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A New Era for Tourism in the Black Sea Area

Zefi Dimadama^{1*}, Georgia Chantzi²

¹ICBSS Director General

²ICBSS Research Fellow

Abstract

Over the last decades, the tourism industry has gained ground as an essential source of revenue for many countries. The Black Sea region has emerged as a new, attractive tourist destination, offering alternative ways of tourism. In this regard, the Black Sea countries join their efforts towards achieving a common target, the development of tourism in a sustainable manner to the benefit of the peoples of the region.

Keywords: *Black Sea, BSEC, ICBSS, tourism, environment, sustainability*

JEL Classification: Z19: Cultural Heritage and Tourism

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the tourism industry has gained ground as an essential source of revenue for many countries. Tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Besides, its development is interconnected to several other sectors of economy, such as transport, infrastructures, culture, to name but a few.

Tourism itself has taken various forms, depending on the reason of the travel, such as business tourism, religious, medical tourism, agritourism and many others; while new destinations have emerged in the global tourist map. The Black Sea region is one of them, attracting nearly 6% of world tourists annually. The number seems low in comparison to international figures; nonetheless, it represents the great potential of the Region to emerge as an attractive tourist destination, offering alternative ways of tourism. In this regard, the Black Sea countries join their efforts towards achieving a common target, the development of tourism in a sustainable manner to the benefit of the peoples of the region.

Building a sustainable future for the Black Sea region however, entails various aspects, closely linked to each other. For example, efforts to economic development should not be in expense of environment. It is important to underline that the latter is often damaged by uncontrolled economic activities; tourism being one of them. Excessive use of natural resources, littering of the coast, oil pollution, illegal logging are a few of the numerous risks that threaten the environmental equilibrium in the Black Sea region.

The present paper aims at presenting a general overview of tourism in the Black Sea area; while identifying the major challenges to tourism industry with respect to environmental protection.

2. The global industry of tourism

Tourism constitutes a continuously flourishing, global industry. Today, the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. It is one of the world's largest and most diverse industries, accounting for up to 5% of global GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and providing more than 25% of the total global service trade.

These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic progress. The tourism industry has been the largest provider of employment all over the world. Jobs generated by this industry are not limited to direct service sectors, but spread to wider areas as well, namely to infrastructure, farming, manufacturing, telecommunications, transportation and retail.

Indicatively, the tourism sector has generated the following^[1]:

- ✓ **Creating Jobs and Wealth** - The tourism industry has been the largest provider of employment all over the world.
- ✓ **Foreign Exchange** - International tourism serves as a major source of foreign exchange earnings.
- ✓ **Multi-Sector Development** - Above all else, there has been more and more recognition of the indirect effects of tourism on economic growth.
- ✓ **An ecological approach for tourism** – Tourism is also more acceptable and preferable than any other industrial production as it is environmentally friendlier than most other industries.

Furthermore, aside from the economic aspect of tourism, the industry provides also for closer social links at regional and international level. It is noted that travelling helps combat racism and discriminations. Consequently, tourism has been acknowledged as a means to decrease prejudice, tension, and hostilities among countries and nations.^[11] It helps countries acknowledge common priorities and foster cooperation in adopting common policies.

A new era of tourism has risen; one that links tourism to culture further and encompasses alternative forms of tourist activities. A continuously increasing number of tourists worldwide are interested in new and alternative ways to get closer to countries and places internationally. Agritourism, religious tourism, gastronomic and film tourism, even medical tourism, gain ground to peoples' preferences constantly; thus, adding new countries and places next to traditional tourist destinations in the global tourist map.

3. Focusing on the Black Sea area; the role of BSEC and ICBSS

Within this context, the Black Sea region is an up and coming tourist destination that demonstrates slow yet steady growth within the tourism industry. Tourism at Black Sea resorts has become one of the Region's growth industries and valued economic sector.

The Black Sea area is a dynamic region and an influential crossroad between East and West. The region has always been a crossroad of political, economic and diversified societal cultures. In the present, it plays the role of an economic, geo-political and trade hub connecting Asia with Europe. At the same time, specific interest for the Black Sea region with respect to sustainable development, energy, tourism is expressed by major global actors from both sides of the Atlantic (the USA and the EU), the neighboring countries of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, South Caucasus, the Mediterranean Sea and the Far East (e.g. China, India, et al.)^[III].

In this framework, the Black Sea countries possess remarkable cultural and ethnic diversity, rich historical and architectural heritage and diverse natural resources, aspects which are blended over the millennia to shape unique communities, languages, religions and trades, a namely distinctive and attractive match to travelers. Realizing the aforementioned, tourism protrudes not only as a great chance for regional sustainable development, but also as a motivation for closer regional cooperation in every field, such as culture, environment, transport and youth.

Founded in 1992, the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) constitutes the most representative form of regional cooperation in the region, providing an institutional framework for intergovernmental cooperation in fields of common interest^[IV].

Bringing together twelve Member States, BSEC aims to utilize more effectively their human, natural and other resources, in line with the principles and objectives defined in the BSEC Charter. To this end, the Organisation *"has defined common policy approaches of Member States in summit and ministerial declarations, inter-governmental agreements, plans of action and strategy documents and has launched major projects and initiatives which are of interest for the Member States"*.

The BSEC organisation was always focusing its attention to take advantage of the great potential in the field of tourism^[V]. For the BSEC Organisation, tourism is a key parameter that is being addressed in the BSEC Documents as means to achieving sustainable regional development. In particular, the Summit Declaration of BSEC, in 1992, underlines *"Taking into consideration that cooperation in the spheres of culture, tourism and youth policy creates better understanding among our peoples, and therefore contributes to a sense of solidarity we call upon the competent authorities of the Member States to develop innovative projects in these fields"*.

Moreover, the Declaration adopted by the Ministers of Tourism in November 2010, recognizes *"the importance of tourism in promoting economic development, mutual understanding, goodwill and close relations among peoples"*, and reaffirms the will of BSEC *"[...]to stimulate as well as strengthen the image of our region as a unique and attractive destination [...] and to ensure tourism promotion within a broadest strategy of sustainable development"*.

Furthermore, in the new BSEC Economic Agenda "Towards an Enhanced BSEC Partnership" (2012), tourism is perceived as an important area for joint efforts to foster dialogue and good partnership. In particular, Goal 8 Development of Tourism and Protection of Cultural Heritage, represents the strong will of BSEC Member States to promote the region as an important tourist destination; to ensure the sustainable manner of tourism development and to enable the establishment and strengthening of cooperation networks in culture and tourism.

Consequently, it is apparent that tourism constitutes an important objective for the next decade; interlinked to sustainable economic development and stability within the wider Black Sea region. Tourism provides the ground for enhanced regional cooperation among the BSEC Member States; a soft law mechanism that promotes cultural ties and dialogue.

Within this framework, the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS), a BSEC related body and its acknowledged think tank, dedicated its 7th International Black Sea Symposium on “*Perspectives on Tourism in the Black Sea area*”, in an effort to bring together experts, stakeholders and academia to explore and discuss the perspectives of sustainable tourism in relation to its social and economic impact on the Black Sea countries. Through the 7th IBSS, the ICBSS aimed at offering an assessment on the sector’s potential with respect to development and regional cooperation that could serve as working platform for the BSEC Member States and regional and international stakeholders. Special emphasis was put on cooperation for common sustainable tourism strategies, policies and practices, social and cultural linkages, youth and inclusive employment in tourism.

Through a fruitful and interactive dialogue, it became evident that tourism provides the Black Sea countries with an excellent opportunity for social development and economic growth that should be further explored in order to reach its full potential.

More specifically, as Kereselidze (2013) highlights, according to the individual country cases from the WTTC (World Travel and Tourism Council) the travel and tourism investment in almost all BS countries is expected to experience a long-term increase by 2022. Starting with Albania, travel and tourist investment was 4.8% of total investment in 2011 and is expected to grow to 5.0% by 2022. For Armenia, the 2011 indicators showed that investment through tourism was 2.6% of total investment, looking at a long-term growth through 2012-22 by which foreign investment is expected to count for 2.0% of its total investment. Azerbaijan is so far ranking 5th place out of 181 countries heading for long-term growth through 2012-22 with foreign investment growing from 2.0% to 2.9%, respectively. In Bulgaria, foreign investment measured 6.1% in 2011 and is expected to experience a noticeable fall in 2012, but will slowly rise again through 2012-22, eventually measuring 5.1% of its total investment. The Georgian tourism industry recorded a 5% growth in its share of economic output in 2011, followed by a 7% growth in 2012. “Georgia was ranked as the world’s third fastest growing tourist destination in 2011 with a 39% increase in international arrivals, according to a March report published by the World Tourism Barometer”^[VI].

Black Sea Region Tourism:

- ✓ 127 million international arrivals (22.5%), out of the 564 million international arrivals registered in European destinations in 2013.
- ✓ 74 billion of USD receipts (15%) out of the 489 billion for the whole European region.
- ✓ 12% of international arrivals as a whole (1,087 billion in 2013) and a mere 6% of world tourism receipts.
- ✓ By 2022, the GDP will exceed \$450 billion, namely over 7% of the overall economy.

Undoubtedly, over the years the quality and quantity of tourism services in the Black Sea region have improved significantly, nonetheless, the sustainable development of the sector along with enhanced regional cooperation allow room for further improvement.

4. Tourism and environment. Friend or foe?

Building a sustainable future for the Black Sea area signifies the development of policies and actions in a sustainable manner, *inter alia* addressing environmental aspects, green activities and energy efficiency.

Consequently, though tourism is an industry that does not harm the environment as much as others, it is important to stress the underlying environmental hazards that are interlinked to tourism development. Despite of increased economic revenues, it is crucial to underline that the unregulated development of the tourism industry results in the disruption of environmental harmony and to this end, in environmental degradation and decline of the sector itself.

The environmental risks caused by unregulated tourist activity vary and affect both the environment and the tourism industry.

More specifically, massive tourism and the unregulated development of large tourist units in popular destinations signify increased needs in food, accommodation and water; in other words, they lead to excessive consumption of natural resources. As a result, the continuous oil supply through the waters by tankers might cause oil spills, hence, water pollution and distinction of the Sea's fauna and flora. In addition, excessive coastal activity, such as overfishing or offspring fishing, as well as, littering could easily destroy the seashore line and disrupt the environmental harmony.

What are the reasons though, that result in the inconsiderate exploitation of natural reserves? The answer lies in profit. For many countries, tourism is an important, or even vital, resource of income, especially to those recovering from economic recession. The market of tourism aims at the satisfaction of the tourist therefore, in an effort to please travelers and attract more tourists, local stakeholders, national authorities and the business sector, often disregard potential environmental risks, thus resulting in endangering the environment and the biodiversity of the region. For example, it is noted that farmers often cultivate exotic kinds of crops and fruits, with the risk of altering the consistency and the quality of the soil, just to provide an alternate tourist attraction to travelers.

However, for the countries of the Black Sea Region and in particular those in South Caucasus, biodiversity in agriculture plays a very essential role for ensuring food security, sustainable livelihoods, ecosystem resilience, coping strategies for climate change, adequate nutritional requirements, insurance for the future, for example, for crop and animal breeding and the management of biological processes needed for sustainable agricultural production^[VII].

On the other hand, environmental degradation affects the tourism industry itself. Natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and others, caused by inconsiderate activities, not only harm the environment but they also lead to the decrease of the number of visitors in a country.

In this respect, in order to design and implement an advanced model of tourism in the area, based on sustainable development, it is crucial to show great respect to the environmental protection and cultural preservation and enhancement, as well as to take into account the social structures of the region, in parallel with its future economic development.

A suggested form of mitigation that is gaining ground lately is the development of alternative forms of tourism. Through the control of the number of tourist activities and movement of visitors within protected areas, alternative tourism could limit the negative impacts on local ecosystem and help maintain the integrity and vitality of the site. The perspectives of alternative tourism in the Black Sea vary; the profusion of nature, the cultures of nations, biodiversity and the promise to witness a different aspect from the ordinary tourist destinations attract numerous people who wish to experience the authenticity of nature. Agritourism, experiential tourism and creative tourism are only some of the forms it could get.

On the positive side, alternative forms of tourism eliminate the excess consumption of natural resources, thus benefiting the environment. Tourists learn to appreciate the authenticity of nature and its significance to human nature. On the other hand, alternative tourism promotes regional sustainability and development and enhances the importance of preserving local customs and traditions.

It is therefore, to our benefit to develop and implement a targeted strategy on tourism, one to incorporate all the special features of the region alongside with its future potential. It is important to foster closer regional cooperation on the field in order to produce a mutually beneficial outcome that will promote competitiveness at a regional and international level. Information sharing, working groups and training sessions for the professionals and the entrepreneurs should be included in a short term plan of action, as first steps to the further development of the sector.

5. Conclusions

Over the last decades, the tourism industry has grown to become one of the primary sources of income for many countries globally. Despite economic challenges, millions of tourists worldwide seek attractive tourist destinations, eager to feel the thrill of the unknown. Consequently, new sites and countries have gain their spot in the global tourism map next to traditional destinations; while new forms of alternative tourism, such as religious tourism, agritourism and medical tourism have emerged.

Within this context, the Black Sea region, with its diverse and unique landscape, cultural wealth, historic heritage and wide variety of opportunities for leisure, stands among world's most beautiful tourist destinations, attracting millions of tourists from around the world.

However, it is important to underline that the economic profit is the one side of tourism development in the Region. Although tourism is considered a generally environment-friendly sector, its uncontrolled development could become a crucial factor to environmental degradation. Unregulated development of large tourist units, massive tourism, and excessive use of natural resources are considered a few of the numerous reasons that can have a negative impact on the biodiversity of a region.

Particularly, with regards to the Black Sea area, a valuable natural asset with rich natural habitats and ecosystems, the negative impact of unregulated tourist activity only adds up to the already important factors threatening its existence. Our challenge is to secure a healthy Black Sea environment at a time when economic development is also being pursued.

In this regard, joining efforts for a common environmental strategy to run through all industrial activities in the region is nothing but imperative. In the Black Sea area, we must strengthen collaboration programs among the nations, as it is crucial for us to work for solutions, beneficial to our common environment and cultural values.

The development of tourism and the most crucial environmental challenges of the Region should be re-examined on the basis of multilevel governance, leading to more effective and integrative outcomes to the benefit of the peoples. The Organisation of BSEC, in close cooperation with its Member States and related bodies, works actively towards adopting a common strategy for the development of tourism and the protection of environment. Building a sustainable future for the wider Black Sea Region is our common target, one that requires the support of all parties involved; national authorities, local stakeholders, civil society and private sector.

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Endnotes

[I] See Kereselidze (2013)

[II] ibid

[III] See Dimadama, Timotheou (2010)

[IV] The 12 BSEC Member States are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine

[V] See Kereselidze (2013)

[VI] ibid

[VII] See Batello et al