



CHALLENGES FOR THE BULGARIAN TOURISM MARKET AFTER THE PANDEMIC COVID 19 – PARADIGMS, PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES¹

/The case of the Bulgarian Southern Black Sea Coast/

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Abstract: *Every crisis provides new opportunities for countermeasures, and Covid 19 has undoubtedly helped us to rethink our traditional ideas about tourism. The pandemic came unexpectedly in our lives, in business, in socio-economic relations, and in addition to being a time for trials, it is also a time in which quite a few lessons can be learned. One of which is that we need a qualitative transformation in the management and development model of tourism. The purpose of the report is to present the results of a survey among Bulgarian tourists who chose the Bulgarian Southern Black Sea for their sea vacation. For the attention of the interested parties, specific results are also indicated regarding the positions of the respondents regarding the possible factors that influence their choice; what are their assessments, attitudes and expectations for practicing summer tourism in the Southeast Black Sea region; what are their beliefs, abilities and skills for the successful realization of intentions. In conclusion, the requirements of modern tourists and their preferences are given.*

Keywords: *Bulgarian tourist market, Covid 19, contemporary challenges*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of modern people's lives. At the same time, the pandemic also showed how connected and dependent people and countries are, regardless of where they are in the world. In this sense, tourism, as one of the spheres of closest contact between people from different parts of the world, was also the most severely affected by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In order to preserve tourism, we should also look to the future of tourism and transport and assess how to make them more stable and sustainable, learn from the crisis and anticipate new trends and consumption patterns related to with her. The aim should be to create conditions for accessible and more sustainable transport and for better connectivity, to promote the intelligent management of tourist flows based on reliable measurements and tools, to diversify the offer of tourist services and to expand off-season opportunities, to develop of skills to offer sustainable tourism to

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those working in the sector and to exploit the diversity of landscapes and cultural diversity, while protecting and restoring the natural endowment.

The transition to digital technologies provides new ways to manage travel and tourism flows, opportunities and greater choice, as well as more efficient use of limited resources. The application of big data analysis can help to understand the trends and needs of tourists. This will enable the industry to respond quickly to changes in consumer demand and provide solutions based on predictive modeling. Digital tools are also a means of instilling confidence in people that travel and tourism can be safe. Broader adoption of digital technologies requires investment in the skills of those working in the sector and fostering innovation. Easier accessibility and a faster travel planning process improve the overall quality of experiences for both business and leisure travelers. Resourceful tourism entrepreneurs who are technologically oriented are increasingly turning their businesses towards modern technology for its disruptive yet simultaneously transformative and creative effect. Company applications are developed with opportunities for detailed study and adaptation to the interests and preferences of individual users.

Consumers today want to be stimulated, entertained, educated and challenged. They are constantly looking for new and new brands that will "dazzle" their senses, touch their hearts, provoke their minds, i.e. looking for experiences. "Individual consumer needs such as convenience, personalization, experiences, environmental sustainability and social connections have come to the fore."

METHODOLOGY

In the summer of the 2021 season, a survey was conducted among 153 Bulgarian tourists, with the aim of establishing the dominant socio-psychological factors determining the choice of a tourist product; to fix the socio-demographic characteristics of tourists; to investigate their attitudes and preferences for choosing a relevant destination on the Southern Black Sea coast. The questionnaire survey requires the surveyed persons to indicate their socio-demographic status, giving them the opportunity to express their opinion and express their attitude towards the opportunities and offers for a summer vacation in Bulgaria. The study also involves collecting data on what the positions of the respondents are regarding the possible factors that influence their choice; what are their assessments, attitudes and expectations for practicing summer tourism in the Southeast Black Sea region; what are their beliefs, abilities and skills for the successful realization of intentions.

RESULTS

11 attributes are presented to the attention of the respondents, which they must rate on a 5-point scale (from 1 to 5), how important their presence is for their good holiday.

From the presented data it is clear that for Bulgarian tourists the highest degree of importance for their good vacation is "Food quality" (73.9%), "Peace and security" (71.2%), "Quality of service" (68%), "Availability of natural and climatic features" (58.2%) and "Proximity to beach and sea" (54.2%). Next in order of importance are "Attractions and entertainment programs" (32.7%), "Opportunity for medical procedures" (31.4%), "Cultural and historical monuments" (28.1%) and "Low price" (27.5%). "Authentic folklore" ranks last in the ranking (22.2%).



➤ **Duration of the holiday**

Regarding the average duration of the holiday or trip, the highest percentage (33.3%) of the selected options 1 – 33.3% (less than 7 days) and 2 – 32.7% (7 days) was found. 24.8% of the surveyed Bulgarian tourists indicated option 3 (7-14 days); 5.2% of them marked option 4 (14-21 days), 0.7% preferred a duration of 21-28 days and 3.3% stopped at a duration of more than 28 days (See Table No. 1).

Table 1. Duration of holiday for Bulgarian tourists

		frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
valid	Less than 7 days	51	33.3	33.3	33.3
	7 days	50	32.7	32.7	66.0
	7-14 days	38	24.8	24.8	90.8
	14-21 days	8	5.2	5.2	96.1
	21-28 days	1	.7	.7	96.7
	More than 28 days	5	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Total:	153	100.0	100.0	

➤ **Holiday price**

When asked about the acceptable price of a tourist trip (1 person/1 week), 34% of the surveyed Bulgarians indicate the amount of 200 - 300 €. For 24.8%, the price of 300 – 500 € is acceptable; 14.4% marked no more than €200; 12.4% choose option 4 – between €500 and €700; 6.5% of respondents tend to spend between €700 and €1000; for 3.9% the optimal price varies between 1000 and 1500 €; 3.3% indicate more than 2000 € and only 0.7% stop at the amount between 1500 and 2000 € (See Table No. 2). From the obtained results, it can be concluded that the majority of Bulgarian tourists cannot afford or are unwilling to invest in an expensive destination. This may be due to a number of factors, such as lower social status, insufficiently high financial income, lower living standards, personal characteristics (economy in spending planning), etc.

Table № 2. Average price for holiday per week

		frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	200 €	22	14.4	14.4	14.4
	200-300 €	52	34.0	34.0	48.4
	300-500 €	38	24.8	24.8	73.2
	500-700 €	19	12.4	12.4	85.6
	700-1000 €	10	6.5	6.5	92.2
	1000-1500€	6	3.9	3.9	96.1
	1500-2000€	1	.7	.7	96.7
	More than 2000 €	5	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total:	153	100.0	100.0		

➤ **Influence of information sources**

When assessing the influence of information sources (question 3) on the choice of a tourist destination, the respondents classified their answers on a 10-point ascending scale (from 1 to 10). After processing the results, the following indicators were recorded: the influence of the information source "Internet" with the highest average value is followed by: "Friends, colleagues, relatives"; "Spouse"; "Employees, subordinates"; "Television and radio"; "Advertising on the street/billboard"; "Advertising in transport"; "Magazines and newspapers"; "Postal advertising" and "Other". Compared to the low relative share of the other information sources, the numerical indicators of "Internet", "Friends, colleagues, relatives" and "Spouse" stand out strongly, which gives a clear indicator that above all they have an influence on the decision of the Bulgarian tourists to choose a tourist destination. (See Table No. 3).

Table No. 3. Influence of information sources

Descriptive statistics					
	Number	minimum	maximum	Average value	Standart deviation
TV, Radio	153	1.00	10.00	4.0458	3.13373
Newspaper	153	1.00	10.00	2.9477	2.64274
Internet	153	1.00	10.00	8.6863	2.28401
Husband, wife	153	1.00	10.00	6.7320	3.74167
Friends, Colleagues	153	1.00	10.00	7.6471	2.74694
Employee	153	1.00	10.00	4.8170	3.27558
Transport Advertising	153	1.00	10.00	3.4706	2.92237
Street Advertising	153	1.00	10.00	3.5294	2.93136
e-mail Advertising	153	1.00	10.00	2.6275	2.44110
Other:	153	1.00	10.00	2.0261	2.62064
Valid:	153				

➤ **Important information sources**

In the next part of the survey (question 4), the respondents rank the information sources important to them on a 10-point descending scale (from 1 to 10), with 1 rating the most important for them, 2 the second most important, etc.

Based on the obtained data, the following conclusions are reached: When examining the most important information source, the values of three parameters stand out significantly - "Internet", "Friends, colleagues, relatives" and "Spouse". We specify that the dependence between the low percentage values and the priority of the information source is a consequence of the ranking on a descending scale. Further in the ranking system are the sources "Television and radio"; "Employees, subordinates"; "Magazines and newspapers"; "Advertising on the street/billboard"; "Advertising in transport"; "Postal advertising" and "Other" (See Table No. 4).



Table No. 4. Important information sources

Descriptive statistics					
	Number	minimum	maximum	Average value	Standart deviation
TV, Radio	153	1.00	10.00	5.6993	3.20174
Newspaper	153	1.00	10.00	6.9020	2.85105
Internet	153	1.00	10.00	2.1503	1.97275
Husband, wife	153	1.00	10.00	4.0654	3.56827
Friends, Colleagues	153	1.00	10.00	3.3595	2.57675
Employee	153	1.00	10.00	6.3137	2.84112
Transport Advertising	153	1.00	10.00	7.4575	2.54689
Street advertising	153	2.00	10.00	7.3333	2.49209
e-mail advertising	153	1.00	10.00	8.3595	2.24081
Other:	153	1.00	10.00	9.3137	2.08210
Valid:	153				

Alternative information sources To the extent that alternative sources of information can influence the decision-making process for choosing a destination, for Bulgarian tourists, the data from the analysis shows the following results (Table No. 5)

The data placed in Tab. No. 5, indicate that the highest valid percentage was reported for the alternative source "Internet" (29.6%), followed by "Friends, colleagues, relatives" (22.4%) and "Television and radio" (17.8%). For 7.9% of the respondents, the alternative source is "Spouse", while 5.9% indicate "Magazines and newspapers". The percentage (4.6%) is the same for "Advertising on the street/billboard" and "Other" (without indicating the alternative source). With the lowest percentage values are "Postal advertising" (2.6%) and "Advertising in transport" (1.3%)

Table No. 5. Alternative information sources

	frequency	percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
valid TV, radio	27	17.6	17.8	17.8
Newspaper	9	5.9	5.9	23.7
Internet	45	29.4	29.6	53.3
Husband, wife	12	7.8	7.9	61.2
Friends	34	22.2	22.4	83.6
Employee	5	3.3	3.3	86.8
Transport advertising	2	1.3	1.3	88.2
Street Advertising	7	4.6	4.6	92.8
e-mail advertising	4	2.6	2.6	95.4
Other	7	4.6	4.6	100.0
Total:	152	99.3	100.0	

➤ **Frequency of visits**

"In the last five years, have you visited the destination you chose this summer on the Southeastern Black Sea coast of Bulgaria?"

Table No. 6. Frequency of visits for Bulgarian tourists

		frequency	percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
valid	Once	47	30.7	30.7	30.7
	More	81	52.9	52.9	83.7
	no	25	16.3	16.3	100.0
	Total:	153	100.0	100.0	

52.9% of the respondents answered that they visited the selected destination more than once during the fixed time period. 30.7% have been to this place only once in the last five years, and 16.3% are choosing this destination for the first time. The answers to this question point to a clear tendency for Bulgarian tourists to visit a specific destination relatively often, and usually the reasons for this subjective choice are concluded in the presence of several characteristics - the destination combines the purpose of the trip and the tourist product as a set of services, from which tourists have been satisfied with; its attractiveness satisfies the needs and perceptions of vacationers; its territory is interesting for visitors and its features satisfy their needs and desires (See Table No. 6).

➤ **Future holiday intentions**

"Do you perceive the tourist destinations along the South-Eastern Black Sea coast of Bulgaria as a potential place for your future vacation?" An impressive number - 85.6% of the surveyed Bulgarians answered affirmatively and only 14.4% stated that they would not choose this destination in the future. The answers to this question confirm that there is a tendency for significant repeat visits.

Table. № 7. Future holiday intentions

		frequency	percent	Valid percent	Cumulative per.
Valid	yes	131	85.6	85.6	85.6
	no	22	14.4	14.4	100.0
	Total:	153	100.0	100.0	

Analysis of demographic characteristics – gender, age, education, marital status, children.

By gender, the data from the survey report that the majority of surveyed Bulgarian tourists are women (62.1%), while men are almost twice as many - 37.9%. We specify that the empirically obtained results cannot be a criterion for the predominance of the female gender in tourist trips and vacations as a regularity, but correlate with the fact that when conducting the research, women were more likely to fill in the questionnaires provided to them.

Regarding the age groups, the percentage distribution is as follows: The age group from 18 to 24 years makes up 47.7% of the trips; 19.6% are in the 25-34 age range;



20.3% indicate that they are aged 35-44; 8.5% are between 45 and 54 years old; 3.3% fall into the 55-64 age group, and Bulgarians over the age of 65 travel the least - only 0.7%. The high percentage values in the youngest age group also determine the parameters in the "Education" category - only 24.2% note that they have a higher education. 75.8% of the respondents noted that they had a secondary education, but at the time of the survey, a significant part of them had the status of university students. In the "marital status" column, the answers "Unmarried" predominate (62.7%). "Married/married/living on a family basis" make up 37.3% of the respondents. One third of the surveyed persons (30.1%) indicate that they have children. 69.9% are without children.

➤ **Selected destination**

The favorable geographical position and climatic characteristics of the South-Eastern Black Sea destinations make them preferred places for summer recreation among Bulgarian tourists. In general, it seems that there is no high concentration towards any specific destination. A relatively even distribution of the tourist flow to the designated resorts is observed, with the largest number of respondents (15.7%) choosing to spend their vacation in Sozopol and Sunny Beach (11.8%). 10.5% of the surveyed Bulgarians indicated Nessebar, and 8.5% gave their preference to Elenite. Similar percentages are observed for Sveti Vlas, Pomorie, Primorsko and Tsarevo, respectively 7.2%, 6.5%, 5.9% and 5.2%. Duni is the preferred resort for 4.6%, and Ravda is the choice for 3.9%. The percentage is the same for the holiday villages of Chernomorets, Ahtopol and Sinemorets (3.3%) and Aheloy, Lozenets and Varvara (2%).

DISCUSSIONS

For the period June - September 2021, a little over 2 million and 300 thousand Bulgarians planned a summer holiday, with 54% preferring to spend their summer holidays in our country. A study by the research center "Trend" reports that 44% of Bulgarians believe that Bulgaria is becoming an increasingly better place for summer tourism. The research is representative of the adult population and was conducted using the "face-to-face" method. The field of the survey was carried out between June 5 and 12, 2021. From the demographic breakdowns, it is clear that young people and those living in the capital are to the greatest extent planning a vacation - nearly three quarters of 18-29 year olds and two thirds of those aged between 30 and 39 years. More than half of the respondents indicate the Bulgarian Black Sea coast as a preferred destination. The absolute favorite for two-thirds of them is the Southern Black Sea coast. According to the data of the research center, 65% of Bulgarians declare that they will vacation with their family, and approximately one third (about 31%) say that they will be with friends. For just over a quarter (28%), the resort (the place itself) is the leading criterion when planning their holiday. The second leading reason for choosing is the price of overnight stays (20%), and the availability of all-inclusive packages is the leading choice for 12% of planners. Only 8% share that peace and quiet is a leading criterion, and this is mostly among people over 60 years old. 42% of Bulgarians planning a holiday in the summer are of the opinion that compared to foreign tourists, Bulgarian tourists are not equally served and do not receive the same quality. (<https://rctrend.bg/project/Нагласи-на-българите-към-лестния-туризм/>).

For the purposes of this study, an own survey was conducted among Bulgarian tourists. Taking into account the indicated numerical values, the following conclusions can be drawn: most often, Bulgarians who travel in the country are under

the age of 44, and among those surveyed, the largest percentage is reported among 18-24-year-olds. In most cases, they do not have preferences for a certain destination and rely on personal experience in choosing a resort and hotel. Usually, the decision to take a vacation is motivated by subjective attitudes and needs, and the attitude towards the destination is formed by previous experience, sharing by relatives and friends or by information from the Internet. About 50% of them make at least one trip a year for the purpose of rest, excursion or entertainment within the Southeastern Black Sea region of the country, which clearly proves that Bulgarians highly value the advantages of domestic sea tourism. The younger the people and the more active their lifestyle, the greater the share of travelers among them.

Family and non-family trips, with and without children, have a different share in the overall structure, with a predominance of non-family vacations. Bulgarians in general have a relatively high educational qualification, are active in the global network, use electronic services and new technologies. The main sources of travel information are the Internet, recommendations from friends, colleagues and relatives and the opinion of the partner (spouse). The longer journey, most often within 7 – 14 days, takes place in the summer when journeys are undertaken to more distant destinations. For the most part, Bulgarians are satisfied with their choice of destination and clearly state their intention to visit the chosen vacation spot again. For most of them, the optimal amount they could spend for one person for a week's vacation stay is no more than 500 euros. When choosing, they are attracted by various top offers, promotions and discounts. During the active summer season, Bulgarian tourists appreciate the potential of the South-Eastern Black Sea tourist destinations and are of the opinion that Bulgaria has become a better place for summer tourism in recent years. They express open satisfaction with the nature, cleanliness and tranquility of their native resorts. Their ideas about the ideal vacation are mainly related to the natural and climatic features of the sea destination, to the tranquility and security, to the quality of service and food, to the attractions and entertainment programs and to the proximity to the beach and the sea, such as the presence of these characteristics is closely related to the age and activity level of the traveler. With increasing age, the share of practitioners of a form of specialized tourism increases. This is especially true for travelers over the age of 55, a large proportion of whom place significant importance on the lower price and the possibility of applying medical procedures.

CONCLUSION

One of the main features of post-COVID-19 tourism is the requirement for health safety, i.e. the possible minimization of the danger of infection with coronavirus. This requirement implies, again, the observance of social distancing and a guarantee of the highest standards of hygiene in the catering and accommodation facilities. At the same time, the requirements of the new tourist for uniqueness and satisfaction when visiting a given destination remain unchanged. Combined, these requirements are driving the ever-growing popularity of self-drive travel. In this way, the gathering of unknown people in public transport is avoided, time flexibility and mobility are increased, and also the possibility of visiting different from traditional tourist destinations. This, in turn, leads to the rise of little-known or non-existent pre-pandemic new tourist destinations that offer unique experiences and relative safety due to the lack of overcrowding (i.e. over-tourism).