

**UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - VARNA**  
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**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF VARNA  
MUNICIPALITY AS A TOURIST DESTINATION**

**SUMMARY**

**of a Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor  
in Professional Field 3.9 “Tourism”,  
Doctoral Programme “Economics and Management (Tourism)”**

**SUPERVISOR:**

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**VARNA**

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The dissertation comprises 258 pages, structured as follows: Introduction (8 pages); Main Content in 4 chapters (203 pages); Conclusion (3 pages); References (9 pages). The main text includes 12 tables and 62 figures, providing comprehensive visual and statistical support for the study. The list of references features 166 titles, encompassing 132 books and 34 online sources. Additionally, the work includes 7 appendices totaling 25 pages.

The defense of the dissertation is scheduled to take place on ..... at ....., in room ..... of the University of Economics – Varna. The scientific jury for the defense has been appointed by Order ..... issued by the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna.

## I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION

### 1. Relevance and Importance of the Problem

The sustained growth of tourism over recent decades underscores the critical need for strategic planning, regulation, and management of the sector. This responsibility is shared among all stakeholders—tourists, local communities, municipal authorities, state institutions, tourist sites, and industry organizations—at international, national, and local levels. Research in this field traditionally highlights the significant *social, economic, and environmental impacts* of tourism on a destination, with success largely contingent on the interplay between these three dimensions. Complementing this perspective is the understanding that any economic activity, including tourism, relies heavily on its social legitimization and the tangible benefits it provides to society.

In recent decades, tourism has become a priority economic sector and a structural pillar of Bulgaria's economy, particularly in the Black Sea region. The economic profile of Varna Municipality distinctly reflects its tourism-oriented character. Notably, the municipality hosts 15.5% of Bulgaria's accommodation capacity and accounts for 15.9% of the total overnight stays in the country as of 2023<sup>1</sup>. Revenue from overnight stays exceeds BGN 355 million, representing 17.1% of Bulgaria's total overnight stay revenue. This performance is underpinned by the region's exceptional recreational resources, including mineral springs, cultural, historical, and archaeological landmarks, protected natural areas, well-developed infrastructure, robust transport connectivity, and the high quality of its tourism products. Despite these strengths, the tourism industry operates in a highly volatile environment. Challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, geopolitical instability, regulatory pressures distorting market mechanisms, inflation, economic recessions in key source markets, and diminishing competitiveness have created significant hurdles for sustainable growth. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further exacerbated many of these challenges, accelerating existing trends and presenting new complexities for Bulgarian tourism. In this context, the adoption and implementation of the concept of sustainable tourism development emerge as a pivotal countermeasure to address these issues and enhance the baseline performance of the tourism sector in Varna Municipality.

The circumstances, arguments, and conclusions presented thus far emphasize the significance and **timeliness of the topic**. It highlights the pressing need to rethink and enhance the role of *sustainable tourism development within Varna Municipality*. Tourism represents a

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<sup>1</sup> Calculations based on NSI: Activity of tourist accommodation establishments in Bulgaria.  
(<https://nsi.bg/bg/content/1847/туризъм>, accessed on 16/10/2024)

crucial element of the regional economy's structure, acting as the intersection where supply and demand converge. This intersection also manifests competing interests and, consequently, a concentration of potential conflicts. The linear-vector orientation of the research—examining the past, present, and future—establishes its relevance from theoretical, practical, and integrative perspectives. The study of Varna as a tourist destination is both cognitively and practically significant, aiming to develop a creative approach toward achieving long-term sustainability.

## **2. Subject and Object of the Study**

The **subject** of this dissertation is the sustainable development of a seaside destination, aligned with contemporary global trends and strategies for achieving balanced progress in tourist destinations.

The **object** of the study is the harmonious functioning of the tourism system within Varna Municipality. This includes the integration of various structural elements and dynamic interactions based on the principles of sustainable development.

## **3. Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The **aim** of this dissertation is *to identify the challenges and outline the prospects for the sustainable development of Varna Municipality as a tourist destination*. This aim is achieved through a theoretical review and analysis of the role and characteristics of tourism in the regional economy of the municipality. To accomplish this aim, the following **research tasks** have been defined:

- to examine the nature and characteristics of sustainable tourism development, based on its systematic conceptualization;
- to explore the origins and evolution of the concept of sustainable development as a framework for addressing inherent imbalances in tourism destinations;
- to define a methodology and select appropriate research tools for studying sustainable tourism development at the municipal level;
- to analyze the structural and functional characteristics of tourism in Varna Municipality and assess its level of sustainable development;
- to propose strategic guidelines for optimizing sustainable tourism development in Varna Municipality as an integral component of the regional economy.

## **4. Research Thesis and Hypotheses**

The **main thesis** of this study posits that the management of tourism within the Municipality of Varna has significant implications for the socio-cultural, environmental, and

especially economic dimensions, contributing to the efficiency and equity of its long-term sustainable development. To support this thesis, the following **working hypotheses** are proposed:

- *Hypothesis 1*: Mass tourism in Varna Municipality is compatible with the objectives and principles of sustainable development;
- *Hypothesis 2*: The concept of sustainable tourism development presents an opportunity, rather than a threat, for Varna as a tourist destination to enhance its competitiveness;
- *Hypothesis 3*: Sustainable tourism development in Varna is grounded in the municipality's unique local characteristics and needs, aligned with global principles and objectives for sectoral growth.

## **5. Research Tools and Limitations**

To achieve the research objective and address the outlined tasks, a comprehensive set of **research methods** has been employed, including: *scientific analysis and synthesis* to assess the current state of tourism development and examine the functional interrelations between its constituent elements; *induction and deduction* to derive general dependencies based on specific examples and to adapt established practices to the unique context of Varna Municipality; *analogical method* to identify commonalities with similar destinations; *comparison* to evaluate and contrast the quantitative and qualitative characteristics and draw conclusions; *statistical method, SWOT analysis, survey, expert evaluations, etc.*

The **limitations** of the object of the study and the formulation of the conclusions are influenced by several key factors: the extensive and fragmented nature of research on sustainable development, which presents challenges in synthesizing a unified perspective; the high differentiation and complexity of the tourism system, which operates as an object of intricate regulation and control. **The main problems** in the dissertation are related to methodological inconsistencies in the collection of statistical data across different sources, resulting in challenges regarding data comparability, as well as the high degree of subjectivity associated with many key indicators used to measure the level of sustainable tourism development within a destination.

## **6. Information Resources**

The information resources underpinning the study of the natural and economic environment, and specifically the state of tourism within Varna Municipality, include: studies and publications authored by Bulgarian and international scholars, the Internet, regulatory and strategic documents from international, national, and regional tourism organizations,

statistical data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and the Unified System of Tourism Information (ESTI), reports and materials provided by the Ministry of Tourism, the Municipality of Varna, and the Regional Inspectorate of Environment and Water (RIEW) - Varna; additional reports and publications from various ministries and agencies. The research for the dissertation was conducted during the period 2022–2024.

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

The structure of the dissertation reflects the author's research framework, aligned with its subject, object, goals, and objectives. The dissertation consists of 258 pages and is organized as follows: Introduction (8 pages); Main content in 4 chapters (203 pages); Conclusion (3 pages); and References (9 pages). The main text includes 12 tables and 62 figures, providing illustrative support for the research. The references comprise 131 sources, of which 59 are in Cyrillic and 72 in Latin, supplemented by 34 specialized websites. Additionally, the dissertation includes 7 appendices (25 pages).

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### III. OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

#### Chapter One. THEORETICAL STUDY OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

In § 1.1 "Prerequisites for Sustainable Development of a Tourist Destination", a systematization and critical interpretation of the theoretical foundations of sustainable tourism development is conducted.

The main objective of sub-paragraph 1.1.1 "Mass Tourism" is to examine the nature and driving forces behind the need for tourism, trace its historical development and evolution, and highlight the factors that have contributed to its consolidation and massification as an *economic, social, and cultural* phenomenon. The review of this dynamic process seeks to address the following questions: how and why was this process made possible; who or what initiated it; and is there a connection between the massification of tourism demand and other parallel social, economic, and cultural processes.

The answers to these questions are explored through historical analysis, focusing primarily on the development of activities closely tied to tourism: *travel and hospitality*, as well as the underlying motives for their emergence, such as trade, healing, religion, sport, and entertainment<sup>2</sup>.

In a historical context, it is evident that the organizational and social structures of travel have evolved dynamically from antiquity to the present day, shaped by technological advancements, demographic changes, and increasing economic prosperity. However, "the motives for travel appear to be largely constant"<sup>3</sup>.

Contemporary tourism as a phenomenon emerged as a direct result of industrialization and the profound societal changes of the 19th and 20th centuries. During this period, three critical prerequisites for the massification of tourist travel were established: (1) scientific and technological progress, (2) the regulation of working hours and the introduction of paid annual leave, and (3) the economic boom and the formation of the middle class in the second half of the 20th century, which set the stage for the "tourist explosion"<sup>4</sup> in Europe and globally.

This section also highlights data from the WTO (World Tourism Organization) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) that underscore the exponential growth of tourism worldwide. Tourism has transitioned from being an individual pursuit to a collective, mass-market demand, with projections indicating continued growth despite periodic

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<sup>2</sup> Neshkov, M., Marinov, S., Kazandzhieva, V. Introduction to Tourism. Varna: University of Economics Press, 2014, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Günter, W. Allgemeine Didaktik und Methodik der Studienreise. //Handbuch für Studienreiseleiter. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag GmbH, 2003, p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Krippendorf, J., Liegt im Tourismus der Keim zur Selbstzerstörung? // Natur und Land (vormals Blätter für Naturkunde und Naturschutz), Band 5-6, 1977, p.164.



economic cycles and global crises. For most economic sectors, discussions about the "limits to growth" tend to be secondary<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, tourism operates symbiotically with its natural and socio-cultural environment, making such limits a critical factor. Excessive growth in visitor numbers at a destination can lead to overcrowding, environmental degradation, and significant lifestyle shifts within local communities. As a result, a critical question arises: what is the threshold beyond which growth becomes unsustainable and is defined as 'excessive'? The study also addresses the modern challenge of "overtourism" as a manifestation of "overdevelopment", which extends beyond sheer visitor numbers to include the inefficiencies in managing a destination's *carrying capacity*.

Sub-paragraph **1.1.2 "Tourism Consumption Dynamics"** examines various aspects of sustainable tourism development (STD) from the perspective of visitors, categorized under tourism *demand*. In the context of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of consumer behavior, a distinction is made between "*consumption*," aimed at satisfying physiological needs and improving quality of life, and "*consumerism*," characterized by excessive consumption with a continually increasing value. In developed countries, tourism is increasingly transitioning into a fundamental necessity of life, with the trend of travel as a luxury or fashion giving way to its perception as a necessity. This shift has led to a standardization of mass tourism products, promoting travel that is progressively "cheaper, more resource-intensive, shorter, more frequent, more distant, and more luxurious<sup>6</sup>." The tourism industry, traditionally considered a "white" or "pure" sector in comparison to industrial production, is gradually accumulating and exacerbating negative impacts, particularly due to the mass nature of tourist travel in environmentally sensitive coastal and mountainous regions.

A number of authors have periodized the evolution of consumer behavior in relation to the economic, natural, and socio-cultural environment, emphasizing the responsibility borne by tourists as consumers of goods and services within the tourism industry. In the early stages of these processes, the awareness of the need to protect the environment was characteristic of a small group of individuals. Over time, however, consumption patterns have evolved, shifting towards values of prosperity, health, and quality, closely associated with the LOHAS movement<sup>7</sup>. LOHAS, which stands for "Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability," builds upon the principles of sustainable consumption, placing additional emphasis on health,

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<sup>5</sup> Kagermeier, A., Overtourism. München: UVK Verlag, 2021, S.17.

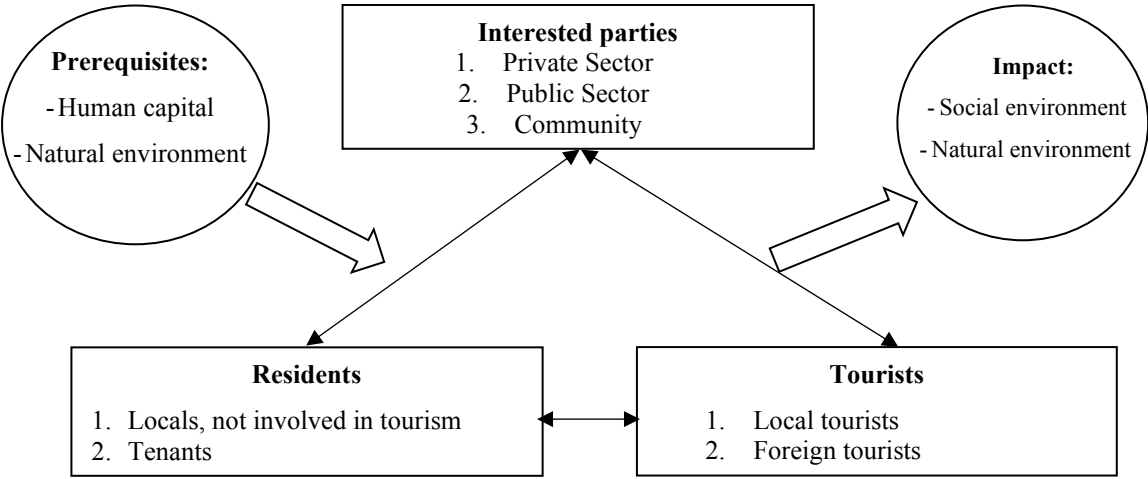
<sup>6</sup> Friedl, H., Tourismsethik. Theorie und Praxis der umwelt- und sozialverträglichen Reisens, München und Wien: Profil Verlag GmbH, 2002, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> The term "LOHAS" (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) refers to sustainably conscious consumers and was coined in 2000 by Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson through the book "The Cultural Creatives. How 50 million people are changing the world".

environmental protection, and social responsibility. What distinguishes LOHAS is its interpretation of sustainable living not as self-restraint or "doing without," but as "conscious good consumption."<sup>8</sup> This approach promotes a lifestyle that balances personal well-being with environmental and social considerations. In 1999, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) adopted the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism<sup>9</sup>, which identifies the individual tourist as a key actor within the tourism ecosystem, capable of influencing its other components through active interaction. The concept of the "*sustainable traveler*" (or responsible tourist) was introduced<sup>10</sup>.

**Sub-paragraph 1.1.3. "The Need for Sustainable Development of a Marine Tourist Destination"** focuses on the development of coastal areas and the associated "most widespread and generally accessible modern type of tourism – recreational (holiday) tourism."<sup>11</sup> This section explores both the economic and non-economic effects of tourism consumption, presenting both positive and negative outcomes.

Drawing on the "BLT"-model ("broker-local-tourist") proposed by Marc Miller, Jan Auyong, and Nina Hadley, the study identifies the key elements of the "coastal tourism system."<sup>12</sup> These include *tourism brokers*, *tourism locals*, and *tourists/visitors*, along with their interactions with one another and with the elements of their surrounding environment (see Fig. 1).



Source: Ibid, p. 8

**Fig. 1 BLT Model (Broker-Local-Tourist)**

<sup>8</sup> Choy, S., Feinberg, R.. The LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) Scale Development and Validation, Sustainability 2021, 13, 1598, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> UNWTO <https://www.unwto.org/global-code-of-ethics-for-tourism> (accessed 03.12.2022)

<sup>10</sup> Slocum, S., Aidoo, A., McMahon, K. The Business of Sustainable Tourism Development and Management. Oxon / New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Neshkov, M., Marinov, S., Kazandzhieva, V. Citation, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, M., Auyong, J., Hadley, N. Sustainable coastal tourism: Challenges for management, planning, and education. // In Proceedings of the 1999 international symposium on coastal and marine tourism: Balancing tourism and conservation, Washington Sea Grant Program and School of Marine Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, Oregon Sea Grant College Program, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, and Oceans Blue Foundation, Vancouver, BC, 2002, pp. 3-20.

In § 1.2 "Evolution of the Concept of Sustainable Tourism Development" the process and key strategic documents shaping the idea of sustainability within the tourism sector are examined. The emergence and evolution of the theory of sustainable development (SD) in the economy and society are driven by the objective need to conserve resources and ensure the future of humanity. The growing scope of human activities has gradually begun to resemble a "time bomb,"<sup>13</sup> with exponential economic growth and population increases colliding with the Earth's finite resources. Early studies emphasized that human activities cannot continue in a state of unsustainability indefinitely. Once the existing balance among ecology, economy, and society is disrupted, it will be restored in one of two ways: (1) through a "managed decline" (the imposition of regulatory constraints) until sustainable levels of activity are achieved, or (2) through a natural "collapse" (crisis or cataclysm), driven either by the forces of "nature" or the mechanisms of the "market"<sup>14</sup>.

The search for various methods and means to mitigate the negative consequences of human interaction with nature in political contexts has gradually established sustainable development (SD) as a leading *global doctrine* in the decisions and resolutions of the UN and numerous other international organizations. Originally derived from environmental studies, the concept of sustainable development has progressively expanded to encompass economic and social dimensions, as reflected in a series of international policy documents. In 1983, the UN established the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which published its report, *Our Common Future* (commonly known as the Brundtland Report), in 1987.<sup>15</sup> This report marked the first time that official policy systematized SD, defining it as "*a progress that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*"<sup>16</sup> It emphasized that development must balance economic, social, and environmental aspects in an equitable manner, while recognizing resource limitations and the need for intergenerational equity.

From the mid-1990s onward, numerous initiatives by international tourism and political organizations have significantly contributed to the recognition of SD as a fundamental prerequisite for the long-term prosperity of the tourism industry. The timeline

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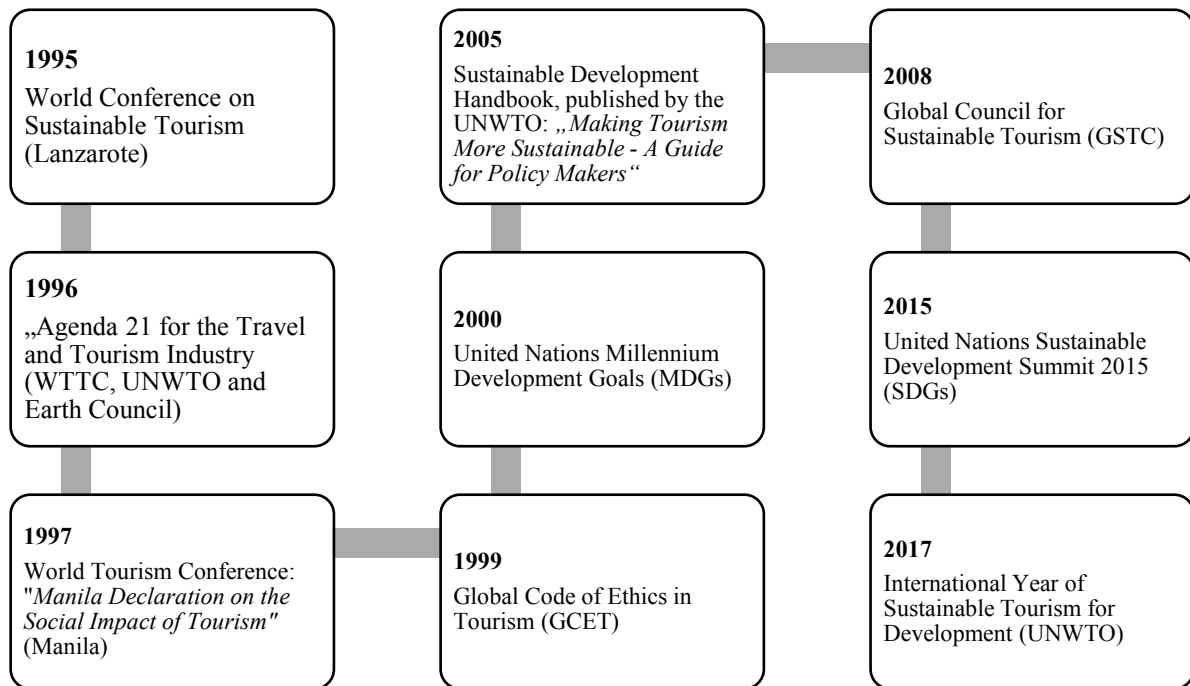
<sup>13</sup> Meadows, D., Randers, J., Behrens, W.. The limits to growth: a report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind. New York: Universe Books, 1974, p.27.

<sup>14</sup> Randers, J. The Real Message of The Limits to Growth, A Plea for Forward-Looking Global Policy // *GAIA - Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society*. Munich: Oekom Verlag, Vol. 21, 2012 Number 2, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> The Commission and the report gained prominence under the name of its chair, Gro Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway (1981, 1986-1989, 1990-1996), Director-General of the World Health Organisation (1998-2003), UN Special Envoy for Climate Change from 2007 to 2010, and Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED).

<sup>16</sup> Brundtland, G. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future. United Nations General Assembly Document A/42/427. 1987. (<http://www.un-documents.net/a42-427.htm> - accessed 17.04.2023).

and key milestones in the process of conceptualizing sustainable tourism development are illustrated in Figure 2.



Source: Author's own work.

**Fig. 2 Evolution of the Concept of Sustainable Tourism Development**

A retrospective review of the evolution of the concept of sustainable tourism development management (STD) reveals its pervasive influence across all spheres of life and at varying territorial levels, from global to local. It has emerged as a leading global socio-political paradigm addressing both the present and the future. The evolution of the concept of sustainable tourism development can be characterized as *a search for a possible consensus area between inherently contradictory yet compatible principles and objectives*.

§ 1.3 "Characteristics and Content of Sustainable Tourism" examines the core aspects of sustainable tourism, including its fundamental principles, objectives, and key elements. In sub-paragraph 1.3.1. "Nature and Definition of Sustainable Tourism," the main focus is to outline definitions of the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism, along with their essential characteristics. Since its initial introduction, the concept of sustainability has undergone a dynamic evolution, with its definitions varying depending on the literature, context, and historical period. The term originated from the German word *nachhaltig* (literally translated as "resilient" or "viable," corresponding to "sustainable" in English) as early as the early 18th century. It was first used in forestry to describe the principle that "no more wood should be cut down than can grow again."<sup>17</sup> During this initial period, the

<sup>17</sup> Dictionary of the German Language: Duden - Bedeutungswörterbuch - (<https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Nachhaltigkeit> - accessed 24.06.2023)

term's meaning was primarily confined to "a way of managing resources over the long term while ensuring short-term profit maximization<sup>18</sup>". Subsequently, the scope of sustainability expanded beyond the purely economic and resource-focused context. First, ecological considerations (environmental protection) were incorporated, followed later by social dimensions, including societal and cultural well-being.

With regard to tourism, the principle of sustainability should promote a quantitative limitation of tourism growth in alignment with the specific natural, environmental, and social characteristics of the region in question. In the specialized literature, numerous definitions of "*sustainable tourism*" exist, which are largely overlapping and complementary. As the general philosophy surrounding tourism consumption and behavior has evolved—rooted in the modern tourist's aspiration to reconnect with pristine nature—the content of tourism as a phenomenon has been continuously enriched by the emergence of various neologisms<sup>19</sup>. These include terms such as "quiet" (Krippendorf, 1975), "mild" (Baumgartner, 1977), "environmentally friendly" (Falch, 1981), "alternative" (Dernoi, 1981; Pompl, 1984), "extensive" (Dorner, 1981), "ecologically and socially compatible" (Kramer, 1983), and "qualitative" (Fischer, 1985).<sup>20</sup> In this initial stage of forming the concept of sustainable tourism (ST), a contrast emerged between the "*new and promising*" forms of tourism—described with terms such as "green," "gentle," "responsible," "reasonable," "sparing," and "harmonious"—and the "conventional and outdated" forms of mass tourism, often characterized as "hard," "big," "monostructural," and "standardized."

Based on the various interpretations and key characteristics of the concept under study, the following **definition of "sustainable tourism"** has been formulated: **a form of qualitative growth in tourism activity that establishes and maintains an optimal balance between environmental sustainability, socio-ethical equity, cultural compatibility, and economic efficiency, in alignment with the needs of both present and future generations, while considering the specific attributes of destinations and the industries integrated within them.** Although not claiming to be exhaustive, this definition underscores the principal aspects of sustainable tourism development (STD), integrating both the temporal (present-future) and spatial (nature-society-economy) dimensions of the concept from a developmental perspective, within the context of contemporary scientific advancements.

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<sup>18</sup> **Groeneveld, S.** Unterhalt statt Nachhaltigkeit // *Nachhaltig reich - nachhaltig arm?* Frankfurt am Main: Brandes und Apsel/Südwind, 1997, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> All of them complement the meaningful nuance and can be grouped under the common denominator of 'sustainable' tourism.

<sup>20</sup> **Danz, W.** Sanfter Tourismus // *Jahrbuch des Vereins zum Schutz der Bergwelt*, München: Verein zum Schutz der Bergwelt e.V., 1985, Band 50, p.97.

Sub-paragraph **1.3.2 "Scope and Structural Dimensions of Sustainable Tourism"** addresses the various components of sustainable tourism and the interrelationships between them across their different dimensions. **Climate and the environment** are among the most critical tourism resources and lie at the heart of the primary motivations for travel. In this context, the relationship between tourism and climate is reciprocal: on one hand, tourism is directly impacted by the negative effects of climate change; on the other, it contributes significantly to global warming, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss. Thus, the tourism industry is viewed as both a contributor to and a victim of environmental destruction. No tourism product or destination could successfully (i.e., profitably) attract visitors without creating conditions that protect the environment from pollution. The driving force in this regard is the tourist themselves, who, in their demand for quality services and products, place a primary condition on a pollution-free environment<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, preserving and safeguarding the natural characteristics of a destination is of utmost importance for the tourism industry.

A review of the **economic aspects** of tourism reveals a range of both positive and negative impacts that shape its development. Tourism has served as a significant economic driver and catalyst for many regional and national economies, with its growth fostering the emergence of new sector-specific businesses that tailor their activities and production to meet tourism demand and consumption. The economic benefits for local communities are particularly pronounced in areas with strong, well-developed domestic agricultural and manufacturing sectors, as well as regional clusters. The added value and economic gains from tourism are further enhanced in regions where tourism services and goods are predominantly produced and managed by local businesses<sup>22</sup>.

The **social and cultural dimensions** of tourism are highly complex, and due to their interactions with various other areas, it is challenging to measure and assess their impacts in a comparative manner. As a social phenomenon, tourism fosters cultural exchange between people, and it is this interaction that shapes the system of tourist-local relations, with both positive and negative consequences for both parties. The contributions of tourism to social inclusion, employment, new forms of labor division, poverty reduction, mutual understanding, and peace are indisputable. Societies and cultures are dynamic and influenced by numerous factors, with tourism being just one of them. As a key globalizing force, tourism plays a significant role in driving social and cultural change, fueled by the particular interest

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<sup>21</sup> **Rakadzhiyska, Sv.** Sustainable Tourism: Concepts and Opportunities for Development. // *UE Notices - Varna*, No. 3, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> **Meyer, D., Meyer, N.**, The role and impact of tourism on local economic development: A comparative study. // *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance (AJPHERD)*, Volume 21(1:1), 2015, pp. 197-214.

of travelers in "foreign" and "traditional" cultures. However, it can also lead to cultural "distortions" or "acculturation"<sup>23</sup>. A key step in defining the social and cultural dimensions of tourism is the *10 principles of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism*, established by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) in 1999, which emphasize the rights of tourists without addressing their obligations. Guided by the maxim "Quid leges sine moribus?" (Latin: "Of what avail empty laws without (good) morals?"), these principles lay the foundation for ethical and cultural norms in tourist-local relations, and contribute to the concept of "responsible tourism".

## **Chapter Two. METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL**

This chapter focuses on the development of the author's methodology and toolkit for studying sustainable tourism development at the local (municipal) level. § 2.1 **Contemporary Models for Sustainable Tourism Development** examines various aspects of the principles and practices of sustainable tourism, as well as innovative approaches to balancing the economic, social, and environmental interests within the tourism sector. Central to these approaches is the goal of benefiting society by maximizing the positive impacts and minimizing the negative effects of tourism activities. Presented primarily as 'growth issues,' the global increase in tourist travel has been analyzed by numerous scholars who have examined the interrelationships among the various elements of the tourism system, forming *contemporary models of tourism development*. Since the 1960s, tourism research has extensively discussed its impact on host communities, with resulting theories mainly focusing on the negative consequences of large tourist numbers on local populations, as well as the landscapes and environments of the regions they visit. Figure 3 visualizes the author's interpretation of an *integrated model* combining (a) Butler's Destination Life Cycle<sup>24</sup>, (b) Doxey's Irritation Index<sup>25</sup>, and (c) Visitor Satisfaction<sup>26</sup>. The interactions between these three models are also directly linked to the phenomenon of (d) over/under-tourism. A potential solution for balancing sustainable development is determining the optimal threshold of carrying capacity (d). The search for equilibrium between the aforementioned variables is closely tied to the pivotal role of governance and institutions, as illustrated in Figure 3.

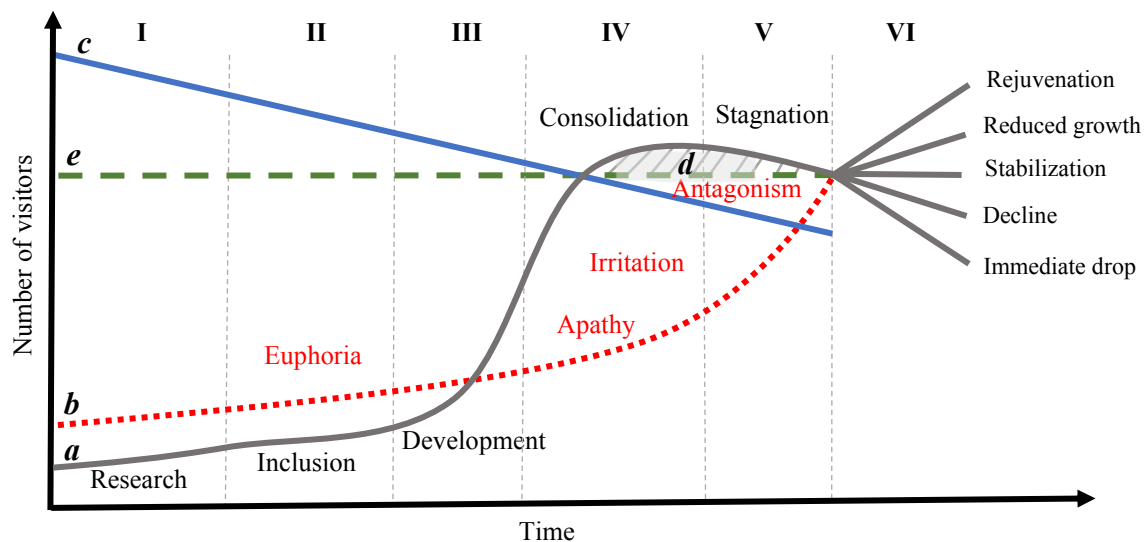
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<sup>23</sup> Cruz, A., Oliver, M. Moving toward settlement: tourism as acculturation practice. // *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51, Issue: 4, 2017, pp. 772-794.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, R. The Concept of a Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources. // *Canadian Geographer*, Vol. 24, Issue: 1, 1980, pp. 5-12.

<sup>25</sup> Doxey, G. When enough's enough: The natives are restless in Old Niagara. // *Heritage Canada*, Vol. 2, 1975, pp. 26-27.

<sup>26</sup> Khan, M. A. A., Hashim, H. Tourist Satisfaction Index for Tourism Destination, Integrating Social Media Engagement into the European Customer Satisfaction Index: A Conceptual Paper. // *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, Vol. 10, Issue: 9, 2020, pp. 72-90



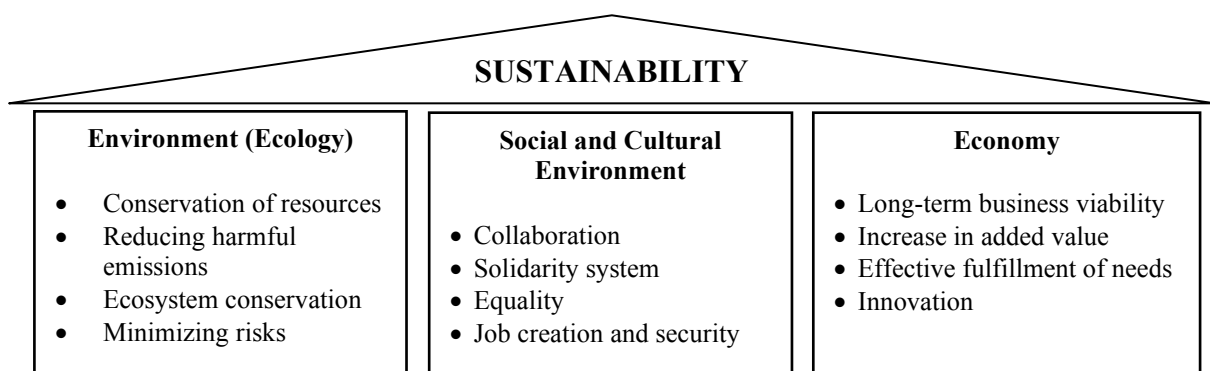
**Legend:**

- a) ———— Tourism Area Cycle of Evolution (TACE);
- b) ..... Doxey's Irridex - Doxey's irritation index model;
- c) ———— Tourist Satisfaction Index;
- d) // // // // Overtourism;
- e) - - - - - Tourism Carrying Capacity (TCC)

**Source:** The figure was created by the author using the models of Doxey (1975) and Butler (1980).

**Fig. 3 Linear Integrated Model of Destination Development**

The number of tourists over time and space, or "saturation," is inversely related to their satisfaction. The juxtaposition of quantitative and qualitative variables presents conceptual challenges in identifying appropriate indicators for their measurement, due to the uniqueness of ecosystems and the complex, multifaceted nature of the processes occurring within them. Since the Brundtland Commission's adoption of the report *Our Common Future* (1987), the primary focus of STD models has gradually shifted from the tourism industry and tourists themselves to the realm of planning and management. The so-called Triple Bottom-Line, TBL or 3BL ( in German: *Drei-Säulen-Modell*) model for sustainable development has gained widespread recognition in conceptualizing this shift, and it has found direct application within the tourism sector as well (see Figure 4).

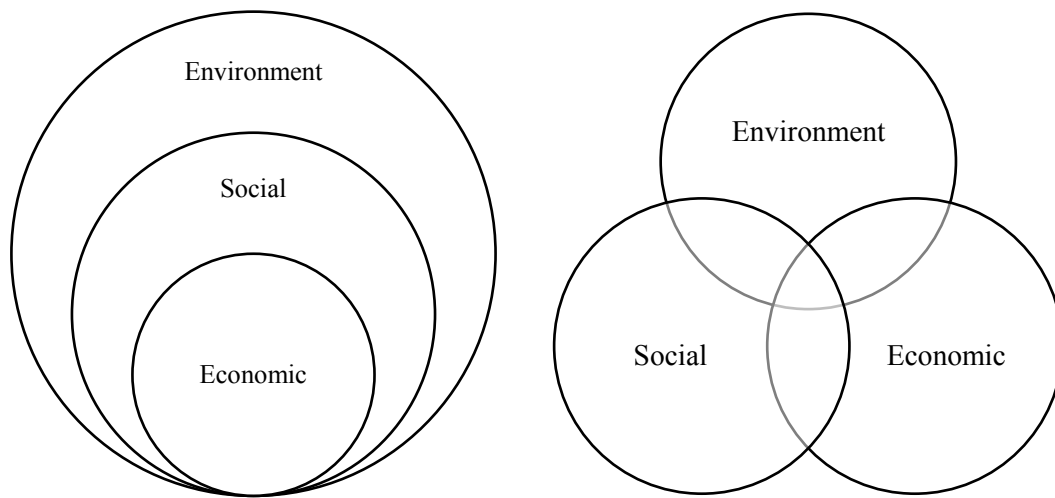


**Source:** Figure created by the author on the basis of the report *Our Common Future* (1987).

**Fig. 4 Three-pillar Model of Sustainable Development**



In theory, the three key areas are balanced; however, it can be assumed that potential losses (damage, trade-offs) in one area may, to some extent, be offset by another. Based on this, the concepts of strong and weak sustainability are developed (see Figure 5).



**A. Strong sustainability (integrated model)**

**B. Weak sustainability (balanced model)**

**Source:** Adapted from: **Slocum, S., Aidoo, A., McMahon, K.** The Business of Sustainable Tourism Development and Management. Oxon / New York: Routledge, 2020, pp. 10-11.

**Fig. 5 Model of Strong and Weak Sustainability**

The integrative "strong" sustainability model (Figure 5.A) positions its constituent elements—economy-society, society-nature, and economy-nature—in a hierarchical vertical relationship. These elements are complementary but not interchangeable. In this model, *ecology* is viewed as a long-term economy, with environmental sustainability playing a central role in relation to the other spheres. The concept of "weak" sustainability (Figure 5.B), on the other hand, aims for a more balanced relationship between the economic, ecological, and social domains, and can be interpreted through the *law of tribology*<sup>27</sup>, which states that "if two systems are in conjunction, their common part will exhibit the characteristics of a third system." Within the STD framework, there is a direct relationship between the natural, social (cultural), and economic elements. Each of these elements can function independently, with its own logic and characteristics. However, during the implementation of tourism activities, these individual elements integrate and interact, forming a new, cohesive system.

Trends in tourism development and the dynamic nature of supply and demand directly influence the change and evolution of various models of STD. Notably, these models share essential similarities in their constituent elements; the main distinction lies in the interrelationships and hierarchy of these components. In this context, *the presented models of STD do not define a state of equilibrium in a destination, but instead describe a continuous,*

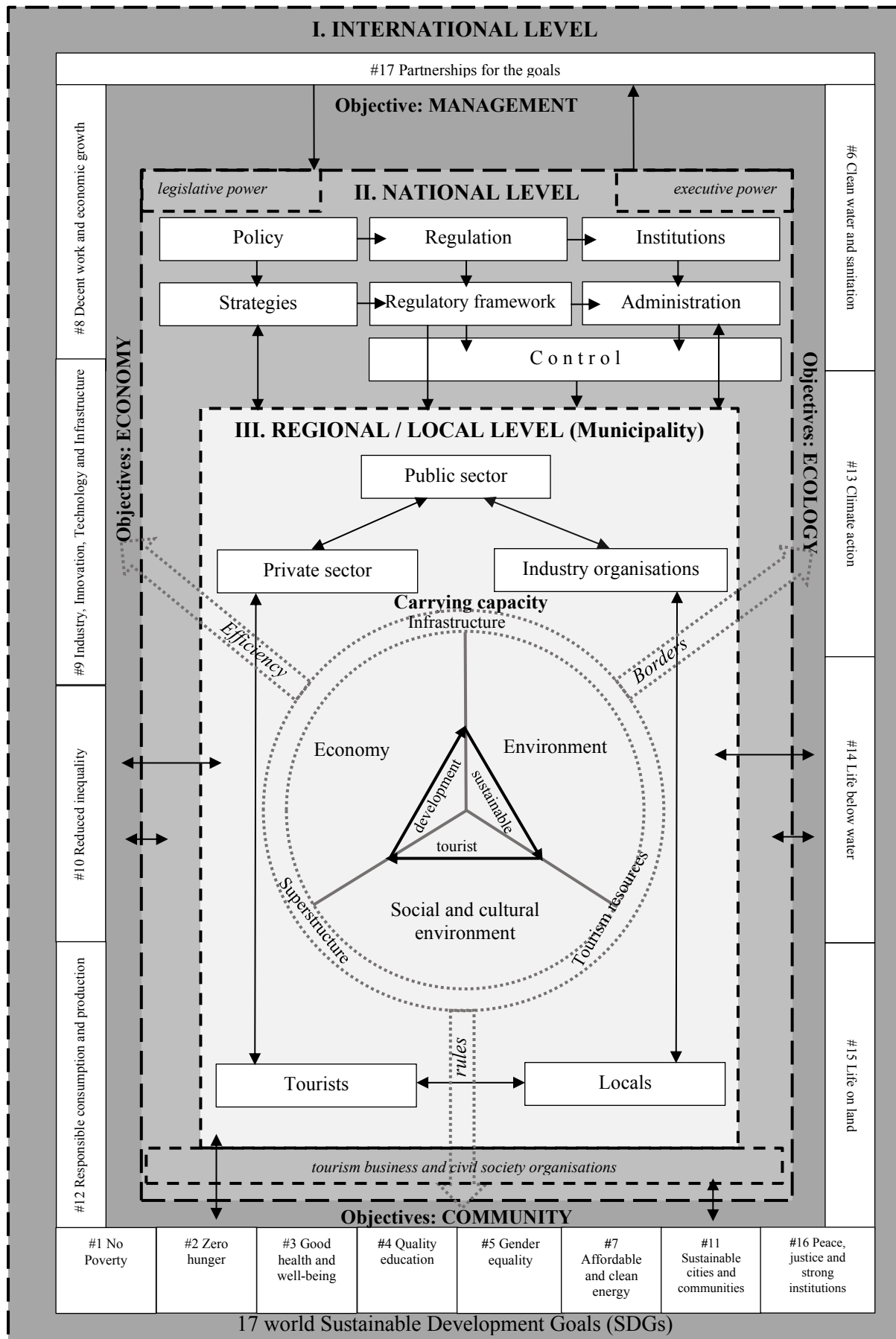
<sup>27</sup> An interdisciplinary science that studies frictional processes and interactions in contact zones.

*dynamic process aimed at balancing the exploitation of resources, investment directions, and the benefits for both tourists and the local population.* Its long-term success is directly linked to the responsibility of each stakeholder, with particular emphasis on the regulatory role of the state and institutions. These actors are tasked with translating abstract global principles and objectives into measurable local actions and initiatives. This process contributes to the formation of a complex web of relationships that underpins contemporary STD models.

In § 2.2 "**Conceptual Model for Sustainable Tourism Development at the Municipal Level**" an attempt is made to construct a model for STD at the local (municipal) level, while considering the global scope of tourism as an economic activity and its local character as a social phenomenon. The model is characterized by its three-dimensionality and complementarity, stemming from the close interrelationship between the objectives set at the international level and their local or regional adaptations for implementation (see Figure 6).

In constructing the model, the characteristics of its constituent elements and their roles in shaping potential relationships and impacts are carefully considered. The primary objective is to ensure the universality and applicability of the system, based on global objectives and local implementation.

At **the international level** (I), strategic objectives and priorities are outlined, with long-term consensus sought for future development. The macro-framework is established by the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (*2030 Agenda*), grouped under four key headings: *economy*, *ecology*, *society*, and *governance*. These overarching strategic goals guide and inform the activities and functions of all related downstream elements. At **the national level** (II), STD is connected to the actions of key governance actors: the legislature, the executive, the tourism sector, and civil society organizations. At the **regional/local level** (III), specifically within municipalities, the model is structured into the following groups: a) Governance Actors: tourists, local populations, industry organizations, public institutions, and the private sector (tourism industry); b) Carrying Capacity: tourism resources, infrastructure, and superstructure; c) Core of STD: (1) Economy, (2) Environmental (natural), (3) Social and cultural environment. The interaction and synergy of these elements are achieved through the respect for guiding principles: efficiency (for the economy), permissible limits (for the environment/nature), and rules (for the social and cultural environment), all of which align with the internationally set global development goals (see Figure 6).

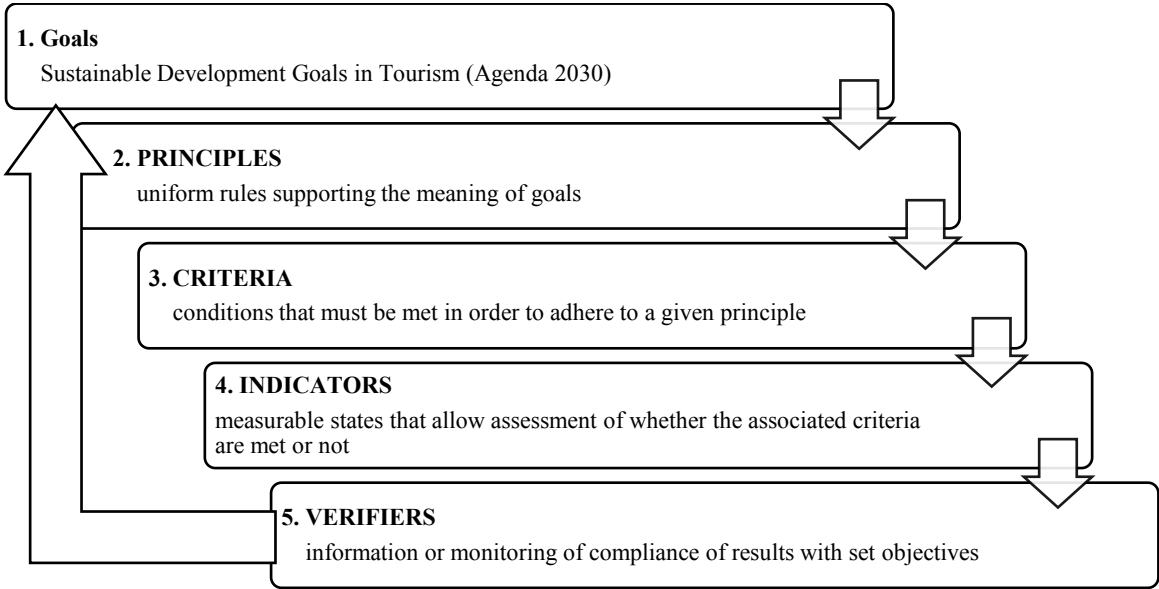


Source: Author's own work.

**Fig. 6 Systematic Conceptual Model for Sustainable Tourism Development at Municipal Level**

From a scientific perspective, the model is designed for research in the field of destination management and is applicable to the development of concepts and programs for tourism development in specific regions and municipalities. Its practical applicability largely depends on the analysis and evaluation of tourism in a given destination.

**§ 2.3 "Development of Methodology and Research Tools for the Assessment of Sustainable Tourism Development at the Municipal Level"** directs the research towards selecting the appropriate tools to assess the status and track development trends across the various aspects of sustainability. The process of translating abstract global (1) *objectives* into the context of individual (2) *principles* and (3) *criteria* is carried out through a system of (4) *indicators* for monitoring and evaluation, followed by (5) *verification* of compliance with the set objectives. Figure 7 illustrates the hierarchy and sequence involved in "localizing global trends" and "globalizing local features".



**Source:** Adapted from: Natural Resources and Ethical Trade Program, 2002 .<sup>28</sup>

**Fig. 7 Roadmap: Objectives and Results**

Based on this framework, a **System of Indicators for Sustainable Tourism Development in a Destination-Municipality** is proposed, covering the following areas: a) Governance - 2 criteria and 5 indicators related to the governance structure, stakeholder engagement, and destination management; b) Economy - 3 criteria and 17 indicators focused on increasing economic benefits and social well-being of the local community; c) Social and cultural environment - 5 criteria and 14 indicators related to the preservation of cultural heritage, identity, and visitation; d) ecology and environmental protection - 6 criteria and 18 indicators in the areas of environmental protection, resource management, waste and harmful emissions. (see Table 1).

<sup>28</sup> National Resources Institute - *What are criteria, indicators & verifiers?* NRET Theme Papers on Codes of Practice in the Fresh Produce Sector, No. 3, London, 2002. (<http://projects.nri.org/nret/TP3.pdf> - accessed 29.03.2024).

**Table 1. Indicators for Sustainable Tourism Development at the Municipal Level**

Section	Criterion	Code	Indicator	Measurement Unit
<b>A) MANAGEMENT</b>	A.1 Sustainable tourism development policy	A.1.1	Presence of a Destination Management Strategy and Action Plan	yes/no
		A.1.2	Existence of a monitoring and evaluation system for tourism development	yes/no
		A.1.3	Share of the tourist tax in total local taxes and fees collected	%
	A.2 Corporate engagement and sustainability	A.2.1	Proportion of tourism businesses participating in consultations for tourism development strategies	%
		A.2.2	Proportion of tourism enterprises with voluntary certification and/or corporate social responsibility initiatives	%
<b>B) ECONOMY</b>	B.1 Contribution of tourism to the local economy	B.1.1	Relative share of tourism in the local economy	%
		B.1.2	Proportion of locally produced food, beverages, goods, and services supplied by tourism businesses	%
	B.2 Tourism supply in the destination	B.2.1	Number of categorized accommodation establishments	pcs.
		B.2.2	Share of accommodation by category	%
		B.2.3	Number of beds in accommodation establishments	pcs.
		B.2.4	Number of overnight stays	pcs.
		B.2.5	Revenue from overnight stays	BGN
		B.2.6	Average length of stay	days
		B.2.7	Average annual bed occupancy rate	%
		B.2.8	Revenue per overnight tourist	BGN
		B.2.9	Revenue per overnight stay	BGN
	B.3 Tourist demand in the destination	B.3.1	Number of overnight guests	pcs.
		B.3.2	Number of visitors to tourist sites (museums, attractions, etc.)	pcs.
		B.3.3	Ratio of domestic to foreign tourist demand	%
		B.3.4	Tourist satisfaction index	%
		B.3.5	Repeat visitor index	%
		B.3.6	Seasonal fluctuation index	%
<b>(C) SOCIAL AND CULTURAL</b>	C.1 Societal impact	C.1.1	Number of tourists per 100 residents in the municipality	pcs.
		C.1.2	Share of employees in the tourism sector	%
		C.1.3	Percentage of residents who rate tourism development positively	%
		C.1.4	Public image (positive/negative media coverage)	+/-
	C.2 Health and safety	C.2.1	Number of doctors per 10,000 residents in the municipality	pcs.
		C.2.2	Number of doctors per 10,000 tourists during peak season	pcs.
		C.2.3	Crime level during and outside the tourist season	degree
	C.3 Gender equality	C.3.1	Male-to-female employment ratio in the tourism sector	%
	C.4 Accessible environment	C.4.1	Proportion of accessible rooms in accommodation establishments	%
		C.4.2	Proportion of accessible public transport vehicles	%

	C.5 Preservation of cultural heritage and local identity	C.4.3	Proportion of accessible tourist attractions	%
		C.5.1	Existence of mechanisms to allocate tourism revenue for cultural heritage conservation	yes/no
		C.5.2	Proportion of destination events focused on local culture and heritage	%
		C.5.3	Proportion of visitors who respect local cultural and religious customs	%
(D) ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT	D.1 Mobility	D.1.1	Proportion of tourists using environmentally friendly transport to reach the destination	%
		D.1.2	Proportion of tourists using environmentally friendly transport within the destination	%
		D.1.3	Average travel distance from home to the destination	km
		D.1.4	Average carbon footprint (CO <sub>2</sub> ) per tourist traveling to the destination	kg
	D.2 Waste management	D.2.1	Waste generated per tourist per day	kg
		D.2.2	Waste generated per resident per day	kg
		D.2.3	Proportion of tourism enterprises implementing waste separation	%
	D.3 Water management	D.3.1	Proportion of wastewater treated	%
		D.3.2	Water quality in bathing and hiking areas	grade
		D.3.3	Quality of tap water	grade
		D.3.4	Average daily water consumption per resident	litres
		D.3.5	Average daily water consumption per tourist	litres
	D.4 Electricity consumption	D.4.1	Average daily electricity consumption per resident	kWh
		D.4.2	Average daily electricity consumption per tourist	kWh
		D.4.3	Share of electricity from renewable sources	%
		D.4.4	Proportion of tourism businesses using renewable electricity	%
	D.5 Conservation of nature and biodiversity	D.5.1	Proportion of protected natural areas in the municipality	%
	D.6 Carrying capacity	D.6.1	Physical space per tourist on the beach during peak periods	m <sup>2</sup>

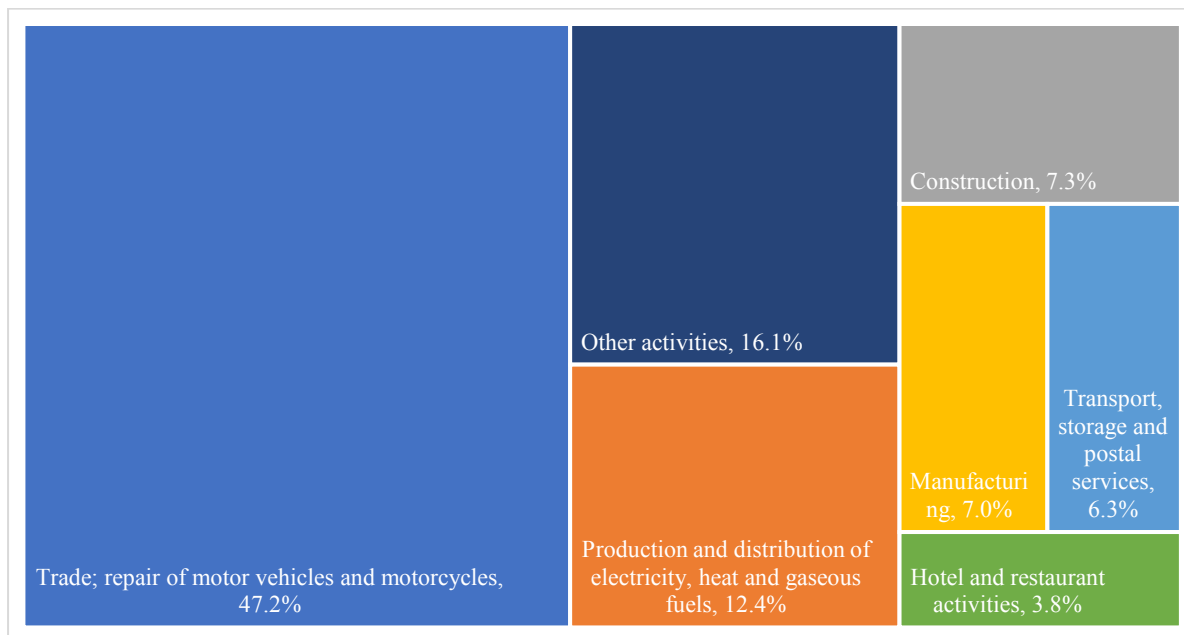
**Source:** Author's own work.

To collect and analyze the data required for the application of the *Indicators for Sustainable Tourism Development in a Destination-Municipality*, we used data from the National Statistical Institute, local executive structures—such as regional and municipal administrations—and relevant territorial units connected to tourism, as well as public registers from the Ministry of Tourism. Based on a field survey and interviews with representatives from all relevant stakeholders—administration and other institutions, tourism business representatives in the municipality, industry organizations, tourists, and local residents—conclusions have been drawn, which are then applied to the developed system of indicators.

### Chapter Three. ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH OF THE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF VARNA MUNICIPALITY

This chapter focuses on the study of the *tourist destination* within the administrative boundaries of the Municipality of Varna, analyzing and evaluating the characteristics of its natural and anthropogenic resources, as well as the socio-economic and demographic conditions in the destination of Varna.

The overview in § 3.1 "Conditions and Factors for Tourism Development in Varna Municipality" includes: 3.1.1 "General Characteristics and Assessment of Natural Resources", 3.1.2 "General Characteristics and Assessment of Anthropogenic Resources" and 3.1.3 "Assessment of Socio-Economic and Demographic Conditions". Tourism plays a highly diversified role in the economic structure of the municipality, with services representing a significant 72% of the economy, compared to the relatively small shares of the primary (3%) and secondary (25%) sectors. The tourism industry supports and accelerates the economic development of integrated sectors such as trade, energy, construction, manufacturing, transport and communications, culture, sport, entertainment, education, and more. Figure 8 visualizes summaries of these different sectoral areas, excluding the contribution of tourism within each.



Source: Author's calculations based on NSI data

**Fig. 8 Net turnover of non-financial enterprises in Varna municipality in 2022 by economic activity (% share)**

§ 3.2 "Study and Evaluation of Tourism Development in Varna Municipality" provides an overview of the key characteristics of tourism in the Municipality of Varna, presenting the main indicators of tourism development, as well as the state and dynamics of

the specialized infrastructure, its efficiency, and occupancy. This section is divided into: **3.2.1 "Tourism Supply"** and **3.2.2 "Tourism Demand"**. The analysis draws on data from a ten-year period (2014–2023), primarily sourced from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) at the municipal level, including the city of Varna, the Golden Sands resort, and the Sts. Constantine and Helena resort. According to the NSI methodology, the data encompasses all accommodation facilities with 10 or more beds, enabling the derivation of central trends in the observed parameters. The resulting sample includes all relevant features and accurately reflects the structure of the general population, making it highly representative of the bed base within the Municipality of Varna. For the purposes of the analysis, additional data from the Unified System of Tourist Information (ESTI), the National Tourist Register (NTR), and the Municipality of Varna are also used.

The observed period is marked by a high degree of dynamics in the indicators, influenced by a range of external factors (such as economic crises, the pandemic, and geopolitical events) and internal factors (including competitiveness and the market environment). The data presented in Table 2 show that the peak values observed in 2018 and 2019 have not yet been surpassed in absolute terms.

**Table 2 Activity of Accommodation Facilities in Varna Municipality**

Year	Accommodation facilities (pcs.)	Beds (pcs.)	Beds-overnight	Overnight-guests (pcs.)	Overnight stays (pcs.)	Revenue from overnight stays (thousand BGN)	Average stay (days)	Medium operational employment	Total revenue per clientA (TRevPEC)	Revenue from 1 overnight stay
2014	280	54 114	9 790 831	790 744	4 053 534	204 636	5.1	41%	259 лв	50 лв
2015	278	57 357	9 876 522	840 109	4 097 665	211 569	4.9	41%	252 лв	52 лв
2016	297	57 807	10 669 774	1 014 759	5 059 435	260 105	5.0	47%	256 лв	51 лв
2017	301	59 512	10 924 595	1 016 300	4 996 653	284 101	4.9	46%	280 лв	57 лв
2018	301	60 868	11 243 975	1 101 344	5 186 434	303 129	4.7	46%	275 лв	58 лв
2019	307	60 268	11 241 637	1 122 325	4 980 494	299 902	4.4	44%	267 лв	60 лв
2020	255	45 428	6 360 373	482 518	1 725 442	100 587	3.6	27%	208 лв	58 лв
2021	262	50 738	7 783 830	745 675	3 018 149	208 343	4.0	39%	279 лв	69 лв
2022	263	53 773	9 222 677	936 035	3 740 626	287 220	4.0	41%	307 лв	77 лв
2023	270	55 640	9 887 559	1 071 428	4 271 853	355 145	4.0	43%	331 лв	83 лв

**Source:** Created by the author using NSI data.

In terms of category structure, there is a predominance of 4- and 5-star accommodations in the relative share of bed capacity. The trends observed during the 2014–2023 period reflect significant investments in modern and upgraded hotel infrastructure, leading to an increase in the high-end 4- and 5-star hotel capacity by +2.6%. This has been accompanied by a restructuring of bed capacity across categories: a decrease of -6.5% in 1- and 2-star hotels, -23.8% in 3-star hotels, and an increase of +18.1% in 4- and 5-star hotels (see Table 3).

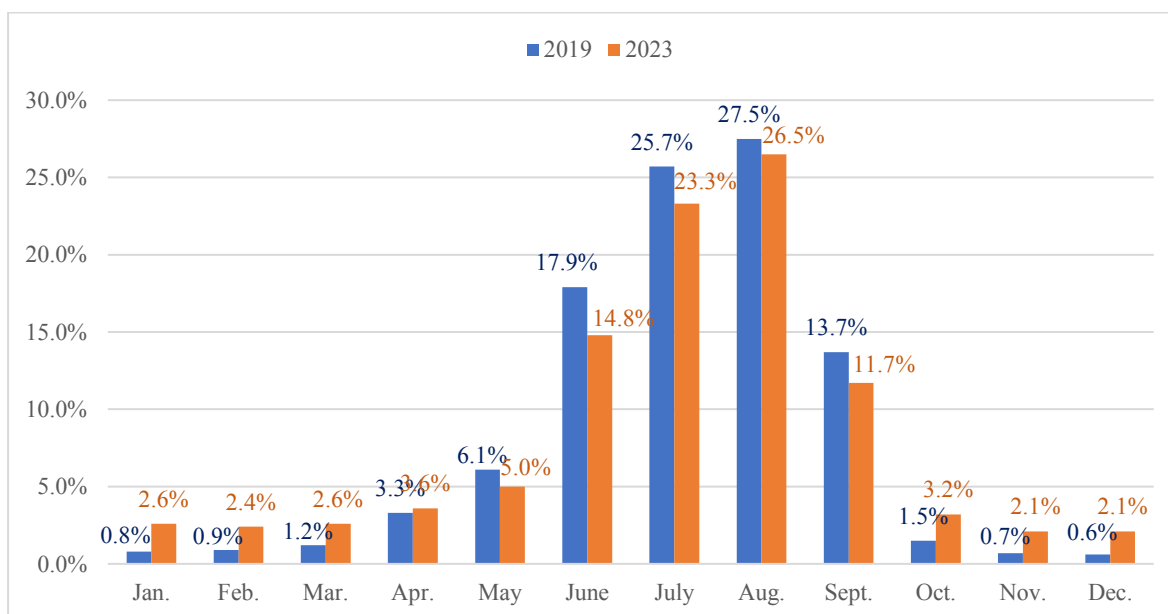


**Table 3: Categories of Accommodation Facilities in Varna Municipality (2014 vs. 2023)**

Year	2014				2023				Δ Facilities	Δ Beds
Category	Facilities (pcs.)	%	Beds (pcs.)	%	Facilities (pcs.)	%	Beds (pcs.)	%		
1 and 2 stars	105	38%	8,454	16%	105	39%	7907	14%	0.0%	-6.5%
3 stars	99	35%	14,811	27%	87	32%	11290	20%	-12.1%	-23.8%
4 and 5 stars	76	27%	30,849	57%	78	29%	36443	65%	2.6%	18.1%
Σ	280		54,114		270		55,640		-3.6%	2.8%
National share (%)	8.9%		17.2%		6.7%		15.5%			

**Source:** Calculations according to NSI's data.

Tourist demand in Varna is characterized by strong seasonality throughout the calendar year. Notably, data on overnight stays by month for 2019 and 2023 (see Figure 9) reveal significant trends. In the pre-Covid-19 period, nearly 85% of all overnight stays in the destination occurred during the months of June, July, August, and September, with July and August alone accounting for over half of the total annual overnight stays—more than 53.2%. This seasonal concentration is largely due to the monostructural nature of the regional tourism product, with summer holiday tourism being the dominant focus, overshadowing alternative types and forms of tourism. Despite this strong seasonality, in 2023 there is a noticeable trend toward balancing the volume of overnight stays, with the traditionally inactive tourist months from October to April more than doubling in comparison.

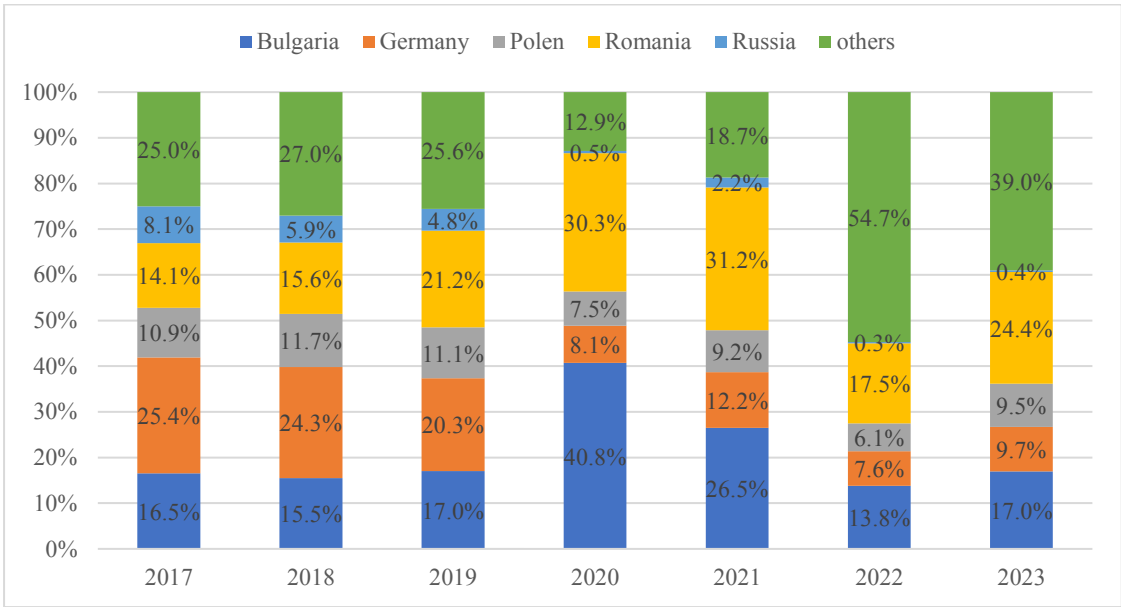


**Source:** ESTI and Varna Municipality

**Fig. 9 Dynamics of Overnight Stays in the Municipality of Varna**

The review of the leading experiential tourism markets highlights the differentiated nature of the market environment in the destination, with three international markets—Romania, Germany, and Poland—taking the lead. Together with the domestic Bulgarian market, these account for over two-thirds of the total overnight stays in the destination. The

development of new and promising markets further enhances diversification, serving as a strategic approach to achieving sustainability in tourism development (see Figure 10).



Source: ESTI and Varna Municipality

**Fig. 10 Dynamics of the relative shares of the main emission markets in the Municipality of Varna by number of overnight stays by year**

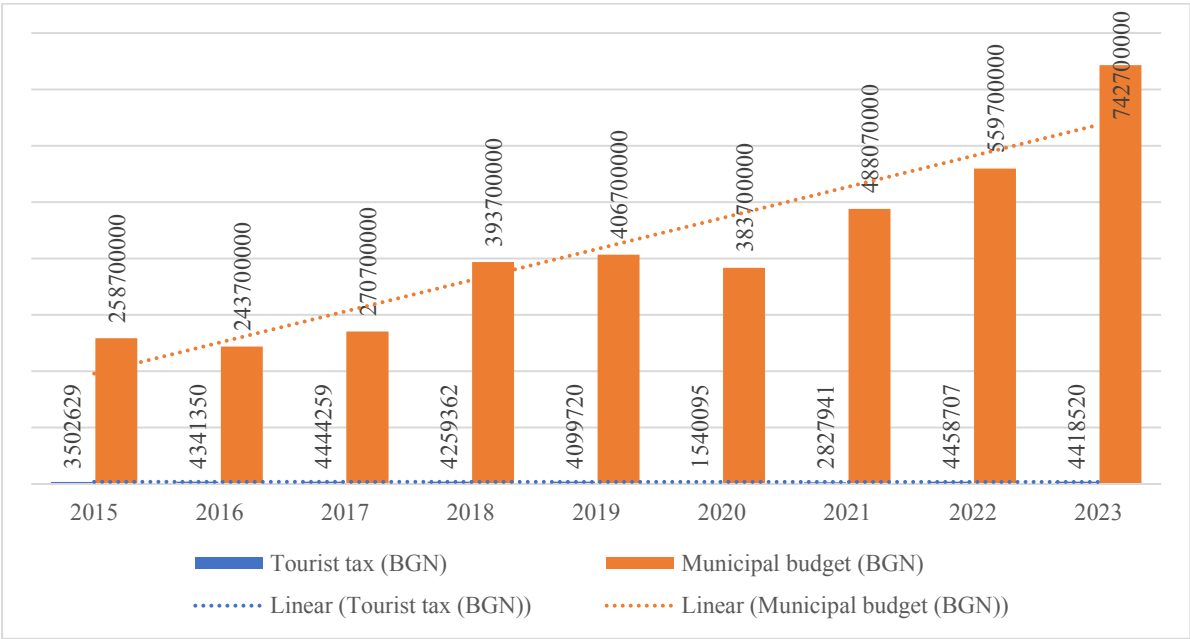
**Sub-paragraph 3.2.3. "Tourism Management"** presents the management of tourism activities in the Varna destination as a direct function of the interaction between tourism management entities at the local level. Strategic objectives and operational tasks at the local level are primarily financed by the tourist tax collected within the Municipality of Varna. According to Article 56(1) and (2) of the Regulation of the Varna City Council on Determining the Amount of Local Taxes in the Territory of the Varna Municipality<sup>29</sup>, the tourist tax is structured as follows: Category 1 and 2 stars (Class "A" and Class "B"): BGN 0.50 per night; Category 3 stars: BGN 0.60 per night; Category 4 stars: BGN 0.90 per night; Category 5 stars: BGN 1.40 per night; Class "B": BGN 0.50 per night.

According to Bulgarian legislation, "taxable persons are those offering accommodation<sup>30</sup>", meaning there should be a high degree of correlation between the volume of overnight stays and the tourist tax collected within the municipality. However, no direct causal link is observed due to additional factors, including flexible tax policies, the 'grey economy,' controls, and the efficiency of tax collection processes. Over the past decade, the municipal budget has nearly tripled (from 259 million BGN in 2014 to 743 million BGN in

<sup>29</sup> Varna Municipal Council - Ordinance of Varna Municipal Council determining the amount of local taxes within the territory of Varna Municipality (<https://varna.obshtini.bg/doc/345772> - accessed 29.08.2024)

<sup>30</sup> The tourist tax regime is regulated by Art. 61r - 61t of the Law on Local Taxes and Fees (<https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134174720> - accessed on 29.08.2024)

2023), while the collected tourist tax has fluctuated around 4 million BGN (see Figure 11). In theory, the growth of the tourism sector should contribute to increased municipal revenues, including a higher volume of tourist tax collection, but this trend is not observed in Varna.



**Source:** Figure created by the author on the basis of public data from Varna Municipality.  
**Fig. 11 Municipal budget and tourist tax in Varna Municipality**

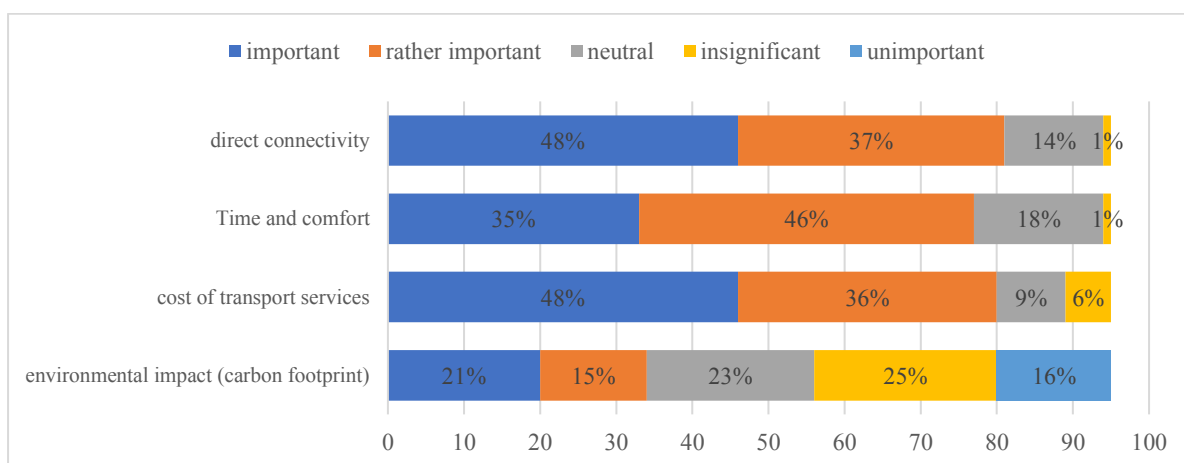
In § 3.3 "Impact of Tourism on the Sustainable Development of Varna Municipality", a SWOT analysis is presented, examining the internal and external factors that directly and indirectly influence the processes of sustainable tourism development (STD) in Varna. The analysis outlines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, considering their positive and negative environmental, economic, social, and cultural impacts.

In § 3.4, an "Assessment of the Degree of Sustainability of Varna Municipality as a Tourist Destination" is conducted through a survey method, focusing on two groups of respondents: a) Consumers, with their expectations, attitudes, and impressions of the destination, and b) Stakeholders, including hoteliers, tour operators, travel agencies, industry organizations, institutions, and educational establishments.

**Sub-paragraph 3.4.1. "Consumer Assessment of the Sustainable Tourism Development of Varna Municipality"** focuses on examining visitors' attitudes towards the elements of the sustainable tourism development model in Varna. The survey, conducted between August and October 2023, targeted selected accommodation facilities within the Municipality of Varna and the city's Tourist Information Centre. A total of 95 respondents participated, with 15% from Bulgaria, 14% from Germany, and 11% each from Great Britain and Belgium. Based on the survey, the average profile of a visitor to Varna is as follows: *a*

*European tourist aged over 40, primarily motivated by recreation, employed mainly in the private sector, and earning an average monthly income of up to 2000 euros.*

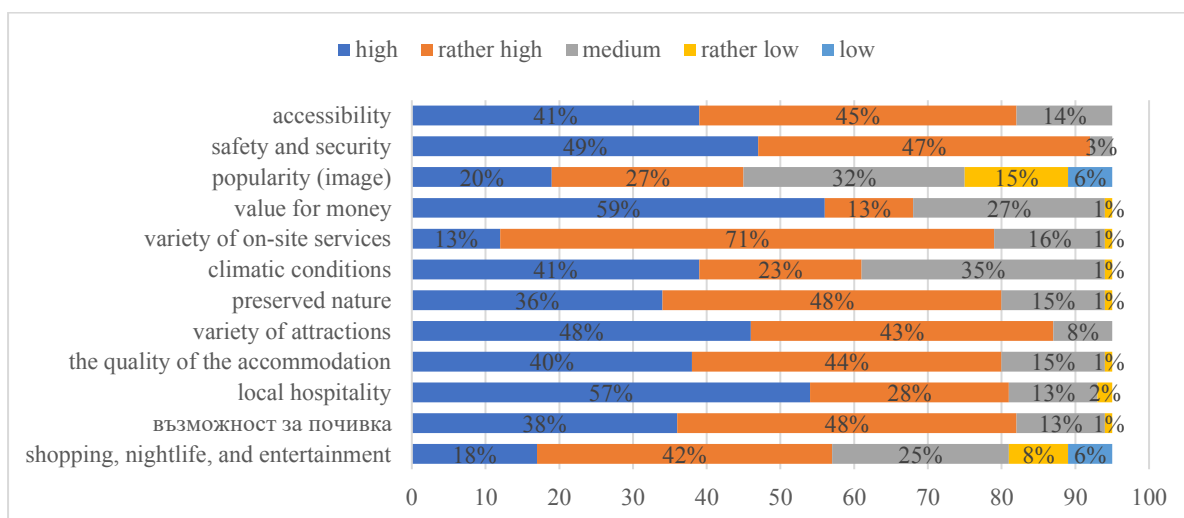
In terms of "transport accessibility," the most crucial factors influencing the decision to travel to Varna are "direct connectivity" and "cost of transport services" with 48% of respondents indicating these as key considerations. "Time and comfort" are rated as less important by 46% of the respondents. Notably, when it comes to "environmental impact" nearly half of the respondents consider the carbon footprint in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> to have a "neutral" (23%) or even "insignificant" (25%) influence on their choice of transport mode (see Fig. 12).



Source: Author's own work.

**Fig. 12 Factors in deciding how to travel to Varna**

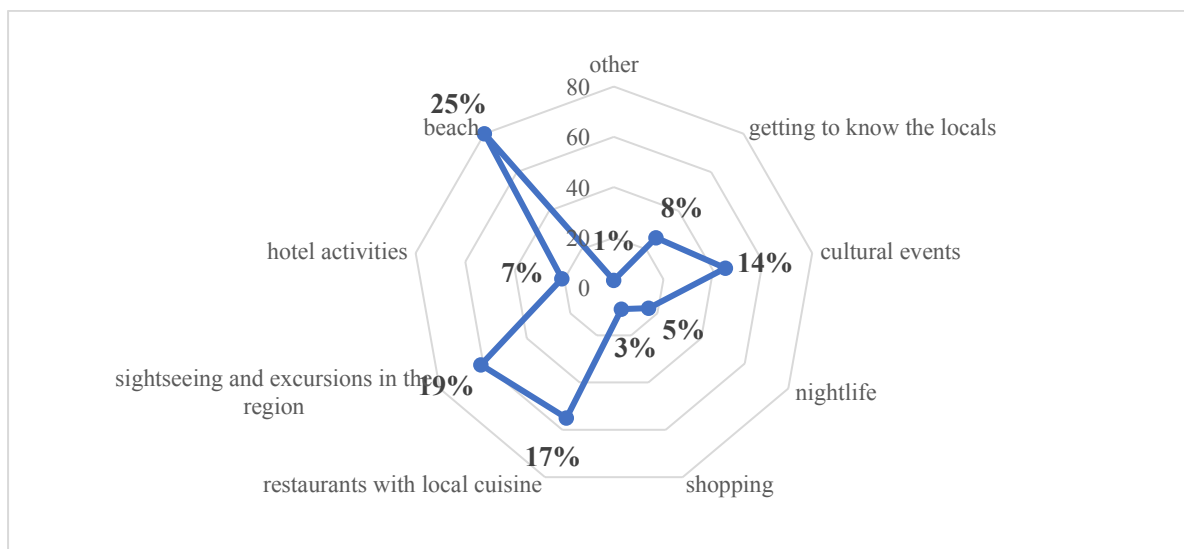
The primary factors influencing the choice of Varna as a destination are "value for money" and good deals (57%), "local hospitality" (57%), "safety and security" (49%), and "variety of attractions" (48%). In contrast, "popularity" (image) and opportunities for "shopping, nightlife, and entertainment" are not decisive in shaping the decision to visit Varna (see Figure 13).



Source: Author's own work

**Fig. 13 Factors influencing the choice of destination- Varna**

Tourists' preferred leisure activities in Varna include visiting the "beach" (25%), "sightseeing and excursions in the region" (19%), and dining at "restaurants with local cuisine" (17%). In comparison, hotel activities, nightlife, and shopping are less favored (see Figure 14).

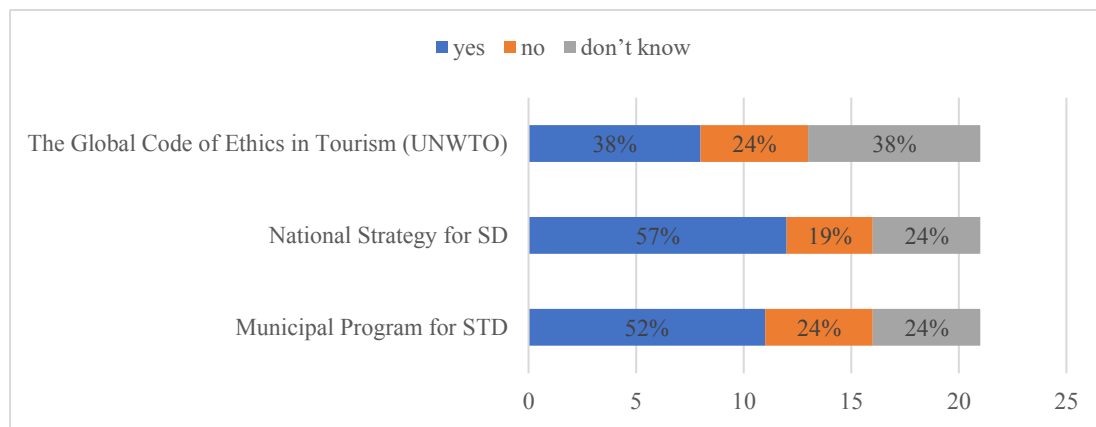


Source: Author's own work

**Fig. 14 Leisure Activities**

In sub-paragraph 3.4.2, the "**Stakeholder's Assessment of the Sustainable Tourism Development of Varna Municipality as a Tourist Destination**" was conducted through a "survey method" from September to November 2023. The study sites were randomly selected to ensure high representativeness and comprehensive coverage of the main stakeholders in tourism planning and management at the destination level. A total of 21 respondents participated, representing: institutions (38%), hoteliers (24%), tour operators and travel agencies (14%), visitor sites (museums, attractions, etc.) (10%), industry organizations (10%), and transport companies (5%).

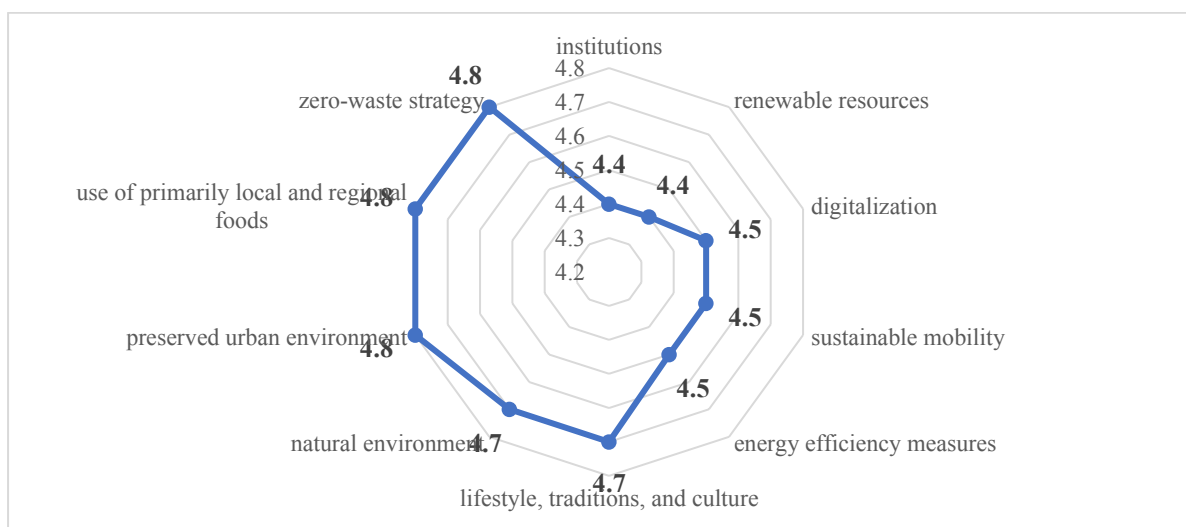
The focus of the empirical research was to examine the gap between the desired (ideal, normatively prescribed) and the actual (current) state. In this context, only 38% of respondents reported applying the objectives and principles of the "Global Code of Ethics in Tourism," while more than half of them followed the "national" (57%) and local "municipal tourism development program" (52%) (see Figure 15).



Source: Author's own work

**Fig. 15 Application of Strategic Documents in Tourism**

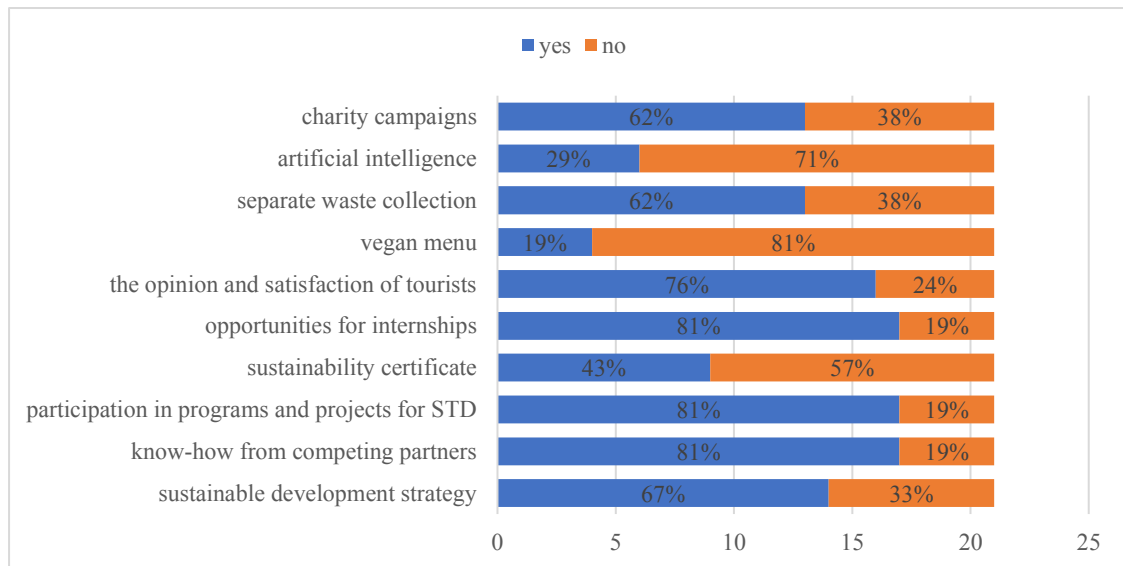
Among the selected sustainable development elements, those rated highest on the five-point scale were: the zero-waste strategy (reuse, repair, or recycle) – 4.8; the preserved urban environment (infrastructure, landmarks, architecture, etc.) – 4.8; and the use of primarily local and regional foods – 4.8. The state of the natural environment, as well as lifestyle, traditions, and culture, scored 4.7. The lowest score was given to the role of public sector “institutions” – 4.4 (see Figure 16).



Source: Author's own work

**Fig. 16 Evaluation of the Importance of the STD Elements in Varna**

Respondents from the tourism sector in Varna noted that they frequently provide "opportunities for internships" (81%), apply "know-how from competing partners" and survey "the opinion and satisfaction of tourists" (76%). However, over half do not have a "sustainability certificate" (57%), 71% do not utilize "artificial intelligence" capabilities, and only 19% offer a vegan menu. Additionally, a third of stakeholders (33%) reported that they do not implement a Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) strategy (see Figure 17).



Source: Author's own work

**Fig. 17 Application of the STD Elements in the Organizations**

**From the study, the following conclusions can be drawn:**

- the concept of Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) is not viewed as a threat but rather as a strategic tool for long-term growth and extending the destination's life cycle in a positive direction;
- the transformation process is not perceived as a limitation or a reduction in visitor numbers, but as an opportunity to introduce innovative business models. The notion of 'sustainability' is seen as a prime example of this;
- the emerging challenges highlight the need for an updated legal and regulatory framework that aligns with the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- the concept of sustainability holds the potential to address longstanding issues associated with the monostructural nature of tourism development, such as staffing shortages, efficient utilization of accommodation facilities, and enhancing the economic benefits of tourism for local communities.

### **Testing the validity of hypotheses**

*Hypothesis 1: "Mass tourism in the Municipality of Varna is compatible with the objectives and principles of sustainable development".* The dissertation repeatedly highlights the existing imbalances in the exploitation of tourist resources, the bed base, and related labor shortages, as well as the decreasing economic impact and low competitiveness. A key challenge identified for Varna's tourism product is its *monostructural* nature. While theoretical formulations suggest that "mass tourism" could align with the objectives and

principles of Sustainable Tourism Development (STD), the dynamics of the monitoring indicators reveal a worsening of existing deficits, such as the lack of qualified staff, a decline in profitable tourists, overcapacity in accommodation, and increasing dependence on a limited number of international markets. Domestic markets also appear stagnant. Moreover, there is a tendency for short-term private initiatives to be prioritized over long-term public initiatives, with the role of institutions being downplayed. Industry organizations often serve as instruments for advancing private interests under the guise of public benefit. The results of surveys with both tourists and tourism sector representatives confirm the unbalanced nature of the economic benefits, despite the favorable conditions offered by the natural and cultural environment. Given these findings, the claim in Hypothesis 1 should be rejected.

*Hypothesis 2: "The concept of sustainable tourism development is not a threat but an opportunity for destination Varna to increase its competitiveness".* The results of the survey clearly indicate that active transformation processes are underway, both among consumers (in terms of their expectations, habits, and behavior) and within the tourism business itself. External factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, military conflicts, and natural disasters have accelerated these changes. As a result, the concept of STD is increasingly recognized as both a vision and a long-term strategy to adapt to global trends and future perspectives. Rather than being seen as a constraint or an added cost, *sustainability* is viewed as an opportunity—an investment that can generate long-term economic benefits. The growing acceptance of sustainable tourism reflects a shift towards it as a competitive business model for the Varna destination. Given these findings, Hypothesis 2 should be accepted.

*Hypothesis 3: "Sustainable tourism in Varna is based on local characteristics and needs, projected through global principles and objectives for the development of the sector".* Varna, as a resort city and a destination with over a century of tourism tradition, has deep roots in the sector. Initially, the mass tourism model was driven primarily by the economic benefits it provided to the local population. Over time, however, the destination has evolved through different stages, influenced by a variety of factors that have shaped its development trajectory. The findings from the survey indicate that there is a growing understanding among both tourism sector representatives and visitors in Varna regarding the importance of applying a moderate and balanced economic approach. This approach is in line with the acceptable environmental, social, and cultural norms that align with the needs and values of the local population. Given these insights, Hypothesis 3 should be accepted.



## **Chapter Four. GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF VARNA MUNICIPALITY AS A TOURIST DESTINATION**

**§ 4.1. "Contemporary Trends and Prospects for the Sustainable Development of Tourist Destinations in Crisis Conditions"** explores areas that enhance the tourism sector's resilience and adaptability to challenges such as pandemics, natural disasters, climate change, and economic shocks. Based on the object and subject of research in the thesis, the following key aspects are highlighted: a) diversification of tourism products; b) digitalization and smart destinations; c) circular economy in tourism; d) environmental responsibility and adaptation to climate change; e) sustainable, socially responsible, and ethical tourist behavior; f) flexible business models and innovation; g) security and safety in tourism; h) public-private partnerships and international cooperation.

The intersection of the trends discussed thus far in the sustainable development of tourist destinations lies in the concept of the "smart" city, particularly the "smart" tourist destination. In the realm of digital tourism, intelligence is viewed as a complex integration of modern ICT, creating a high degree of synergy between the actors in both the real and virtual tourism markets. This convergence brings a range of benefits to visitors, tourism businesses, and the broader economy of tourism destinations.

Sustainable tourism development in times of crisis requires an *integrated approach* that addresses the complex interplay of economic, environmental, and social factors. In this context, flexibility, innovation, digitalization, and environmental responsibility are essential components for the successful management and long-term sustainability of tourism destinations.

**In § 4.2. "Problems and Challenges for the Sustainable Development of Varna Municipality as a Tourist Destination"** difficulties specific to tourism in Varna Municipality are identified. These challenges have regional particularities but, due to the volume and mass nature of tourist activity in the destination, they are often a focus of state and international policy. The leading challenges include: a) seasonality; b) insufficient infrastructure development; c) the general state of the superstructure and facilities; d) the profile of tourists and dependence on a limited number of international markets; e) the state of the environment and the protection of natural resources; f) insufficient tourism diversification; g) marketing and promotion; h) the deepening shortage of qualified staff; i) social and demographic trends; j) increasing competition from other destinations; k) lack of reliable statistical information, etc.

**§ 4.3. "Guidelines for Optimizing the Sustainable Tourism Development of Varna Municipality"** outlines recommendations and strategies that tourism entities in the destination should consider. These guidelines aim to achieve long-term economic viability, maximize positive impacts on the environment and society, and minimize the negative consequences, particularly those arising from mass tourism.

Any economic activity, including tourism, relies on its social legitimization. Therefore, the formulation of the main directions for sustainable tourism development considers the benefits for the broader society, which extend beyond narrow private entrepreneurial interests to encompass public welfare. The strategic directions for enhancing the sustainable tourism development of Varna Municipality are grouped into four main areas:

- Economic: Limiting the seasonal factor; adapting the tourist offer to modern forms of demand and consumption; quality management; strengthening the multiplier effect of tourism; involving broader social strata in service activities, etc.;

- Socio-cultural: Preserving public order and security; ensuring quality medical care; providing fair working conditions; fostering cultural dynamism while preserving local identity;

- Environmental: Reducing the impact of climate change; setting absolute limits on carrying capacity; protecting biodiversity and conserving natural resources, including water management measures;

- Institutional: Adopting an integrated approach to tourism management aligned with supporting industries; creating a secure and predictable policy environment with long-term priorities; implementing a set of indicators for monitoring tourism activity, its territorial structuring, and optimization; embracing digital transformation of administrative and business models; rethinking products and services; and optimizing the value chain of the tourism product in the Municipality of Varna.

**§ 4.4. "Sustainable Management of Varna Municipality as a Tourist Destination"** outlines 10 strategic management objectives for the sustainable development of Varna Municipality as a tourist destination, emphasizing an integrated management approach, environmental protection, social responsibility, and economic viability:

1. Maintain awareness of the international tourism market by collecting and analyzing information on its development trends;

2. Conserve and preserve unique and authentic natural and anthropogenic tourism resources;

3. Ensure better transport accessibility to tourism resources;

4. Establish sufficient, modern, and comfortable facilities, including accommodation, catering, and entertainment;
5. Maintain an experienced and managerially skilled tourism industry while securing a sufficiently skilled workforce;
6. Offer quality goods and services that are safe for the health of the tourist at a favorable price;
7. Develop and promote a typical positive image in the global tourist information space;
8. Ensure efficient movement of tourist flows within the destination;
9. Gather information on the implications of tourism development for the destination.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation, dedicated to sustainable tourism development and the guidelines for its improvement and application in the Municipality of Varna, is fully justified by the specific need for the practical implementation of modern theory and practice, as well as the search for concrete mechanisms and initiatives at the destination level to achieve global development goals. In line with the research tasks set out in the dissertation, we have conducted a theoretical analysis and a systematic characterization of the concept of sustainable tourism development, from which we have derived the key directions and strategies for the Varna destination.

This dissertation is based on the following principles: **first**, social, economic, and environmental impacts are not assessed independently, but interdependently, in a systematic way; **second**, the views of local people and their understanding of the phenomenon are paramount in assessing tourism impacts; **third**, collaboration between academia and administrative structures is key in formulating strategies and conducting follow-up monitoring of processes; and **fourth**, tourism impacts are not considered in isolation but in relation to other socio-economic and environmental dynamics.

Guided by an understanding of the complexity of the tourism system and the dynamic influences across various areas, we offer an interpretation and reflections on the possible projections and development of the Municipality of Varna in alignment with global contemporary governance models. In the context of tourism, focusing solely on efficiency may not always be the right approach. We propose that placing greater emphasis on equity could lead to more long-term and balanced outcomes with positive impacts for a wide range of stakeholders. The dynamics of tourism processes are accelerating, and we believe that the results of this dissertation will contribute to further development of the sustainable tourism concept at the destination level.

#### IV. STATEMENT OF THE DISSERTATION CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions of the dissertation are structured according to their scientific and applied nature as follows:

##### 1. Scientific and Theoretical Contributions:

- Systematization and Interpretation of Theoretical Formulations on Sustainable Tourism Development: This includes a theoretical analysis, characterization, and periodization of the concept of Sustainable Tourism Development (STD), as well as the definition and guidelines for applying sustainability principles in the context of the tourism industry at the regional level;

- Development of an Author's Methodology and Tools for Researching Sustainable Tourism Development at the Local (Municipal) Level: The dissertation introduces a conceptualized *System Model* for sustainable tourism development at the municipal level. This model is designed for research in the field of destination management and is applicable in the development of concepts and programs for the growth of the sector in specific regions and municipalities;

- Identification of Key Indicators: A system of indicators has been formulated to measure sustainability in tourism at the local level, focusing on the social, environmental, economic, and governance aspects. These indicators are essential for evaluating the sustainability of tourism in municipal destinations.

##### 2. Practical-Applied Contributions:

- Analysis and Assessment of the Sustainability of the Development of Varna Municipality as a Tourist Destination: This includes an empirical analysis of the tourist potential of the region, covering natural, cultural, and infrastructural resources, and evaluating their contribution to the overall sustainability of tourism in the municipality;

- Outlining the Opportunities for the Development of Varna Municipality as a Destination for Sustainable Tourism: This contribution identifies the main challenges for the sustainable development of Varna and proposes strategies for overcoming them. It also adapts modern planning models, integrating the unique characteristics of Varna municipality into international frameworks for sustainable tourism development.

#### V. LIST OF THE DISSERTATION PUBLICATIONS

##### Articles:

1. **Patarinski, T.** (2021). Role of the Sustainable Tourist Development for the Regional Economy of Varna Municipality, *Izvestia Journal of the Union of Scientists - Varna*.

Economic Sciences Series, Varna: Union of Scientists - Varna, 10, 2021, 3, 165-176., ISSN(in print) 1314-7390, ISSN(online) 2603-4085 / DOI 10.36997/IJUSV-ESS/2021.10.3

**2. Patarinski, T.** (2022). Overtourism as a Prerequisite for the Sustainability of Tourist Destinations, Izvestia Journal of the Union of Scientists - Varna. Economic Sciences Series, Varna : Union of Scientists - Varna, 11, 2022, 1, 214-221., ISSN(in print) 1314-7390, ISSN(online)

### **Reports:**

**1. Patarinski, T.** (2021). Guidelines for the Development of Varna as a Smart Tourist Destination, Contemporary Tourism. Smart Solutions for Tourism Development in Bulgaria in the Conditions of Covid-19 Pandemic, Varna: Science and Economics, 2021, 86-95. ISBN (in print) 978-954-21-1101-6

### **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

I declare that this dissertation is my own original work and that no other publications or materials have been used in its development in violation of copyright laws.