

**UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS – VARNA**

**FACULTY “MANAGEMENT”**

**DEPARTMENT OF “ECONOMICS AND LABOUR ORGANISATION”**

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**Stefka Veselinova Hristova**

**INCREASING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF A  
CONFERENCE TOURISM DESTINATION /THE  
EXAMPLE OF MUNICIPALITY OF VARNA/**

**ABSTRACT**

of a dissertation for award of Doctor’s degree of Education  
and Science in the professional field of Tourism 3.9.,  
scientific specialty Economics and Management (Tourism)

**ACADEMIC ADVISOR:  
Prof. Stoyan Marinov, PhD**

**VARNA  
2024**

The dissertation was discussed and directed for public defense at an extended council of the Department of „*Economics and Organization of Tourism*“ at the University of Economics - Varna.

The dissertation consists of an introduction (7 pages), a statement in three chapters (178 pages), conclusion (8 pages), and a list of references used (7 pages). The main text contains 10 tables, 33 figures. The list of sources used consists of 111 references. There are 4 appendices to the dissertation.



The dissertation defense will take place on ..... at ..... in hall .... of the University of Economics - Varna at a meeting of the scientific jury appointed by Order ..... of the Rector of the University of Economics - Varna.

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Author: Stefka Veselinova Hristova

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# I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTIC OF THE THESIS

## 1. Relevance of the problem

The competitiveness of countries is a phenomenon subject to various factors. The European model of competitiveness research focuses on the relationship between the process of wealth creation and a nation's standard of living and prosperity. At the beginning of the 21st century, competitiveness is seen as a way forward that does not entail winners and losers, but a pattern of competing countries for shared prosperity, well-being and economic strength. In the competitive rivalry of nations, tourism is a major factor in enhancing national competitiveness.

The pandemic of Covid - 19 caused great damage to tourism. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2020 the Gross Domestic Product of global tourism had declined by 49.1 % from 2019, which is a loss of US \$4.5 trillion in absolute terms. 62 million jobs had been closed.<sup>1</sup>

A major segment of the tourism industry is conference tourism, which is broadly identified with the organization of congresses, conferences, business meetings, business trips and business events. On this basis, in tourism practice the term "conference tourism" overlaps in meaning and content with the recently emerging abbreviation "MICE tourism", meaning: business meetings, incentive travel, conferences and exhibitions. Conference tourism or MICE tourism is important for the development of tourist destinations. It is associated with the construction of specific infrastructure and superstructure (transport passenger terminals, congress halls, exhibition centres, hotel complexes, information technologies, etc.) and with the creation of a special tourist service organisation.

With the international tourism market becoming a "buyer's market" and intense global competition redistributing market shares of tourism venues, issues of competitiveness of conference tourism destinations are becoming extremely relevant.

## 2. Subject and object of the study

**The subject** of research in the dissertation *is the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a tourist destination for conference tourism.*

The present dissertation has as its **object** of study *the municipality of Varna as a tourist destination for conference tourism, interpreted in the context of the general theory of tourism and in particular - of tourism management.*

## 3. Aim and objectives of the study

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<sup>1</sup> WTTC. GLOBAL ECONOMIC IMPACT & TRENDS 2021. Available online: <https://wttc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Global%20Economic%20Impact%20and%20Trends%202021.pdf> (June 2022)

**The aim** of the study is *on the basis of a developed theoretical model for the evaluation of the competitiveness of the tourist destination for conference tourism to analyze the competitiveness of Varna municipality and to propose strategic directions for the formation and development of its competitive advantages in the field of conference tourism.*

The set objective determines the solution of the following specific **research tasks**:

*First, clarifying the nature of conference tourism;*

*Second, systematizing the theoretical aspects of tourism destination competitiveness and the models for its study;*

*Third, identifying the factors, criteria, indicators and methods for research and evaluation of the main components of a tourist destination and at the same time the factors of its competitiveness: tourist resources, infrastructure, tourist superstructure, security and safety systems, product palette, prices, distribution systems and marketing communications;*

*Fourth, developing a methodology for assessing the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination at the municipal level;*

*Fifth, characteristics of the development of conference tourism in Bulgaria and Varna municipality;*

*Sixth, analysis and evaluation of the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a destination for conference tourism based on the results of an empirical study of the opinion of the tourism business and organizations using the conference product of the municipality;*

*Seventh, preparation of a SWOT analysis of Varna Municipality as a tourist destination for conference tourism;*

*Eighth, revealing trends in the development of conference tourism;*

*Ninth, formulating proposals for improving the components of Varna Municipality as a destination for conference tourism;*

*Tenth, outlining guidelines for managing the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a destination for conference tourism.*

#### **4. Research thesis and hypotheses**

The research thesis of this dissertation is that **the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination is a function of multiple factors**, the main ones being: *infrastructure, superstructure, accessibility, security and safety systems, marketing mix, effective organisation and partnership between stakeholders.*

The proof of the thesis is based on the acceptance or rejection of the following hypotheses (H) :

H1. The competitiveness of a conference tourism destination is a resultant variable of the correct combination of the destination's content components in line with the profile of conference users.

H2. Varna Municipality has conditions for the development of conference tourism.

H3. Varna Municipality is more competitive than its direct competitors.

H4. Varna Municipality has the potential to increase its competitiveness as a tourist destination for conference tourism.

## **5. Research tools**

The aim and objectives of the development determine the use of the following main **research models**:

*First*, a descriptive-inventory, which reveals the characteristics of the internal and external environment of Varna as a tourist destination;

*Second*, a discovery approach, which is used to distinguish competitive disadvantages and advantages on the main components of Varna as a tourist destination for conference tourism;

*Third*, a cause and effect approach, which in a laboratory setting outlines strategic directions for forming competitive advantages for the destination under study.

For the interpretation of the data collected on the research issues and the formulation of reasoned conclusions in the development are used mainly two general scientific methods - induction (overall characterization of the system of Varna municipality as a tourist destination) and deduction (conceptualization of strategic directions for increasing the competitiveness of Varna municipality as a tourist destination).

## **6. Information Assurance**

The research in this dissertation is based on data from a variety of secondary sources as well as data from an empirical study. Specialized scientific publications by Bulgarian and foreign authors have been systematically studied. A total of 111 literature and information sources were used, including 35 titles in Bulgarian; 52 foreign titles and 24 specialized websites.

## **7. Main limitations and problems of the research work**

The present study is bound in certain limitations.

*First*, a limitation exists due to the lack of adequate and reliable statistical information on the problem under consideration, which creates difficulties in research work;

*Second*, the study is limited by the entrepreneurial confidentiality of information on the factors we investigated that determine the competitiveness of Varna municipality as a tourist destination.

*Third*, the empirical research is limited to the competitiveness of a tourist destination at the municipal level and specifically to the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna.

## **II. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION**

### **1. Structure of the dissertation**

The structure of the dissertation is determined by the combination of its subject, object, aims and objectives and reflects the author's approach to the research.

The dissertation consists of an introduction (7 pages), a statement in three chapters (178 pages), a conclusion (8 pages), and a list of references used (7 pages). The main text contains 10 tables and 33 figures. The list of sources used consists of 111 references. There are 4 appendices to the thesis.

### **2. Content of the dissertation**

The content of the dissertation is in line with the set tasks and is presented in the following sequence:

#### **CONTENT**

#### **Abbreviations used**

#### **Introduction**

#### **Chapter One. Theoretical foundations of conference tourism**

##### 1.1. Essence of conference tourism

##### 1.2. Competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism

##### 1.3. Methodology for Competitiveness Research of a Conference Tourism Destination

#### **Chapter Two. Analysis of the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination**

##### 2.1. Development of conference tourism in

##### 2.2. Characteristics of conference tourism in Varna municipality

##### 2.3. Competitiveness Assessment for Varna Municipality as a Destination for Conference Tourism

#### **Chapter Three. Guidelines for increasing the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination**

##### 3.1. Trends in the development of conference tourism

##### 3.2. Improving the components of the marketing mix of Varna Municipality as a destination for conference tourism

##### 3.3. Managing the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination

#### **Conclusion**



## List of literature and internet resources used Applications

### III. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

#### CHAPTER ONE

Chapter one of the dissertation aims to present the conceptual framework of conference tourism, theoretical and methodological aspects of the study of competitiveness of a conference tourism destination.

**In § 1.1. The essence of conference tourism** is defined as the term "*conference tourism*". Conference tourism is a form of business tourism, which consists in travelling and staying in a destination in order to participate in a scientific, business or political event. The essence of conference tourism is to create conditions for a favorable atmosphere for the event, to enable meetings between participants, exchange of experience, discussions, information, creation of business contacts and negotiations and last but not least to give delegates the opportunity to get acquainted with the cultural and historical attractions of the destination, entertainment, entertainment and relaxation off the record. In this sense, conference tourism includes the overall preparation, organization and holding of an event, as well as the accompanying cognitive and entertainment programs.

On the basis of the interpretations of various authors, the analogous term of conference tourism in tourism theory and practice - *MICE tourism* is discussed.<sup>2</sup> MICE tourism, understood as a set of meetings, incentive trips, conferences and exhibitions, is a type of tourism in which large groups, with pre-planned events, gather at a specific location and at a regulated time. Recently, there has been a trend in practice to use the term "business meetings industry" to avoid confusion from the acronym.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, the factors for the development of conference tourism are distinguished - *urbanization*, business development and economy; *the promotion of business meetings and events*, *the improvement of safety and security of business trips*, *the desire to extend the tourist season in the destination*, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Getz, D. Event Tourism: Definition, event tourism and research in *Tourism Management*, vol. 29 No 3, 2008.; Kadieva, S., K. Yancheva. Varna as a destination for the development of MICE TOURISM, scientific proceedings of the round table "Specialized types of tourism" 2-4 June, Academic Publishing House of the Agrarian University-Plovdiv, Vol. LX, Vol. 1, 2016; Marinov, S. MICE tourism: contemporary theoretical and practical aspects, MICE tourism: festivals, incentive events, conferences, exhibitions. Ed. Slavena, 2019; Yancheva, K. Opportunities for the development of MICE tourism in the city of Varna (on the example of the cultural and entertainment complex "Sea Casino", MICE tourism: festivals, incentive events, conferences, exhibitions. Slavena Publishing House, 2019

<sup>3</sup> ICCA "Definition of "MICE"". *International Congress & Convention Association*. Retrieved , May 30, 2007

**In § 1.2. Competitiveness of a tourist destination for conference tourism** presents the theoretical aspects of the competitiveness of tourist places offering conference tourism. The concepts of competitiveness of M. Porter and St. Garelli are discussed.<sup>4</sup> Revealing the specificity of the competitiveness of the tourist destination on the basis of a critical analysis of the theoretical formulations of authors such as M. Ribov, M. Neshkov, S. Marinov, V. Kazandzhieva, B. Ritchie and G. Crouch, L. Dwyer, E. Heath, O. Bahar and M. Kozak, etc.<sup>5</sup> Special attention is paid to the research of the competitiveness of a tourist destination on the basis of the Competitiveness Index in “Travel and Tourism” developed and used by the World Economic Forum.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the determinants that influence the development of a conference tourism destination are systematized - accessibility, security and safety, conference infrastructure; accommodation and catering facilities; leisure entertainment opportunities.

**In § 1.3. Methodology for Competitiveness Research of a Conference Tourism Destination**<sup>7</sup> presents the author's model and methodology for research and evaluation of the competitiveness of a conference tourist destination. The research model in Figure 1 integrates the elements of the marketing mix of a conference tourism destination, locked between the expectations and satisfaction of MICE tourism consumers. The conference product is presented in detail as a set of elements at two levels - central and peripheral (complementary). The central level includes the conference superstructure (halls, conference complexes), conference equipment and conference services. At the peripheral level, the accessibility of the destination, security and safety, accommodation and catering facilities in the tourist location are presented.

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<sup>4</sup> Porter, M. *Competitiveness of Nations*. Sofia, 2004; Garelli, St. *Competitiveness of Nations: The Fundamentals*, International Institute for Management Development (IMD), 2002.//<http://www.compilerpress.ca/Competitiveness/Anno/Anno%20Garelli%20CN%20Fundamentals.htm>, (Accessed on 15 June, 2023);

<sup>5</sup> Ribov, M. *Competitiveness Management in Tourism*, S, 2003; Ritchie, J.R., Brent, G. Crouch. I. *The competitive destination: A sustainable perspective*. *Tourism Management*. 21, 2000; Heath, E. *Towards a model to enhance Africa's sustainable tourism competitiveness*. *Proceedings of the Australian Tourism and Hospitality Research Conference*. Coffs Harbour, February 2003, 21-23. 04, 2002

//[www.up.ac.za/academic/economic/NEPAD.htm](http://www.up.ac.za/academic/economic/NEPAD.htm), oct., 2004; Dwyer, L., Ch. Kim. *Destination Competitiveness: Determinants and Indicators* (2003), DOI: 10.1080/13683500308667962; Dwyer, L., P. Forsyth, and R. Spurr (2004). “Evaluating Tourism's Economic Effects: New and Old Approaches.” *Tourism Management*, 25; Neshkov, M., S. Marinov, V. Kazandzhieva, T. Dyankov. *Competitiveness of the tourist destination*. Varna 2013; Fuchs, M., Kl. Weiermair. *Destination Benchmarking: An Indicator-System's Potential for Exploring Guest Satisfaction*, *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 42, February 2004, 212-225 DOI: 10.1177/0047287503258827, at Eindhoven Univ of Technology on January 9, 2015; Bahar, O., M. Kozak. *Advancing Destination Competitiveness Research: Comparison Between Tourists and Service Providers*. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 22(2) 2007

<sup>6</sup> World Economic Forum. *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019 Travel and Tourism at a Tipping Point* // [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_TTCR\\_2019.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2019.pdf) (Accessed on 15 December, 2022)

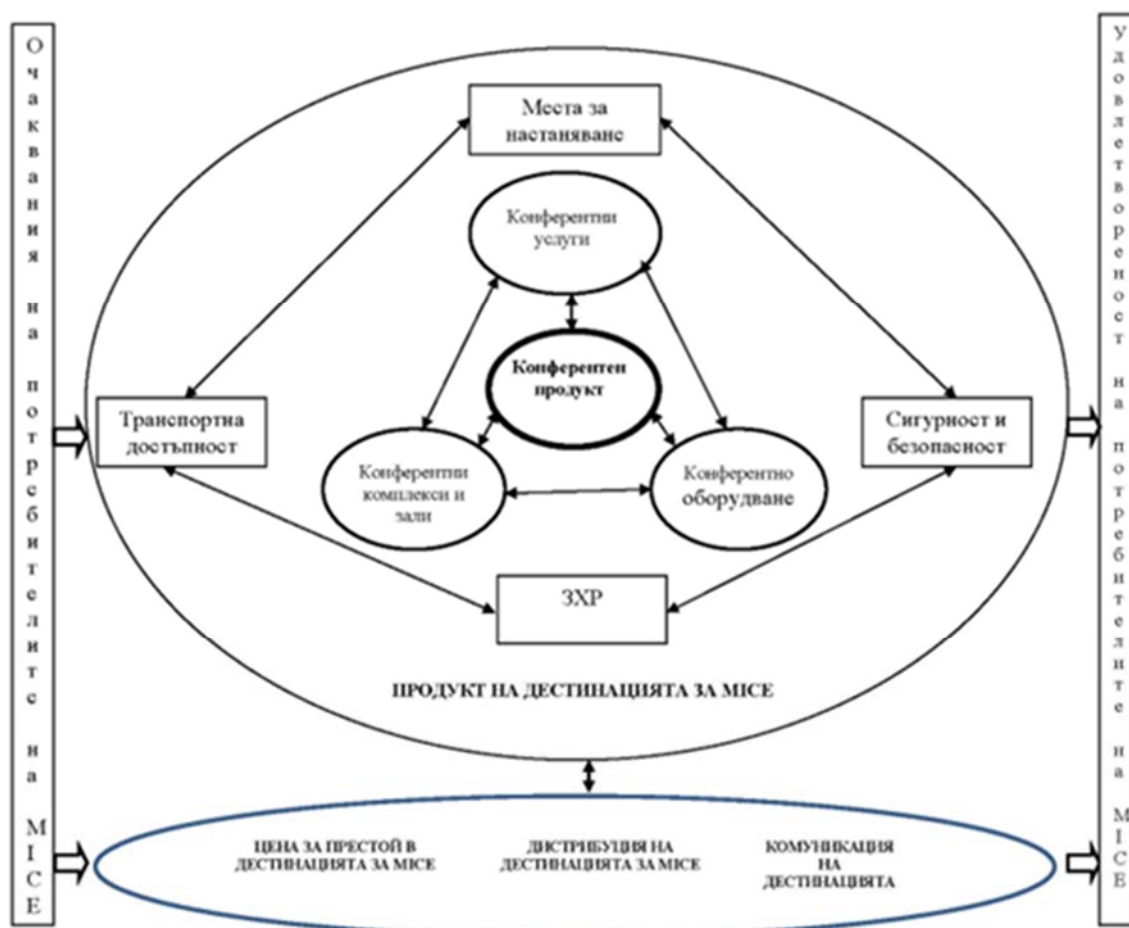


Figure 1. A model for the analysis and evaluation of the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination  
 Source: figure prepared by the author

The research methodology includes a questionnaire developed on the components of the model to explore the views of stakeholders. The proposed questionnaire for the needs of the study is of the following type: **a standard questionnaire** - the individual questions and answer options are given in advance and in a specific sequence. For the development of the questionnaire a model of a questionnaire for the assessment of the competitiveness of a tourist destination was used with the authorship of M. Neshkov, S. Marinov, T. Dyankov, G. Ilieva.<sup>8</sup>

A methodology is followed to conduct the survey, which consists of preparing, conducting and analysing the survey results.

<sup>8</sup> Neshkov, M. Marinov, S., Kazandzhieva, V., Dyankov, T., Ilieva, G., Competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a Tourist Destination, Science and Economics, 2014

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Analysis of the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination**

Chapter two of the dissertation is devoted to the analysis and evaluation of the competitiveness of conference tourism in Varna municipality.

**In § 2.1. Development of conference tourism in Bulgaria** - a retrospective of the Bulgarian meetings and events industry from its inception to the present day is presented.

The development of conference tourism in the world is mainly dictated by convention bureaus - specialized marketing companies that represent and promote the conference destination on the tourism market. In 2016, the Bulgarian Congress Bureau (BCB) association was established with founding NGOs and private associations and is based in the National Palace of Culture. BCB is a member of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), which is the largest active international organization in the event industry. BCB is actively working to promote Bulgaria's opportunities for conference tourism.

The conclusion is that Bulgaria has good conditions for holding business meetings, congresses and corporate events - for this purpose our country has the necessary superstructure. Along with the well-established superstructure, the infrastructure is essential for the country, its condition is decisive for the development of tourism, including conference tourism. One of the important infrastructure components for the conference industry is the state of air transport and ground facilities (airports), as the bulk of business travel is done by plane. Bulgaria can boast of investments in infrastructure and technological improvements at Sofia, Varna and Burgas airports.

**§2.2. Characteristics of conference tourism in Varna municipality.** The paragraph characterizes Varna municipality as a destination for conference tourism. A distinctive feature of the destination is its bivalence - on the one hand there is business and business tourism, and on the other there are elements of holiday, leisure and cultural tourism. This bivalence brings significant positives to the municipality of Varna in view of its anthropogenic and natural features.

The geographical location, the infrastructure, the bioclimatic potential, the attractive coastline for tourists as well as the economic and human resources provide excellent opportunities for the prosperity of the municipality as a tourist destination. Rich natural resources and ancient history make Varna one of the most attractive and famous resort centres in Europe and the largest in the Black Sea region.

The hospitality industry offering services in conference and event tourism has high-category accommodation. On the territory of the Municipality of Varna, according to the NSI, in 2020 there are 70 hotels in the four and five star class with a total number of beds in these accommodations of 30 074.

The municipality has modern specialized centers for conference and MICE tourism - the Palace of Culture and Sports and the Festival and Congress Center.

Festival and Congress Centre (FCC) - is a separate cultural institute with great functional possibilities. The eleven halls of different capacity and purpose offer opportunities for congress, cultural and social events. FCC is a member of three of the most prestigious international congress associations - International Congress and Conference Association (ICCA); European Federation of Congress Towns (EFCTA); International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC). Membership in these organizations not only means prestige and recognition, but it provides the FCC with employment base, commitments and revenue.

The Palace of Culture and Sports (PCS) is a multi-purpose center that has 6 halls with seating capacities from 55 to 5 200. The complex itself is an attractive venue for the city's significant events, both sporting and cultural, as well as numerous meetings, events and exhibitions of national and international character. For more than 20 years the PCS has been the owner of the Summer Theatre, which is located in the heart of the Sea Garden, with 2341 seats. With its extremely picturesque interior and exterior, the venue is a sought-after stage for local and international performers.

### **§2.3. Competitiveness Assessment for Varna Municipality as a Destination for Conference Tourism**

The assessment of the competitiveness of Varna as a MICE destination is based on a field survey. Experts in the field of supply, organization and consumption of specific services of conference tourism, tourism professionals and users of MICE services were included in the study. The survey specifically is target *six main groups: representatives of centres and exhibition complexes; intermediaries-organizers of conference tourism; hotel complexes; organizations-users of conference tourism and NGO organizations* - all with a common mission - the development of conference tourism in Varna.

The competitiveness of Varna Municipality is examined by factors identified and integrated in the developed research model. The survey asks respondents to rate the destination on individual indicators using the Likert scale.

In a logical sequence, the survey includes assessments of the most important factors that influence business and business tourism: *transport accessibility, destination image, the availability of a specialised environment in the meetings and events industry, high category accommodation, dining, hobby and entertainment venues.*

The survey was implemented twice in one preceding and one following period to track changes in the determinants of conference tourism in the destination. In 2019, the first survey was conducted to assess the factors influencing Varna's attractiveness as a conference tourism destination. A total of 53 tourism experts and professionals were included in the study. A second survey is conducted between April and November 2021, with 66 tourism representatives participating.

Respondents' overall assessment of the accessibility, popularity and image of destination Varna increases in 2021 (compared to the previous survey period). There has been a downward trend in security and safety criteria, the enabling environment for MICE tourism development as a result of the SARS Cov-2 pandemic and the global restriction on community movement and meetings (2020 -2021).

The communication infrastructure factor follows its own smooth and steady pace of development. An important prerequisite for sustainable growth, innovation and the provision of a wide range of digital services based on the rapid exchange of large volumes of data is the availability of modern infrastructure. The degree of digitalization of Varna's telecommunications network is three times higher than the national average.

An important point of the survey is the comparison of Varna Municipality on the indicator "quality-price ratio" with major competing destinations for conference tourism at national and international level. Varna Municipality is compared with Burgas, Plovdiv and Sofia municipalities. At cross-border level, the comparison is between the municipalities of Varna, Constanta (Romania) and Thessaloniki (Greece).

As a result of the evaluations and comparisons, the survey systematizes the strengths and weaknesses of Varna as a destination for conference tourism.

The main competitive advantages of Varna as a destination for conference tourism are:

- ✓ Favorable tourist-geographical location;
- ✓ High degree of accessibility to major source markets for conference tourism;
- ✓ Varna is a well-recognized destination in the tourism and MICE industry;
- ✓ Varna has enough high-category hotels, conference halls and centers with capacity for the needs of business travelers;
- ✓ Варна има по-ясна концепция за развитието на MICE туризма;

Weaknesses of the municipality as a destination for conference tourism are:

- ✓ Varna needs better and innovative infrastructure;
- ✓ Varna is lagging behind in the construction of facilities for attraction and entertainment of visitors and residents of the city;
- ✓ Varna is lagging behind in the construction of access facilities for people with disabilities and mobility difficulties;
- ✓ There is a need to overcome the supply of quality tourism services at a low cost, which in turn is directly related to motivation and staffing in business tourism;
- ✓ Businesses need to adapt more quickly to new hybrid forms of event delivery;
- ✓ There is no institutional unit at municipal level - a convention bureau to market the destination along the lines of conference tourism.

On the basis of the theoretical discussion, the implemented field survey and the analyzed results, the formulated hypotheses are proved as follows:

First, the hypothesis that the competitiveness of a conference tourism destination is a resultant variable of the correct matching of the destination's content components according to the profile of conference consumers is confirmed.

Second, the assumption that Varna Municipality has the conditions for the development of conference tourism is confirmed.

Third, it is established that Varna Municipality has competitive advantages over its direct competitors - national (Burgas, Plovdiv and Sofia) and international (Thessaloniki and Constanta).

Fourth, it confirms the assumption that Varna Municipality has the potential to increase its competitiveness as a tourist destination for conference tourism.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Guidelines for increasing the competitiveness of Varna Municipality as a conference tourism destination**

#### **§ 3.1. Trends in the development of conference tourism**

The main factors that will influence the development of conference tourism can be divided into two groups - factors of the past and factors of the future.

*The factors of the future* are those that will directly determine the positioning of a destination for MICE tourism:

- Social networks and mobile devices;
- Hybrid and virtual business meetings;
- Experience in running "new" generation meetings - technically trained moderators.

The trends of conferences, business meetings and "new generation" events will be related to systematization and structuring in the personalization and digitalization of events. In the near future, the main actors (hosts) of the live meetings will be - the host of the event, the interior designer and the digital operator.

Modern man's concern for his own health and material well-being as well as for the protection of the environment makes him a sensible consumer. The aggregation of sustainable products by relevant attribute forms a sustainable MICE industry through the creation of "green" or responsible conference centres. Event organisers are increasingly analysing international climate change issues and implementing 'green' strategies at MICE events.

Business tourists in Europe show the preferences of business travelers and shed light on corporate attitudes. The emergence of a new modern business tourist, in which professional and personal development are associated. It is important to note that traveling business tourists pay more and more attention to the possibility of a full night's rest and shorter travel time. Nowadays, the conference tourist makes his choice largely influenced by the positive aspect of the trip, productivity and work intensity.

The importance of international events is also expressed in their informational and social effect, which is expressed in the exchange of information between politicians, cultural figures, etc., and if the events are on a budgetary basis, they pursue a political and informational effect. These international forums have a pronounced economic effect. The dynamics of tourism on a global scale are pushing more and more responsible and interactive tourists to the fore.

### **§ 3.2. Improvement of the components of Varna municipality as a destination for conference tourism**

Increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism is primarily related to improving the quality of the tourist product. The quality of the total tourism product is constantly changing as a result of changes in its components - the included services and goods.

The quality of services in MICE tourism and in particular in the municipality of Varna can also be considered in an ecological context. The ecological challenges of modern marketing are connected both to the new technologies of active intervention in nature and to the new requirements of people for the way of life (work, rest, food, clothing, etc.). The Municipality of Varna, as a destination offering tourist products, synthesizes all resources and efforts in the focus of the ultimate goal – creating an ecological product with properties that satisfy the needs of visitors better than competing destinations.

The Municipality of Varna should create a product for conference tourism, which is based on scientific and technical achievements, satisfies the specific needs of MAIS tourists, but also satisfies their traditional tourist needs of socializing with colleagues and friends, getting to know the historical and cultural destination traditions and free time entertainment.

The improvement of the components of the Varna destination to increase its competitiveness regarding MICE tourism requires the undertaking of certain activities that directly affect the local executive administration of the Varna municipality. In order to increase the price competitiveness of the destination, the "Tourism" Directorate - Varna must use seven indicators - the country of origin of the consumers (issue market); market competition; country of visit (receiving market); collection of relative price data; the prices and their cost share are summarized in the annual budget of the Municipality of Varna; the ratio of purchasing power (PPP - Purchasing Power Parities) of tourist costs must be calculated; the exchange rate.

### **§ 3.3. Management of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism.**

The management and planning of human resources is a major structural component in the development of the municipality of Varna, as a destination for MICE tourism. The conference industry is in direct interaction and closely related to human activity.

When we talk about a marketing approach, it is necessary to evaluate: is there a developed concept for the development of MICE tourism in the municipality of Varna according to the new attitudes and challenges in the industry for conference events. The ideas, expectations and intentions of all stakeholders must be taken into account when developing the plan. This is most often accomplished with the preparation of a good plan regarding *branding, positioning, core competencies and the new user* of the XXI century.

For the branding of the municipality of Varna as a "City of business meetings and events" it is necessary: for the destination to establish its brand for the conference



tourism segments and the business partners in these segments. Any successful destination must argue its "tourism and economic" advantages to corporate clients and MICE industry associations.

The interested parties in the destination Varna should work both for positioning (creating an image or identity in the mind of the target market) and for repositioning (changing the identity of the destination as a product, compared to the identity of a waning competitive advantage), as there is always in given the change of opinion of the participants in the MICE sector and its constant evolution.

In the management of the Municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism, it should emphasize three key areas: use of *innovation and originality* in the offer of goods and services as a competitive destination; *creation and implementation of an effective marketing framework* to attract the attention of the potential market of MICE tourism; providing *unforgettable experiences* for the visitors-participants in the MICE events.

In summary, specific recommendations are outlined for the management of the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism:

First, the concept of the development of the municipality of Varna as a "MICE tourism destination" should be included in the municipality's strategic planning documents for development until 2030.

Second, it is necessary to create a congress office on the territory of the municipality (Varna Congress Center - VCC).

Third, it is necessary to maintain an excellent communication infrastructure, influencing the increasing traffic, having the coverage, speed and reliability necessary to meet the needs of modern digital life.

Fourth, actions to increase the length of stay of business tourists.

Fifth, increasing the income from MICE tourism.

Sixth, increasing interest in types of tourism additional to MICE tourism: cultural, gourmet and wine, entertainment, spa and wellness, etc.

Varna is among the most popular Black Sea destinations in Europe and a city of four seasons. This makes it a suitable place for the development of MICE tourism.

## CONCLUSION

In the conclusion, the analyzes and conclusions regarding the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism are summarized. The theoretical and practical guidelines for the management and increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism have been systematized.

The main conclusion from the analysis of conference destination Varna is that the municipality of Varna has the conditions and potential for the development of MICE tourism. The destination has a vision and planned operational measures regarding the future development of the industry for business meetings and events, which is the result

of the long-term accumulated experience, knowledge and realization of MICE tourism in a real competitive environment.

The implementation of the shared ideas for increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism has its favorable prerequisite in the desire and readiness of all interested parties in the destination for partnership.

## LITERATURE

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#### IV. REFERENCES FOR DISSERTATION CONTRIBUTIONS

As a result of the completed research work on the dissertation work, more important scientific and practical contributions can be highlighted:

**First**, the theory of defining and classifying conference tourism as a manifestation of business meetings and events is clarified. The factors determining the development and competitiveness of the MICE tourism destination are systematized.

**Second**, an author's model was developed for research and assessment of the competitiveness of a destination for conference tourism, which was tested on the example of the municipality of Varna.

**Third**, the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism was researched, analyzed and evaluated through a survey. The strengths and weaknesses of the destination are brought out by comparison with main national (Burgas, Plovdiv, Sofia) and international (Thessaloniki, Constanta) competitive destinations.

**Fourth**, author's ideas and recommendations for increasing the competitiveness of the municipality of Varna as a destination for conference tourism are proposed.

## V. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

### Articles

1. Hristova, S. (2016) Contemporary trends in the development of congress tourism in Varna". In Scientific works. Agricultural University - Plovdiv, Specialized types of tourism - challenges and perspectives LX., vol.1, ed. Academic publishing house of the Agrarian University Plovdiv, pp. 361-368. ISSN 1312-6318

### Reports

1. Hristova, S., (2017) "Education as a factor for competitiveness and the development of the European tourism industry". In Proceedings of the VIII International Scientific Conference "The Economy in the Changing World - National, Regional and Global Dimensions" (IPS-2017). ed. "Science and Economics" - University of Varna, pp. 56-63, ISBN 978-954-21-0928-0

2. Hristova, S. (2018). Attitudes about the applicability of robotization and artificial intelligence in the tourism industry of Bulgaria. In: Collection of reports from the Black Sea Tourist Forum "Black Sea Region - a destination for sustainable tourism products", ed. Slavena - Varna, pp. 216-225, ISBN 978-619-190-122-7

3. Hristova S., M. Stoyanova (2019). The competitive advantages of the municipality of Varna as a destination for MICE tourism. In: Proceedings of the Black Sea Tourist Forum "MICE TOURISM: Festivals, incentives, conferences, exhibitions", ed. Slavena - Varna, pp. 198-207, ISBN 978-619-190-149-4

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*I, the undersigned Dorothea Angelova Draganova, ID №: 0149271053, certify the accuracy of my translation from Bulgarian into English of the attached document – **ABSTRACT of a dissertation**. The translation consists of 20 (twenty) pages. Translator: Dorothea Angelova Draganova*