



Possibilities for Development of Rural Tourism in Villages Around Sofia

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The theme is a question of a present interest for several reasons. On one side we have all the documents for Bulgarian regional development, including this one of Sofia with the neighboring lands. There we see that the modern economy and regional development of the country must have as a priority of the future rural tourism. In Bulgaria many representatives of tourism industry do not make a difference between agro, and rural tourism. Probably the reasons come from traditions, and poverty. In this respect our media are working hard – they manipulate the society's views, and expectations. They create the impression, that the country was ready for rural tourism in the near past, and today, when we live in a democratic country, this development will start easy, and very soon we will have impressive results.

Our professional conscience and experience lead us to a different view, and we want to share it on this very serious forum. Much more, our theme is set for many geographical characteristics of the capital Sofia, as well as, from its special place in planning of the regional development of the country, and its management. Complex scientific research is rare, as the rural tourism is on the focus either for specialists in agriculture, or specialists in tourism. The attempts with the help of intelligence, and intellectuality to achieve the results are not always with a sufficient effect. When we compare GDP per capita, Bulgaria is on the last place among today's and future members of the EU. The difference in temps of economic development in recent years, divides the opinions of politicians and specialists. EU has temps of GDP's rising around 2%, and Bulgaria – around 5%. We believe that the Bulgaria's economy dropping behind needs radical policy for development, and special measures to take. Unfortunately, in the documents for the regional development of Bulgaria /laws, strategies, plans, programmes at a national, regional, and local level/ this could not be seen. There is a big difference between understanding of the EU, and the Bulgarian traditions at the scale of intra-regional differences, quality of life, the substance of urban, and the rural way of life. The criteria of EU for rural regions in Bulgaria were a big surprise for the society. The results were clear – over 80% of the country's territory was rural, and there around 45% of the population lives. At the same time since the end of 19th century in Bulgaria the understanding of a city, a city way of life is connected to lower economic and social indexes. In Bulgaria the quality and content of life of the population were not so much important, as the administrative power, and political and economic functions of the settlement. Due to this reason there is no clear criterion for declaring of the cities. The country cannot remember total crisis as this one of the last 16 years, and despite all the process of transformation from villages into cities is continuing. Naturally, without clear criteria, especially such kind of them, that underwent through open debates within the society. Because of this, part of the urban population is only formally urban, and at the same time we have a rural way of life. This leads to difficulties when trying to determine Bulgarian content of the rural tourism. The same problem we have with agro tourism. In Bulgaria terminologically we still make a connection between the agriculture and the village, influenced by the Russian language in the past. It is called, by mistake, rural economy. In most cases by agro-tourism is understood the tourism connected with agriculture or with cited rural economy. The understanding of agro-business, of impossibility to develop agriculture on its own, without all other elements of agro-business/industry, trade, services, still has weak positions in Bulgaria, especially among scientists and part of administration.

One could even meet the opinion at a highest administrative level, that the agro-business and the agriculture are synonyms. Following this logic when we speak about agro-tourism we should understand tourism connected to agriculture, but it is not the case of Bulgaria. In most cases by agro-tourism we mean tourism connected to revision/crafts or industry/ of agricultural production, as well as to various forms of trade of agricultural goods. Unfortunately, even some specialists in travel agencies count the visits to a winery/with wine tasting/, or to a dairy for a production of the unique Bulgarian yoghurt, as part of agro-tourism. Nowadays in Bulgaria we finish with the picking of the rose blossom. We produce rose oil in one and the same way since the Middle Age. The technology is unchanged, but there is no national advertising campaign for tourists.

The analysis of existing definitions of the rural tourism shows that it is defined mainly from two points of view: the environment and motivation, and the activities. In the first case we usually speak about rural, or green tourism, meaning all forms of tourism that are practiced in rural areas, and in the second case – for agro-tourism (tourism in farms), where we accentuate agriculture as the main reason and objective of the tourist's activities. It is obvious that the second concept is narrower than the first one, i.e. we could say that agro-tourism is a part of the rural areas (Marinov, 1994). Another characteristic of this kind of tourism that is shown by the author is the fact that the „employment in tourism services is not the only source of income, but it is an additional work load” for it.

After the opinion of Marinov, V. “in the near future we cannot expect to have a massive internal demand for rural tourism”, as well as “because of Bulgaria's tourism location towards countries from Western Europe, the active tourism from these countries is connected almost totally to the use of charter flights (individual trips are exceptions)”.

There are also other difficulties for the development of the rural tourism in Bulgaria: the development of similar activities in the neighbouring countries of the Balkans, the distant location of Bulgaria towards Western countries, which traditionally generate tourists for the rural tourism, infrastructural, linguistic, material, and informational lack of training in Bulgarian tourism companies. The lack of previous experience is another issue that worth mentioning. .

If in Western countries rural tourism is seen as a balance for urbanization and industrial employment, recently, in Bulgaria it is seen as an alternative. The country has had a very short period of time with a leading role of the industry /since the beginning of the 60s, until the end of the last century, and quickly jumped to service industries. Today, Bulgarian agriculture is the smallest in Europe in terms of land per owner. The average size of land part is of 0,2-0,3 ha, and over 1/5 of the farmers have less than 1 ha land in their possession.

Along with these national characteristics, there are some interesting facts about the region of Sofia, which is the subject of our work.

The city of Sofia is situated in a big valley/area of 1.000 sq. km well surrounded by high mountains. Among all European capitals only Madrid is situated at a higher altitude than Sofia with its 550-600 meters above the sea level. The climate is similar to this one from the Basin of Danube River. Summer temperatures grow up to 35° C and winter temperatures fall to -20° C. During the day, the population of Sofia arrives at 2 million inhabitants. Many people are coming here from other parts of the country for work or education. In fact this means one fourth of the country's population.

In 1879 when Sofia was declared the capital of Bulgaria, it had a population of about ten – fourteen thousand people. In 1944 it was already of 400.000, and at the beginning of the seventies of the last century it exceeded 1 million. The process of rapid increase of the population also comes from the natural increase, and the location of refugees, especially after the First World War with refugees from Dobrudja, Nis, and Macedonia. The cultural landscape has changed rapidly. At the end of the thirties of the last century the Bulgarian geographer Gunchev spoke about the so-called periurban zone of agriculture in the valley of Sofia. The industrialization of all other settlements is far behind this one of the capital, and today for the smallest of them the main sector of the economy is the agriculture. The industrial crisis and, on the whole, the crisis of economy gave chance to the service industry, and now they create over 90% of Bulgarian capital's GDP.

The development of economy, including agriculture on one hand, and the development of services, tourism, and settlements around Sofia on their own, on the other hand is going on a

different gear. The traditional economy is well ahead to the development of infrastructure, and the settlement's content. Several decades ago only the small towns in the valley had their own economy, which is of course connected with and dependent on the capital. Their population is under 10.000 inhabitants. Even towns like Bankia – with mineral springs, Novi Iskar – railway transport and Buhovo – the only Bulgarian factory in the past for flotation of Uranium since the end of 70's are part of Sofia. Actually, the settlements from the valley of Sofia are "sleeping rooms" – settlements. Their active population is working in Sofia's industrial and services' companies. Recently, the population's content has changed at least two times. Yet, at the end of 60's of the last century the administrative regime allowed the citizens of Sofia to freely choose where to live, and they have used this given opportunity. On their place from the interior of the country many young people with a higher educational level have come. They started to work in the economy of Sofia, having in mind to stay in Sofia forever. This became possible at the end of the 70's, and during the 80's, when Bulgarian companies started to sell their homes to their employees. Nowadays, in Bulgaria, over 90 percent of the population lives in their own homes. The rents are very high. The second wave of depopulation of Sofia, and settling of the region around it, with population from the interior of the country, came at the same time with the democratic changes at the end of the last century. But the composition of this third wave of people is not the same. Most of these people are of gypsies', and Turkish minorities. They have a lower level of education, and they practice low paid physical work. Characteristic conflicts, emerging with the compact minority groups, from criminal, ethnic, and even religious content have come as well. Each idea of building a Muslim temple in or around Sofia faces many problems. Bulgaria was liberated from the Turkish Ottoman Empire more than 125 years ago. But the positive changes are exceptionally at a national, and not at a local level.

As every big city, Sofia creates its own culture with its own speech, organization of leisure time, tastes, fashion in buildings' styles, and clothing's styles, and subordinates all the coming settlers. The Sofia's way of life infiltrates slowly in all neighbouring settlements yet during the 30s' of the last century (Prof. Penkov). Today we can see the differences in lifestyles very easy.

Where is the tourism industry, and more precisely the rural tourism in this geographical situation? In the valley of Sofia tourism activities are located either in the city centre, or in surrounding mountains, mostly Vitosha Mountain. The surrounding villages are part of the suburban zone of the big city yet during the beginning of 20th century. Their functions are demographic /to be a human resource sources for the capital/ and economic/mainly suburban agriculture, and villages around the main roads, also infrastructural functions. The tourist functions, as everywhere till today, are traditional. They are connected to historical, archaeological, and religious motives. The agriculture has not been a motive for tourism development until today. But the way of life in the villages around Sofia is mostly urban, therefore, being no way of offering the typical for the rural tourism services.

Our opinion is that the development of rural tourism here is almost impossible. It would be very hard to work it out, but not quite. There are traditional tourism activities in Sofia. There is also a suburban agricultural area that provides milk, meat, grain, potatoes, and fodder for the city. There is no natural possibility for other agricultural products. Traditional crafts for processing of agricultural products are absorbed of the over one million city's industry. The structure of villages, houses, and their interior has lost their rural character. It is clear that most of the villages around Sofia are already officially declared to be quarters of the city. The use of territory for tourist needs is limited also by stone-pits, industrial zones, warehouses, intensive transport infrastructure, and garbage areas for exceptional quantities of garbage. The industry and the big city are polluting the environment. For example villages around the big industrial manufacturer near the village of Kremikovtsi, and near Uranium ex-mines in Balkan Mountains, have an agriculture which could not answer to any ecological norms. At the same time more or less monasteries and churches are situated here, which can be considered as tourist attractions. Such a conflict situation we also have near the monasteries around the village of Kubratovo, which is situated on the North of Sofia, and Sofia's purifying station. Certain limitations exist also in Vitosha Mountain, on the South, which is declared a natural park area.

The role of a connection between rural tourism, the big city, and tourism services is fulfilled by the preserved crafts, and traditions from the past. Their development for the tourism industry is at an early stage. There are no suitable places to accommodate tourists for spending

overnight. Building houses or parts of them dedicated to tourists here, is unknown. There is almost nothing left from the ancient language, way of life, folklore, clothing, and communications. They have lost their meanings.

We think that it is possible to create a regional association for the development of rural tourism. Its centre could be in Sofia. Its members could represent the interests of all the villages in or close to the valley. A very serious training of the local population is needed. There are standards of EU for development of the rural tourism. The following weak place of the villages around Sofia is infrastructure, and human resources. Contacts with Bulgarian, and foreign travel agencies should be organized and maintained. The reality tells us that today rural tourism in the villages around Sofia could complement and enrich the tourist product of the capital. It will be a part of it as mineral springs, mountains, city with its history, architecture, parks, and entertainment. The specialized services offered by the rural tourism will form a part of Sofia's package.

An interesting geographical index is the price of the old village houses in the valley of Sofia. During the recent years they have risen several times, but there is an even more demand out of the valley. The almost depopulated region of the Iskar River gorge, in the North part of the city is growing in the number of people who have bought old houses, and turn them into secondary homes. There is a growing interest among foreign citizens towards village houses here. They are also looking for villages far from the city of Sofia. For them is not so essential to have a comfortable transport. They are looking for an isolated quiet place where to spend their spare time, or where to permanently live. The more settled one region is, the less developed rural tourism becomes, and the interest towards old houses is minimal. The chance of the local and regional economy for an increasing development here is essential. We have to mention that with the sale of village houses to foreign citizens, the development of rural tourism will decrease. After the house is bought it will be a private property to otherwise potential tourists. This way the tourist expenditures will be minimal to none. The economic effect on which the local population counts will decrease. The foreigner will become local owner. He or she will sleep, eat, and deal with specific rural activities "at home", and as owner, but not as a tourist.

As for conclusions, we think that rural tourism development in the region around Sofia is not possible because of all mentioned reasons. But we could recommend several places for one day excursions at the periphery of the capital. Their focus will be of course upon the rural way of life. Once again they will enrich the tourist product of the city of Sofia. After a research of Dimitrov, V., 2006 a big attraction for foreign tourists at Sofia represent the folklore festivals, mostly those of Koprivshitsa, Pernik, Kazanlak. They are also famous among many local people, and Bulgarian tourists from other parts of the country.

A visit to the festival could be well combined with a visit, lunch, demonstration of local crafts, tasting event, etc. to the villages around Sofia. This will help tourists to enter into the village environment and atmosphere. It will help local people to prepare themselves for the future development of a true rural tourism here.

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