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Desk Research Report - Bulgaria

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Table of contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Project objectives

1.2 Project Target group

2. National Report

2.1 The objectives of the Report

2.2 The methodology

2.3 The results

2.4 Conclusion

3. References



1. Introduction

On the grounds of Heritage Tourism acting as a fundamental part of cultural heritage and sustainable tourism making up almost 40% of tourism revenues globally, a wide list of digital initiatives has been taken during the last few years. In particular, advanced technologies (such as 360o photo, Augmented Reality, 3D scanning, etc.) in conjunction with hybrid skills (i.e., technical and non-technical) of businesses' digital transformation have been providing endless possibilities in the field of cultural tourism towards enriching tourists experiences based on cultural heritage. Indeed, there are several examples revealing that heritage tourism is increasingly moving towards a new digital era. However, the COVID-19 crisis has a massive impact on the tourism-related cultural sector, having shone a light both on the challenges endured by people working in the sector and on how cultural life is weakened by the global lockdown (Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends, 2020). In fact, the pandemic crisis jeopardizes the most crucial parts of cultural tourism (UNESCO, 2020). With almost 13% of museums being under the threat of never re-opening, more than 80% of UNESCO World Heritage properties being locked and most people working on tourism-related jobs being currently unemployed, the need to move towards digitization becomes even more urgent. To that end, new skills are being required among the professional profiles of culture and tourism. It is thus rational for young people seeking job opportunities in the heritage tourism sector to be more equipped with digital competences to form a more resilient tourism workforce (UNWTO, 2020).

1.1 Project Objectives

The project aims at empowering young people in promoting Heritage Tourism resources through the development of their own skills in Digital Design for the digital transformation of heritage tourism. Moving towards a totally new era in cultural tourism that integrates the concept of digital heritage tourism into cultural life, young job seekers should be equipped with competences that allow them to differentiate themselves among a close and yet competitive industry. After the project completion, participants will be able to put their creativity into action being in position to map out digital content that promotes local culture and manage the tones of resources that cultural life offers (museum exhibits, local products, places to visit, local food, etc.) in an intuitive manner. Recent research has shown that the tourism sector has been turning into digitalised solutions towards the establishment of Smart Tourism. The objective is to lead creativity and innovation in tourism, while contributing to new destination configurations (Dredge, et. Al., 2018). In fact, the Digital Heritage Tourist definition has recently appeared under



the scope of tourists visiting a place (museum, location, etc.) virtually instead of physically, having the entire tourist experience in a digital manner.

However, after COVID-19 outbreak, global tourism is brought to a standstill, with millions of people looking for cultural experiences from their homes and with professionals being rather unprepared for the lockdown and with their hands tied in the context of a travel-less world. On the other hand, youth play a significant role in all action plans to limit the impact of the crisis, while they are among the most vulnerable groups being the main victims of the aftereffect of the pandemic (Rojo, 2020). Therefore, with youth unemployment being increased by 0.8% within the first month of the crisis (March-April 2020) and with Heritage Tourism being at stake and turning to digital solutions to survive, there is an urgent to equip young people with digital competences in order to overcome unemployment and support heritage sustainable development.

1.2 Project Target group

The main target groups of this project are:

- Young adults that already have working experience in heritage tourism or are interested in promoting heritage tourism
- Young adults that are interested in improving their digital competences
- Youth workers
- Youth training organizations
- Tourism organizations
- Organisations related to the creative/cultural industry
- NGOs or other organizations/authorities taking initiatives towards sustainable development
- Digital designers/Digital design/e-Learning companies
- Policy makers

2. National Report

National Reports are the official documents by which countries report information and research data useful to the development and delivery of a project. Used collectively, National Reports can draw the picture of the overall context of the project.

2.1 The objectives of the Report

The main objective of the reporting phase of the project is to cumulate research data and useful information about the partners' countries, in order to draw the picture of the overall context of the project. This phase can help making clear the general objectives



of the project and what are the needs, trends, and issues to be considered during the whole project development.

In this case, the aspects to be considered during the research phase, that will then be used as research questions for the national report writing, are: the unemployment statistics in the partners countries in the tourism sector; the number of people who have actually conducted tourism and cultural heritage studies in the country; data of employed people in the tourism and cultural heritage sector; what study programmes the country offers in the tourism sector; what issues concern this field nowadays and the people involved in it; how the Covid context has affected the tourism sector and the people involved.

2.2 The methodology

The brief research was prepared using a theoretical and analytical approach, observation, and collection of information online and from secondary sources, statistical data processing and a brief survey conducted among representatives of education institutions, tourist companies and others active in the tourism sector in Bulgaria.

From the National sources were extracted and summarised data from: National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria 2014-2030 (updated version), World Tourism Trends, (Ministry of Tourism, 2019), Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria - 2014-2020, Centres for professional education register. National agency for vocational education and training, National agency for vocational education and training, National Statistical Institute, etc.

2.3 The results (questions)

1. What are the main areas that tourism-related training programmes/curricula that your country focus on?

The increase in the quality in opposition to quantity of the Higher Education and its synchronization with the European educational standards has been indicated as a challenge in the Strategy for the Development of the Higher Education 2014-2020¹, where the condition of Higher Education has been defined as insufficiently modernized and not compliant with the needs of the labour market. Geographical and social barriers, including also the strong ethnical shaping of small settlements, are hampering the training of young people, which justifies the necessity of more flexible, effective, and cheap training methods. In comparison with the common European development, the digital and distant training forms remain complementary and lagging and the lifelong learning opportunities are insufficient, not diverse enough and unpopular.

¹ Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria - 2014-2020. Portal for public consultations. Electronic resource, available at: <http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?id=962>

Currently tourism in Bulgaria is being taught in 58 institutions at secondary school level and 25 at university level, with more than 540 centres for vocational education issuing diplomas for a profession or part of a profession in various tourism subjects.² Each year between 2000 and 2200 students receive university degree in the subject "Sports, tourism and hospitality".³ For the past 9 years, since statistics are available, 11 610 persons have received a professional qualification and another 21 934 – are qualified for part of a profession in the Centres for vocational education in the fields of "Hotels, restaurant and catering" and "Travel, tourism and leisure."⁴

The main areas of the tourism-related training programmes are:

Area 1: Geography of tourism

Area 2: Tourism Economics/Management

Area 3: Management of a particular type of tourism (rural, cultural, etc.)

Area 4: Management of a separate activity typical for tourism (hotel management, hospitality management)

Area 5: Marketing of tourism

2. Are there any training programmes that promote digital upskilling in the Tourism sector in your country? If so, please describe (title, provider, objectives, focus areas).

According to the sectoral competency model developed by the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce (Competence Assessment Information System, 2015), technical competencies (language and digital) are part of the three main subsectors in tourism - hotels, restaurants, tour operators and agencies. In practice, however, as the content analysis of the curricula in Tourism in the higher schools in the country showed, a significant part of these digital competencies is not acquired through formal training and education. The modern requirements of the labor market in terms of digital competencies are related to such areas as digital marketing strategies, online reputation and use of social media, m-tourism (mobile) - related to the use of smart phones and user experiences. Specific digital competences are related to the skills to work and service the changing demand - in terms of how to plan, reflect, review (visibility) in multiple digital platforms (e.g., EU Directive 2015/2302). The main directions for increasing the digital competencies of key importance for the trainees in the professional field "Tourism" in the future will be related to:

² Centres for professional education register. National agency for vocational education and training. Online resource. Available at: <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/registar-na-tsentrovete-za-profesiona/>

³ National Statistical Institute. Number of graduates per educational degree and fields. Official website, available at: <http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3405/>

⁴ National agency for vocational education and training. Statistics of educated. Online resource, available at: <https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/statistika-na-obuchenite-litsa/>



- Management of the processes of sharing, awareness and commitment, incl. in social networks;
- Maintenance, creation, and management of a database for information, transparency, and awareness in the Internet space and on the spot in the tourist sites;
- Personalization of the service, care and experience of the tourists, incl. use, development and application of mobile apps, the so-called SMART (or smart) travel and tourism; connecting users (network), sharing - location, social networks, experience, and experience. Creating and maintaining interactivity through augmented reality, including game elements (gamification) to attract interest, attention and generate added value to the experience;
- Internet marketing in its two main areas: at the destination level and the activities of destination management organizations (linking to the destination, GIS and other positioning systems) and application of marketing tools in different communication environments (digital), change in distribution channels , sales and advertising;
- Business Intelligence Competencies, which include “the ability of an organization to make competitive strategic decisions based on the analytical processing of large amounts of information” (Chaudhuri S., Dayal U., Narasayya V. 2011).

Table 1: Programmes that promote digital upskilling in the Tourism sector*

**The list is non-exhaustive*

Title	Provider	Objectives	Focus areas
Digital Management in Tourism	Sofia University Source: https://www.uni-sofia.bg	<u>Goal of the program:</u> To create highly qualified management staff and experts, mastering modern forms, methods, and tools for management in the field of tourism in a rapidly	Students acquire basic professional competencies for creating competitive, innovative products and digital experiences in the field of tourism and leisure management. Such are the competencies related to the management of tourism activities in a digital environment, the implementation of strategic and digital marketing strategies; use, improvement and adaptation of new information technologies, systems, and applications for management of various activities in tourism (such as CRM and GIS).



		<p>changing technological environment. The program aims to position itself as innovative, modern, and related to the requirements of the labor market, the rapid digitalization and transformation in the tourism sector. The focus of the program is on training specialists in digital management in tourism, who have the competencies, skills, and knowledge to work in a dynamically changing business and digital market environment.</p>	<p>Students form practical and applied skills in the field of: organization and management of tourism at different spatial and corporate levels; creation of innovative digital solutions in the field of tourism management to various structures of the state administration, private business and non-governmental organizations; work with management information systems, development, and implementation of digital marketing strategies necessary for modern information support of the business, information provision for the dynamics of the environment, tracking the behavior of consumers and competitors. By applying a systematic approach, graduates will be able to create integrated services and complex products in the field of tourism.</p>
<p>Tourism and Digital Transformations</p>	<p>International Business School, Sofia</p>	<p><u>Goal of the program:</u> To create highly qualified management staff and</p>	<p>In this academic program the necessary combination of economic and social sciences in the perspective of tourism services and tourism development will be found. It has</p>





	<p>Source: https://ibsedu.bg</p>	<p>experts, mastering modern forms, methods, and tools for management in the field of tourism in a rapidly changing technological environment.</p>	<p>a strong practical focus on acquiring knowledge and skills for innovative approaches to starting, managing, and developing a business in the field of tourism. The educational content is in line with modern trends for the introduction of innovative business models under the influence of digitalization and digital transformation. During the training the necessary entrepreneurial skills, general management and analytical competencies, skills for time management and organization will be acquired. The program focuses on foreign language training, digital skills, generation and evaluation of innovative business ideas, effective business communication. The program also includes the opportunity to choose and profile in three specializations - management of tour operator and travel agency activities, hotel management and restaurant management.</p> <p>This program gives the opportunity to enter professions in which the key is to understand global business processes - tourism advisors on local or national level, managers of cultural and natural heritage centers, international airlines, airports, hotels, owners of successful businesses.</p> <p>All types of digital technologies are studied - chatbots, robots,</p>
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			virtual / augmented / mixed reality, kiosks, hotel software, etc. In 2021 the discipline won the Smartourism.bg award.
Digital Technologies in Tourism	University of Economics - Varna Source: https://www.ue-varna.bg/	<u>Goal of the discipline:</u> It aims to build theoretical knowledge and to form practical abilities among the students in the field of digital technologies that find application in the tourism.	It is a free discipline within the programme "Tourism and Leisure Management".

Vocational digital trainings, such as those approved in the list of the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training and created by it, cannot be found. There are several training centers that offer ICT training, ranging from programming to software engineering, coding, etc., but they are specifically designed as short-term training and usually serve the needs of a particular company or enterprise (in most cases foreign IT companies operating on the territory of Bulgaria and urgently in need of IT specialists). The positive side of these trainings is that they are very practically oriented, and the negative side is that most of them are not officially recognized as professional trainings and are not on the VET list. The Center for Digital Innovations was founded several years ago (as part of the Bulgarian Chamber of Industry) with the main purpose to serve as a remote center, providing training, consulting, and support to companies in the process of digitalization. However, there is no information on whether this center is still operational.

3. What are the main problems of the tourism sector in your country? (If any)

Some of the main problems that the tourism in Bulgaria is facing, are:

- The desire of the owners to control the processes, their unwillingness to delegate the management to the managers, the unwillingness of the owners to cooperate to improve the conditions in the destination, as well as the new market environment and the adaptation to it.
- Lack of qualifications and entrepreneurial experience among owners, businesspeople, and locals is also a problem for alternative tourism.

The way out of overcoming the shortage of employees in the tourism sector is the automation and digitalization of it. This is possible and it can be seen in several hotels in Bulgaria. Three of them have already introduced robots as part of their work, and two of these hotels are in the Golden Sands resort (the third is in Sofia). A good example is one of the Varna hostels, which has been working contactless with its clients for several years.

According to the Concept for digital transformation of the Bulgarian industry, Bulgaria is expected to be recognized as a **regional centre of the digital economy** through the implementation of products, technologies, business models and processes from Industry 4.0. by 2030. The aim is to reach the average European level of the DESI index. In general, Bulgarian companies lag the average performance of the rest of the EU in terms of digital progress, mainly due to human resource skills and lack of financial resources. Very few companies have already implemented or are in the process of implementing or planning to implement digital technologies. There is no unequivocal opinion as to which industry will be the pioneers in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In addition to experts, the automated industry will play a leading role in digitalization. This will reduce production costs, connect with the management of inventory through modern transfer of information about the need for production. Compared to the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, the sectors that will continue to be most affected by digitalization are mechanical engineering, electrical industry, transport, energy industry. According to a survey conducted by the German-Bulgarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce in 2016 among 59 Bulgarian, German, and other foreign companies, more than 80% of respondents rate the role of digitalization in their company as "decisive" or "very significant". Regarding the current level of digitalization, more than half of the respondents answered that it is above average. Nearly 90% of companies within three years will have already taken steps to digitize the processes, and 64% say they have a department or employee responsible for this. Over 70% of respondents in the next five years will invest up to 3% of their turnover.



4. Do young people in the tourism sector face any challenges or obstacles when looking for a job?

According to a research conducted by the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce⁵, the employment by main sectors in tourism is, as follows:

- Restaurants - 39%
- Drinking establishments - 26%
- Hospitality - 22%
- TO and TA - 6%
- Other sectors (including tourist attractions) - 7%

There is one main obstacle defined by the tourism industry: lack of necessary practical skills and knowledge of graduating students in tourism. But the real definition of the problem is that there is a lack of competence-oriented educational programmes for Tourism "in higher educational institutions".

One way to deal with this problem is a legal regulation of the partnership between the main subjects (university, tourism business, government), through appropriate mechanisms. There should be a monitoring system and indicators for measuring changes in demand, new technologies, innovations, trends, new professions, respectively knowledge and skills.

The young people also find it hard to work for low salaries and redirect themselves in other sectors of the economy.

The Covid-19 situation reduced the supply of labour in tourism.

5. What has been the response of the tourism sector in your country to the Covid-19 travel restrictions?

Although Bulgaria has introduced one of the most liberal regimes for entering the country, opening "green corridors" without tests for foreigners with vaccination certificates, including, for example, the Russian Sputnik vaccine, as well as people who have had the coronavirus in the last six months, no effect. There are several factors for this: Bulgaria is still not in the safest areas for tourism based on morbidity or vaccination level, and 2021 has already emerged as the year of island tourism, in which the country has nothing to offer.

At the same time, there are still large restrictions on Bulgaria's main tourist exporting markets, as most of them have not yet lifted their restrictions at home. Germany is going

⁵ Project of the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, № BG051PO001-2.1.06, 2015

through one of the most serious lockdowns. The second most important market for Bulgaria in recent years - the Polish, opened its restaurants only on May 14, and hotels a little earlier. In many places, vaccination is running slower than expected and tourists will not have vaccination certificates, so they will play a significant role for the 2022 season.

Charter flights to Bulgaria from Germany, the country's largest market, were canceled by June 30. Bulgaria has been identified as a high-risk country, along with many others by the German Robert Koch Institute, due to the high number of infected, with 50 infected per 100,000 people being considered a critical number.

The other indicator is the number of vaccinated, which is also lagging, and the third is whether there are new strains of the virus registered in the country.

The situation with the key eastern market - Russia - is completely unclear. At this stage, there have been no canceled flights to Bulgaria since June, but Russia itself has not given any signs under what conditions its citizens will travel abroad.

According to tour operators, Bulgaria could separate the morbidity statistics for its tourist areas from the general statistics for the country and thus be more attractive from the point of view of security.

The industry has managed to arrange for tourism staff to be vaccinated as a matter of priority and vaccinations are currently underway. However, little is also known about these processes, as the country fails to advertise itself as a safe destination. That is why the main tourism organizations have called for serious efforts in the field of diplomacy.

6. What has been the response of the tourism sector in your country to the Covid-19 unemployment?

The Government and the Ministry of Tourism offer programs that try to help the most affected sectors of the economy, regarding the employment:

- New employment package "Employment x 3" - Under the Operational Program "Human Resources Development" a new procedure "Employment for you" has been launched, aimed at the economic operators in the sectors - "Hotel and restaurant business" and "Tour operator activity". The main objective of the measure is to provide support for the reintegration of the unemployed who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic and the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The procedure allows for the direct provision of grants until the end of 2020, in the total amount of up to BGN 160 million, for which a specific beneficiary is the Employment Agency.

- PROJECT BG05M9OP001-1.104-001 "SHORT-TERM SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC" - The aim of the project is to provide support



to enterprises and self-insured persons whose economic activity is directly affected by the adverse impact of the state of emergency imposed in the country, declared by a decision of the National Assembly on March 13, 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19. In order to maintain the employment of employees in enterprises engaged in economic activities in the relevant sectors - hotels and restaurants, transport and tourism, specifically specified in the Annex to RMS № 429/2020 (amended and supplemented by RMS 982/2020 d.), The project will support employers, self-insured persons and municipal enterprises established under Art. 52 of the APA by providing compensation for part of the salary and due tax and social security contributions at the expense of the insurer and the insured person in the amount of BGN 290. The employment of the supported workers and employees, as well as the activities of self-insured persons should be reserved for the entire period of payment of the compensation, as well as for an additional period equal to half of the period for which the compensations have been paid. Applications for payment of compensations will be accepted until 31.05.2021 or until the available financial resources are spent.

Project BG16RFOP002-2.010-0002 "Increasing the capacity of SMEs in the tourism sector by supporting the establishment and operation of Tourism Management Organizations" - The total value of the public procurement is BGN 3 million with VAT, and its purpose is to help tour guides and mountain guides in the country to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and promote domestic tourism. In addition, the inclusion of guides and their work in the online space will accelerate the process of digitalization and expansion of the range of services provided by them, which is fully consistent with the planned measures to accelerate digitalization in the tourism sector.

One of the problems is because large number of employees in the sector worked in the informal sector or the grey economy before the pandemic, i.e. either they had no contracts or received a minimum wage (their basic income came from bonuses or tips). In this way, they were not actually able to take advantage from any benefits of the upper programs (neither the companies themselves nor the employees). Workers are struggling to survive or simply try to change their field of employment. Of course, the on-going situation with the virus is a major problem because it does not give any guarantees to the owners or to the employees that there will not be any new waves or lockdowns.

19,2% of the people who started working in May, 2021 are in the manufacturing sector, 15,1% in the hospitality industry, 14,5% in trading, 5,7% in construction, etc. The biggest number of free positions in the economy is in manufacturing (24,3%), hospitality industry (22%), trading (11,4%), etc.

The positive forecast is that when the Covid situation becomes stable, the negative level of unemployment will normalize and the contractual force will already be on the side of the workers, because the supply of jobs is more than the demand for them, at least for



now. Many people reoriented themselves and left tourism, so to bring them back, there should be way better conditions.

7. What is the level of digital knowledge in your country among young people (18-29)? Which digital tools do they use the most and for what purposes?

A study conducted by ESTAT on behalf of UNICEF Bulgaria shows that children and young people do not think they are addicted to digital media. 3/4 of the young people in Bulgaria surf social networks and communicate through online applications on a daily basis, but most find what is happening in the real world more important and exciting. This is shown by the results of a national survey, which focuses on media habits and practices, popular personalities on the Web, as well as the extent to which digital technologies help them to express themselves and achieve individual and community goals.

89% of young people own some kind of a smartphone. They use them mainly for fun, chatting, communicating with friends. This is not the case with laptops and desktops - ie devices that allow educational process, especially in distance learning, only 34% have such technology. 14% have their own iPad or other form of such a device. The connection to the Internet is great, the presence in social networks is significant, but when we talk about quality feedback when it comes to the educational process, the situation is worrying. Most of the Bulgarian youth do not have the necessary technological tools through which to be included in such a quality process. "

Traditional forms of media awareness, such as newspapers and magazines, have virtually no space in young people's lives.

69% prefer Facebook, although the trends around the world are towards Instagram, Tik Tok and so on. 22% use Instagram, and only 7% - Tik Tok. Diverse trends depend on the age group and interests. The most preferred format for young people is short videos. On Instagram, photo content is more popular, while Tik Tok stands out with the generation of trends - popular trends. As adulthood matures and the pursuit of emancipation progresses, a search begins for channels in which young people, not adults, reside. "

One in four respondents actively follows "influencers", while every second participant said that they follow "vloggers" on the Web. The study concludes that children and young people would make sense of the opinions shared by "influencers" and other celebrities, but would not aim to look, think or act completely like them. There is a belief that they can pursue and achieve their own goals without following role models.



As conclusion, there is low level of digital literacy in the original sense of the word, mainly surfing, use of digital resources for information. Ignorance to create your own content (maybe because of the young age).

8. Please look for examples (practices, projects, tools, etc.) implemented in your country that promote digital solutions for the safeguarding of Heritage Tourism.

Virtual and augmented reality are such a solution. Instead of showing visitors brochures and computer screens, travel agents can provide their customers with a virtual experience. This approach can also be used for greater effect at trade fairs and events. In this way, interest from the general public is quickly gained. For example, the most attractive and advanced innovation in the Madara National Historical and Archaeological Reserve is the place for virtual reality, located in the field. Up to 20 people at the same time have the opportunity to go to a virtual tour of the village and to find interesting information about each object.

There are some good examples for projects, applications, and websites that promote digital solutions:

- URBO is working towards the digitalization of tourism services. It is a web portal and mobile application for entertainment and leisure for the traveller or active resident in an urban environment.
- Plovdiv City Concierge is the first city chatbot in Bulgaria, which offers automated process in the communication with customers, automatically answers the most frequently asked questions, automates reservations, surveys, etc. „Since 2018, Umni helped businesses save thousands of staff hours by digitizing communication with clients, and automating frequently asked questions and routine tasks.“⁶
- Plovdiv Municipality's website - extremely interactive site, which has absolutely all the necessary information to visit the city of Plovdiv, with the practical links, information and details about attractions, accommodation, places to eat, events, maps, video gallery, etc.
- EDIBO project: European Digital Training Laboratories, funded by the Youth Employment Fund of the EEA Financial Mechanism and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2014-2021. The project will organize a total of six training courses on "Digital Skills" free of charge - The first course attracted 25 unemployed young people between the ages of 21-29, most of whom live in the small towns around the town of Dobrich. Students entered the course with quite different levels of education (45.5% - completed secondary education, 40.9% - completed higher education), digital skills, language skills (only 20% with a basic level of English) and

⁶ <https://umni.bg/en/about-umni-chatbot/>

- social standard. All participants have passed the curriculum, and the main topics of the program are computers and business; basic programs for the daily life of the entrepreneur; organization of the entrepreneur's work with the help of a computer; electronic interaction with institutions; digital entrepreneurship, etc.
- TRANS-EDU-NET Project which was implemented by National Tourism Cluster "Bulgarian Guide", funded under the INTERREG V-B Balkan - Mediterranean 2014-2020 Programme. It offered transnational curricula in the field of tourism, applicable for 4 partner countries and several master classes, incl. education in digital skills in tourism. A specialized virtual platform for joint transnational online preparation of a business plan for start-up companies in the field of tourism and a business simulation game (Hotel Empire) in tourism, dedicated to the hospitality management techniques and risk management, were also developed.

9. What kinds of thematic tourism are present in your country?

According to the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria 2014-2030, these are: rural, ecological, mountain, adventure (cycling, horseback riding, skiing, and snowshoeing, boating, diving, penetration into unlit caves, crossing alpine routes with a guide) and thematic (related to cultural and historical heritage, with the esoteric, religion, wine, traditional cuisine, ethnography and traditional music and crafts). Bulgaria is also developing the so-called niche tourist products - sports, urban entertainment, cruise, and business tourism. The products of alternative tourism are divided into priority and those with potential for development. Also, cultural, and cognitive tourism, religious tourism, wine tourism, culinary tourism, festival and event tourism, health tourism (medical, spa, wellness).

Creative tourism, especially in rural areas, has become an important strategy for cultural tourism to remain competitive in today's mass tourism market without having to lose the local authenticity on which it depends. That is why it is important to look at this trend in greater detail. As an emerging trend, the creative journey is rooted in the rise and mass democratization of cultural travel. The Tourism and Recreation Training Association (ATLAS) shows that the experiences that cultural travelers enjoy the most are those that offer a true understanding of local culture. The more experienced travelers are, the more likely they are to set specific educational goals for their trip before rest and relaxation. In the past, cultural travel was largely based on cultural heritage, such as visits to museums or monuments. With the rise of the creative class, the socio-economic class, whose main driving force is economic development through education and entertainment, this focus is gradually shifting.

Another trend: **Religious / Pilgrimage tourism** in the new media era religious tourism is tourism based on people traveling individually or in groups with motives related to worship, missionary purposes, or entertainment.



According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, about 300 million pilgrims visit the world's most famous religious sites each year. There are many aspects associated with these types of visits: visits to the sanctuary, pilgrimages on the way to St. James, visits to monasteries, vacations, or visits to religious tourist attractions. Religious tourism has existed since ancient times. Devotees, for example, are believed to travel for several reasons:

- To understand and appreciate their religion through a tangible cultural heritage.
- To feel secure about their religious beliefs, • To connect personally with a holy city or place.

There is no doubt that religion played an important role in encouraging early travelers and pilgrims to cross the European continent to visit holy places. Today, many of them fill up the map of the world as important heritage sites in a certain country or region.

Other types of tourism that are present in the country:

- Cultural Tourism
- Eco Tourism
- Sea Tourism, incl. camping tourism
- Mountain tourism
- Balneo, SPA and wellness
- Sport and adventure tourism
- Rural Tourism
- Event Tourism – congresses, business, festivals, etc.
- Wine-culinary

10. What kinds of thematic tourism could be developed in your country?

When planning the development of tourist activities in an area except its specific features - nature, cultural attractions, accessibility, economy, capacity of the local population, etc., the general principles, trends, and policies applicable to the development of tourism, especially within the EU, but also globally must be considered. The redistribution of tourist resources and changes in services are imposed on one hand in a more natural way - through the already mentioned factors such as easy accessibility of destinations, cheap transport, more free time, and on the other hand are the result of purposeful European regulations - need for environmental protection, striving for reducing the number of tourists at the same time and place, strategic planning of activities for a fairer distribution of the economic benefits in the regions concerned (for example, not only for hoteliers but also for hoteliers) for local agricultural producers or vulnerable groups), planning a balance between tourism services and other socio-economic and public activities in an area.

Further thematic tourism that could be developed:



- Adventure Tourism: Diving, rowing, Skydiving
- Geotourism
- City tourism
- Sport tourism (golf, cycling, etc.)
- Hunting tourism
- Photo tourism
- Scientific tourism
- Entertaining tourism

2.4 Conclusions

Tourism is one of the main economic pillars and among the national priorities of the Bulgarian economy. In 2019, it formed ar. 12% of the GDP and around 11% of the employment in the country⁷. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on the tourism and revealed the significance of the tourism sector for the economy and social wealth. It can be clearly seen from the decrease on the number of tourist visits of foreigners in Bulgaria for the period January-April 2021 in comparison to the same period in 2020. The decrease is 58.1%. More than 70% is the decrease in the visits for holiday and recreation.⁸

The pandemic further emphasized the importance of digital skills and boosted the development of the digitalisation in the tourism. Some tour operators started to offer virtual tours, museums adapted to virtual exhibitions, etc.

Even though young people in Bulgaria are below the EU average level of basic or above basic digital skills, digitalisation is rapidly developing and entering many fields of the tourism education.⁹ Upskilling and gaining further expertise in the field are mostly offered in the higher education and are not easily accessible to all. As far as the employment in the tourism sector is concerned, the best-case scenario is that the negative level of unemployment will get back to normal. Many workers, however, left the tourism sector and received other qualifications in other sectors. Especially in times of pandemic and during the post-pandemic period, the tourism sector in Bulgaria will need to adapt and attract potential visitors, customers, and workers by digital means.

⁷ Data for 2019, Ministry of Tourism

⁸ National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, www.nsi.bg

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200715-1>



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