



The Impact of COVID-19 on Destination's Life Cycle (The Case of Samokov Municipality, Bulgaria)

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Abstract: *The life cycle of a destination is a concept used by Butler (1980) to examine and analyze tourism evolution in specific destinations.*

With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic world tourism arrivals and revenues decreased, occupancy rates fell, and international markets shifted.

The paper aims to examine the extent of these changes and the pandemic effect on the life cycle in one of the most popular winter ski and sports destinations in Bulgaria – Samokov municipality. The methods used are based on statistical data provided by the Bulgarian Statistical Institute.

The main results of the research are that Bulgarian tourism in general is recovering quickly and successfully after the COVID-19 pandemic and that the life cycle of a destination is not limited only to the changing numbers of tourist arrivals to it. There is a need to review the classic model of Butler and introduce more indicators to be used.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a high-priority economic sector in Bulgaria producing 10% of the country's GDP. Its tourism destinations are at various stages of development and of their life cycles.

The life cycle of a destination is a concept used by **Butler (1980)** to examine and analyse tourism evolution in specific destinations regarding their development as a clearly expressed continuous process. This concept has a graphic interpretation and the life cycle as a whole can be represented by several consecutive stages called introduction, growth, maturity, stagnation and decline.

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic tourism in Bulgaria as in many other European countries drastically changed – tourism arrivals and revenues decreased, occupancy rates fell, and international markets shifted. These phenomena brought a very significant change in the life cycles of many destinations and the sequence of their stages.

The paper aims to examine the extent of these changes in one of the most popular winter ski and sports destinations in Bulgaria – Samokov municipality where the oldest ski resort in the country (Borovets) is situated.

To achieve this aim several tasks are formulated and performed: primary and secondary data are gathered and analysed to describe the temporal development and changes of various tourism indicators (No of beds, nights spent, tourist arrivals, revenues, tourist function, lodging index, etc.). Statistical data is provided by Bulgarian Statistical Institute and graphics are widely implemented to reveal the changes and the period when they have been observed.

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Based on tourism recovery in the investigated destination which is illustrated again by statistical data of recent years and based on the results of the analyses done conclusions are drawn that confirm the following work hypotheses:

- Bulgarian tourism is recovering quickly and successfully after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the latest UNWTO barometer in 2023, the No of tourist arrivals is 27% higher than in the pre-pandemic 2019 which puts the country in the 6th position in the world; and the revenues show a 21% increase for the same period placing the country in the 10th position in the world (Investor Media Group, 2023);
- After the end of the pandemic tourism destinations in general are likely to recover quickly and resume their previous life cycle stage;
- The life cycle stage of a destination should not be determined only by its quantitative characteristics and indicators.

The main result of the present research is that the life cycle of a destination is not limited only to the changing numbers of tourist arrivals to it in various periods. There is a need to review the classic model of Butler and to introduce more qualitative indicators to it.

2. SAMOKOV DESTINATION

Samokov municipality is situated some 60 km away from Bulgaria's capital Sofia in the highest mountain on the Balkan peninsula Rila. It is one of the oldest tourism destinations in the country still attracting many one-day and overnight visitors from the country and abroad.

Although it was first developed as a summer destination, nowadays winter mountain ski tourism is prevailing. Throughout the years several tourism centers were formed:

- Borovets – the oldest ski resort in Bulgaria. Founded in 1896 as a summer holiday destination for the royal family it is now an established national resort with over 4 thousand beds and 430 000 registered overnights.
- Malyovitsa – is another famous resort in the destination which is recently renovated.
- Several villages at the feet of the mountain develop mostly rural, eco-tourism and second homes.
- The town of Samokov – famous for its cultural heritage, sports facilities and event tourism.
- Belchin baths – a new center developing SPA and balneological tourism.

Thanks to the beautiful nature, unique location and rich cultural heritage, Samokov and the region are attractive places to visit and relax. The year-round development of various forms of tourism is appropriate.

The development of tourism in the municipality over the last 25 years has been at a significantly slower pace. This speaks of a certain saturation of the tourist potential of the destination and of the stage of its life cycle in which it is, namely slow and small development with a transition to stagnation. The negative rates of increase in the average stay of tourists also speak for this.

There is a tendency to decrease the length of stay and increase weekend visits, which is explained by the proximity to the capital and the preference of its residents for a weekend in nature and skiing, spa without unnecessary loss of time on the road. The number of vacations during the year has increased at the expense of their length, which is another trend characteristic of the new generation of Millennials. Another factor that has contributed to this line of development is low-cost airlines, which have created additional convenience and opportunity for international travelers (Table 1).

Table 1. Tourism indicators of destination Samokov

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Growth rate (%)
No of beds	5102	5212	5403	5284	5827	5195	26,4
No of nights	537 897	548 531	369 657	370445	520813	501574	34,7
-Bulg.	283265	289634	161146	294242	302399	284314	65,1
-Intl	254632	258897	208511	76203	218414	217260	8,5
No of tourists	194 530	232 474	111 564	148993	189595	181627	75,9
-Bulg.	131513	146730	65932	127375	136909	128226	77,8
-Intl	63017	85744	45632	21618	52686	53401	71,6
Revenues (leva)	26625580	28952287	22390532	20911773	37460458	39524578	1 311,4
Average stay	2,7	2,4	3,3	2,5	2,8	2,8	-22,2
-Bulg.	2,2	2	2,4	2,3	2,2	2,2	-8,3
-Intl	4	3	4,6	3,5	4,2	4,1	-35,9
Occupancy	33,7	33,9	30,9	22,8	31	31,1	11,5
No of nights/bed	105,4	105,2	68,4	70,1	89,4	96,5	6,5
Bed density/km²	4,2	4,3	4,5	4,4	4,8	4,3	26,5
Tourist function	0,127	0,130	0,130	0,130	0,146	0,133	52,9
Tourist intensity	15,34	15,79	10,23	10,47	15,24	14,77	20,9

Source: NSI, 2024; Own calculations

The municipality continues to have a pronounced two-season tourism - strong winter ski tourism and weaker summer mountain tourism, with the main part of overnight stays (with a predominant percentage of foreigners) taking place in the national resort of Borovets, while visits by Bulgarians prevail in the villages. The number of overnight stays realized in the town of Samokov is insignificant.

Continued slow development of tourism in the municipality of Samokov can be expected, as the main prerequisite for this will be the new forms and types of tourism that will be implemented and will attract tourists without further increasing the tourist super- and infrastructure to future sustainable tourism development in it.

The possibilities for future development of tourism in the municipality are related to:

- the skilful combination of tourist development with the protection of the natural environment and respect for the way of life and culture of the local population;
- the use of National Park “Rila” for reorientation towards new alternative and modern forms of ecotourism and implementation of ecologically oriented projects;
- improving the summer operation of the resorts and diversifying the offered tourist products with forms of summer sports and activities;
- development of small and medium-sized tourism businesses with active involvement of the local population in the tourism process;
- attraction of funding sources in the tourism sphere from European funds.

3. TOURISM AREA LIFE CYCLE (TALC)

The concept of life cycles was first mentioned by Levitt (1965), adapted and used by Butler for tourism research in the 1980's (Butler, 1980). Butler (1980) conceptualized a Tourist area an evolutionary cycle

(tourist area life cycle or TALC), which describes the development of a destination area in terms of a series of stages defined by visitor numbers and infrastructure developed. The ‘exploration’, ‘involvement’, ‘development’ and ‘consolidation’ phases of the model signify growth, while the ‘stagnation’ stage represents a gradual decline. As the consolidation stage is entered the number of visitors declines. A major part of the area’s economy is tied to tourism, while in the stagnation stage, the peak number of visitors will have been reached. The area is well developed but no longer in fashion. The end of the cycle is marked by the ‘post-stagnation’ phase, which comprises a set of five options that a destination may follow. The decline may ensue if the market continues to wane and the destination is not able to compete with newer attractions.

However, if counter-measures are adopted, such as the reorientation of tourist attractions, environmental enhancement, or the repositioning of destinations within an overall market, the decline may be offset and varying degrees of rejuvenation and stimulated (Butler, 1980; Agarwal, 1997). It is now more than four decades since the original Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) article first appeared (Butler, 1980), and rather surprisingly the model proposed in that article is still being cited and used in tourism research. It attempts to portray a common pattern of the development of tourist resorts, a pattern which argues is common to many resorts throughout the world (Butler, 2011).

Despite some heavy criticisms from various researchers, Butler’s destination-life-cycle concept is used frequently in the tourism literature. Several researchers have adopted the lifecycle concept to the life cycle of resorts (e.g. Agarwal, 2002; Andriotis, 2003). Others focused on the life cycles of destinations or regions (e.g. Faulkner, 2002). Most researchers agree that in the life cycle of destinations, some stagnation or decline will eventually appear. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the signs of stagnation and alert core stakeholders of their presence. It needs to be emphasized that stagnation can only be averted if it is realized that the approaches of the past will not work in the future (Faulkner, 2002).

The concept of Buhalis (2000) and the matrix developed by him makes it possible to determine the stage of development of the destination, which reflects on the wholesome development of tourism – tourism impacts, marketing responses, etc., and in general can be used as a tool for strategic planning, which makes it extremely valuable for academic and practical application purposes.

The TALC concept was used by many Bulgarian scientists (Dogramadjieva, 2013; Marinov et al., 2016; Assenova, 2013; Mitova, 2020; Kotsakov, 2024; etc.) to determine the life cycle stages of various tourism destinations in the country.

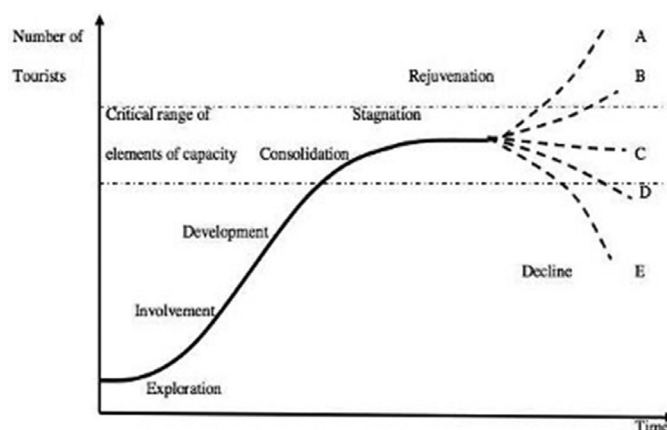


Figure 1. Tourism Area Life Cycle

Source: Butler, 1980

All analyses carried out so far lead to the conclusion that the tourist destination municipality of Samokov is generally in the stage of consolidation from 2006 to 2019. After the pandemic, in which a decline in almost all indicators was noted, a stage of recovery began, which has not yet been completed and it cannot be determined whether it will continue as growth (revival) or remain in the stagnation stage.

Some new tourism products and some tourism territorial entities in the destination though are now showing signs of growth. SPA and balneological tourism, rural and cultural tourism, ecotourism are in the development phase, and adventure, event and golf tourism are in the introduction phase.

4. COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND TOURISM

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic not only had a significant impact on public health, but it also affected one of the linchpins of the global economy, the tourism industry. As many countries introduced travel restrictions to contain the spread of the virus, domestic and international travel significantly declined in early 2020. The financial repercussions of the pandemic manifested later that year when the total travel and tourism spending worldwide more than halved between 2019 and 2020, decreasing from over five trillion U.S. dollars to 2.44 trillion U.S. dollars.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the tourism industry due to the resulting travel restrictions as well as slump in demand among travelers. The tourism industry has been massively affected by the spread of coronavirus, as many countries have introduced travel restrictions in an attempt to contain its spread. The United Nations World Tourism Organization estimated that global international tourist arrivals could have decreased by 58% to 78% in 2020, leading to a potential loss of US \$0.9–1.2 trillion in international tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2024).

In many of the world's cities, planned travel went down by 80–90%. Conflicting and unilateral travel restrictions occurred regionally and many tourist attractions around the world, such as museums, amusement parks, gyms and sports venues closed down. After March 2020, tourist firms' connectivity has skyrocketed. Restaurants are the most significantly impacted subsectors of tourism, followed by airline firms. UNWTO reported a 65% drop in international tourist arrivals in the first six months of 2020. Air passenger travel showed a similar decline. 2020 international travel declined by 72% worldwide and the number of events declined by 90%.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development released a report in June 2021 stating that the global economy could lose over US\$4 trillion as a result of the pandemic (UNWTO, 2021).

In Bulgaria, the first state of emergency was announced on March 13, 2020, and on June 14, 2021, Bulgaria was enrolled in the list of countries with a high risk of Coronavirus contamination (Robert Koch Institute – Germany). On October 24, 2022, over 1,284,051 confirmed Coronavirus cases (Ministry of Health). The epidemiological situation was officially canceled on April 1, 2022. Bulgaria is at 87 place in the world by the number of contaminated persons.

After June 14, 2020, only business trips were allowed. Tourism was blocked – totally or partially. Hotels were not officially closed but many of them closed down due to the lack of tourists. Tour operators ceased their activities but did not reimburse tourists. Insurers refused to pay insurance caused of force majeure circumstances. Finally, it was decided that vouchers should be issued to

tourists. Strict measures were imposed on hotels, restaurants and visitor attractions. Prices went up due to high exploitation costs and low number of clients.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The municipality of Samokov has well-developed tourism, considering that it is home to the national resort of Borovets and its relatively high tourism function - 0.133.

Conditionally, we can divide the analysis of the values of tourism indicators before and after 2019, since the emergence of the pandemic has changed the way of travel and vacation for people all over the world. Until 2019, a steady growth of both tourists and overnight stays was noted. After the sharp decline in 2020, we can report growth in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

A significant decline in the tourism development of Samokov municipality was observed during the Coronavirus pandemic - especially in 2020. It is noticeable in all indicators of the structure and type of tourist development (Fig. 3 and Fig. 5) and in all absolute indicators except the number of beds in accommodation (Fig. 2). Some indicators of the intensity of tourist development in the municipality also have not changed – e.g. tourist function (Fig.4).

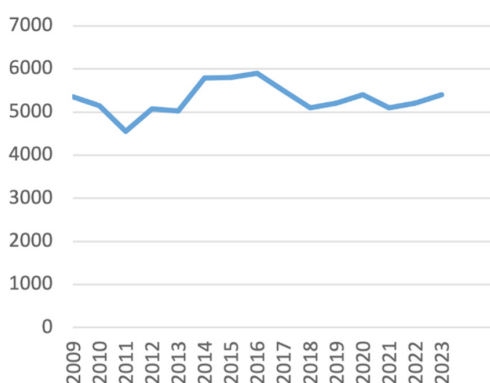


Figure 2.
Dynamics of bed numbers

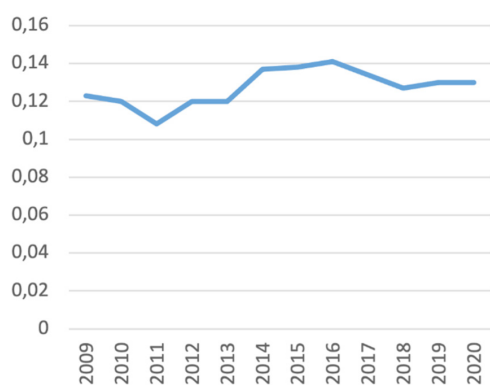


Figure 4.
Dynamics of the tourist function

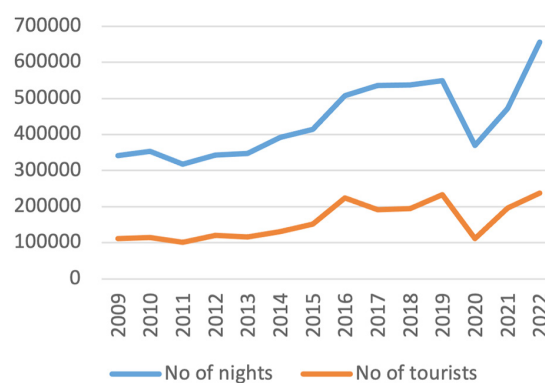


Figure 3.
Dynamics of nights spent and tourist numbers

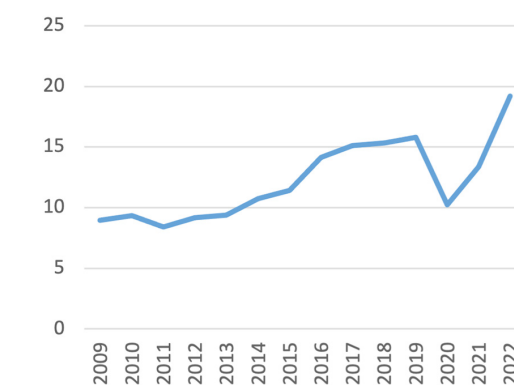


Figure 5.
Dynamics of the tourism intensity

Source: Own processing

In terms of new projects and investments in tourism, the COVID-19 crisis had also some positive aspects, which allowed the modernization of accommodation and the adaptation of supply to new consumer demands.

1. The Lyon, Breza, Ella, etc. hotels were completely or partially renovated in the Borovets resort.
2. The Malovitsa resort complex started the 2021-2022 season with a completely renovated ski area. Malovitsa Hotel and Alpinist Hotel were renovated with a new museum dedicated to mountaineering in Bulgaria, restaurants, a large parking lot and numerous summer sports activities for children and adults.
3. SPA complex "Belchinski Izvor" was opened in 2020 in the village of Belchin. It is the newest specialized balneological 4-star complex in the municipality, offering a year-round combination of balneo, SPA, rural, event and cultural tourism.
4. Okol Lake Park is a priority investment project on an area of 3,000 acres, which aims to build an 18-hole golf course, a five-star hotel complex "Pullman Resort" and a village of 650 single-family houses according to an individual project. The start of the golf course was on July 3, 2024, and the opening of the hotel and the adjacent accommodation villas will be on January 1, 2025.
5. Project "SamElion" is a multifunctional complex in the southernmost part of the city of Samokov next to the Iskar River and Lago Park, which includes the construction of sports and conference halls, SPA and wellness hotel and housing - houses and apartments. Its launch date is September 2024.

Dramatic changes such as climatic changes, epidemics, wars, etc. can significantly change the dynamics in numbers of tourists and hence create an impression that the lifecycle has changed or has been interrupted. The research revealed that some characteristic indicators such as No of beds or tourist function remain unchanged and thus place the destination at the same stage of its life cycle.

The relatively long period of stagnation in which the destination is located should serve as an incentive for the governing bodies, tourism organizations and individual entrepreneurs to look for ways to move towards the revitalization of the destination, so as not to reach its ultimate decline. It should not be forgotten that, while in the case of TALC, there is an opportunity for the next stage of revitalization after the maturity or consolidation, in the case of the Tourist Product Life Cycle there is no such possibility. This means that either new products must be introduced or the quality and focus of existing products with all their tangible and intangible components must be fundamentally changed.

The individual tourist areas in Samokov destination are also at different stages of their life cycle – national resort Borovets (stagnation) with some elements of renewal (updated bed base and new activities, e.g. Theater in the Mountain), the villages (accelerated growth) and the town of Samokov (moderate growth).

There was a significant period (until 2015-2019) during which the destination relied on only a few types of tourism - summer, winter, sports, hunting and fishing. Since 2019, a highly dynamic development of alternative types of tourism by-products has begun, with the latest ones showing a significant growth rate. At the same time, mass tourism is stagnating and declining.

A positive moment that can contribute to revitalizing the destination, avoiding the next stage of decline and reaching a stage of rejuvenation, is the introduction of new products and new types of tourism in it - golf tourism, balneo and spa tourism, summer mountain, alternative winter sports in Maliovitsa and others.

6. CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn are related to two subjects:

- The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism evolution in destination Samokov;
- The life-cycle stage of destination Samokov.

Bulgarian tourism is recovering quickly and successfully after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the latest UNWTO barometer in 2023, the No of tourist arrivals is 27% higher than in pre-pandemic 2019 which puts the country in the 6th position in the world by speed of recovery; and the revenues show a 21% increase for the same period placing the country in the 10th position in the world by speed of recovery (UNWTO, 2024).

Recovery after COVID-19 is difficult and ambiguous, the municipality does not see a perspective for now, but knows the direction and has a strategy and planning documents with scheduled development measures (PIRO, 2021), *Program for the Management of Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Samokov Municipality for the period 2021-2030 (2021)*. The public-private partnership is difficult, the local population is not always included in the tourism planning processes, the private initiative is more flexible and effective than the municipal authorities, and there is certain corruption, but there are partial successes and good practices.

COVID-19 has positive changes, although the period has been difficult for the municipality, its population and tourism in particular - bankruptcies, inflation, the war in Ukraine, restructuring of ownership, restructuring of markets, new investments and projects in the works, by-products, which are year-round and meet the new consumer requirements, etc. The development of new tourist year-round sub-products with a vision, provides an opportunity for optimism, as well as the conclusion that the municipality is working in the right direction - for sustainable, an environmentally friendly, highly effective tourist product that meets the new needs of tourists.

It has been established that the two-year period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria did not lead to a complete cessation of the evolution of the destination municipality of Samokov, which already managed to recover, albeit not fully, the level of its development.

It can be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to being a crisis, has provided an opportunity for the restructuring of products, markets and the development of territorial entities specializing in new and modern types of tourism – resort complex Maliovitsa, Belchin and Belchin baths, Okol Lake Park and other new projects.

So it seems that after the end of the pandemic tourism destinations are likely to recover quickly and resume their previous life cycle stage.

It has been proven that the life cycle stage of a destination should not be determined only by its quantitative characteristics and indicators.

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