

THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF KOSOVO TOURISM

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Abstract

The Republic of Kosovo has significant touristic potential that is currently not developed to its full potential. The country's natural, cultural and historic rarities attract an ever-growing number of foreign visitors, record increased number of tourists' overnight stays, increased number of tourism operators, and bring an increased share to Kosovo's gross domestic product (GDP). Cultural, transit, weekend and winter tourism are the most developed types of tourism. Further sustainable development of tourism in Kosovo will largely depend on the governments strategic policies that would be comprehensive and participatory by nature, in all stages from planning to evaluation. Improvement of the overall tourist offer (product) and promotion at national and international level need to be at core of the future measures, as well as strengthening of the human resources working in tourism. These and other measures would be the path to increasing the share of tourism in the country's GDP to between 10 and 12 per cent by 2020, as forecasted by the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Keywords

Tourism, tourism development, Kosovo, cultural tourism, transit tourism, weekend tourism, winter tourism, tourism development strategy

Introduction

Kosovo is located in the center of the western part of the Balkan Peninsula, with a very interesting shape, which is surrounded by high mountains which are natural borders, whilst inside the plains and valleys. It is quite rich in surface and underground waters, whilst the climate changes depending on the diverse shape and forms of land relief. The country has great potential for development of various types of tourism, being blessed with numerous cultural, historical and natural rarities: business, transit, winter, weekend, hunting and health (medical) tourism. Kosovo is a landlocked country, bordering four neighbors: Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. The climate is continental, with areas on higher altitude with predominantly mountainous climate. Local traditions and cultures are open and hospitable.

Tourism can be defined as the movement of human beings for the purpose of recreation, entertainment, healing and expansion of cultural knowledge. It is an economic activity which brings lucrative income for the economy of each and every country. Numerous potentials and their utilization, from touristic perspective, play an important role in economic development and GDP. While Kosovo is a small geographical area, it offers good opportunities for development of local, regional, international, transit and stationary tourism.

But despite its rich and rare resources, protection or utilization of these beauties has not yet reached the appropriate level. Potential analysis shows that Kosovo can use its resources for the sake of tourism much more than at present. This could be achieved if the responsible government authorities develop the strategic concept for tourism development, providing strategic direction and development of tourism products in order for Kosovo to be a future touristic destination locally and internationally.

Relying on traditional economic development activities has so far not brought about any major effect on the Kosovo tourism development. Therefore, enriching the economy structure with the development of new economic activities will provide an important opportunity for Kosovo to advance its economy and society in general.

The main goal of this paper is to identify and highlight the opportunities for and importance of tourism development towards economic growth and progress of the Kosovo society. Focus will be put on the country's geographical location and its natural resources and cultural sites.

Methodologically, the paper has been prepared through analysis of relevant national and international primary and secondary sources of information, i.e. data of official governmental structures and existing research studies and reports.

Importance of Tourism in Kosovo

Tourism is one of the priority areas for economic development. Regarding the principles of sustainability, authors refer to environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects, in particular addressing mountain tourism. Sustainable mountain tourism should do the following¹:

- Optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity; and
- Respecting socio - cultural affiliation of hosting communities, preservation of inherited and lively heritage such as cultural values and traditional values, contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance to interested parties for tourism, etc.

The development of contemporary tourism in Kosovo began after the World War II. However, until 70's of the 20th century, the absence of good roads in Kosovo dictated the low tourist activities. After the seventies, with the construction and modernization of the road network and improvement of economic circumstances, tourist movements began to proliferate². Flows of local tourist, individuals, families and groups for the purpose of recreation and relaxation mainly take place during the summer to cool beside pools, rivers and lakes, or in the winter at ski centers (such as, Brezovica and Rugova). In the postwar period, many new pools were built, which attract large numbers of new tourist clientele. There are regions and facilities that show the antiquity of this Dardan land, many cultural and historical monuments dating from the Illyrian period. Also, business tourism has also seen an increase, as well as sports and health related travels.

One has to stress that the consequences of war have left deep traces with the destruction of historical, cultural, religious, economic, and tourist sites and heritage. Currently, there are indications of concrete commitments from responsible bodies to reconstruct and/or preserve and take measures for developing tourism. One of the essential issues which that tourism development in Kosovo relies on is how the cultural-historical heritage will be functionalized, as it is still not sufficiently preserved, collated and presented to the public at large. This is the main reason why Kosovo still lacks behind in the area of tourism development when compared to the neighboring countries, while at the same time has similar historical and cultural values and sites.

Thus, after the war in 1999, Kosovo began increasing its efforts for tourism development and tourist offers, but this came mainly as a result of individual and group initiatives for short term periods. There is still no long-term, organized coordination and planning effort. Such an effort should focus around the fact that almost in all its regions, Kosovo has huge capacities for tourism development, with a particular priority in the development of nature tourism, cultural, winter,

¹Kruk, E.Hummel, J. and Banskota, K. (2007). "*Facilitating Sustainable Mountain Tourism Volume I*". Nepal Resource Book

²Mustafa, I.(1997). "*Enterprise in contemporary business*", Prishtina.

adventure, health, transit etc. Distinguished tourist regions are well known such as touristic region of Mitrovica, Sharri, Prishtina, Anamorava, Albanian Alps – to name just a few.

In the absence of official statistics on tourism, several indirect indicators can be used to present the trends in tourism development in Kosovo in the recent years, such as the number of registered hotel businesses:

Table 1: Hotel businesses registered in the period 2005-2011

Number of businesses	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Hotels and motels with restaurant	95	132	202	122	190	250	284
Hotels and motels without restaurant	36	53	74	16	41	53	64
Hotels and mountain lodges	11	16	22	18	28	32	26
Camps and trollies	3	7	23	2	8	13	8
Settlement for short stay	153	241	347	150	181	413	217
Restaurants	1,751	2,226	2,459	1,121	1,669	2,238	2,078
Night bars	152	223	382	75	148	503	831
Canteen and kitchen	226	287	342	168	235	338	334
Catering prepared	82	218	848	342	522	886	951
Tourist agencies	195	214	346	183	263	376	348
Total:	2,704	3,617	5,045	2,197	3,285	5,102	5,141

Source: Kosovo Agency for Business Registration

All hotels should have attractive appearance, architectural design and attractive environment. Hotel facilities must have good parking lots including the road which connects without any obstacles in traffic. Parking lots should have proper lighting and high level security. During tourist travel management, tourist potentials in rural areas should be taken into consideration. Basic features of the current situation of rural tourism ranks Kosovo in regions with considerable resources. Characteristics of space, the state of biodiversity, geo-communications position, climate and other natural features are good basis for the promotion of rural tourism.

Data of the Kosovo government³ show that in 2007 the accommodation and food industry generated a turnover of 34 million Euros, which amounted to 2.28 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). On the other hand, data of the Kosovo Statistics Office present that the contribution of hotels and restaurants in Kosovo's GDP varied between 0.7 and 1.4 per cent in the period 2006-2011. Vast majority (between 90 and 95 per cent each year) stems from the private sector. In the same period, the same data show an important increase of foreign visitors,

³Sector Profile of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry of the Republic of Kosovo, 2014.

reaching over 60,000 persons in 2012 for the first time in postwar period. In the same year, the number of overnight stays of foreign visitors exceeded 100 thousand, with most of visitors coming from the following countries: Albania, Croatia, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Slovenia, Turkey and United States. Similar trends and structure of foreign visitors were reported in the following years.

One has to stress that, as in many other fields, the challenge for tourism development is the lack of adequate statistical data. This is partially a product of not having a common understanding among the different governmental departments of what tourism entails. All the data presented above stem from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, which runs a data base that includes various tourism operators as presented in the table above. However, this manner of data registration and documentation completely overlooks the income from various tourist events (such as music or film festivals) that also generate income, employ persons and largely impact local economies. Therefore, speaking of research, one always has to combine different sources of information in order to depict more precisely the overall picture of tourism in Kosovo. At practical level, such lack of data may prove a difficulty when it comes to planning and implementing adequate tourism development strategies and public policies.

Types of Tourism in Kosovo

Increasingly, tourism is becoming the main income supplier to the economy. For the first time in 2015, tourism rose at the top in terms of remittances from abroad. However, spontaneous development without clear strategies and quality services can not be converted into a tool for ensuring sustainable high growth rates. According to the central banking authority, the annual growth of the income from tourism is estimated at about 23 percent. The growth rates of the sector, in fact, result to be higher than in any other sector. According to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the income from this sector should represent between 10 and 12 per cent of the overall GDP of Kosovo by 2020⁴. Experience has shown that the main types of tourism in Kosovo are⁵:

1. Cultural tourism;
2. Transit tourism;
3. Weekend tourism;
4. Winter tourism.

Cultural Tourism

The list of Kosovo cultural heritage includes: Bazar (çarshi), towers, bridges, guest houses (hane), churches, mosques, shrines, masjids, madrasah, etc. The density of these sites can be illustrated with the cultural tourism prospect of only one of the five Kosovo's regions – that of Peja, which includes cultural and historic sites from ancient times as follows:

⁴Official webpage of Ministry of Trade and Industry, Department of Tourism. Downloaded from internet webpage on 16 February 2017. For more details visit: www.mti-ks.com.

⁵ Scientific Journal Business Administration, Peja 2010.

- 10 archaeological sites,
- 12 Christian monuments,
- 23 Islamic monuments,
- 102 towers,
- a Bektashi shrine,
- and 9 water mills.

In the recent years, there have been several initiatives to host and organize various cultural events, in an attempt to boost cultural tourism in different parts of the country, such as Dokufest film festival in Prizren, Green Fest in Mitrovicë (music festival), Into the Park in Pejë (arts and culture festival), Anibar in Pejë (animated film festival), NGOM Fest in Prizren (music festival), Skena UP in Prishtinë (film and theatre festival), etc. Some of these festivals, such as the Anibar, offer various touring programs for the visitors to the cultural and historic sites in the Pejëregion. It is interesting to note that the Tour de Kosovo, a sports (biking) manifestation that has gradually turned into a tourist attraction, as the organizers have used the competition in different regions and towns to promote the cultural and historic heritage of Kosovo. In addition to the sporting success of the manifestation (it was started with 100 mostly national participants in 2008, while over 900 participants from the country and abroad participated in the 2013 edition).

However, despite the success, the organizers of events that promote cultural tourism in Kosovo are faced with numerous difficulties, with the lack of adequate institutional support often perceived as the essential barrier. Other identified difficulties include:

- Limited funding from local and central governments;
- Lack of proper cultural and tourism policies at the local level of government;
- Inability of local governments to integrate culture into a broader tourism development strategic framework;
- Inadequate physical infrastructure for cultural and artistic events; and
- Insufficient cooperation between cultural events and other tourism operators⁶.

Transit tourism

Due to the specific political situation in the region, it is again the region of Peja which can be used to illustrate the position of transit tourism. Peja is a link with other places through four roads, Gjakova, Prizren, Prishtina, Mitrovica and the border with Montenegro, through the QafaQakorit and Kulla. The corridor that connects Kosovo with Montenegrin coast –contributes to the economic development for this area. However, it would take significant improvement of the regional geo-political situation before transit tourism in Kosovo could become an international attraction, despite the geographical position being suitable. For example, Kosovo connects Macedonia and Montenegro at best, or Southern Serbia and Montenegro, but the wide use of these roads would require improvements of the political relations and solving of political disputes between the countries in the region. In the meantime, transit tourism is mainly limited to

⁶Sector Profile of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry of the Republic of Kosovo, 2014

harvesting income from domestic tourists. This is an example of how politics, including international politics, significantly impacts tourism development.

Weekend Tourism

Flows of local tourists, individuals, families and groups for the purpose of recreation usually take place during the summer visiting pools, rivers, lakes, or in winter at ski centers (Brezovica or Rugova) and elsewhere. As mentioned, in the postwar period, large number of pools have been constructed, which attract many tourist for weekend brakes. However, as explained in the previous section, due to the regional political situation, weekend tourism is mainly limited to domestic tourists (or at best international expatriates residing in Kosovo). The most famous weekend destinations are:

- The Lake in Drelaj,
- The Canyon of the Gorge of Rugova,
- Source well of White Drini River– Radac,
- Black Hill, etc.

Winter Tourism

The high mountains of Kosovo enable good opportunities for development of mountaineering and winter tourism in the tourist areas of Pashtriku, Koshare, Brezovica, Shala e Bajgores, Belegu, Rugova, etc. The Rugova Region has better quality ski trails. Night skiing races were held for the first time in Kosovo in 2015, which are of great importance to this sport. Outstanding centers of Albanian Alps are: Bogë, Hajla, Rusolia, Shtedimi, Strellci Mountains, Koprivniku, Lumbardhi Mountains, Rrasa e Zogut, Gjeravica, Maja e Rupes, Neqinati, etc., which include altitude up to 2,656 meters. The skiing center in Bogë is equipped with a ski-lift with length up to 1,000 meters and contains established facilities for the establishment and organization of different local and international tournaments.

Recommendations for Future Development

It is the main responsibility of the state and the government to undertake further strategic comprehensive measures for sustainable tourism development. The strategy needs to be developed in a participatory fashion, with public consultations with a variety of actors involved in the tourism business. As can be noted above, there are sufficient actors who have already managed to develop and improve tourism offer through private and local initiatives; these experiences need to be translated into a synergetic national-level plan and action.

One needs to focus on further developing of the tourist offer itself: contemporary tourists are interested in a combination of experiences, be it cultural, or historical, or enjoying the nature or the local food and music, etc. The current partial tourist offers need to be connected into larger and more complete offers, that would make tourists increase the number of overnight stays, as well as the non-accommodation related expenditure, including developing various form of indirect tourism revenues.

Data collection and processing related to tourism needs to be strengthened and improved. Systems and mechanisms need to be developed that will provide solid basis for facts-based strategies and public policies planning. Such systems will also be of crucial importance in monitoring the implementation of such policies and, whenever needed, designing and undertaking corrective measures.

Tourism development needs to be placed higher on the governmental agenda. This particularly includes increasing the allocation of budgetary funds for this purpose. The government should also seek to motivate foreign donors and partners to prioritize sustainable tourism development on their agendas and to invest additional funds.

Training of tourism managers and professionals needs to be strengthened. As in all industries, qualified management and staff are of key importance for the development of tourism. While there are three high-education institutions provide studies in tourism, their curricula need to reflect the contemporary approaches in this sector.

Promotion needs to be strengthened at national and international level. Local self-government units need to be involved in the process and provide their contribution in promoting the natural, cultural and historical sites and other tourism-related events within their local communities. This also includes support for production and promotion of local souvenirs and products that reflect local

Finally, tourism development needs to be adequately intertwined in other strategic governmental plans and public policies. The overall development policies in various fields (development of economy, infrastructure, culture, education, etc.) need to be supportive of and promote sustainable tourism development. This would ensure the application of the needed multidisciplinary approach and would lead towards improvement of the coordination between the different governmental departments and units, as well as other actors at local and national level.

Conclusions

Kosovo is a landlocked country in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula that has significant potential for sustainable tourism development. Its natural beauties and the abundance in natural beauties and cultural and ancient historic sites, the moderate and warm climate, the traditional hospitality of its people towards foreigners – all create a solid basis for tourism development and its increased share in the country's overall GDP.

However, this potential is not used as per the possibilities, mainly due to the consequences of the war in the late 90s of the twentieth century and the remaining political instability in the region. On the positive side, tourism is the fastest growing industry in the recent years, with growth rates in certain years exceeding 20 per cent compared to the previous year.

While there is a lack of statistical data and figures on tourism, existing data show constant increase of the number of tourism operators in Kosovo. As an illustration, the number of tourism operators has almost doubled in the period 2005-2011. Positive trends are also recorded in the field of increasing the number of foreign visitors to the country, as well as the number of their overnight stays. Also, the contribution of tourism to the country's GDP is on the constant rise: from 2.28 in 2007 to its expected share of between 10 and 12 per cent in 2020 (as per the estimates of the Kosovo Ministry of Trade and Industry).

Four types of tourism are dominant in the tourism sector in Kosovo: cultural, transit, weekend and winter tourism. Each of these mentioned types of tourism need to be further promoted and systematically improved. The geographical milieu and the local cultures and traditions also provide excellent opportunities for further development of the rural and alternative tourism, which are currently, generally speaking, overlooked.

Further development of tourism requires systematic and strategic approach that would be led by the government, but would be participatory by its nature. Sustainability needs to be at the core of such development. Improvement of the overall tourist offer and its promotion at national and international level needs to be among the foreseen measures. Public spending on tourism needs to be increased and seen as an investment that would bear dividends in the near future. Coordination between public and private actors at local and national level and data monitoring and collection needs to be strengthened. Training of tourism professionals needs to be further improved, building upon the current rather positive point of departure.

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