

INCREASING TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES FOR CROSSBORDER DESTINATIONS – CASE OF PELAGONIJA REGION¹

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border regions face challenges how to encourage and promote cooperation between the countries to which they belong. In this regard, as most common approach is the use of their potentials in order to improve the overall socio-economic development of the regions. The co-operation marks a number of examples of initiatives that are often within the framework of certain international cross-border co-operation programmes.

Among the specific goals of the programs, including the promotion of sustainable economic development in cross-border regions, priority is given to encouraging tourism by improving the attractiveness and promoting tourism in the regions. In this context, the opportunities for development of the regions as recognizable tourist destinations are increasing, not only in the cross-border regions but also in the wider regional environment. This approach is with aim to achieve increased competitiveness and increased employment opportunities of local population.

KEY WORDS: tourism; tourist destinations; cross- border regions

INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalization tourism is faced with the emerging need of providing more opportunities for destinations competitiveness. As Dwyer and Kim (2003) stated, destination competitiveness is the “ability of a destination to deliver goods and services that perform better than other destinations on those aspects of the tourism experience considered to be important

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bytourists”.In this regard, it should be noted that destinations located in cross-border regions face bigger challenges to achieve this. Cross border regions have joint challenges how to develop cross border tourism among which most common is how to increase opportunities for the use of natural and cultural potentials and create a competitive cross-border tourism products. Therefore it is particularly important to mention the role of the cooperation which is in function not only of utilizing the potentials for tourism development, but also the cooperation in function of utilization of common values in such cross-border regions. According to Makkonen et al. (2018) cross-border tourism initiatives in European Union (EU) contribute to the promotion of sustainable tourism and development of innovation in tourism sector offering to destinations to become leading ones. As Nilsson et al.(2010)further stated, the enhanced importance of tourism and destination development is reflected in cross-border regionalization. Such cooperation is proven as very good practice within the EU funded Interreg programs that incorporate tourism as important part of cross-border development. The cross-border tourism development is every indicative aspect of the EU integration processes, which are implemented within the framework of various cross-border cooperation programs.They include different areas of cooperation as is the example of the IPA II programme for cross-border cooperation between Greece and Republic of North Macedonia.

In addition, special attention should be paid to the activities that, by encouraging the use of tourism opportunities, simultaneously contribute to the creation of common tourist values through different types of tourism products. According to Nestoroska (2020), creation of competitive tourist offer demands careful selection of potentials and their combination in attractive tourism products upon the proper selection of authentic values.The use of natural and cultural resources is an important basis for the development of tourism in these areas, especially when they are used to form tourism products with diverse content that give complex characteristics of the tourist offer.In that way, conditions are created for improving the content of the stay of the tourists, but on the other hand, more intensive involvement of these environments in the development processes, affirmation of the localities and facilities, as well as the territorial units in the cross-border area. In order to utilize the tourism potentials, many stakeholders have opportunities to get involved in the development of tourism.Tourism products that are created by using tourism potentials contribute to diversification of income and socio-cultural development. In this sense, the creation of close and friendly relations of the population in cross-border

regions and in this manner destinations is of special importance, both in the regional and municipal units and in cross-border frameworks.

The inventory approach towards valorization of tourist values that are incorporated in tourist products leads to the provision of qualitative and quantitative parameters, and the spatial and temporal determination of the relations in function of development. This approach has a multifunctional character because it allows stakeholders to recognize the values in these environments. They also have a promotional importance because the promotion of values will enable the recognition of cross-border regions as tourist destinations with specific and recognizable tourist products. By exploring and incorporating resources through a creative approach, elements of natural and cultural heritage acquire an affirmative character as recognizable content of cross-border regions. Tourist products are the basis for their promotion and presence on the tourist market, but also for the improved tourist development of the cross-border regions.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion about the importance of increased tourism opportunities of the cross-border regions by presenting the characteristics of Pelagonija region as tourist destination. The paper will analyze the tourism characteristics of Pelagonija region with focus on exploring opportunities how to utilize tourism resources to create cross-border tourism products.

TOURISM CHARACTERISTICS OF PELAGONIJA REGION

Regions are spatial units with different natural and cultural values that can be used for tourism. The spatial dispersion of such values enables diversification of tourist offer with different contents of tourist products. Therefore, tourism development of the regions is in close relation with their attractiveness and competitiveness as tourist destinations, as well as the receptive characteristics that possess the regions. Pelagonija region has characteristics of a valley in the south part of N. Macedonia, and with its position it is extended towards the territory of Greece, which is a good basis for creation of combined tourism products with different elements (Nestoroska, 2020). The region has natural and cultural heritage with great potentials for recreational and cultural activities and different studies deal with the analysis of the potential for tourism development of Pelagonija region, both on regional and local level (Integrated plan for local development of municipality Krushevo for the period 2019-2020, [2019]; Strategy of the local action group for rural development – Pelagonija (2015-

2020), [2015]; Local strategy for tourism development in Resen 2019-2024, [2018]; Program for development of Pelagonija Planning Region 2015-2019 [2014]; Register of the potentials for development of rural tourism in Pelagonija Planning Region, [2017]; Strategy for cultural development of Pelagonija Planning Region 2013-2016, [2013]; Strategy for Local development of Municipality Bitola 2014-2018, [2014]; Strategy for local economic development of Municipality Prilep 2014-2018, [2014]; Study for networking and promotion of monastery tourism on Baba Mountain, [2011]).

Tourism performance in Pelagonija region is not satisfactory, with absorption of around 5,0% of total number of tourist arrivals in N. Macedonia in 2021 with a total of 35 384 arrivals (State statistical office, 2022). The region is on the fifth place in the country, and is far after the leading regions of South-West, Skopje and Southeast. According to Nestoroska (2020) during last decade the region didn't mark any increase in the number of tourist arrivals which were the highest in 2011 with a total of 76.469 arrivals. The territory of Pelagonija region (picture1) has nine municipalities and covers an area of 4,717 km², i.e. 18.9% of the total territory of the country (Marinoski, 2002). Most of them are rural with possibilities for development of rural tourism in combination with other forms of tourism which is possibility for creation of complex tourist content within different tourist products.



Picture 1. Municipalities in the Pelagonija Planning Region

Cross-border position of the region, that is extended not only in N. Macedonia but in Greece also, enables cross-border cooperation within different fields and tourism as well, particularly because of the operation of the Medzitlija border crossing. Cross-border cooperation is important because it enables international characteristics of tourism in the region. This has a double meaning. The first is that the emitive zone for visits to this area

is expanded with the tourism products of different recreational and cultural activities. And the second refers to the possibility for a combined way of using the resources of the region in creating tourist offer within international frames. In that way, the region becomes more attractive and has increased opportunities to become cross-border tourist destination. It should be noted that Pelagonija region has emphasized functional characteristics of the tourist-geographical position. Its transit position and contactibility should be emphasized as functional features of the tourist-geographical position. These peculiarities arise from the fact that the region is not an isolated territorial area, but is characterized both by complexity and connectivity, as well as in terms of the environment, diversity and number of tourist values that possesses. The transit characteristic of the region is in relation with the road routes that pass through this area and it is in communication with the international road corridors E75 and E65. This enables the region connectivity not only with Greece but broader with eastern European countries and Asian, with the Adriatic coast, and further through Italy and with the southwestern Europe (Nestoroska, 2013). Such transit position has important functional features because it provides easier access by tourists to Pelagonija as tourist destination, increase its tourist value and an opportunity for creation and differentiation of selective forms of tourism by utilizing the potentials. The contactibility of region's tourist-geographical position is in relation to its position towards Southwestern and Vardar regions in N. Macedonia and the border position with Greece and Albania (Ministry of local self-government, 2022).

Natural and cultural values are significant basis for creation of different tourist products. Natural tourist values are present to a large extent due to the composite relief structure that characterizes the Pelagonija (Marinoski, 2002). This richness is reflected in the number of represented forms, as well as their heterogeneity. A special place in the creation of diverse tourist offer has the mountains, gorges, caves, lakes and canyons, particularly the National Park Pelister, National Park Galichica, Baba Mountain and Busheva Mountain. Their valorization can be enriched by the recreational and aesthetic attributes.

Cultural values are significant potential for attracting tourists and solid basis for further development of cultural tourism with composition of architecture, cultural-historical buildings, events, manifestations and ethnographic heritage. As particularly attractive category is the old architecture in Krushevo, the old Bazaar of Bitola and the Prilep Bazaar, and in rural areas. Most of the remained and preserved facilities are built with indigenous materials as soil, stone and wood. Diverse sacral and profane architecture,

cultural monuments, archaeological sites and museums represent great part of cultural values in this region along with ethnographic heritage and cultural events (Strategy for cultural development of Pelagonija planning region 2013-2016, 2013). Within the region there are over 250 different cultural values comprised of institutions that support and accelerate cultural development of the region, museums, galleries, cinema and theaters, churches, mosques and monasteries built in all different historical periods from early Christianity to the period of the new age and the twentieth century, and archeological sites.

The abundance of natural and cultural values, region's touristic-geographical position, tourist performance and cross-border position represent remarkable opportunity for developing Pelagonija as cross-border destination. Such values and characteristics are basis for developing different tourist products with regional and international content.

UTILIZATION OF TOURISM RESOURCES TO CREATE CROSS-BORDER TOURISM PRODUCTS

Since the Balkan becomes more interesting travel destination for international tourists, the region as still relatively unknown and unexploited destination by tourists has such potential to develop as a cross-border tourist destination. This is opportunity for neighboring countries to create and develop cross-border tourism products that will be part of the tourist offer. The combination of different tourist resources and values leads towards the creation of attractive tourism products, and it further increases competitive position of cross-border destinations.

The abundance of these factors in the region allows more complex and complementary tourism products to be created. But, it is a fact that tourism is still relatively underdeveloped and needs to be improved. The region is far behind the Southwest, Southeast and Skopje regions in terms of tourism infrastructure and the overall tourism turnover. Therefore, a creation of tourism products is important part of the tourist offer of Pelagonija region because they contribute to the region's tourism interaction and promotion.

Tourism products are comprised of various elements and components that range with recreational, adventure, active, culinary and cultural elements. Both natural and cultural values can be different combined and enable creation of various theme-based tourism products. They are specially designed, with inclusion of significant natural, cultural and historical values

that are attractive for sightseeing, experience, and cognition by tourists. They are forms of offering a complete and thoughtfully planned, organized and conducted services and activities to the tourists, and are increasingly in demand by tourists. The selection of the most attractive and most representative tourist content in the cross-border region has to be as result of:

- Conducted analysis and mapping of tourism products that will further be promoted and sell by tour operators and tourism service provide;
- Prepared programs and maps for the tourism products of the cross-border region;
- Careful and optimal use of the available values as tourist resources and available tourism capacities with respecting the principles of sustainability;
- Respect for spatial relations, connection and networking within the region.

The potential value of tourism product largely depends on the overall quantity and quality of the accompanying content that Pelagonija region can offer to tourists and visitors. In order to achieve dynamics and harmony in the creation of tourism products in the region, the coexistence of different types of content should be taken into account, such as: natural, cultural, structural, service content and accompanying content, such as elements on adventure, culture, and food. It is important to take into account the allowed capacity of a certain area, and constantly think about not disturbing the natural environment and degradation of that area. When assessing the natural and cultural-historical content in the creation of tourist products and routes, one should be aware for the overall attractiveness, then the offer and interactivity.

As part of the multi-disciplinary approach in the creation of tourist products in the region, certain European experiences have to be followed. It is recommend to pay attention to the practical development of the route, the recording of resources, the evaluation of the content and all other aspects that are part of the traveling of tourists and visitors.

CONCLUSION

Pelagonija region has a solid foundation and opportunity to revive tourism in this area through diverse type of visit facilitated through wellthought-out tourism products. The defined criteria for selection of tourist content for tourism products in the cross-border region Pelagonija is very important, and it should be considered as strength to the tourist offer. This region is significant spatial area with the potential for developing different types of

tourism. As elaborated, the dispersion and abundance of natural and cultural values forms a solid basis for development of Pelagonija as a cross-border tourist destination.

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