

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Nikolina Ruenova Popova,
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of the dissertation work of assistant Vasya Verchova Yaneva

"LIFE CYCLE OF THE TOURISM PRODUCT OF THE DESTINATION SAMOKOV MUNICIPALITY"

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a professional field 4.4. Earth Sciences (Geography of Recreation and Tourism)

The current review of the dissertation work of Asst. Vasya Yaneva on the topic: "Life cycle of the tourism product of the Samokov destination municipality" was prepared on the basis of Order No. RD -38 -608/ 2.10.2024. of the rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

I. Relevance of the topic and general characteristics of the dissertation

The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that the main tourist product - the winter ski tourism of the Samokov municipality, in whose territorial scope falls one of the most developed winter resorts "Borovets", should be subject to periodic systematic analysis and evaluation, in order to bring it in accordance with changing tourism demand. Understanding the stage of tourism development is crucial for developing strategies based on the study of its life cycle in order to predict its future development, as well as taking into account changes in the natural, socio-cultural and economic environment. The purpose of the study is clearly stated and contains the research contribution element to knowledge. Of the eight (8) tasks arising from the aim and formulated by the author, five are of a clear research nature, 5 and 6, according to the reviewer, are components of a task, and tasks 3 and 4 are elements of any scientific research. Tasks 6 and 8 contain the research novelty, with an expected contribution character, as follows: 6 task - "To empirically establish the stage of the life cycle in which the tourist destination Samokov is located" and 8 task - "To present and justify a model of life cycle of the tourism product of a destination, with relevant indicators and parameters for use in similar studies in the country.

The **object** and **subject** of the research are correctly formulated. The research question (thesis) and hypotheses are clearly and precisely formulated.

From a structural and content point of view, the dissertation corresponds to the topic and specifics of the scientific specialty Geography of recreation and tourism, to the research tasks identified and is based on an algorithm that allows conducting a logically sustained research process, and thus also contains the main attributes of research corresponding to the standards for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor".

The dissertation is 227 pages long (without the appendices and bibliography), including 26 tables and 61 figures. It is structured in an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography with 355 sources, of which 74 in Cyrillic, 265 in Latin, 16 internet sources and 4 appendices.

II. Scientific areas and problems developed in the dissertation

The dissertation fully covers the scientific field stated in the thematic title. This circumstance is presented in the essential characteristic of the work.

The theoretical analysis of the key concepts contained in the title of the work, namely: "tourist object", "tourist product", "tourist destination" and "life cycle" is carried out in the first and second chapters. The author demonstrates a very good knowledge of modern sources related to the considered concepts, conducts a comparative analysis and draws relevant conclusions.

In the **first chapter** of the dissertation, the author clarifies the essence of the main ones concepts of "tourist object", "tourist product" and "tourist destination".

The author examines in a comparative plan the legal and scientific aspects of the definitions of the considered concepts, which is determined by the practical nature of the research. He accepts as a working definition the "atomic model" of the tourist product, according to V.

Marinov (1997). The author uses this model when choosing criteria for empirically establishing the stage of the life cycle of a given tourist product.

Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the concept of "tourist destination". A significant volume of scientific literature has been analyzed, including that of a critical and constructive nature regarding the essence, applicability and content aspect of the concepts. The doctoral student makes a very successful, multifaceted analysis of the concept of "tourist destination" - essence, features, boundaries, hierarchy, etc. justifying in the second chapter the choice of a tourist destination within the administrative boundaries of a municipality. The subject of analysis is a number of tourist destination models with a summary of the characteristic features relevant to their management.

In the first chapter, the methodological framework of the study of the life cycle of Samokov municipality is presented in detail. It would fit logically right after the life cycle analysis of the tourist destination as such. The research methodology is described in detail as a research process going through the main stages of scientific research, with the methodological tools used- in full accordance with the set goal, namely: sociological method - semi-structured interviews with two groups of interested parties - the tourism business and key informants (mayors, managers of tourist associations, municipal councilors, hoteliers and leaders in the sector, the manager of the TIC in the municipality, etc.), a semi-structured questionnaire in the places of accommodation, a field observation method in Samokov municipality. The empirical research was conducted in two stages - in 2014 and 2023, with the aim of comparative analysis of the results and revealing of essential features.

In the **second chapter**, the concepts of the life cycle of the tourist product and the tourist destination are reviewed. The author examines the generic concept of "life cycle" historically, starting from the concept of similarity between goods on the market and the life cycle of biological systems and man, Levit (1965). The author does not only a thorough analysis of the phases in the life cycle of the product from the field of the material production, but also their specificity in the tourist product, as well as the possible marketing strategies to increase the market.

A central place, directly related to the topic, in the second chapter, is occupied by the life cycle of the tourist product (LCTP) and the life cycle of the tourist destination (LCTD). The in-depth and extensive analysis is based on a good knowledge and interpretation of theoretical statements of a large number of sources - Bulgarian and foreign. Despite the fact that for decades, the model for LCTD has been perceived as an important tool for the management and planning of tourist destinations, taking into account the recreational capacity in order to limit the negative influences of tourism, the author thoroughly examines the criticisms of this model based on its practical application. Strategies to avoid the stage of decline and eventual death of the destination also come into focus of analysis. They are reviewed in detail with important features highlighted. The in-depth analysis of the main approaches to the applicability of the LCTD model leads to the identification of the advantages and disadvantages of each of them.

As a result, the essential characteristics of the life cycles of the considered objects are derived, which construct the theoretical framework for conducting the empirical study.

In the **third chapter**, a comprehensive natural-geographical, socio-cultural and economic analysis of the municipality of Samokov, intertwined with an evaluative approach, revealing the conditions and factors for the development of tourism, was conducted. In some places, the

descriptive approach prevails, which could be supplemented with systematization and the use of a balance method for presenting the natural and cultural-historical resources and attractions in the municipality. The main territorial tourist structures are particularly clearly presented - Borovets National Resort, Belchin Village - Belchin Bani and Tsari Mali Town, Malyovitsa Resort and the villages of Beli Iskar, Govedartsi, Madjare and Little Church - "Iskrovete".

The **fourth chapter** is dedicated to the current state of tourism in Samokov municipality. A precise and comprehensive analysis of the development of tourism in the municipality of Samokov for the period 1998-2023. steps to the use of a set of indicators: absolute indicators, indicators of the intensity of tourist development - density of beds, tourist intensity, tourist function, structure indicators and the type of tourism Peculiarities are revealed in the tourism development of the municipality of Samokov, the period of Covid-19 is also "caught", as well as the dynamics of the indicators in the post-pandemic years.

The fourth chapter also contains the empirical research conducted by the doctoral student, whose methodology was evaluated by the reviewer in the first chapter, in which it was described. The first stage of the survey was conducted in 2013-2014. in the accommodation sector. A new up-to-date survey among accommodation establishments, with an updated questionnaire, was conducted in the spring of 2024. - it was carried out in two stages, the beginning of May in the national resort of Borovets and the city Samokov and the end of May in the villages of Beli Iskar, Govedartsi and k.k. Maliovitsa, Belchin and Belchinski baths and around Lake Park. The number of interviewees. owners or managers of sites in 2014. is 49, and in 2024 - a total of 38, with the studied year being the calendar year 2023. Trends in the development of tourism, both in supply and demand, have been revealed. Key informants from the public and private sectors in the municipality were also interviewed. The results show the main problem areas in the management of tourism in the territory under consideration, among which are COVID-19, inflation and the war in Ukraine. A summary presentation of the development of tourism in the municipality is the SWOT analysis developed by the author.

The **fifth chapter** is dedicated to the life cycle of the tourism product of the Samokov destination municipality. It also contains an analysis of similar studies conducted in Bulgaria, proving the practical-applied aspect of Butler's model. A wide range of indicators, outlined in Chapter 4, were used. The author defines the stage of development of the municipality of Samokov until 2019 as the stage of consolidation. The period during the COVID-19, shows specificity, which is the basis for the conclusion that the Samokov municipality marks a partial return to the stage of consolidation - the accommodation base is preserved, the level of the tourist function and the average stay, as well. The start of the post-pandemic period 2023/24. according to the author, it is the beginning of a new development or revitalization of the destination. Regarding the life cycle of the national resort of Borovets, according to the analysis, it is at a stage of stagnation, as far as all indicators are concerned, except for income. The model of Buchalis (2000) applied by the author to the destination municipality of Samokov, tab. 24, p. 208, containing an assessment of the residential complex of the destination Samokov and the impacts of tourism and showing that the municipality of Samokov falls entirely into the stages of maturity and saturation. Of a contributing nature is also the determination of the economic value of 10 tourist sub-products of the Samokov destination (according to Zimmermann, 1997), showing that, with the exception of mass winter tourism, all the others show a positive trend of development.

IV. Reliability of the results and analysis and their scientific-theoretical and applied value.

The results of the research leave no doubt about their scientific value.

The author has developed a relevant methodological framework of the research, including modern theoretical statements, excellent information security of the topic and the use of

adequate methodological tools, through which he effectively defends the subject of the dissertation work, referring to the model for the life cycle of the tourist destination as a development management tool.

In general, the reviewer finds that the candidate has succeeded in achieving the goal set in the dissertation work. and with his work contributes to the expansion and deepening of research searches in the field of residential accommodation of a local tourist destination.

V. Scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation work

There is sufficient evidence of scientific and applied contributions in the dissertation work.

They can be divided into two groups:

A/ Theoretical and methodological contributions

1. Butler's (1980) model for LCTD was further developed by justifying the need to include additional indicators for determining the stage of development. We consider this a theoretical modification of the basic assumptions of the model.
2. It has been established that individual tourism sub-products in a given destination are at different stages of their life cycle.
3. A significant volume of new factual information was obtained, supplementing the theory of LCTD, as well as the theory of the geography of tourism for sustainable development of tourism at the local destination level.

B/ Practical-applied contribution

1. The model of Buchalis (2000) applied by the author to the destination municipality of Samokov, tab., has a practical and applied contribution character. 24, p. 208, containing an assessment of the Samokov destination residential complex and the impacts of tourism and showing that the Samokov municipality falls fully into the stages of maturity and saturation.
2. Of a practical contribution is the determination of the life cycle of 10 tourist sub-products of the Samokov destination (according to Zimmermann, 1997), showing that, with the exception of mass winter tourism, all the others show a positive development trend.

VI. Critical notes

Basically, I have no particular critical notes. . Some omissions, which are not of a fundamental nature, have been made and they are indicated in the review.

VII. Abstract and publications on the topic of the dissertation work

The abstract presented by the doctoral student Vasya Verchova Yaneva in volume 46 standard printed pages meets the academic standards for a summary presentation of independent scientific research. The abstract presents the purpose, the research tasks, the subject and object of research and the main research results. The presented scientific publications - 3 issues (conference papers) - are directly related to the thematic area of the dissertation work.

VIII. Conclusion

Bearing in mind the stated scientific and scientific-applied merits of the dissertation work on the topic: "Life cycle of the tourism product of the destination Samokov municipality", as well as the contributions made, with conviction I propose to the esteemed jury to award Vasya Verchova Yaneva the educational and scientific degree " doctor" in professional field 4.4. Earth Sciences (Geography of Recreation and Tourism).

city Sofia,
November 28, 2024

Reviewer:
/prof. Dr. Nikolina Popova/