searching for holiday destinations outside the main season and reviving demand in the post-crisis period. For this reason, consumer preferences are also included in the survey.

In Bulgaria, three mountain resorts develop international tourism, based mainly on winter ski tourism. These are Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo. There is significant potential for expanding and increasing attendance in mountain sites. The country has many small settlements located in the mountains, with the potential for the development of varied types of tourism.

Model of research work

When we characterise winter resorts in Bulgaria and their chances for attracting tourists during the summer months of the year, we can define few strong sides, in particular: strategic location, relatively good tourist infrastructure (for ski and mountain tourism, eco paths), unique and conserved nature and climate, presence of protected territories, rich natural and culture-historical heritage, famous local lifestyle and culinary products, strategic location of the country, low level of living density and developing material and technical bases which can receive a big number of incoming tourists.

Along with the strengths of the Bulgarian mountain regions, a number of weaknesses can be noticed as well. The ones with special attention are: lagging behind in the development of the technical infrastructure compared to the pace of construction of the new tourism zones, undeveloped transport infrastructure, lack of common marketing strategy and complex tourist product which can promote the whole region, lack of access to services in the small towns – medical, social, informative, communicative, and last but not least defined seasonality and significant problems as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

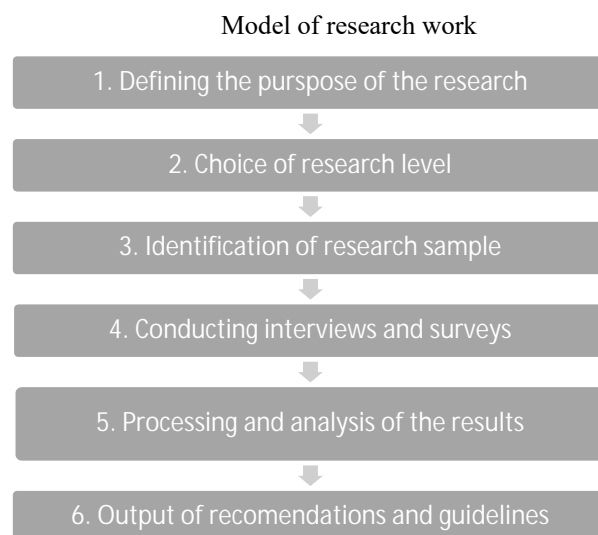
The research and experimental work in this publication use an adapted model for the study of winter resorts, developed by Wilson (Wilson, 1952). The structured interview method was used to conduct qualitative research. Following were the identification of specialists in the field of tourism and pursued interviews. Where the method of the structured interview identifies gaps, as well as to answer specific scientific questions and study the behaviour of tourists in the region, the method of the questionnaire study is used.

Based on a summary of the answers given by the experts to the asked questions, we can derive the following basic information. In the mountainous regions of Bulgaria is developed mainly winter tourism based on skiing. Contrary to expectations, many people prefer to visit mountain places outside the winter season. The possibilities for a holiday during the summer months create conditions for attracting a bigger number of tourists, and the material and technical base in the mountains, gives the opportunity for organising different events. It is a premise for attracting tourists outside the high season and offers unique experiences. Among the possible reasons for extending the tourist stay, experts identify the host destination,

attendance of cultural events, discounts of per night stays and SPA procedures (Dimitrova, 2018).

The purpose of our model is to structure and present in a more visual way the algorithm of our research work.

Figure 1



Source: a systematisation of authors.

To surmount the seasonality in tourism and the pandemic crisis in the mountain regions, the interviewees noted the need for the transport infrastructure, improvements of the destinations in their entirety with all the main and accompanying types of tourism, and various advertising campaigns on social networks, emphasising compliance with the full pack of safety measures. Emphasising the opportunities for providing health services in the Bulgarian mountains is also important. In order to change the direction for the development of tourism in the mountainous regions out of season, they indicate renovation of the existing material and technical base, provision of lower prices and organisation of various events during the summer, autumn and spring seasons. In addition, according to them, the events can be used to promote the offer in the resorts as a safe and secure place. The greater the response to an event, the better. For this reason, as a result of the interviews with the experts, a survey of tourists was developed. The questions were about the significance and demand for the events as a motive for visiting the mountain areas outside the main season.

Survey results

The research question in the survey is: “Can the organisation of events in the mountainous regions be a factor for overcoming seasonality in tourism and overcoming the consequences of COVID-19?”.

In the search for answers of this question the following working hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1 – In the winter, tourist resorts is more expedient to look for ways to extend the season than offering-year-round alternative types of tourism.

Hypothesis 2 – The organisation and the supply of differentiated events product in the winter tourist resorts is a premise for extending the visits of tourists, practising winter ski tourism.

It turns out that the modern tourist is well educated, receives a high monthly salary and based on that he travels more often for a shorter period of time. He is distinguished by responsibility and environmental consciousness. The majority of them prefer to travel out of the high season, which is an excellent premise for overcoming seasonality in mountainous tourism by organising events. Besides that, the tourists are less inclined to cancel trips because of fears of catching a disease.

The biggest part of the respondents thinks that participating in an event is a reason for the visitation of a mountains region as a tourist destination. The major reason for travel is the holiday purpose and with opportunities/options for some activities during their stay. The need for socialising, entertainment and cultural enrichment have a reflection on the answers given by the respondents.

For example, we will examine the answers to question number 6: “Which of the following you think is a strength for the region?” (Table 1).

Table 1
Uniform distribution of the strengths of the region indicated by the respondents (x6)

| 6. Total frequency | | | |
|--------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Advantages | Answers | | % |
| | N | % | |
| Culture | 11 | 3.35 | 11.0 |
| Nature | 102 | 31.10 | 102.0 |
| History | 5 | 1.52 | 50.0 |
| Infrastructure | 12 | 3.66 | 12.0 |
| Industry | 9 | 2.74 | 9.0 |
| Location | 36 | 10.98 | 36.0 |
| Sport events | 89 | 27.13 | 89.0 |
| Entertainment | 64 | 19.52 | 64.0 |
| Total | 328 | 100.0 | 328.0 |

*a. Dichotomous group, distinguished by value
Source: author's research*

The results prove the high potential of organising events in the Bulgarian mountain resorts and their ability to attract a large number of tourists outside the peak seasons and after overcoming the crisis. It is these events that should be successful among Bulgarian and foreign tourists. Due to the relatively small percentage that infrastructure has, there is a necessary change of the ways, resorts can be accessed.

More than 50% of the respondents identify nature as a key component when choosing a strong side of the hosting destination; entertainment also takes an important part of the

answers. In order to preserve nature as one of the leading reasons for visiting the host region, it is necessary for the uncontrolled redevelopment in the area of the resorts to stop and the capacity of the already existing infrastructure to be optimised. Sports events must be optimised, which includes practising different types of sports during the summer, thus extending the tourist season through the creation of new facilities, the development of already existing ones and the connection between them, as well as the natural resources of the environment. Another possible measure is the elaboration of detailed plans for the organisation of various types of events such as festivals, seminars, music and culture events and the attraction of a big number of investments which can cover the costs of their organisation. In addition, the road infrastructure needs to be significantly improved and the usage of installations for the production of artificial snow during the winter season in the zones, needs to be reduced because it represents a potential risk for lack or deterioration of the drinking water for the needs of locals (Dimitrova, 2018).

Reviewing the guests' preferences when talking about entertainment at a destination, we can say that SPA and wellness tourism is still the most preferred ways of spending guests own free time. Attendance of a cultural event, sporting event and conference for training are also very close. This comes from the fact that more and more tourists prefer to attend a cultural or sports event instead of a traditional holiday. The forecasts are that this tendency will grow more and more and the organisation of events as a form of entertainment, will gain popularity, with which it will lead to raising the number of visitors outside the high season.

A presence of a sporting event comes second in the answers given by the respondents (56 of the participants have identified it as a preferred form of entertainment or 28% of all respondents).

Question number 10 refers to the type of tourism that can be of interest for potential visitation in the respondents: "What type of event can make interested of visitation?".

This question has multiple answers. After analysis, we gain the following results (Table 2):

Table 2
One-dimensional distribution of the types of events that would be interesting to visit (x10)

| 10. Total frequency | | | |
|-----------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Event | Answers | | % |
| | N | % | |
| Cultural event | 47 | 8.97 | 8.97 |
| Musical event | 125 | 23.85 | 23.85 |
| Sports event | 167 | 31.87 | 31.87 |
| Festival/ carnival | 133 | 25.38 | 25.38 |
| Event related to art | 11 | 2.10 | 2.10 |
| Socio-political event | 15 | 2.86 | 2.86 |
| Natural event | 26 | 4.96 | 4.96 |
| Total | 524 | 100.0 | 524.0 |

a. Dichotomous group, distinguished by value
Source: author's research.

From the table above is visible, that the biggest interest for visitation comes from the organisation of a sportive events (31.87%), followed by festival/carnival (25.38%), musical

event (23.85%), cultural event (8.97%), natural event (4.96%), socio-political event (2.86%) and last, event related to art (2.10%). The big interest for sports events facilitates outlines the need of organisation of ones for attracting more tourists in Bulgarian mountain regions.

The results of the research allow us to conclude that sport events can be the main possibility for prolonging the season. Reasons for it are opportunities that mountain resorts offer are endless and we can give examples with mountain hikes or “off-road” safari in Borovets, sport fishing, shooting or horseback riding, etc.

Question 15 from the survey “Identify the reason for revisiting a destination” gives us the following results (Table 3):

Table 3
Uniform distribution of the reasons for revisit given by the respondents (x15)

| 15. Reasons for revisit of a destination | | | | |
|---|-----------|-------|---------|---------------|
| Validity | Frequency | % | Valid % | Accumulated % |
| Deeper exploring of the region as a tourist destination | 38 | 19.0 | 19.0 | 19.0 |
| Attendance of an organised event which is important and interesting | 106 | 53.0 | 53.0 | 53.0 |
| Holiday | 47 | 23.5 | 23.5 | 23.5 |
| I would not re-visit a destination | 9 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 |
| Total | 200 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: author's research.

It turns out that the attendance of an organised event would be the main reason for visiting a tourist destination. This answer is given by 53% of the respondents. Followed by holiday as a reason for a revisit (23.5%) and deeper exploring of the region as a tourist destination (19%).

The motives for revisiting a destination led us to the possibilities of turning the Bulgarian mountain regions into a year-round destination. The development of unpopular specialised types of tourism, including the events tourism, is very limited mainly due to the lack of information. It would be good to look for a way to organise various events for the development of mountain regions as a destination for “non-mass” tourism. The most distinguishing characteristics for attending an organised event, we can point out, are exactly the possibility for people of all age groups to take part in it during any season of the year, the created conditions for rest in the area and the popularity of the product/service (Dimitrova, 2018).

One of the other questions in the survey is closely related to identifying possible reasons for extending the tourist stay. The question asks: “Identify a possible reason for prolonging your stay at a destination”. The goal is to check if it is possible for the attendance of an organised event or business skills development event to be a reason enough that tourists extend their stay at a destination. With this question, we can check the research hypotheses and obtain the following table:

Table 4

Test statistics

| | Group |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Mann-Whitney U | 10.000 |
| Wilcoxon W | 25.000 |
| Z | -1.767 |
| Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) | .047 |
| Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)] | .112 ^a |

a. Uncorrected links.

b. Variable group: Possible reason for extending the tourist stay

Source: author's research.

Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) = 0,047 < $\alpha = 0,05 \rightarrow H1$ – According to data from this sample and with a 5% chance of error, we have reason to prove the two hypotheses in support of the thesis, i.e. in the winter tourist resorts, the search for alternatives for extending the season is more appropriate than offering year-round types of tourism. The organisation and the offers for diversified events products in the winter tourist resorts is a premise for extending the stay of tourists that practice winter ski tourism.

The two hypotheses were made based on the correlation between seasonality and events tourism. With the help of statistics methods of proving a hypothesis, we figure out that the organisation of some sort of event would inspire interest in the travellers and it is a premise for limiting and overcoming seasonality in the mountain regions of Bulgaria. It is necessary to underline that the analysis of the results reveals not only the correlation between the two phenomena but also the overcoming of seasonality would have positive benefits on the local economy and in that sense, the hypotheses are being proved.

As of the present moment, we can identify the tourist activity in the mountain resorts in Bulgaria as one way, oriented mainly towards the development of winter ski tourism. In most cases, however, the possibilities for overcoming seasonality are limited because of the high demands the destinations have towards secondary resources, secondary supply and the necessity of long term investments in a specialised material and technical bases and professional services.

Through the development of accompanying tourism activities and services and the attracting of tourists outside the high season – mostly during the summer and less during the fall and spring, the consequences of the financial and economic crises can be reduced. There is a potential both for an increase in overnight stays during the winter period and for the formation of a second, albeit weaker, summer season, and why not for even and sustainable year-round employment. So far, only in Bansko, there are signs of the formation of a second weaker summer season, which will provide additional employment to the tourist base.

The conclusions of the survey are used as a basis for further growth in mountain resorts in Bulgaria. Due to the dynamic nature of consumer preferences, research should be confirmed by expert analysis for greater reliability of the results.

Results and Vision for Development

Bulgaria has potential for developing year-round types of tourism such as cultural and SPA tourism but is still competitive only in the sea tourism and partly the winter one (Velikova, Anev, 2019). The transformation of mountain resorts into year-round, sustainable destinations requires the efforts of all stakeholders and the maximum use of the available potential in a responsible and environmentally friendly way.

In our view, the achieving of the three main pillars of sustainable planning requires close cooperation between the private and public sectors in the face of institutions and public authorities. This will increase the competitiveness of Bulgarian tourism, the efficiency of tourism companies and will improve employment and wages in the sector. This, in turn, will support government policy in the field of tourism and successful business development. This is also confirmed in the study of Dunets et al. (2019). They find that sustainable tourism development is a combination of processes characterised by spatial heterogeneity and controllability. Only with the help of conscious regulation, one can come closer to a balanced combination of compromises between objects and subjects of tourist activity.

The travelling industry in Bulgaria is quite dependent on the meteorological conditions and it is extremely seasonal. The two most developed types of tourism are particularly vulnerable – a rainy summer would affect the sea, sun, sand tourism and the level of employment in the accommodation sector of the seaside resorts, while the lack of snow could have a serious negative effect on the income of the ski tourism (Vodenska, Gösling, 2017). Experts say that the results of global climate warming are due to contamination (Bogomilova, 2017). Although they were significantly reduced during the pandemic, the risk still exists to a big degree. During the past few years, a lot of cities in Western Europe clearly stated that they are determined to reduce their negative influence on the environment. They confirmed this by joining the created in 2008 European Commission's initiative that requires the local governments to take the responsibility to reduce carbon emissions by 20% by 2020 (Tzvetkova, 2019). The measures taken already give results but the forecasts for the winter vocational period are not exactly promising.

Thus for Bulgaria is really important to think of future plans to overcome seasonality in the mountain regions, especially once the COVID-19 pandemic is over. A big part of those strategies, according to us, should be intended towards resifting the main tourist offers of winter tourism to alternative tourist packages. This is particularly important for the lowland areas where the consequences of the climate change are expected to be huge.

A significant competitive advantage for mountain destinations is their ability to offer a wide spectrum of services. During the winter season, the tourists in the mountain destinations can enjoy different sports and activities such as: skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiles, hockey, ice skating and others. During the summer season, tourists can practice rafting, kayaking, rock climbing, mountain biking, bungee jumping, paragliding, berry and herb picking and so on. All of these activities attract tourists from all over the world. At the same time, mountain tourism and its related mountain activities depend to a degree on the weather and the local climate (Velikova, 2020).

The weather forecasts in Bulgaria show a continuous decline of snowfall and earlier snow melting. Rainfall can have negative effects on the quality of the snow and the expectations of holiday goers. This will have a significant negative consequence for the ski resorts, especially the ones situated at a lower altitude (Vodenska, Gösling, 2017). While the summer season could benefit from climate changes, the winter one can suffer terrible consequences.

Strategies that are characteristic of overcoming seasonality in tourist destinations arise mainly from geographical location and climate effects (i.e. seasonal changes in time). The possibility for extending the tourist season or the inclusion of a second season depend strongly on the location and the competitiveness of the destination. For example, isolated or peripheral areas can face difficulties when they try to develop similar tourist products. This was proved by Dimitrov and Stoilova (2014).

Moreno-Gené et al. (2018) state that the smaller resorts are the ones with a more uncertain future. Their sustainability will therefore need to be assessed, as resorts are not only profitable for themselves, but also have influence in the surrounding territory. They promote the profitability of other local businesses, such as restaurants, commerce, hotels, training companies, and complementary activities, generating jobs and acting as economic engines. However, these complementary activities can only exist if the winter seasons are long and allow the practice of winter sports.

Despite the fact that seasonality would never be completely eliminated, there are a lot of ways to equalise the high and low periods of tourist visitations throughout the year. The positive effects from the efforts to reduce them are present in some tourist destinations, due to applied strategies and the fast growth of tourism in the last four-five years. All of the efforts are pointed at resifting the tourist visitations towards the calmer periods of the year, i.e. outside the high season.

The mountainous region can become the largest centre of international eco-tourism, scientific research, cultural relations and rational use of resources. Tourism makes a significant contribution to the sustainable development of mountain regions (Dunets et al., 2019).

According to the authors of this publication, the sustainable planning for sustainable development of the Bulgarian mountain resorts can be secured with the application of the following development model (Figure 2).

To ensure the current model, coordination and cooperation of the public and private sector efforts are expected. For the purposeful development of the following types of tourism are needed:

- Winter ski tourism and ski sports (during the months from December to March) – currently available and provided mainly on a private-sector basis. The public sector participates by giving a concession of ski slopes. It is possible to enrich the offer through SPA and wellness packages and cultural experiences;
- Transit, shopping and event tourism (in October-November and April-May) – are showing the potential for a significant increase in tourist visits and revenues. Bulgaria's geographical location guarantees a significant transit flow during all seasons of the year. In 2019 according to the NSI (National Statistical Institute), 4 930 515 tourists had visited

Bulgaria with the purpose of guests or transit. This is a remarkable reserve, which is not yet covered by the leisure industry – no overnight stays are realised in the licensed means of accommodation. In our opinion, it is possible to implement a strategy to stimulate the stay of transit tourists by increasing and promoting the opportunities for shopping and organising events. These types of tourism are very poorly developed or completely absent. For this reason, there is a need for a clear strategy and close cooperation of all stakeholders at each level;

Figure 2
Model for sustainable development of mountain resorts in Bulgaria



Source: Velikova, 2020.

- Summer mountain tourism (from June to September) – poorly developed. The increase in visits can be stimulated through the development of outdoor activities, events, spa and wellness offers and visits cultural sites – activities that will become especially popular after the pandemic. Here again, a clear strategy and close cooperation of all stakeholders is needed in order to stimulate visits to the mountains during the summer months. Diversification of the stay and the increasing of activities related to the preservation of the health condition, for example, spa and wellness offers and sports proposals, conceal serious potential for increasing summer vacations. In this regard, the targeted use of the available mineral water resources in Bulgaria, which are also significant in the mountainous areas, also need serious investments, popularisation of the possibilities for developing a strategy for including them in the tourist turnover (Velikova, 2020).

These options will improve the supply in the Bulgarian mountain resorts, which significantly exceed as a territory those for the offer of sea tourism. Close cooperation of municipalities with the private sector can be achieved through the building of alliances. This is a form of cooperation that allows the conservation of independence between the different participants

and their cooperation for achieving a common goal (Velikova, 2012). Once the goal is achieved, the alliance can cease to exist or build a new strategy for action.

The implementation of the current model will provide a significant competitive advantage to Bulgarian mountain tourism and will help it to establish itself even more on the international stage. Authors prove that mountain tourism can provide an alternative, environmentally friendly employment opportunities for local communities and contribute positively to their socio-economic wellbeing. In most of the region, however, tourism development is poorly planned, often even unplanned, and the development of infrastructures such as recreational facilities, guest houses, camping sites, and restaurants often have significant negative impacts on the mountain environment (Wang et al., 2019). This requires careful planning and zoning of each part of the tourist area.

It is important for the future development of tourism in Bulgaria to observe the trends that will dominate tourist travel after overcoming the crisis with COVID-19. We believe that their combination with strategies for ensuring sustainable development is a guarantee for future prosperity. In our opinion, they can be summarised as follows:

- Tourists would avoid the visitation of big hotels, “all-inclusive” resorts and loud mainstream resorts. This would be a “fresh air” for the small tourist organisations. In our opinion, this type of places would be avoided not because of their inability to maintain high hygiene but because of the accumulation of more people. In the short period, this would be the main psychological effect of influence from the measure taken to fight the pandemic. More and more small accommodation with “green” certificates will be sought. The service “all-inclusive” has been under attack for a long time from supporters of sustainable development because of the generated food waste, offering it from common buffers and limiting the access of the local population to the benefits of tourism;
- The concepts for sustainable development of tourist resorts rely on the establishment of ecological modes of transport. Ecological self-awareness presupposes a preference for the train over the personal car and the bus. The railway transport is cheap, ecological but not very practical. In Bulgaria, there is a need to improve the transport infrastructure in this regard and increase its usability. To this end, targeted efforts are again needed from all stakeholders;
- Outdoor activities will be necessary to a large extent – walks, outdoor sports, rock climbing, hiking, etc. In this regard, the mountains have to offer excellent possibilities. Personal responsibility and self-awareness after the crisis will increasingly promote lifestyles striving for a healthy and environmentally friendly way of life. This means that many sports activities and “healthy” foods will be sought;
- Technologies and innovations also can help the sustainable development in tourist destinations. Increasing the possibilities for using electric vehicles, including car rental, is just one example in this regard. The modern tourist environment needs new technological solutions to support it. Artificial intelligence will create many new opportunities in tourism and this is still to come.;
- Epidemiological measures will establish the pools as a preferred and sought form for sports, healing and recreation after the COVID-19 crisis. In this regard, the entire territory

of the country has an indisputable competitive advantage - the presence of over 550 deposits of mineral springs and peloid resources with an extremely wide range of prevention and treatment. With small investments and targeted policy, this resource can be used effectively;

- Corporate social responsibility will be established through the search for “eco-friendly” travel companies. New models of tourist accommodation and catering will be established, providing greater independence and isolation (Velikova, 2020).

These trends can also be significantly supported by the creation of the aforementioned alliance between the private and public sectors. In our opinion, even the new consumer requirements will inevitably impose this cooperation in response to the new socio-economic needs.

Conclusion

We can emphasise overcoming seasonality at the tourist ski resorts as a main conclusion, special attention must be paid at the ways of minimising their weaknesses. They should be limited by improving the interaction between the suppliers of tourist products in the country with the leading incoming tour operators. They have access to many emitting markets to which they can offer destination Bulgaria.

The present study, along with determining the positive and negative consequences that seasonality has on tourism and the analysis of the Bulgarian mountainous tourist resorts manages to create foundations of a strategic plan for action and optimisation of tourist development in the Bulgarian mountain areas. The results of the empirical research, together with the conclusions of the theoretical settings related to specifics of the organisation of events with the purpose of extending the tourist season, could be practically reduced to the possibilities for promotion of event tourism at a tourist destination.

In Bulgaria, there are opportunities for practising many other types of tourism besides summer sea and winter ski tourism. We have many mineral springs and hundreds of cultural resources. The strategies for the development of the tourist products should be developed in the context of the whole strategy for sustainable development of a destination; thus, the new products can complete and support one another.

The possibilities for turning the Bulgarian mountain regions into sustainable destinations that can be visited throughout the whole year are good. The development of the less popular specialised types of tourism, incl., and event tourism, is slightly limited, mainly due to lack of information. It would be appropriate to look for options for organising various events to build a vision of the mountain regions in Bulgaria as destinations for “non-mass” tourism.

The authors of this publication consider seasonality as a barrier that reduces the economic benefits of tourism in mountainous areas. They defend the thesis that finding opportunities for year-round use of the tourist base is a prerequisite for sustainable development of the territory, only when the proposed types of tourism are not mass, develop regularly and according to environmental principles. These types of tourism can be transit, shopping, event,

cultural, spa and wellness tourism. By carefully planning and offering them at certain times of the year, the tourist potential of the mountains can be greatly increased.

The current development of tourism in the mountainous territories of Bulgaria shows that it is more profitable for entrepreneurs to focus on extending the existing winter season. Despite the severe consequences of the pandemic, consumers continue to seek tourist services and the change in their behaviour is minimal. As soon as the borders are opened and travel is allowed, tourist travel will regain its pre-crisis values. The proposed model for year-round visits to mountain resorts can significantly increase the tourist potential of the mountains in Bulgaria. The aim of the model is not to make the proposed types of tourism mass. By attracting a number of visitors, acceptable to the capacity of the mountains, such a sustainable development of the resorts can be ensured that can combine economic, social and environmental components for development.

Rising temperatures and climate change will cause more changes in the tourist offer of mountain resorts. Of interest for future research may be the search for alternatives to ski tourism. This means a radical change in supply. Reconceptualising the tourist profile of a resort is a long and complex process that requires significant effort and strategic decisions. It should not be forgotten; however, that planning for future development must be based on the principles of sustainability.

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