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APPLICATION OF TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS MODEL ON RURAL DESTINATIONS

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Abstract: Measuring competitiveness has become one of the key factors for ensuring successful and sustainable tourism development, especially destination's current level of development and its growth and vitality. The main goal of this study was to analyze the applicability of the Ritchie and Crouch competitiveness model in order to assess tourism advantages and disadvantages of Vojvodina Province (Northern Serbia) as a rural tourism destination. Exactly 216 tourism stakeholders on the supply side that have the knowledge and/or experience relevant to this topic were interviewed. The results show that stakeholders believe that Vojvodina is not a competitive rural tourism destination, but some destination's advantages were identified, and they can be used for improving Vojvodina's position on rural tourism market. The research has shown that the key resources and the attractions of rural areas of Vojvodina are rated better than the macro and industry-related factors. In order that Vojvodina stands out in the competitive market, destination marketing is crucial and should be more closely focused on new products and market development.

Keywords: tourism competitiveness, rural tourism, stakeholders' perception, tourism market, Vojvodina Province

Introduction

In the tourism industry, competition between tourist destinations and products has become very intense which has also been contributed by greater market transparency of prices and other elements of products and services (Cracolici, Nijkamp & Rietveld, 2008). Global competition in the tourism industry has become a challenge for many countries that compete to become a desirable

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tourist destination, and the understanding of the factors that contribute to the competitiveness of a destination is essential to maintain the current level of development of tourist destination, its growth and vitality (Hassan, 2000). Therefore, the measuring of competitiveness can be considered a key factor in ensuring the success of tourist destinations (Hudson, Ritchie & Timur, 2004).

Some researchers have introduced different concepts and models to measure the competitiveness of tourist destinations. So far, the most comprehensive models of competitiveness that include all essential aspects affecting the competitiveness of tourist destinations are models by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), Dwyer and Kim (2003) and Enright and Newton (2004).

The main goal of this study is to analyze the applicability of the Ritchie and Crouch (2003) competitiveness model in order to assess tourism advantages and disadvantages of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination. The paper is divided into five sections. The first introduces the focus of the study, while in the next section, the theoretical context concerning tourism destination competitiveness and rural tourism in Vojvodina was set out. This is followed by a presentation of the methodology, and in the fourth section, empirical results from a survey of Serbian rural tourism stakeholders are presented and discussed. Finally, in the last section, the main conclusions are presented.

Theoretical background

Tourism destination competitiveness

The most famous model of destination competitiveness was developed in 2003 by Ritchie and Crouch, commonly known as *Conceptual Model of Destination Competitiveness*. The model contains five large dimensions — major competitiveness factors — and 36 sub-factors. The authors through their model emphasized that a well-chosen and well-implemented program of destination management can improve the tourist destination competitiveness, especially marketing efforts can strengthen the image of the destination. Although the list of attributes measuring destination competitiveness is extensive, Crouch (2010) and Demirović, Petrović, Neto Monteiro and Stjepanović (2016) pointed out that not all attributes equally affect the destination competitiveness, and that some of them are more or less important for certain market segments. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate, that is, assess their relative importance or significance, because although an attribute is considered important characteristic of the destination, it will not be a determinant of competitiveness if it is not different or does not stand out compared to the same attribute of the competitive destination.

Rural tourism in Vojvodina (Serbia)

Vojvodina is the northern province of the Republic of Serbia and occupies 24.3% of its total area. According to the 2011 Census there are 1,931,809 inhabitants in Vojvodina (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2014). Vojvodina is divided into seven districts, 45 municipalities and 467 villages of which 415 are rural settlements (CESS, 2010).

The development of tourism activities in the villages of Vojvodina has a relatively long tradition (since the late 70s of the 20th century). Tourist product of rural tourism includes a variety of facilities in rural areas (farms, ethno houses), rural architecture and folk architecture, numerous events and authentic gastronomy as well as significant potential of protected natural areas. Vojvodina has significant natural resources, agricultural land, traditional approach to agriculture, good potential for development of rural tourism, a distinctive traditional local food specialties and possibilities to develop other complementary activities (Petrović, Blešić, Ivolga & Vujko, 2016; Petrović, Blešić, Vujko & Gajić, 2017). However, rural areas are faced with many problems, such as reducing number of farmers (the total share of agricultural population in the total population is below 11%), increase in the number of elderly households due to departure of young people to urban areas, and the reduction of agricultural land at the expense of construction of industrial areas (Novković, Mutavdžić & Vukelić, 2013).

Methodology

Instrument

In the existing literature there is no unique set of indicators for measuring competitiveness that will be applicable to all tourist destinations at any time (Dwyer, Livaic & Mellor, 2003). A survey instrument for measuring destination competitiveness in this paper is based on the list of indicators identified by Ritchie and Crouch (2003). Some attributes in Crouch and Ritchie model were modified in order to measure the competitiveness of rural tourist destinations. The selected attributes were chosen and adapted to represent the characteristics of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination.

The respondents were asked to rate each attribute within five determinants on a five-point Likert scale. The options ranged from 1 (the competitiveness level of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination is well below the levels of competitor) to 5 (the competitiveness level of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination is much above the levels of competitor).

Participants

The survey research of this study included all those tourism stakeholders on the supply side that have the knowledge and / or experience relevant to this topic: the teaching staff at higher education institutions that educate future staff to work in tourism, the employees of the Tourist Organization of Vojvodina and Serbia, as well as the employees of the local tourist organizations, employees of national and provincial institutions of importance for the development of tourism, managers of travel agencies, owners of tourism businesses in rural areas of Vojvodina (ranches, farms, restaurants, ethno-houses, museums, wineries, souvenir shops, organizers of rural events, etc.) and others (societies, associations, clusters). Contacts were made with 384 experts in rural tourism for the research purposes, of whom 216 participated in the study (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' general characteristics

| Characteristics | Share (%) | Characteristics | Share (%) |
|---------------------------|------------------|---|------------------|
| Age | | Workplace | |
| 21–30 | 16.20 | Faculty/Institute | 20.83 |
| 31–40 | 34.26 | Tourist Organization | 18.06 |
| 41–50 | 22.22 | Republic/provincial institution | 7.87 |
| 51–60 | 20.37 | Travel Agency | 8.80 |
| Over 61 | 6.95 | Economic entity | 37.96 |
| Total | 100.0 | Other (societies, associations, clusters) | 6.48 |
| Level of education | | Work experience in tourism | |
| High School | 13.89 | Total | 100.0 |
| College | 14.82 | Less than 5 years | 23.61 |
| Faculty | 31.48 | 6–10 years | 41.20 |
| Master | 23.61 | 11–20 years | 22.69 |
| PhD | 16.20 | 21–30 years | 6.02 |
| Total | 100.0 | More than 31 years | 6.48 |
| | | Total | 100.0 |

The largest percentage of the respondents is in the age group between 31 and 40 years (34.26%). Division of the results by level of education shows that most respondents have a university degree (31.48%). Analyzing the structure of respondents by the organization in which they are employed, it can be seen that the majority of them gave the answers to the questions from the perspective of the economic entity (37.96%). Most respondents had between 6 and 10 years of experience in tourism (41.2%).

Procedure — data collection and data analysis

The survey was conducted in two ways — a personal interview, i.e. “face to face” technique and by sending a questionnaire via e-mail. The survey was anonymous, that is, the names and surnames of respondents were not relevant to the requested information. Selected travel experts were surveyed in the period from March to the first half of June 2017. The response rate was about 55%. Data were analyzed by means of software package SPSS 20. The missing data were replaced by EM method, while analyses of deviated values indicated that there were none.

Results and discussion

Competitiveness by destination determinants

The competitiveness of individual destination attributes was analyzed for each competitiveness determinant. Those are: Core resources and attractors; Supporting factors and resources; Qualifying and amplifying determinants; Destination management; and Destination policy, planning and development determinants, in order to evaluate the weakest and strongest points of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination.

Core resources and attractors

The Figure 1 shows that the highest ratings were assigned to the following destination attributes: multicultural ambience, climate and gastronomy. The respondents estimated that the climate conditions are suitable for the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina, and with the appropriate tourist offer (outdoor or indoor activities consistent with weather conditions) they should be used to overcome the problem of seasonality. The multiculturalism of Vojvodina can significantly increase the tourist attractiveness of rural areas of Vojvodina, and at the same time can become a “pulse” to create tourist functions and promote rural area. Vojvodina’s cuisine is a mixture of Serbian, German, Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak cuisines, and almost every dish contains meat or products derived from it. The long tradition of winemaking and brewing could be interesting for foreign tourists and the establishing of gastronomic routes.

Research results have shown that the respondents believe there are not enough accommodation facilities in rural areas and they are not characterized by authenticity. Accommodation in rural farms must be coordinated with the rural environment and culture of the local community, and in this regard the aesthetics of accommodation facility is important. Tourists will not only meet the basic

tourist services, it is necessary to offer additional content. The attractiveness of farms can be increased by for example making places for sitting in nature, places for grilling, active involving of visitors in agricultural activities and more.

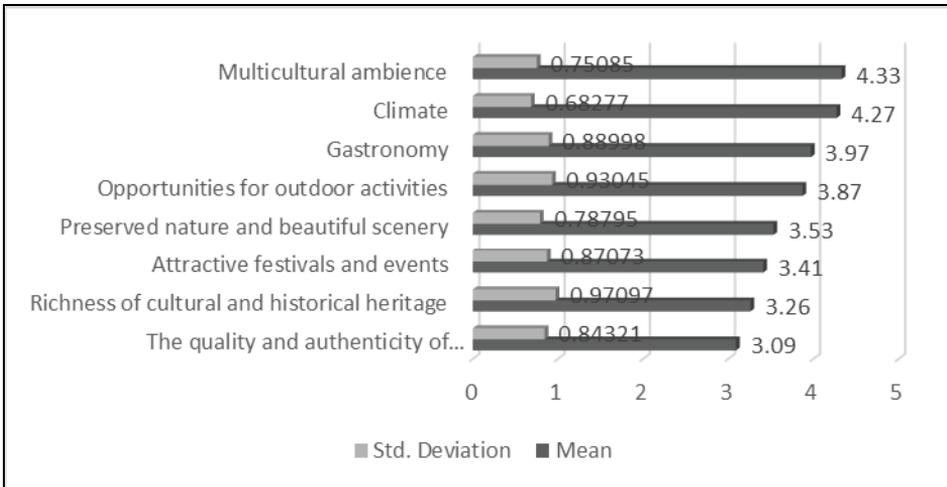


Figure 1. Mean and standard deviations for individual attributes of *Core resources and attractors determinant*

In the near future holders of tourism development and tourist offer of Vojvodina should improve the condition of factors with the lowest values, in particular the quality and quantity of accommodation facilities and the attractiveness of events, because these elements can be controlled, as opposed to the physical and geographical elements of the environment and cultural heritage which are the inherited resources and they are very little or not at all subject to changes. Factors within this determinant are very important for the attractiveness of tourist offer of rural destinations and authentic experience of visitors.

Supporting factors and resources

In the context of this determinant, the respondents gave the highest score for the hospitality of the local population (Figure 2), indicating that the local population is acting well in the segment of welcoming, friendly relationship they make with tourists, providing a sense of security, openness, kindness and courtesy.

In rural tourism of Vojvodina, there is insufficient interest in the tourist offer integration and the lack of cooperation is also present at all levels. The result of this (in)cooperation is the fact that rural tourism has still been marginalized in relation to other forms of tourism. Previous cooperation between the public and

private sectors through the establishment of clusters or other forms of association did not give satisfactory results.

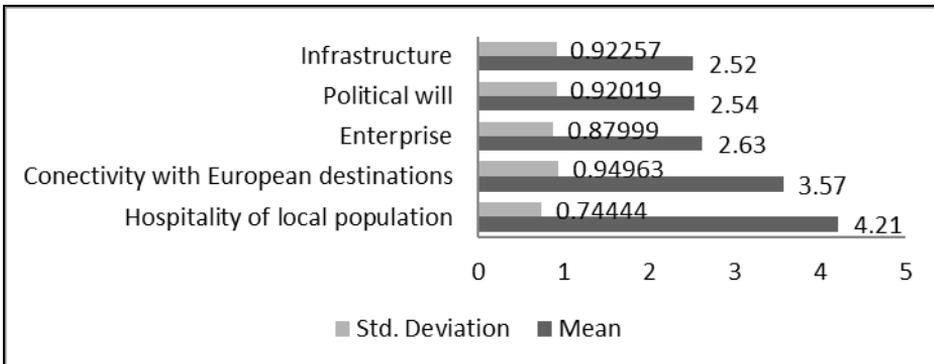


Figure 2. Mean and standard deviations for individual attributes of *Supporting factors and resources* determinant

The attribute that can be a major obstacle for further development of rural tourism in Vojvodina is the poor quality of infrastructure, especially rural road network and tourist signaling. Transport infrastructure is poorly developed in almost all parts of Vojvodina. The built roads are in poor condition, and traffic signaling is inadequate and insufficient. A particular problem may be the lack of inadequate approach to agritourism facility. Placing the tourist signaling in rural areas would improve the quality of service for tourists and contribute to their better informing. In order to enhance the value of this attribute, signposting is necessary towards rural tourist destinations including mark boards, tourist route direction arrows and tourist information boards.

Qualifying and amplifying determinants

When compared to its competitor destinations, Vojvodina is perceived as being more competitive in three out of five attributes: safety at a destination, geographical location and price/quality ratio (Figure 3). It is extremely important that the attribute “Safety at a destination” got high score (4.05) of the respondents, since this factor is one of the primary conditions for the successful development of destination.

Positively estimated price competitiveness of Vojvodina, especially the total value (price-performance ratio), plays an important role in attracting both domestic and foreign tourists because they often opt for a destination by comparing the resulting possible value for money. The current price level can be

an attractive factor for foreign tourists (the prices of services in rural areas of Vojvodina are at a lower level than in the European Union countries).

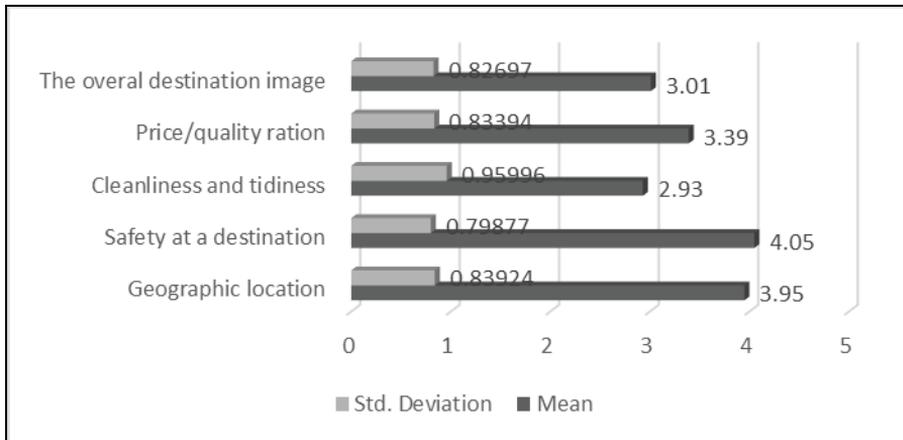


Figure 3. Mean and standard deviations for individual attributes of *Qualifying and amplifying* determinants

The respondents gave the lowest grade to the attribute “Cleanliness and tidiness”, which indicates that the cleanliness and tidiness of the place are not at a high level. This attribute has a significant impact on visitors' satisfaction and their experience at the destination - regular waste collection, maintenance of grassy and floral areas, cleanliness of streets and more. On the other hand, cleanliness of catering facility has been one of the most important categories for tourists in the assessment of the quality of accommodation facilities. Owners of accommodation facilities have to pay most attention to cleanliness, because a lack of hygiene can spoil the impression, even if it is the best and most expensive capacity.

Destination management

All six destination management attributes were rated less competitive when compared to the chosen competitor destinations (Figure 4). In the Republic of Serbia, i.e. Vojvodina, there is no continuous and adequate collection and analysis of data for rural tourism. There is neither official database of accommodation and catering facilities, nor the record of the number of visitors in rural areas. It is necessary to establish a national database that will provide relevant, comprehensive, accurate and objective statistics. It is recommended to monitor the number of visitors, estimate tourist spending, survey tourists (spending, motivation, pleasure, etc.) and holders of tourist offer.

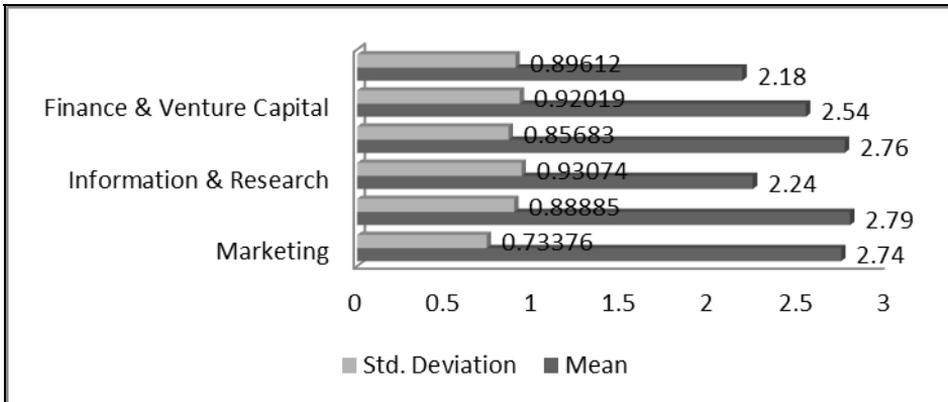


Figure 4. Mean and standard deviations for individual attributes of *Destination management* determinant

A review of the current way of providing financial support at all levels is necessary because it has proved to be insufficient and ineffective. Although there are significant resources that are allocated for the promotion of rural tourism development at national, and particularly at the level of Vojvodina, they did not give satisfactory results. This may lead to the conclusion that the holders of the tourist offer are not able to properly invest the funds received. It is necessary to introduce control over the spending of stimulus funds to make sure that they are spent appropriately and to train the owners of tourist facilities that received funds.

A significant problem that can affect the reduction of competitiveness of Vojvodina as a destination for rural tourism is insufficient education of stakeholders of rural households and other stakeholders on many aspects of doing business in rural tourism. In addition to the level of service providers, trainings are also necessary for officials in state / provincial and local services in order to increase the awareness of employees in these institutions about the benefits that the development of rural tourism can bring.

Destination policy, planning and development determinants

As expected, all factors in this group are poorly rated (Figure 5). Awareness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination in foreign countries is extremely low, and therefore Vojvodina as a brand virtually does not exist. The Marketing Strategy of Tourism of Vojvodina (Provincial Secretariat for Economy and Tourism of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, 2009) assessed the competitiveness of Vojvodina as a tourist destination based on Porter's "diamond" of economic competitiveness and identified deficiencies (without

emphasizing any benefits). Lack of research in competitiveness of tourism of Vojvodina is reflected in the fact that the assessment of the elements of competitiveness and key factors of success of identified tourism products is not carried out in relation to the set or imaginary set of competing destinations, and so the competitive advantages of Vojvodina have not been noticed compared to competing destinations. Given that rural tourism has been identified as one of the key tourism products, there is a need to investigate the competitiveness of the product in relation to the same product of competing destinations in the region.

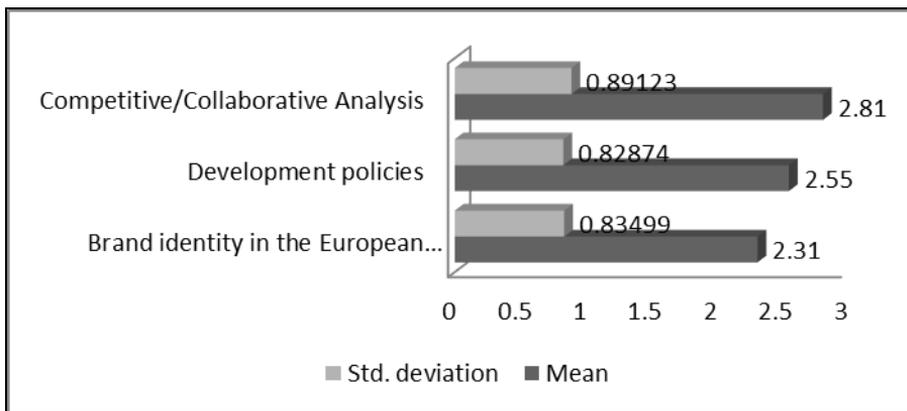


Figure 5. Mean and standard deviations for individual attributes of *Destination policy, planning and development* determinant

Vojvodina as a destination for rural tourism has a large number of public and private stakeholders in the sector. In practice, a strategic framework is necessary in order to define the clear roles and options of each stakeholder. There is a growing need for stronger partnership and cooperation between all stakeholders in order to promote the potential of destination and the maximum, but sustainable utilization of available resources. Serbia (and therefore Vojvodina) is still in a period of transition. The privatization of tourist companies has just begun, and all these circumstances are not in favor of an ideal public-private partnership.

Hypothesis testing

Based on a thorough review of the available literature and research in the field of rural tourism, as well as on expectations during the fieldwork, two hypotheses and eight sub-hypotheses were proposed to determine the competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination:

H₁: *Vojvodina as a destination for rural tourism is the most competitive in the field of Core resources and attractors.*

H_{1a}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Core resources and attractors” and “Supporting factors and resources”.

H_{1b}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Core resources and attractors” and “Destination policy, planning and development”.

H_{1c}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Core resources and attractors” and “Destination management”.

H_{1d}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Core resources and attractors” and “Qualifying and amplifying determinants”.

H₂: *Vojvodina as a destination for rural tourism is the least competitive in the field of Destination management.*

H_{2a}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Destination management” and “Core resources and attractors.”

H_{2b}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Destination management” and “Supporting factors and resources”.

H_{2c}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Destination management” and “Destination policy, planning and development”.

H_{2d}: There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores of the determinants “Destination management” and “Qualifying and amplifying determinants”.

The Figure 6 shows the Box plot for all determinants, indicating that most of the determinants are below the average value. The largest value, that is, the congruency is observed in determinants “Core resources and attractors”, which confirms the hypothesis H₁. Although this determinant is assessed as the

strongest in the model, due to low rating, it does not constitute a competitive advantage of Vojvodina, but some already mentioned attributes within this determinant are the competitive advantages that Vojvodina should use to attract foreign tourists and to strengthen domestic demands. The determinant “Destination management” has the lowest value, thus confirming the hypothesis H_2 . Due to low ratings, all attributes within this determinant require special attention of tourism policy makers and holders of tourism development, both at the level of Vojvodina and the level of Serbia.

The results in the Table 2 indicate that there are statistically significant differences between determinants at pairs 1, 2 and 3 ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$; $t \geq 2.58$), so the sub-hypotheses H_{1a} , H_{1b} , H_{1c} are accepted, while the sub-hypothesis H_{1d} is rejected because there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes of respondents, indicating that respondents believe that the attributes within these determinants have approximate quality and level of development.

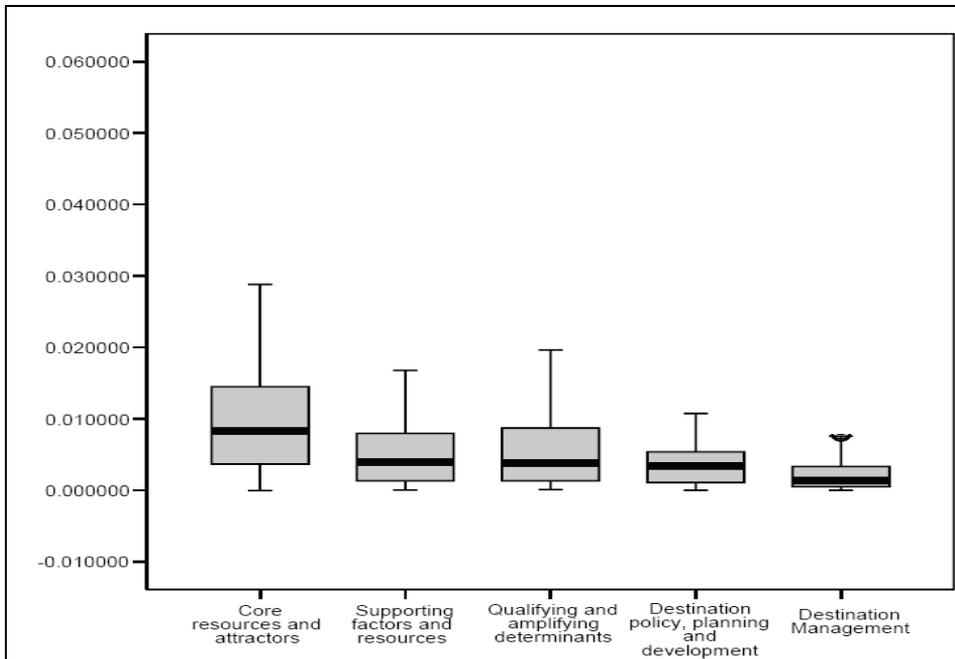


Figure 6. Box plot of Attribute Determinacy Measures

Notes: The black bar in a box plot represents the average value of the determinant. The shaded box illustrates the interquartile range in the results (i.e. 50% of the results lie within the box).

Therefore, “Core resources and attractors” is the strongest determinant in a model of competitiveness and this determinant may contribute to the increased competitiveness of Vojvodina as a destination for rural tourism, while other determinants are the weak links in the model, and they must be given extra attention in order not to reduce the competitiveness of Vojvodina. Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008) have also come to the same results while studying the competitiveness of Slovenian tourism, which means that regardless of the form of tourism and tourist movements, tourist attractiveness of destination has primary role in creating a competitive position in the tourism market. However, it should be borne in mind that without proper marketing of destination, trained and professional staff, well-defined actors of policy, planning and destination development of rural tourism and others, tourists will not have in mind Vojvodina as a potential destination for rural tourism, no matter how attractive it is, and the compliance of all the determinants of competitiveness model is the state to which all involved stakeholders of rural tourism should strive.

Table 2. Testing differences between arithmetic means of the determinant *Core resources and attractors* and other determinants

| Pairs of determinants | | Mean | Std. deviation | T | Degrees of freedom | Significance |
|-----------------------|--|--------|----------------|--------|--------------------|--------------|
| Pair 1 | Core resources and attractors — Supporting factors and resources | .83799 | .45608 | 21.427 | 135 | .005 |
| Pair 2 | Core resources and attractors — Destination policy, planning and development | .73757 | .46198 | 18.619 | 135 | .000 |
| Pair 3 | Core resources and attractors — Destination management | .82693 | .41239 | 9.739 | 135 | .000 |
| Pair 4 | Core resources and attractors — Qualifying and amplifying determinants | .72432 | .42656 | 1.583 | 135 | .140 |

Based on the obtained results (Table 3), it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the pairs 1, 2 and 4 ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$; $t \geq 2.58$), by which the sub-hypotheses H_{2a} , H_{2b} , and H_{2d} are confirmed, and the differences in the arithmetic means cannot be attributed to random variation in the data patterns. The results show that there is no statistically

significant difference between the pairs *Destination management — Destination policy, planning and development*, so the sub-hypothesis H_{2c} is rejected.

Table 3. Testing differences between arithmetic means of the determinant *Destination management* and other determinants

| Pairs of determinants | | Mean | Std. deviation | T | Degrees of freedom | Significance |
|-----------------------|---|---------|----------------|--------|--------------------|--------------|
| Pair 1 | Destination management — Core resources and attractors | .82693 | .41239 | 9.739 | 135 | .000 |
| Pair 2 | Destination management — Supporting factors and resources | -.10042 | .40620 | -2.883 | 135 | .005 |
| Pair 3 | Destination management — Destination policy, planning and development | .37609 | .40023 | 1.583 | 135 | .116 |
| Pair 4 | Destination management — Qualifying and amplifying determinants | .75643 | .46349 | 12.816 | 135 | .000 |

These results indicate that the respondents consider that these two groups of determinants are the weakest and with approximately similar characteristics and that can significantly contribute to reducing the competitiveness of the rural tourism sector in Vojvodina.

Conclusion

The development of tourism sector in Vojvodina in recent years was based on the construction of physical infrastructure. Elements such as the quality of services, training programs for human resource development, encouraging creativity and innovation and creating new and interesting tourism products, have been neglected. The development of tourist destination management, which is one of the most important factors for competitiveness, was unsuccessful. Research has shown that the key resources and the attractions of rural areas of Vojvodina are rated better than the macro and industry-related factors. This suggests that a rural development strategy should have a special bond with the resources and attractions of the destination, that is, priority should be given to maintaining all aspects of safety and security, continuous improvement of

services, using the benefits of a multicultural environment, diversity of culinary products, as well as the application of the principles of sustainability in environmental management. The need that is increasingly recognized and accepted is that the resources have to be managed in a sustainable way if they are to be preserved for future generations.

During the development of human resources in rural areas of Vojvodina, special importance should be given to the training of personnel, ranging from manufacturing to management level. From the perspective of the carriers of offer, quality management services and human resource development are co-dependent variables in support of excellence in service. In addition, in order that Vojvodina becomes distinctive in a competitive market, destination marketing is crucial and should be more closely focused on new products and market development. Despite the fact that a lot of tourism experts from research belong to a group that has an impact on the management of destination, destination management attributes are rated lower grade. This indicates that there is no clear strategy for further development of rural tourism of Vojvodina. This is evident from the low level of cooperation between the public and private sectors, between educational institutions and tourism companies. It seems that the government has no long-term solution for cooperation between all actors involved.

According to respondents, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia (and increasingly Romania) are the most important competitors of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination. The level of development of rural tourism in these countries is higher than in Vojvodina, which suggests that the holders of tourism policy and tourism offer should look at this group of countries as markets that require higher investments and significant efforts to meet the demands of their sophisticated rural tourists, which cannot happen in a short period of time. In the coming period Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia should be seen as partners and joint projects should be developed with their stakeholders, which will contribute to increasing the quality of rural tourism offer of Vojvodina. Meanwhile, attention and efforts should be made to foreign tourist markets for a possible faster entry, and these are the countries with which Serbia has good traditional ties (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece and Russia).

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