

CHALLENGES FACING BULGARIAN CONGRESS TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Tourism sector has proved its role for the GDP of Bulgaria and its indicators are permanently traced out. Nowadays however global challenges are not missing that turn to be quite influential for the sector and practically threaten large part of businesses. There's dire need of radical changes in models of work and management, marketing and collaboration on the tourist market. The current paper reveals some potential directions that can turn congress tourism into a more effective specialized form of tourism in the country. Some challenges are outlined that concern: new principles of working out successful hotel congress product; image repositioning of Bulgaria on the congress tourism map; retargeting of potential tourist flows both in low- and high category hotels; bringing forward privately owned local accommodation places on the congress tourism map; using the potential of affirmed regional sites for the needs of congress tourism; cooperation between tourist entities in the region.

KEYWORDS: *accommodation places, business hotels, challenges, congress tourism, regions.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria is a tourist country with traditions in welcoming tourists from all over the world. Long years the tourism sector has been pointed to servicing mass tourism – mainly resort tourism (summer and winter), recreative and vacation tourism, tour groups. The reason is its effective contribution to the national economy and the already established models of work. In the same time however on strategic level the so-called specialized forms of tourism are slightly researched and thus their potential remains unused. Official figures show that foreign tourists visited Bulgaria in 2021 after-pandemic year are about 60% lower compared to 2019 pre-pandemic year (Ministry of tourism, 2022). The changed post-covid reality requires totally new approaches and methods of leading the national policy in the tourism sector because it has also led to new specifics in tourist demand (Varadzhakova, 2021).

Congress tourism in recent years is more frequently mentioned (24 chasa, 2022) as one of the perspective forms of tourism in Bulgaria. It is one of the five priority types in the country. The COVID pandemic from 2020 and the changed political, economic and social environment requires fostering some measures aiming development and raising competitiveness of congress tourism. For this purpose, specialized data is needed that is to set the foundations of a resilient detailed approach to congress tourism. The current paper represents an example for empiric research aiming to enlighten one of the main stakeholders in congress tourism that are simultaneously essential resource for its development – *business hotels and accommodation places with similar characteristics*. The **purpose** is to identify the current number of selected hotel type structures (that

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meet certain criteria) on the territory of Bulgaria, their conference halls, capacities (accommodation and congress) laying on the actual tourist division of the territory of the country – the nine tourist regions. Thus, the dimensions of the national congress tourism supply, on the basis of entities' resources is to be revealed. The **methodology** includes *integration activities* between a business organization in the congress and event tourism and an academic unit (Department of Tourism in a university). The resilience of this fundamental research consists of establishing consequent research process that will reveal perspective potentials of congress tourism in Bulgaria and will represent the country as a desired congress destination. The authors' **hypothesis** is that there is a real possibility for the congress tourism in Bulgaria to raise its significance in the national tourism sector by overcoming some challenges.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paragraph the accent is put not only on congress tourism as a phenomenon in the tourism sector that differs essentially from leisure tourism (which is the idea about the occurrence of tourism as whole). References are made to its specifics from the point of view of the territorial organization of business accommodation places as its main product representatives; to the location of entities; to the beneficial effect it brings to the destinations; to the organization of research processes etc.

Research from 2013 examines hotels in Bulgaria that have congress functions. About ten years ago it is still too early for the national tourism reality to distinguish "business" or "congress" hotels. The analysis is based on pre-selected selective criteria funding on data from specialized studies and expert assessments (Maneva & Marinov, 2013, p. 290) and shows that on the territory of the country there are four- and five-star hotels that offer facilities for holding congress events. *Their territorial distribution however is not uniform.* This leads to identification of only several territories where hotels suitable for congress purposes are concentrated (Maneva & Marinov, 2013, p. 294). According to Boychev (Boychev, 2018) congress tourism plays essential role in the development of local economies by contributing for their integrity on the international market. This makes us think that *diversifying the tourism portfolio of underdeveloped destinations with congress tourism product can be of great economic benefit for them.* Business tourism (of which congress tourism is an essential part) is fruitful for the developing and conversion economies (Ahmed, 2020, p. 282). Some destinations would sure have "cost-effective advantage" „and expand their economies" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 282). Congresses usually take place in *towns and cities*. This kind of destinations are most commonly used as namely they offer the supporting infrastructure that is required to host a congress (Davidson, 2018). However, Rob Davidson claims that there are rare *exceptions* to this general rule (Davidson, 2018) applicable to some kinds of events. According to Varadzhakova (2019) the congress tourism as part of MICE tourism is a system composed of four subsystems, that connects clients (companies), specific service provider companies, complex service provider companies (usually tour operators) and event venues (hotels and conference and event centers).

Ficarelli in a group of scientific researchers (2013, p. 8) consider that some of the main elements fostering the incoming congress tourism in the destination are *destination congress image promotion* and "*brand enforcement*". Yozcu and İçöz (2010, p. 109) treat congress tourism in the context of creative tourism and stand the position that they are of a favor to each other. They argue that congress hotels are in fact tourism products but they should *include the complexity of local heritage and creative activities* and thus to be marketed "in the form of a package" (Yozcui & İçözi, 2010, p. 109). Gregoric and company in 2015 make a research about congress tourism in Republic of Croatia. They claim that *there is a need for the development of the entire supporting industries that are part of this branch of tourism*: gastronomy, entertainment, tours, nightlife, shopping, sports. (Gregorić et al. 2016, p. 201). Another fact that deserves attention in their work is the sources they use to reach their results and conclusions. Information about congress tourism in a country

comparatively near as an economy to Bulgaria – Croatia, is available from several institutions including Central Bureau of Statistics, the Institute for Tourism, Zagreb Tourist Board, Tourist Board of Opatija, the Dubrovnik Tourist Board, Serbian Convention Bureau. This evidently shows that *processes in congress tourism are pretty well tracked and observed* on the researched national market.

In a conference paper a Bulgarian scientific group makes research in the field of culture tourism (Marinov et al., 2020) that can be used as a model for defining the congress reality in our country as well and which is very near to the principle used in the current research paper. By *filling the gap of primary information*, they reveal the territorial concentration of cultural heritage sites (Marinov et al. 2020, p. 149). The research gives the possibility *clusters of tourist demand* to be outlined together with some *hubs*.

References made by all the authors in the current paragraph are to be taken into consideration and are main accents of interest for the hereby presented study.

The methodology used includes an unconventional by its nature method mixing the methodical (follows specific methodology grounding on empirical data collection and classification) and the creative (uses its own unique logic and involves the capacity of tourism students in online environment) (Long, 2007, p.16). The aim of the research is relevant to the method used and concerns producing new knowledge and disseminating it to make it available to everyone (Walliman, 2011, p.65). Data is measured by using first nominal level i.e., separate categories of information are divided and then compared to each other and second - ordinal level (Walliman, 2011, p.75) i.e., the data is put into order and grouped according to separate criteria. The current research can be classified as mixed one – both typifying it as pure or applied. Pure, as it is being conducted to improve understanding of certain issue (Finn, M. et. al, 2000, p.3) (the number and territorial disposition of business hotels with congress facilities) and applied, as it is conducted for further analysis (Finn, M. et. al, 2000, p.3) and in order to be found paths for development of congress tourism in Bulgaria on the base of the new knowledge derived.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the pattern of work followed in the current paper can be captured several focuses but hereby we present one of them main focuses that are subject to be further developed - Provision of *primary information for the needs of congress tourism* concerning data for accommodation places possessing facilities for congress events. For its purposes a group of students of tourism, mentored by their lecturers amass empirical data that concerns business hotels on the territory of Bulgaria, hosting congress events. The research is set by a company that manages an online platform for event places. The final aim is to be issued a specialized edition containing texts with analyses and assessments of congress resources in business hotels in Bulgaria as well as to receive whole vision about the disposition and characteristics of congress-suitable accommodation places in the country. Four stages of the research process can be defined, presented on the data collection matrix below (Figure 1) each of them typical for its specifics.

- *Preparation of excel blanks for filling the empiric information (Preparatory stage)*

This process is runned by the lecturer – supervisor of the so called educational and practice-applied project and is consulted by the manager of the guaranter company. In order to be correctly compound the team should be quite aware of the criteria sought. The ones in the same time represent the *limitations* of the research.

- The research done for the purposes of the edition covers only the accommodation facilities that offer congress services. All other buildings for congress purposes - halls, multifunctional facilities for sports, culture and events, community centers, galleries, open spaces, etc. are not of interest to the present study;

- To be classified as congress the accommodation place should hold at least one conference hall with at least 25 seats. Some places without conference halls are not excluded (though they are scarce number) in case there are other premises used as conference hall but only if a specialized hotel product aiming congress tourists is identified; only if there are quality amenities satisfying the needs of the contemporary business guests in general;

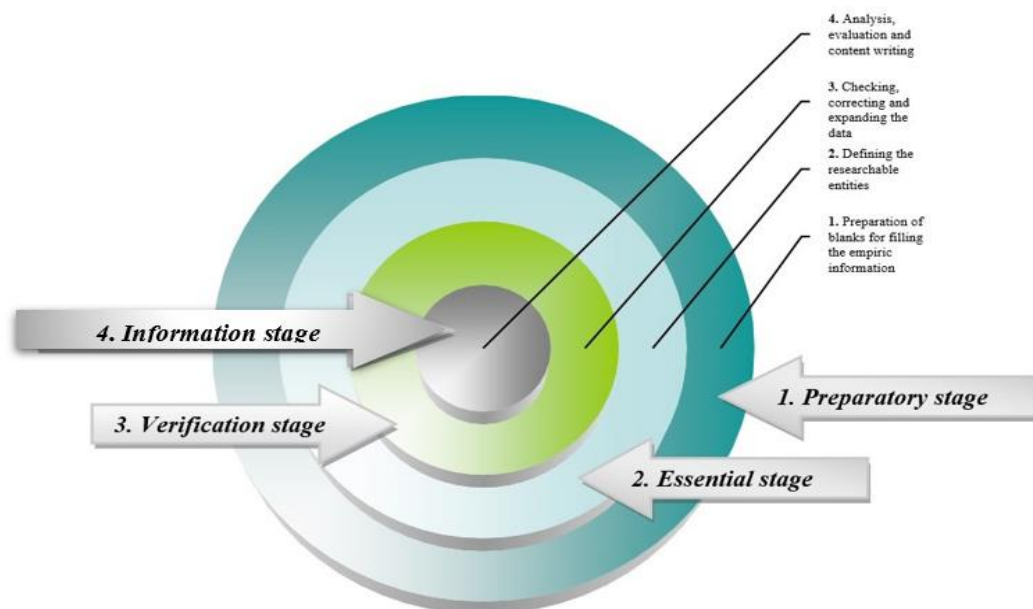


Figure 1. Data collection matrix

Source: The figure is created by the authors

- When grouping accommodation places according to their category, the institution (Ministry of tourism or Municipality) that gives the categorization is the leading factor. For example, in the group of four-star facilities, except *hotels*, there can persist also *apartment tourist complexes* and *holiday villages*, as they receive their category by the Ministry of Tourism (Tourism Law, 2013). Similarly, the group marked with "3*" does not include *family hotels* that are given three (and less) stars, as their category is given by the mayor of the municipality. They fall into the group marked "below 3*", together with 1* and 2* hotels, *motels*, *guest apartments*. Such practices are often applied by Bulgarian entrepreneurs. Some of them are labeling their properties as *three-star family hotels* instead of *three-star hotels*, thereby avoiding the higher law requirements. The difference in signage can be hardly perceived by guests;
- When carrying out research activities, the latest official district division published in the *Concept of tourist zoning of Bulgaria (CTZB)* is taken into consideration (Concept for tourism zoning of Bulgaria, 2015). According to it, the country is divided into nine tourist regions - Danube, Stara Planina, Sofia, Thrace, Rose Valley, Rila-Pirin, Rhodope, Varna Black Sea, Burgas Black Sea. Sofia Tourist District is not included in this research. We proceed from the assumption that falling among the priority specialized types, congress tourism (part of MICE tourism) in the capital district is well conceptualized and more developed;
- The data is garnered anteriorly by web pages of accommodation places. It is accepted that they are the most reliable connection between the suppliers of congress product and its consumers and are to present the most correct information. In cases when such is missing or is scarce, figures from National tourist register (<https://ntr.tourism.government.bg>, 2022) are used. This last

limitation stands in front of the current study as there’re no resources provided for direct contact or on-site visits. However, this gap can be filled by the toolkit of the Government and the Ministry and the practice of gathering congress tourism data may be turned into a resilient one. The period defined for this first stage of data collection is February – April 2021.

- *Defining the researchable entities (Essential stage)*

This process is performed by work groups of tourism students. In the research took part all together 19 students divided into two main teams. The first one is to define, according to the blanks supplied, and fill in the places of accommodation that fall into the group of congress hotels. Students work in pairs collecting data for one separate tourist region. Then the same region is treated by a second pair. Finally, the blanks are passed to the second work team which main task is to correct, verify and complete the gathered information.

The period defined for this second stage is April – May 2021.

- *Checking, correcting and expanding the data (Verification stage)*

This process is performed by work group of tourism students. The second team is making verification of the information together with some aesthetic design of the tables. Then the figures are united in one common excel file and the information is passed out to the manager of the guarantor company.

The period defined for this third stage is May – June 2021

- *Analyses, evaluation and content writing (Information stage)*

This process is performed by lecturers from the Tourism Department of “St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo. The aim on this stage is to be driven out essentially new data. *Turned into knowledge*, encompassing the congress tourism in Bulgaria, it may serve for educating novice employees in the events industry; to be in favor to public authorities – both municipal and national; to supply a conceptual overview to business entrepreneurs and students.

The period defined for this fourth stage is July 2021 – June 2022.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The processed data for each of the tourist regions (TR) separately together with some analyses and conclusions is to be published in the already mentioned above, specialized edition for congress tourism. Hereby are to be presented final figures outlining the whole picture on the national congress hotel product market.

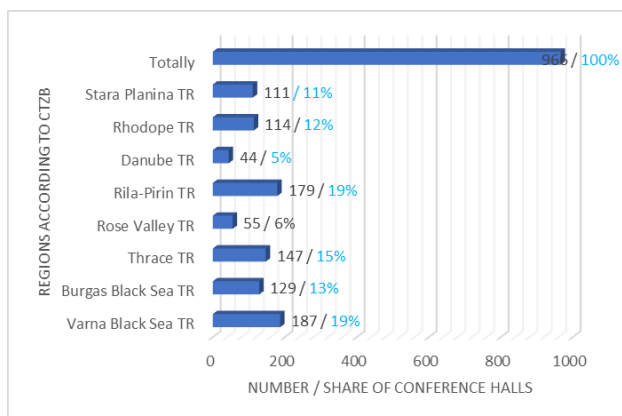


Figure 2. Conference halls by regions according to CTZB

Source: Authors’ research

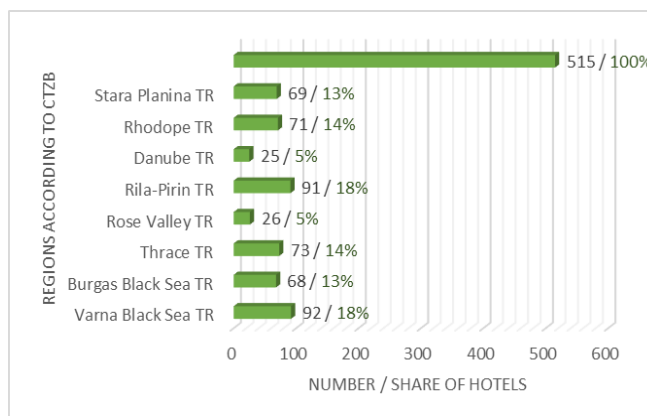


Figure 3. Accommodation places by regions according to CTZB

Source: Authors’ research

Figure 2 displays the number and share of conference halls in business hotels, pulled out as ones with congress facilities, for each TR. Four of them evidently prevail by percentage – Varna Black v

Sea TR and Rila-Pirin TR holding a share of 19%, Thrace TR – 15% and Burgas Black Sea TR – 13%.

Figure 3 illustrates nearly the same shares concerning the number of accommodation places, pulled out as researchable ones. Again the first two positions hold Varna Black Sea TR and Rila-Pirin TR with 18% share of accommodation places suitable for congress needs. Thrace TR and Rhodope TR are secondly placed with 14%.

Three of the regions that struggle for first positions in holding conference facilities are resort regions – either sea or winter ones. Thrace TR differs by these as it is centrally located region proposing city environment to its delegates.

Authors hold the position that namely in regions that have long traditions in offering tourist product it is reasonable specialized forms of tourism such as congress, to be further developed and improved. The long experience in tourism industry is a prerequisite and a sufficient base for strive to raising up quality both in superstructural and infrastructural conditions and in service and management. The data is not by chance considering the following two interesting facts. First - the oldest resort on the territory of Bulgaria, situated in Rila-Pirin TR is *Borovets* – a successor to the former Chamkoriya (<https://www.borovets-bg.com/page/info/borovets/istoriya>, 2016) dates back to 1942 year. Secondly – the city of Plovdiv, considered as one of the *hubs of the national congress tourism*, situated on the territory of Thrace TR, is the home of the first exhibition in Bulgaria - agricultural-industrial one as early as 1892 year. Today the building and facilities of *International Fair Plovdiv* meets yearly averagely 250 000 visitors and delegates from Europe and all over the world and more than 350 events of a various kind.

So, these results can naturally set the first two challenges in front of the congress tourism in Bulgaria:

Ch 1: Bulgarian sea and winter resort destinations together with the south facing Thrace TR have the power to strategically lay out successful congress hotel product and formulate principles of its functioning on the market. Cooperation between public authorities, local tourism businesses and a research/educational organization, in an appropriate legal form may turn into a powerful tool.

Ch 2: The same regions can image reposition Bulgaria on the world congress tourism map turning it into an attractive congress destination.

The total number of accommodation places in the research is 515. Fig. 4 displays the shares of the prevailing categories of entities that meet congress participants. Although the local picture in the separate regions can be quite different the below graphic shows that on national basis the two groups with the most palpable presence accommodation congress places with 4 and under 3 stars.

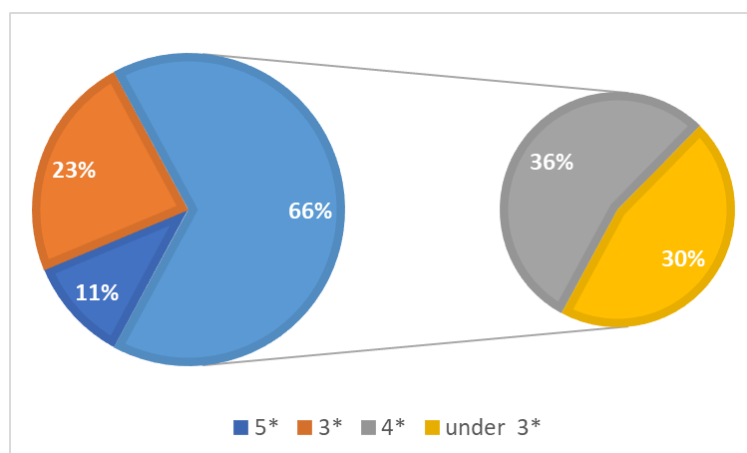


Figure 4. Representative groups of accommodation places for congress tourism by category

Source: Authors' research

Even more detailly – 66% of the total market of congress hotels are divided between four-star hotels and low-category accommodation places in the country. The greatest share anyway belongs to the group of first ones – 36% versus 30% for the second group.

This statistic holds its reasonable explanation. Via the course of the researches and content writing of the eight separate materials the research team comes to the conclusion that in Bulgarian hospitality reality namely *four-star hotels are those that offer the full package and most quality congress services*. Bulgarian entrepreneurs after the year 2000 commenced to build and equip the so-called *full-service hotels* that practically attract all kinds of business tourist. The era of new hospitality is nascent together with the tangible increase in tourists visiting the hotels for the purpose of participating in a business event. This explains the tactile presence of the four-star hotels in our statistics.

What about the low-category group of accommodation places? According to data, supplied by National Statistical Institute (<https://nsi.bg>, 2020) on Bulgarian market of hospitality and restaurant business about 90% are micro enterprises (holding employees up to 10 people) and more than 99% are small and middle enterprises. Under 1% are businesses that keep over 250 employees. Hotel properties classified under 3* can fall in the second group but it is even more possible to be positioned in the first one – micro enterprises (there isn't available statistics about this). That's why it is not difficult a group of micro, middle and small low-category, privately owned accommodation places to be used as places for business and congress events. So another challenge is to be outlined:

Ch 3: High category four-star hotels as well as low-category “under 3*” accommodation places in Bulgaria can put congress tourists among their priority target segments and thus form specialized hospitality product.

What does the regional picture show if we keep on exploring in-and-out this last tendency? (Fig. 5)

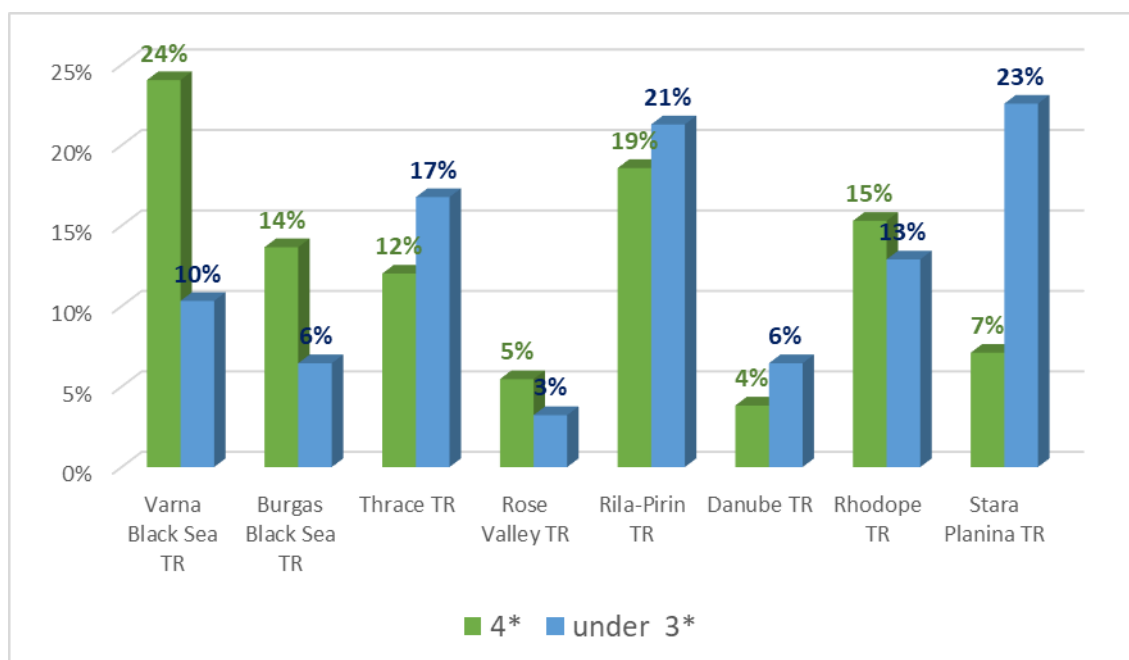


Figure 5. Regional shares of the two prevailing category groups of congress accommodation places

Source: Authors' research

Two tendencies can be outlined:

First: 4* congress hotels take the biggest market share in the Varna Black Sea TR

Second: Low-category accommodation places take the biggest market share in Stara Planina TR

The first one can be explained with the large number of full-service upscale entities together with timeshare properties available in the region. All of them share facilities for group business clients (the question is touched upon in the specialized edition for congress tourism). Stara Planina is a very interesting region with the most elongated territory. More than 30% of the properties here are of the so called “Renaissance type” – mostly *family-owned* properties, representatives of the typical lifestyle and traditions of the sites. So, the above statistic is not surprising. For the sake of formulating the fourth evident challenge the same is to sound like this:

Ch 4: Both four-star and low-category, privately owned, with unique local product accommodation places can be promoted as proper places in Bulgaria to hold congress events.

Speaking about potential we cannot miss to pay attention to those regions that evidently fall behind the others. There can be distinguished two that have quite insignificant part in the tourism sector of the country – Rose valley TR and Danube TR. We can see on fig. 6 and fig. 7 the shares represented by capacities – of conference hall seats and accommodation (beds).

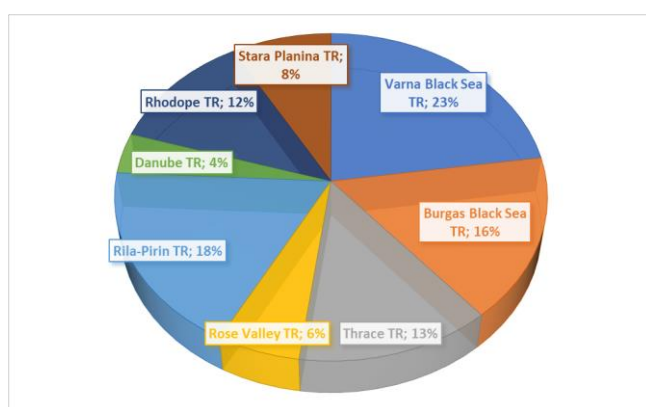


Figure 6. Shares of conference halls seats by region

Source: Authors' research

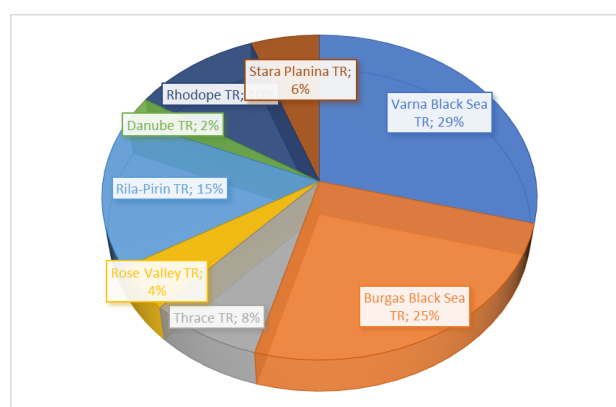


Figure 7. Shares of accommodation beds by region

Source: Authors' research

The data shows that Danube TR holds only 4% from the capacity of the seats in conference halls and only 2% from the one of hotel beds in Bulgaria. The Rose valley holds 6% of the conference halls capacity and 4% of the bed's capacity. Obviously, it can be hardly spoken about developed and well-presented congress hotel product. Both of the regions however hold typical and it can be even said exotic tourist resource. For Danube it is the river Danube that passes through some of the settlements here. *This is the only region in Bulgaria developing river tourism.* The Rose valley TR is famous for its festival – *the Rose festival* organized once a year but anyway acquired the meaning of a local (let's not say even national) brand. Both regions already have affirmed tourist resources that play the role of image brands and can definitely foster the attractiveness of the congress tourism as well.

Ch 5: Congress tourism can be fostered in the lowest developed tourist regions in case accommodation places use the potential of the affirmed regional image (and symbols, such as Danube and roses) and place it in their ad messages to organized business tourist.

Restaurant business, food and beverage together with the catering services are inseparable part of the congress tourism. Eating at many events is nothing more than a basic service, but it should be an *experience*” (Getz, 2007, p. 230). Several Spanish researchers (Carral, E. et al., 2020) outline a tendency showing that gastronomic activities are quite intensive at a destination and they are focused on the consumption of *specific, local traditional food*. In the same time some food-related *cultural and social aspects* outweigh the food quality for their relative importance to travelers. (Erkmen, 2019). So researching restaurants and food supply at a destination is just as important as

researching hotels' supply. In recent years restaurant service in Bulgaria managed to answer consumers' expectations noticeably in larger sizes than the hospitality service and enterprises as a whole. It is not aduuous to cognise the several-time changing style and conceptions of some emblematic (but not only) eating places especially in middle and big city centres. For the sake of this research are scoped averagely 13% of all the registered eating places in Bulgaria (<https://regtourist.uslugi.io/public-register>, 2022). About 70% of them belong to the included accommodation places. The rest are independent entities. The process of reserching them through internet is encompassing and sophisticated. However, it is visible that the collaboration between privately owned hotels and restaurants is not a common practice and there is slight relation between the hotel congress product and restaurants in the destination. The researchers of this paper mind that as rich the congress offer is as more requests for proposals the owners will receive because of the raised customer's experience. A group of Bulgarian authors suggest clusterization as a proper method (Popova, et al., 2019). The next challenge in front of the national congress tourism can be the following:

Ch 6: Local owners of hotel and restaurant business should try some forms of cooperation and integration in order to make their end tourist product more attractive to congress tourists.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Tourism sector in Bulgaria has proved its role for the economic and is already defined politically as one of the priority industries. For many regions and destinations, it turns into a successful alternative one in conjuncture of missing production enterprises. The long-imposed image of a tourist country, the existence of world well-known vacation destinations, together with the changed reality after the COVID pandemic as well as some other current force majeure circumstances, impose the necessity to develop specialized forms of tourism and what's more – searching for the most low-elastic ones. Congress tourism has proved its profile as such.

The above presented research supports the main thesis of the authors about the unrevealed potential of congress tourism in Bulgaria. Tourist regions with higher specialization have come out, together with the more distinct and suppliable congress hospitality product. Namely in them more active policy is necessary in order congress tourism to be turned into a priority. All this is possible after the local business is convinced of the sustainable benefits of congress tourism and organized events. A number of challenges still faces the stakeholders. The above presented challenges are in fact ones facing the tourism business – hospitality, restaurant and event from one side, and from another - the government and public authorities. A look at foreign practices in congress tourism shows that a working format leading this niche ahead is establishing a kind of non-profit organization, usually associations, to defend interests of its members, to provide possibilities for sharing and generating knowledge in this field and to strategically position congress tourism as one of the successfully working tourism forms. Future researches are to show if Bulgarian tourist market is already mature enough for such structure.

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