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Rethinking Destination Accessibility: The Case of the Pelagonia Region

Ivanka Nestoroska

Prof. dr.

Corresponding Author

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9208-8446>

University St. Kliment Ohridski,
Faculty of tourism and hospitality-
Ohrid
North Macedonia
ivanka.nestoroska@uklo.edu.mk

Irena Ruzin

Dr.

Institute and museum Bitola North
Macedonia
irenaruzin@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose – the paper tends to provoke future reflections, research and discussions on the importance of accessibility as an integral part of the conceptual development of tourist destinations. The aim is to present findings from conducted research related to the accessibility in Pelagonia Region as tourist destination. It discusses the importance of reconceptualization of accessibility and developing a conceptual framework for rethinking destination accessibility. It further emphasizes the importance of cooperation among stakeholders in the process of integration of accessibility into destination development, management and promotion of destinations.

Methodology/Design/Approach – The research employs theoretical and empirical approach, including a combination of desk research, policy analysis, field research of tourism infrastructure and services, interviews with key stakeholders, and questionnaire. The respondents represent accommodation and catering facilities, travel agencies, museums and other cultural institutions and facilities, tourist sites, recreational and locations, non-governmental organizations and representatives of local authorities responsible for tourism development.

Findings – The research indicates that accessibility in Pelagonia Region is still limited and has significant physical, informational and organizational barriers. Although examples of good practice were identified, accessibility is largely addressed through isolated interventions, rather than as an integral component of destination development. The findings point to the need to rethink accessibility as a key component of tourism planning in this region.

Originality of the research – The originality of this research lies in its regional-scale empirical assessment of accessible tourism primarily based on field research. It provides a systematic evaluation of the accessibility of tourist attractions, institutions, tourism facilities and mobility infrastructure across the municipalities in Pelagonia region and identifies regional disparities and accessibility gaps. The research expands the limited knowledge on accessible tourism in North Macedonia by pointing out regional accessibility challenges, thus providing a basis for future tourism research and planning.

Keywords: Accessible Tourism; Sustainable Destination; Development; Pelagonia Region; North Macedonia

INTRODUCTION

Accessible tourism in its essence is complex, consisting of many segments that need to be appropriately incorporated and adapted to ensure accessibility and availability, which is mostly related to public transport, catering and accommodation facilities, tourist attractions, as well as information about tourist destinations. However, another aspect is equally important, and that is the commitment of all tourism stakeholders through coordination of activities, cooperation and co-creation to ensuring accessibility. Providing a tourist service with all the necessary segments that will satisfy such needs makes the destination special and recognizable in the tourism market. Through accessible tourism, which is guided by the motto "tourism for all," conditions should be created to ensure the opportunity for everyone to equally, fairly and non-discriminatorily

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engagement in tourist trips. Hence, the need to think and rethink accessibility becomes particularly important, especially considering the growth of global tourism and the increased pressure on destinations that continuously face challenges related to their development

As the population ages and travel becomes more diverse, destinations are challenged to rethink how to ensure access for all visitors regardless their age, physical or sensory abilities. Accessibility has become an important issue in tourism driven by demographic changes, evolving visitor expectations and growing awareness of social inclusion and human rights. Accessibility in tourism is therefore increasingly recognized as a key pillar for destinations aiming to be sustainable and inclusive (UNWTO, 2016; United Nations, n.d.; Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). Accessibility is considered one of the four axes, along with innovation, technology and sustainability, for the development of smart destinations and is considered an important component for measuring competitiveness (Porto, Rucci & Ciaschi, 2018). However, accessibility in destinations is still often considered in a fragmented manner with a lack or absence of integrated access and is still understood in narrow terms.

Experiences show that providing accessible services and products require commitment from all tourism stakeholders, hence many destinations face the challenge of accessibility. An accessible destination is not only a benefit for people with disabilities, but also for older people, families with children or visitors with temporary limitations. Becoming more accessible is not only a social responsibility for a destination, but also a strategic opportunity that can increase its competitiveness, expand diversity and seasonality, and increase its visibility in the tourism market. In this context, it is important to approach the assessment of destinations not only on the basis of tourist attractions and infrastructure, but also on the basis of the ability to provide inclusive and equitable experiences for different groups of visitors.

In the theoretical background section, we provide a review of the literature regarding the importance of accessible tourism as key component of sustainable and competitive destinations. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of accessibility not only being understood as the need to provide conditions for those with disabilities, but also for all visitors. The focus is also on the role of all stakeholders in ensuring accessibility. The importance of collaborative creation and a systemic approach is particularly emphasized.

In addition to the theoretical background the paper presents methodology and results from an empirical research for Pelagonia Region in North Macedonia conducted as part of the project activities of ALTERTRIP (co-funded by the European Union and by National resources of the participating countries within the Interreg IPA CBC Programme "Greece-Republic of North Macedonia", 2022-2023) to assess legal requirements for providing accessible tourism services and facilities, the performance of existing accessible tourism services and facilities and to analyze difficulties and barriers for provision of accessible tourism services and facilities. The main aim is to present current situation within the region, key barriers for accessibility, to present stakeholders' perceptions about inclusive destination development and to discuss about the meaning of a conceptual framework for improving destination accessibility.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: ACCESSIBILITY AND TOURIST DESTINATIONS

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) disability is only one of many factors that influence participation in everyday activities and life situations, and almost everyone experience a temporary or permanent disability at some point in their lives. An estimated 1.3 billion people, around 16% of the world's population live with significant disability and this number is growing. As umbrella institution for tourism, the



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United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) is strongly committed to the promotion of accessibility in tourism as a fundamental human right and as key component of sustainable tourism development. Through numerous and various initiatives, policy recommendations, manuals and guidelines (UN Tourism, n.d.) it encourages destinations, tourist businesses and governments to create inclusive tourism environment accessible to everyone regardless their disability, age or other specific access needs. According to the European Council (2025), 24% of the EU population over the age of 16 had some form of disability in 2024 which equals to around 90 million people or 1 in 4 adults, around 47% of them are over 65 years age. This data indicates a large number of people who face accessibility problems and obstacles in various areas of daily life, including travel and tourism. Despite numerous institutions, organizations and initiatives (UN Tourism; ENAT; IUCN; EASPD; ISO) that are dedicated to ensuring persons with disabilities in the enjoyment of their rights, including free movement, the data still shows that in many European countries access to various products and services does not correspond to the growing number of people facing this barrier (European Council, 2025).

In numerous tourism studies, accessible tourism has emerged as one of the important dimensions of sustainable and competitive tourist destinations, considering various interrelated aspects. Accessibility is identified as part of the process of achieving a competitive advantage for the destination by contributing to tourism development. According to definition by Darcy & Dickson (2009) accessible tourism emphasizes the importance of enabling people with access requirements to function independently, equitably and with dignity through universally designed products, services and environments. The authors further highlight that accessible tourism is actually intended for all consumer segments seeking to experience tourism with ease and comfort. Buhalis & Darcy (2011) consider that accessible tourism enables overcoming disabling barriers and create enabling environment for visitors. Yau, McKercher, and Packer (2004) emphasize the accessibility as a multi-stage tourism experience by highlighting psychological, social and experiential aspects beyond physical aspects. In contrast, Farkas, Raffay and Petykó (2022) conceptualize accessibility as a philosophical and sustainable concept that ensure equitable participation and dignity for all.

The conceptual model of competitiveness by Ritchie & Crouch (2003), in which they suggest that a tourist destination is influenced by many interconnected factors (socio-cultural conditions, economic development, technology, environmental changes and tourist behavior), explains that a destination becomes competitive through two main dimensions. The first relates to the destination resources (natural and cultural attractions, human resources, infrastructure, knowledge and financial capital), and the second dimension refers to the destination's ability to manage and use these resources effectively for long-term planning and development. Taking into consideration that the model recognizes the influence of external factors such as economic, political, environmental, and social changes, the competitiveness depends on the ability of destinations to adapt and develop sustainably. In this context, accessibility should also be taken into account.

According to the interpretation by Nestoroska (2020) that the creation of a competitive destination's tourist offer requires careful selection of tourism values and their combination into an attractive tourist product based on the correct choice of authenticity then, in the context of accessibility a special attention should be paid to the creation of tourist products that will be suitable for meeting accessibility needs. As Angelevska-Najdeska and Nestoroska (2024) state that the access to tourism facilities, products and services should be considered as a central part of any tourism policy for responsible and sustainable destination accessibility should be seen as opportunity for destinations' development. Furthermore, Nestoroska et al. (2023) discuss that regardless the disabilities, limitations or age, accessible destination enables people to enjoy the destination, products and services that are provided on equal and non-discriminatory manner. Regarding the accessibility of the destination, Popovic, Slivar and Gonan Bozac (2022) draw attention that accessibility



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includes not only the quality of the environment and infrastructure, but also suprastructure and the provision of appropriate access to relevant information that enables equal tourism experiences for persons with special needs. Porto, Rucci and Ciaschi (2018) found that destinations with better accessibility conditions attract higher level of international tourism demand for which they recommend that accessibility should be understood as a broader concept that includes political commitment, institutional support and inclusive tourism policies particularly in World Heritage Sites.

Stakeholder cooperation and a shared commitment to developing an accessible destination should be considered from the perspective of providing appropriate conditions. Chwaja et al. (2025) elaborate that the process of experiencing accessible destination requires understanding that tourism experiences are multifaceted, for which different individual access considerations as mobility, visual, hearing, cognitive and other needs, need to be taken into account. Providing equal opportunities for visitors to enjoy tourist services is important for both established tourist destinations and those that are less developed but have great tourist potential. This is essential because destination competitiveness is strongly related to its ability to attract and satisfy visitors' needs where as key indicators are usually taken the physical aspects mainly related to accommodation or transport, and strategic commitment by tourism stakeholders. Authors (De La Fuente-Robles et al., 2020) emphasize the role of co-creation and collaboration in the process of development of accessible tourist products and experiences. But as Gillovic and McIntosh (2020) argue, a major obstacle in delivering high-quality accessible tourism experience is the insufficient awareness and understanding of accessibility aspects in destinations, and limited cooperation between stakeholders. Furthermore, the authors underline the importance of broader cultural change in societal attitudes for achieving more accessible world. Ensuring quality of accessible tourism experience within a destination requires cooperation among stakeholders due to the fragmented nature of tourism industry. This process is complex because it needs good coordination, trust and cooperation of all stakeholders in the tourism sector.

Pelagonia Region is positioned in the southwestern part of North Macedonia and within its valley is extended towards the territory of Greece (south) and Albania (southwest) thus providing good conditions for creating cross-border tourist products (Nestoroska, 2020). Although it is the largest region in the country by area, 10.9 % of the population lives in the region within 9 municipalities which makes it the seventh region in the country in terms of population density. For comparison, the average population density in the country is 81 inhabitants per km² and in the region is 48 inhabitants per km². The development of the region depends on its attractive and receptive characteristics and in this context Pelagonia Region has significant urban and rural configuration which is in favour of tourism development. Dispersion of rural and urban areas within the region is comprised of significant natural heritage abundant with recreational and attractive factors. In addition, the cultural heritage plays also important role for the region's tourism development as an attractive component through various forms of material and nonmaterial heritage (Nestoroska, 2020). Different studies that deal with analysis of the potentials for tourism in Pelagonia Region on regional and local level are consulted for the purpose of this research (Program for development of Pelagonija Planning Region 2021-2026, (2021); Local strategy for tourism development in Resen 2019-2024, (2018); Local strategy for tourism development in Krushevo 2020-2025, (2020)). The analysis revealed that, although these documents recognize tourism as an important driver for development, accessibility is not addressed as a strategic priority, and there is a lack of specific objectives, measures or actions for improving accessibility and promoting inclusive tourism. The importance of accessible tourism has not been integrated in tourism planning and development at the regional level. The conducted research indicates that Pelagonia Region have solid basis for development and promotion of tourist products on national and international tourism market, and additionally for increased tourism development. As mentioned in the introductory part, in addition to the theoretical approach to accessibility in tourist destinations, this paper also presents the results of the authors' field research on the



accessibility of the Pelagonia region as part of implemented activities in the aforementioned IPA project. Several factors make this area relevant for research on accessible tourism. Firstly, as one of the largest planning regions in the country it is characterized by diverse tourism offer thus providing an appropriate setting for assessing accessibility across different types of tourism products and services. Secondly, the region has well-established tourist destinations (Bitola, Krushevo and Prespa) attracting both domestic and international visitors throughout the year. But there is a limited empirical research on the accessibility of these destinations for persons with disabilities and other visitors with specific access requirements which creates a research gap that justifies the selection of the region. And thirdly, the Pelagonia Region represents a suitable case for examining the relationship between tourism development and accessibility because it combines diverse areas with relatively developed tourism infrastructure and less developed destinations. Therefore the findings can provide practical recommendations not only for this region but also for the other regions of North Macedonia and countries with similar characteristics, as well.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodological approach in the research is based on a combination of secondary and primary data sources for the analysis and assessment of existing available tourist services and capacities in the Pelagonia Region from a perspective of accessibility. The secondary research employs literature analysis, statistical data, analysis of strategies, programs, plans, and studies and research relating to the aspects of development of the Pelagonia Region as a tourist destination in North Macedonia. The primary research was conducted through interview with key stakeholders, questionnaires and field research. The designed methodology included desk research on the characteristics of the Pelagonia Region as a tourist destination, analysis on the current situation of legislation regarding accessibility and analysis of the conducted assessment of the existing accessible tourist services and capacities in the Pelagonia Region.

2.1. Desk research on Pelagonia Region as a tourist destination

The research was focused on basic indicators related to tourism performance of the Region within the period 2019-2024 aiming to identify its position within Macedonian tourism. The following categories are analyzed: number of tourists and overnight stays, average stay, seasonality, and region's participation in the distribution of tourist flows. For the research, data from the State Statistical Office was mainly consulted as well as other relevant sources (Center for development of Pelagonia Planning Region, Agency for promotion and support of tourism, Ministry of Economy, Local municipalities in Pelagonia Region). The analysis referred the two basic categories: domestic and foreign tourists in order to determine the ratio of their representation in the total tourist turnover. Overnight stays, total as well domestic and foreign, and were taken as an indicator to determine the average stay in days and to observe the dynamics of growth / decline of tourist flows. Further, the structure of tourists by country of origin was assessed for identifying region's tourism markets and visitor segments. The size of tourism flows in Pelagonia Region is compared to the other seven regions of North Macedonia serving as a ground for comparison analysis of the region's positioning to other regions. Such approach for researching the characteristics of Pelagonija as a tourist destination, through defined indicators, allows for the provision of data in order to determine the current situation in terms of the region's tourism development in relation to other regions in North Macedonia.

2.2. Analysis of legislation regarding accessibility

The analysis of the current situation for legislation regarding accessibility served to identify what is specifically applicable or has conditions for possible applicability of relevant international and national regulations for

accessibility to tourist services in the Pelagonia Region. In this segment, the emphasis of the analysis is on the application of appropriate regulation that should remove the difficulties and barriers and enable conditions for providing accessible tourism services as a key element for providing such services in the Pelagonia region. In doing so, a systematic and critical analysis of the regulation is used, which treats this issue from an international and national perspective. Such analysis is the basis for determining applicability in catering, accommodation and other tourist facilities and institutions. In this context, it should be emphasized that the application of appropriate regulation for providing accessible tourism services is a significant responsibility not only for providers of such services in the region, but equally in national and international frameworks.

The analysis encompassed the following aspects of the regulation: ensuring accessibility within the framework of the UN and the specialized organizations of the UN (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; Declaration on the facilitation of tourist travel, 2009; UNWTO Recommendations on Accessible Tourism, 2013); international accessibility standards (ISO 14785:2014; ISO 13009:2015; ISO 17049:2013; ISO 23599:2019; ISO 21902:2021); the European system for ensuring accessibility (EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030; 2021) and the regulation for ensuring accessibility in North Macedonia, and respectively Pelagonia Region (National strategy for equal rights of persons with disabilities, 2010-2018; 2023-2030; By-laws that define the mandatory prerequisites for ensuring accessibility in the hospitality and tourism industry in North Macedonia). The aim was to determine the structure of the relevant legislation that regulates accessibility according to the defined prerequisites and how it is applied in tourism. Further it is a basis to identify the real situation in terms of the applicability of the regulations in the Pelagonia Region. Then, the deductive approach was applied for identifying the applicability of this regulation in tourism. A tabular presentation was prepared with provision of the relevant regulations for accessibility in tourism that have a global and international dimension and which, according to their content and ratification by countries in the world, are also binding in national regulations. The purpose of this summarized presentation was to provide an overview of the specific applicability of the regulation that is and should be applicable in the Pelagonia Region. According to the same methodological approach for international regulation, a tabular presentation was also prepared for the relevant national regulation and by-laws that are applicable for providing accessible tourism and hospitality services.

2.3. Analysis of the existing accessible tourist services and capacities in the Pelagonia Region

An assessment of the existing accessible tourist services and capacities within the region was conducted aiming to determine the actual applicability of the regulation in providing such services. It encompassed accommodation facilities, catering facilities, travel agencies, museums and other cultural institutions and facilities, tourist sites and some sports locations, non-governmental organizations and representatives of local authorities responsible for tourism development, social protection and the well-being of persons with disabilities. Promotional materials, websites and other promotional activities for the cities, destinations and capacities of the region were also included in the analysis. This assessment employed a combination of desk research (analysis of existing strategic documents for Pelagonia Region and for the municipalities, Register for categorization accommodation facilities, Register for categorization of tourism and hospitality facilities, statistical data) and field research with visits to facilities, electronic communication, and interviews (on-site and by phone).

The research involved representatives of institutions and businesses operating within the tourism sector in the region. The purpose of such sampling was used to select participants because the research was focused on organizations that are directly involved in the provision and management of tourism products, services

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and visitor attractions. The targeted sample was identified according to the data from the State Statistical Office for registered institutions and businesses in Pelagonia Region.

Two categories of respondents were defined: the first category comprised public institutions for culture, sports, and natural attractions, and the second category included tourism and hospitality businesses (accommodation providers, restaurants, travel agencies) and other tourism-related facilities. The questionnaires were distributed to a total of 112 organizations, including 31 institutions of culture, sport and nature, and 81 tourism and hospitality establishments and related facilities.

Data were collected by using two structured questionnaires designed for the two groups of respondents. The first was intended for institutions responsible for managing cultural, sports, and natural attractions, and the second targeted tourism and hospitality businesses and related tourism facilities. The questionnaires enabled the collection of information tailored to the specific characteristics of each group. They were distributed to the selected organizations and responses were obtained from representatives responsible for the management or operation of the respective institutions and facilities. In addition to the questionnaire survey, on site assessments were conducted to evaluate the accessibility conditions of the surveyed facilities who responded that have such conditions, the number of which was 48 with a response rate of 42,8%. The assessment focused on key accessibility components including entrance area, internal circulation and communications, sanitary facilities, service counters, information boards and orientation plans for movement into facilities. These elements were evaluated to identify existing barriers and assess the level of accessibility.

The results of the research were processed and analyzed in order to obtain information on whether the managers and employees in the facilities are familiar with the legislation, whether the legislation has been implemented, was there a field inspection, or if it has been implemented whether it has been implemented correctly. The research provided answers to the questions of the current situation with the implementation of the legislation on accessibility for people with disabilities in the Pelagonia Region as a pilot region and what is the situation with the provision of specific, special tourist services for people with disabilities. The following five categories of disability were considered: A) Disabled persons who are partially dependent on a wheelchair, B) Persons with walking disabilities who need a wheelchair permanently, C) blind persons or persons with visual impairment, D) Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, E) combined B, C and D categories. In the assessment, particular emphasis was placed on checking the following elements with defined dimensions: accessibility elements for overcoming height differences (ramps, stairs, elevators, vertical lifting platform and inclined lifting folding platform), do they have such elements and whether the dimensions are compatible.

An observation on accessible elements for independent movement in public transport for people with wheelchairs and people with reduced mobility was conducted for a stand and a platform, parking space, public pedestrian area, traffic lights, pedestrian crossing, pedestrian island and intersection (do they have such elements and whether the dimensions are compatible).

3. RESULTS

The regional distribution of tourism flows in North Macedonia was first examined before the analysis of accessibility of tourism in the Pelagonia Region. The purpose was to provide an overview of the region's position within the national tourism market and to evaluate the tourism significance of the region and its potential for further development through accessible tourism. The data show considerable regional disparities in tourism flows indicating that tourism demand is concentrated only in few regions of the country.



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Pelagonia Region is positioned at the fourth level, well behind other leading regions as the Southwest with largest share in tourism flows ranging 37.63% to 45.77%, Skopje and Southeast. Such tourism performance in the Pelagonia Region indicates a gradual decline throughout the observed period, rather than a stable or growing volume of tourism flows. Although accounted for only 4.33% of total tourism flows in 2024 (table 1) it is one of the most diverse regions of the country encompassing cultural and natural tourism resources. Therefore, its modest market share reflects underutilized resources and opportunities for development rather than its limited tourism potential. The region possesses substantial tourism resources whose accessibility and sustainable development remain insufficiently explored.

Table 1: Regional distribution of tourism flows in North Macedonia (%)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100
Vardar Region	2.12	1.46	1.98	2.09	1.67	2.38
East Region	2.71	4.11	3.24	2.23	1.99	1.76
Southwest Region	37.63	45.77	40.03	39.02	39.03	40.35
Southeast Region	14.13	15.96	17.32	13.87	12.02	10.98
Pelagonia Region	6.15	7.63	5.99	5.21	4.88	4.33
Polog Region	3.54	6.64	5.04	4.16	3.70	3.25
Northeast Region	0.88	1.33	0.73	1.08	0.99	0.96
Skopje Region	32.84	17.10	25.66	32.36	35.71	35.98

Source: State Statistical Office: <https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/>

In terms of the structure of tourists, domestic tourists prevail in comparison to foreign tourists (table 2) with a tendency for growth in the volume of tourist flows in the region. The dynamics of growth are different in relation to the structure of domestic and foreign tourists. It is more pronounced among foreign tourists compared to domestic ones, although the number of tourists has not yet exceeded that of 2019, equally among domestic and foreign. Regarding the structure of foreign tourists who visited the region, the most represented are tourists from Greece, Turkey, Serbia, Germany, France, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, USA and Australia (State Statistical Office) representing a significant tourism market for the region.

Table 2: Number of tourists and nights spent in Pelagonia Region, 2019-2024

Year	Number of tourist		Nights spent	
2019	Total	72.833	Total	183.520
	Domestic	42.168	Domestic	103.066
	Foreign	30.665	Foreign	80.454
2020	Total	35.682	Total	88.463
	Domestic	31.145	Domestic	78.004
	Foreign	4.537	Foreign	10.459



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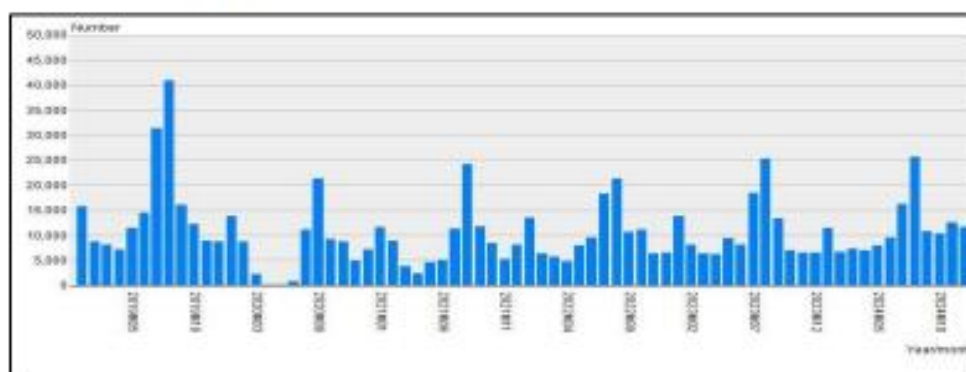
2021	Total	42.063	Total	105.214
	Domestic	32.585	Domestic	81.826
	Foreign	9.478	Foreign	23.388
2022	Total	50.506	Total	121.979
	Domestic	33.000	Domestic	74.128
	Foreign	17.506	Foreign	47.851
2023	Total	57.011	Total	128.972
	Domestic	36.022	Domestic	74.361
	Foreign	20.989	Foreign	54.611
2024	Total	54.624	Total	137.041
	Domestic	34.739	Domestic	75.937
	Foreign	19.885	Foreign	61.104

Source: State Statistical Office: <https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pwweb/en/MakStat/>

According to the ratio between domestic and foreign tourists and the structure of foreign tourists by country of origin Pelagonia Region is characterized by a diverse market visited by the following visitors' segments: regional tourists, expatriates, international travelers and domestic tourists.

The ratio between the registered number of tourists and nights spent within the period 2019-2024 shows that the average stay is 2,6 days corresponding to the average on national level for this period i.e. 3 days, and needs to be considered for future developmental activities. Monitoring the distribution of tourist flows in the region (graph 1) shows a pronounced seasonal nature in the analyzed period. The highest concentration is registered in the summer period, i.e. in the months of July - August. This situation indicates pronounced peaks that Pelagonia has as a tourist destination in this time period with an uneven time distribution of tourist flows.

Graph 1: Seasonality in Pelagonia Region 2019-2024



Source: State Statistical Office: <https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pwweb/en/MakStat/>



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The findings from conducted questionnaire survey, field research and interviews provide a comprehensive overview of the current situation of accessibility in Pelagonia Region in relation to legislation for accessibility, accessibility in institutions for culture, sports, and natural attractions, tourism and hospitality sector businesses, promotion, staff preparedness to provide accessible services and accessibility of public infrastructure.

The legislation related to accessibility is comprehensive, consistent and compatible with global and European legislation. It includes numerous regulations and acts that broadly or specifically relate to this area on national as well as regional level. They all include the postulates of equality, non-discrimination, respect and care for persons with disabilities. But yet, it should be noted that the six analyzed bylaws most specifically regulate this issue and can be applied to the greatest extent in the facilities in providing accessible tourist and tourism and hospitality services in the region (1) Rulebook on minimum technical conditions for performing tourism activities; 2) Rulebook on minimum technical conditions for performing catering activities; 3) Rulebook on conditions for categorization of facilities for performing catering activities; 4) Rulebook on the technical characteristics and dimensions of the movement path of persons with physical disabilities and persons with impaired vision; 5) Rulebook for ensuring unhindered access, movement (horizontal and vertical), residence and work of persons with disabilities to and in buildings for public and business purposes, buildings for housing in residential buildings, as well as buildings for residential and business purposes; 6) Rulebook on urban planning). Three of the above mentioned rulebooks (4), 5) and 6)) fully cover the most specific needs and requirements for accessibility of persons with disabilities.

The assessment of accessibility in institutions for culture, sports, and natural attractions shows that most of them have not implemented accessibility standards (80%) while 60% reported limited knowledge of existing legal requirements and accessibility guidelines. Physical accessibility is generally limited, some of the institutions have installed entrance ramps, but many of them do not comply with the technical standards, and others provide access partially. Particular attention was paid to the entrance area, communication conditions in the facilities, sanitary facilities, service counters, information billboards and orientation plans for movement. According to the rich experience gained through accessibility training within the Balkan Museum Network and practical work in the region, specifically in the Museum in Bitola, achieving accessibility in older buildings which are at the same time monuments of culture is a significant challenge. In such cases, the focus should be not only on physical access but also on enabling a multisensory experience (tactile exhibits, audio interpretation, sign language and Braille). There are few institutions in the region that have provided accessible services for people with disabilities or implemented legal obligations. A small percentage have cooperation with people with disabilities as well as with special schools. Mostly, these are recreational - educational programs dedicated not only to physical accessibility to the facility, but also to a program for visitors. The Museum in Bitola (2019) provides an experience for people with visual impairments, tactile experience (through tactile copies, tactile images and Braille) videos in sign language and audio narrations. It is the most accessible institution in the region and is a leading example of accessible cultural institution.

Being accessible destination on tourism market is a crucial characteristic for promotion. The review of promotional media, websites and facilities within the region reveals that no information is currently available regarding accessible services for people with disabilities. However, in the vision of the Pelagonia Planning Region (Program for the development of the Pelagonia planning region 2021-2026, 2021), it is clearly emphasized that the Pelagonia Region is a competitive and desirable destination for living and for tourism, with prospects for young people, good social inclusion, a clean environment and a European future. Very few institutions have an accessible website or publish on media or social networks about the activities for people with disabilities, most of them (46,7%) do not know how to implement a universal design. All respondents



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stated that they would like to be recognized as an accessible and socially responsible institution or business in the future. Undoubtedly, the implementation of universal design is of great importance, making it accessible to people with different types of disabilities.

More than a half of the tourism and hospitality sector businesses (52,4%) employ over 15 staff members and 38,1% have been operating for more than 15 years indicating relatively stable and well-established business capacities. Most of the capacities provide combination of accommodation with food and beverages. The most common are accommodation capacities with 10 to 20 rooms (50%). But three quarters (75%) of the capacities reported that they do not have adapted rooms for guests with disability. Although 66.7% stated that accessibility was taken into account when designing seating arrangements in their facilities and 70.7% reported appropriate conditions for people with disabilities and reduced mobility, yet they rarely serve guests with disabilities and reduced mobility. Travel agencies also reported that they have very limited experience in organizing tours for people with disabilities. According to the respondents the main barriers include the poor condition of cultural and natural attractions and inaccessible infrastructure. Furthermore, no Tourist Information Center operates in any of the municipalities.

Research results reveal the importance of the staff preparedness to provide accessible services. A small number of the employees (33%) in tourism businesses are aware of legal obligations regarding accessibility requirements, while only 6.7% of employees in cultural institutions have been trained to work with people with disabilities. Many respondents express a desire to invest in their facilities to make them more accessible to people with disabilities. A huge interest by managers and employees in public institutions is expressed for additional information regarding the implementation of laws and standards in order to enable accessibility (86.7%). A very important finding from the research is that most employed in the facilities express a desire for training, seminars, and accessibility training (76.2%), since most of them have never attended this type of training (66,7%). Such a high percentage of respondents who have not participated in any training and who want to be trained indicates the unpreparedness of the capacities with appropriately trained personnel for this issue.

Field research further demonstrated that public infrastructure is one of the major barriers for accessible tourism development. A general assessment of the streets, sidewalks, parks, public transport facilities and pedestrian infrastructure showed that they provide only limited accessibility. Numerous obstacles were identified: absence of audible pedestrian signals at traffic lights, uneven sidewalks, partial accessibility of bus stations, and limited accessibility to the platforms at the railway station in Bitola. The identified deficiencies contribute to the reduced accessibility of destinations with limiting the possibility for independent mobility for persons with disabilities.

Based on the conducted field research and findings detailed above, specific observations were conducted to evaluate the accessibility levels of each municipality in the Pelagonia Region. The individual assessment and detailed evaluations for the municipalities are systematically presented in Table 3.



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Table 3: **Municipalities' accessibility state of art**

Municipality	Main attractions	Accessibility attractions facilities	of and Mobility issues	Good examples	Challenges
Bitola	Archeological site Heraclea, Museum of Bitola , National park , Pelister, Theater, Cultural Center, Bezisten, Officers' House, Manaki Cinema, "Brother Manaki" International camera film festival	Heraclea, the Museum and Manaki are partially accessible (elevator, ramp, sensory programs, and wheelchair access to the auditorium). Walking paths are partially accessible in the national park area, most of facilities are inaccessible.	Compared to other municipalities Better opportunities although many public facilities and institutions have barriers	Museum of Bitola, Archeological site Heraclea, Manaki Cinema	Architectural barriers; lack of universal design; inaccessible accommodation;
Krushevo	"Tose Proeski" Memorial House; Memorial monument "Makedonium"; historical site "Mechkin Kamen"; Art Gallery "Nikola Martinovski" , recreational lake area, ski center, paragliding world cup	Most of the cultural attractions are inaccessible. Mechkin Kamen has good accessibility. Recreational lake area has partially accessible path. Accommodation and catering facilities are partially accessible	Configuration of the city and surrounding area (steep terrain, cobblestone streets).	"Tose Proeski" Memorial House is fully accessible	Architectural barriers; lack of universal design; inaccessible accommodation; limited transport infrastructure
Prilep	Museum of Prilep, Tobacco Museum, "Markovi Kuli" archeological site, International theater festival "Vojdan Chernodrinski	Most of attractions are inaccessible. Partial accessibility of the Museum of Prilep. Few facilities have accessibility for restaurants services,	Limited accessibility, steep and rocky terrain of "Markovi Kuli"	Partial access in the Museum in Prilep	Inaccessible cultural heritage sites, very limited accessible accommodation, need for adaptations; architectural

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		accommodation accessibility is very limited.			barriers; lack of universal design
Resen	"Tatarchevi" memorial House; The Saray, Lake Prespa	The Saray is partially accessible (elevator to the first level only); "Tatarchevi" has steep stairs; Prespa Lake area is largely inaccessible. Some accommodation and catering facilities have limited accessibility.	Very limited accessibility of the infrastructure	Partial access in Saray	Architectural barriers; inaccessible natural attractions and beaches; very limited accessible accommodation;
Demir Hisar	Memorial museum in Smilevo , Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Slepce, Ethno- village Sloeshtica, Private library in the village of Babino	Most of the attractions and facilities are inaccessible	Very limited accessibility of the infrastructure	Scenic environment	Architectural and terrain barriers; lack of accessible accommodation and catering facilities; very limited tourism services.
Dolneni, Krivogaštani, Mogila, Novaci	Mariovo area, the Stone Bridge near Zovic village known as the "Film Bridge" by famous director Milcho Manchevski in the movie "Dust"	Most of the attractions and facilities are inaccessible, no registered accommodation facilities; few catering facilities	Very limited accessibility of the infrastructure	Zovic village but with not satisfactory accessibility; Scenic environment,	Architectural and terrain barriers; lack of accessible accommodation and catering facilities; very limited tourism services

Source: authors' contribution.

Municipalities in the Pelagonia Region mostly differ in terms of accessibility conditions in institutions, attractions and facilities. They all face accessibility challenges, especially considering that in some of them this aspect is regulated only partially, not systemically with a clear vision and conceptual strategy. Municipal administration in most of the municipalities consider accessibility when adopt social programs on an annual basis, and within their framework calls are published for funding adaptation, construction or installation of infrastructure and equipment for physical accessibility of existing or creating new conditions for local population' housing premises. Other forms of incentives for encouraging and supporting business and public institutions are not identified.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings from the research show that accessibility in Pelagonia Region is not at a satisfactory level and is still perceived only as a way to enable physical accessibility by overcoming barriers rather than to be considered as an entire chain of provided institutional and functional conditions, services and products. Although the existing legislative framework quite adequately covers the international and national levels of implementation, the empirical evidence show a substantial gap between legislation and practice.

An important lesson emerging from this research is that accessible tourism should not be viewed as the responsibility of tourist businesses alone. Instead, it requires coordinated action among local governments, public institutions, tourism and hospitality sector businesses, transport providers, civil society organizations and organizations representing persons with disabilities. The research shows that even when some facilities provide accessibility conditions, the overall tourist experience remains limited because accessibility is not ensured across the destination as a whole. Therefore, accessibility should be considered as a continuous chain of services and experiences that will be available not only for tourists with disabilities in Pelagonia Region but also for its citizens with disabilities. A co-creative, synchronized and supportive approach is recommended in achieving this goal in Pelagonia Region. Such a systemic approach leads to directing the destinations to rethink their strategic orientation in future development as a challenge how to expand the dimensions of accessibility. The perception of accessibility in tourism needs to change from a fragmented approach, focused primarily on physical accessibility, to an integrated and inclusive approach that addresses the needs of all visitors. Similarly, the reactive practice of providing accessibility measures and removing barriers should be replaced by a strategic and proactive approach.

A key contribution of this research lies in its holistic assessment of destination accessibility because it examines accessibility across multiple interconnected dimensions, including tourism and hospitality businesses, cultural institutions, destination promotion, public infrastructure, staff competencies, digital communication, and stakeholder awareness. By combining questionnaire surveys with field research, interviews and institutional assessments, the research provides a comprehensive destination-level evaluation of accessible tourism. This integrated perspective offers a more realistic understanding of the barriers that visitors with disabilities encounter throughout their travel experience in Pelagonia Region.

The results also highlight that improving accessibility is not just an infrastructural issue but also adequate knowledge and organizational capacity. The high proportion of respondents expressing interest in accessibility training demonstrates a positive willingness among stakeholders to improve their services despite their limited knowledge of accessibility standards and universal design principles. This finding suggests that investments in education, professional training and stakeholder cooperation may generate substantial improvements even before major infrastructural investments are undertaken.

From a practical perspective, the research reveals that local governments should play a leading coordinating role by integrating accessibility into strategic tourism planning, urban development, transport planning, destination management and marketing. The research findings confirm that accessible tourism is not only a social responsibility but also a strategic opportunity for sustainable destination development strengthening its competitiveness on tourism market. Furthermore accessibility should not be viewed as a single attribute but a complex system that shapes overall tourist experience. As such, accessibility is a systemic challenge for the Pelagonia Region as a destination that requires coordinated actions across stakeholders. Therefore it is necessary to create opportunities for stakeholders to exchange views, experiences and good practices that

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will strengthen communication and cooperation, and rethink future tourism development models in a coordinated manner.

The findings also have broader relevance beyond Pelagonia Region. The integrated assessment framework from this research can serve as a model for evaluating destination accessibility in other regions of North Macedonia, the Western Balkans and comparable international destinations.

CONCLUSION

The study provides a comprehensive assessment of the current state of accessible tourism in the Pelagonia Region by examining tourism and hospitality businesses, cultural institutions, public infrastructure, destination promotion, stakeholder awareness, staff competencies and digital communication. The findings indicate that accessibility in the region is still predominantly perceived in terms of removing physical barriers and providing adaptations for people with disabilities while neglecting other dimensions of accessibility including sensory, digital, informational and cognitive. The findings also indicate that accessibility depends on stakeholder knowledge, organizational capacity and greater awareness of universal design and inclusive tourism principles.

The research confirms that accessible tourism should be approached as a destination-wide responsibility by all tourism stakeholders. This holistic approach provides a more comprehensive framework for evaluation of destination accessibility. It requires a shift from fragmented and reactive accessibility measures to integrated, strategic and collaborative approach.

Accessible tourism in Pelagonia Region should contribute to improving and providing a comprehensive tourist experience for all tourists regardless of their needs, and be promoted as a region's recognizable content. In this way, it will enable inclusion and affirmation of more sites and facilities, as well as various urban and rural entities in the tourism offer of the region.

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