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# **STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION OF TOURISM IN BULGARIA – ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND GROWTH POTENTIAL**

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**Abstract:** The subject of this study is the tourism sector. The analysis focuses on the strategic transformation in the sector to ensure its economic recovery and realize its growth potential. The research hypothesis posits that recovery in the tourism sector is predicated on amendments of national strategic documents, assessment of consumer and service provider attitudes in the tourism industry taking into account the absolute and relative international advantages and resources of our country which faces strong competition from Greece and Turkey as well as the existing geopolitical challenges. The main task is to analyse macroeconomic data to determine the degree of post-epidemic recovery of the tourism sector as well as to conduct a survey intended to identify possibilities for rebranding and making amendments to national strategic documents to reflect the country's absolute and relative international advantages and resources. Structurally, the article is divided into two main sections. The first section identifies indicators for assessing the level of post-epidemic recovery of Bulgaria's tourism sector. The second section presents findings from a survey conducted among benchmark economic operators and customers regarding the possibilities for strategic transformation of the tourism sector, including rebranding and digitalization. The conclusion summarizes the findings and presents author's own critical comments regarding the current state of the tourism sector.

**Keywords:** tourism, sector transformation, rebranding, international competition.

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## Introduction

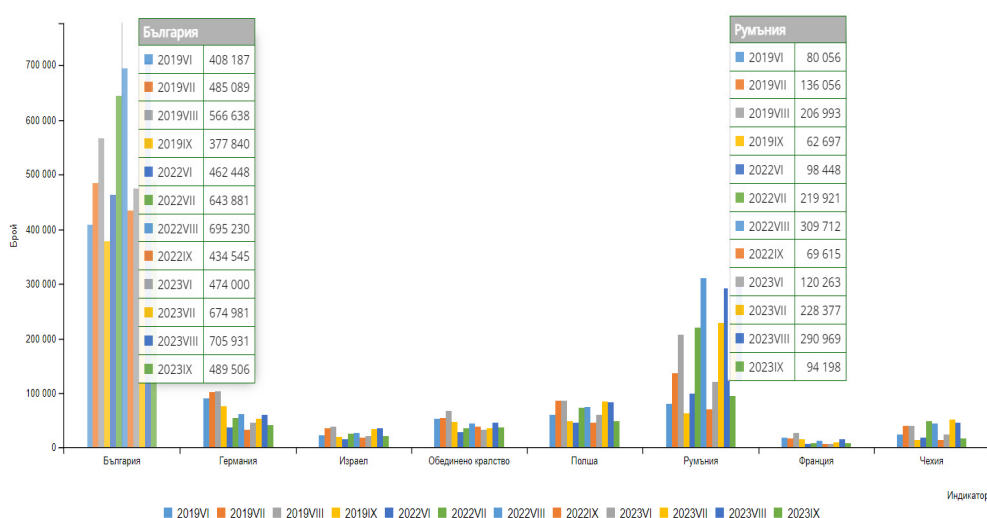
**T**ourism is the cornerstone of the national economy of the Republic of Bulgaria. Its evolution over the years was marked by substantial private and public investments, a capacity to offer year-round tourist products, a rich cultural and historical heritage, as well as natural resources that include mineral springs, mountains, seas, and rivers, which is a sound foundation for establishing a strategic advantage over competing destinations both regionally and globally. Therefore, the focus of this study is the strategic transformation of the sector towards its economic recovery, rebranding, and realization of its growth potential. The research hypothesis posits that recovery in the tourism sector is predicated on amendments of national strategic documents, assessment of the attitudes of consumer and service providers in the tourism industry taking into account the absolute and relative international advantages and resources of our country which faces strong competition from Greece and Turkey as well as the existing geopolitical challenges. To address this, the study aims to analyse macroeconomic data to determine the degree of post-epidemic recovery of the tourism sector as well as to conduct a survey intended to identify possibilities for rebranding and making amendments to national strategic documents to reflect the country's absolute and relative international advantages and resources. Structurally, the article is divided into two main sections. The first section identifies indicators for assessing the level of post-epidemic recovery of Bulgaria's tourism sector. The second section presents findings from a survey conducted among benchmark economic operators and customers regarding the possibilities for strategic transformation of the tourism sector, including rebranding and digitalization. The conclusion summarizes the findings and presents author's own critical comments regarding the current state of the tourism sector.

### 1. Indicators of post-epidemic recovery in Bulgaria's tourism sector

The analysis of the key indicators for assessment of the extent of post-epidemic recovery in the tourism sector in Bulgaria serves as a foundation for implementation of measures and actions aimed at fostering a strategically positive transformation in the sector. (Ivanova & Simeonov, 2019). Therefore, the focal point for visualization and discussion is targeted statistical data from the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria.

According to the monthly statistics regarding the age structure of tourists during the summer season of 2023, the primary markets for inbound tourist flow reveal that in the under-14 age category the Czech Republic stands out with the largest relative share of 27.6% in July. For the 15–29 age group, Poland holds

the greatest relative share of inbound tourist flow recorded in September 2023. In the 30–44 age segment, Romania stands out with the highest relative share of 37.1%, reported in July 2023. For the 45–59 age category, the share of domestic summer tourism of Bulgarians accounts for 30.9% in September 2023. The German market maintains its leadership position in the over-60 category boasting a share of 33.1% as reported in September 2023.



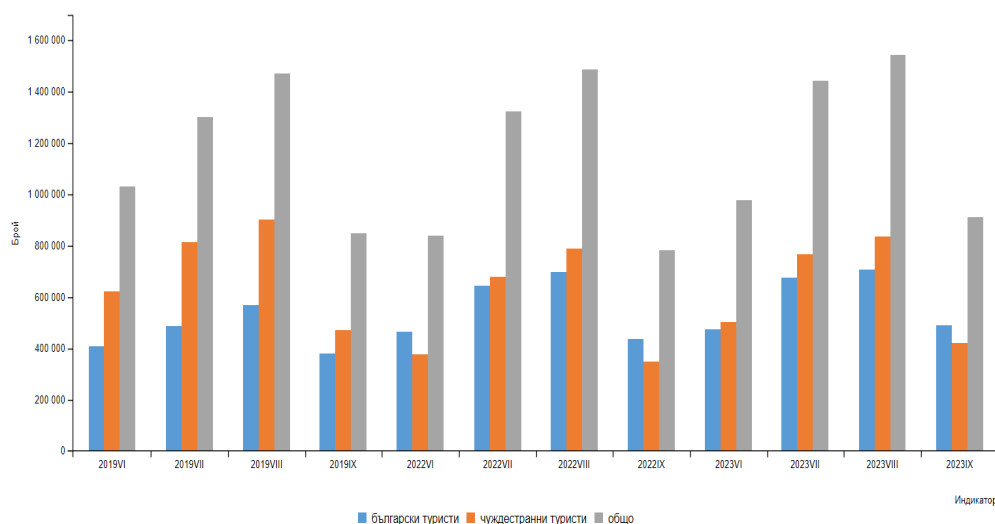
*Source: MT, Statistical data for 2023.*

**Figure 1. Number of registered tourists by main tourist inflow markets over the summer season months of 2019, 2022 and 2023**

The number of registered inbound tourists in the summer season months of 2019, 2022, and 2023, categorized by primary inbound tourism markets, clearly shows that, during the summer holiday season, the accommodation facilities are predominantly occupied by domestic tourists from Bulgaria, with a significant increase from the benchmark pre-epidemic 2019 year. The increase in visits to tourist attractions by Bulgarian nationals in July rose remarkably with 16%. The statistics for July shows a record increase of 1.39 times. August is reported as the peak month for summer vacations, with nearly 706,000 registered Bulgarian tourists in hotels, marking a substantial growth of 24.6% in 2023 compared to 2019. Moreover, September is markedly active as well with almost half a million tourists - an impressive growth of 29.5% in 2023 from 2019 despite the traditional commencement of the school year on September 15.

Romania is traditionally the largest market for inbound tourism, where the recovery trend compared to 2019 is distinctly evident. However, there has been a decline in the peak month of August for 2023 compared to 2022. On a monthly basis, the overall growth of the number of visits of Romanian tourists to

Bulgaria records an average increase of 52.2% for 2023 compared to 2019. The most notable increase occurs in July, with an impressive peak of 67.9%. Following closely behind, both June and September showcase relatively similar figures, demonstrating a growth of 1.50 times. In August, the increase was 1.41 times. Nevertheless, during the busiest month of August, the number of Bulgarian tourists stays in our hotel accommodations is 2.42 times greater than the stays of Romanian citizens. The total number of Romanian tourists who stayed in Bulgarian hotels during the summer season of 2023 was 733,807, compared to 485,802 in 2019. In relation to Bulgarian tourists, the statistics indicate a growth of 27.6% - from 1,837,754 to 2,344,418 hotel stays during the summer season.

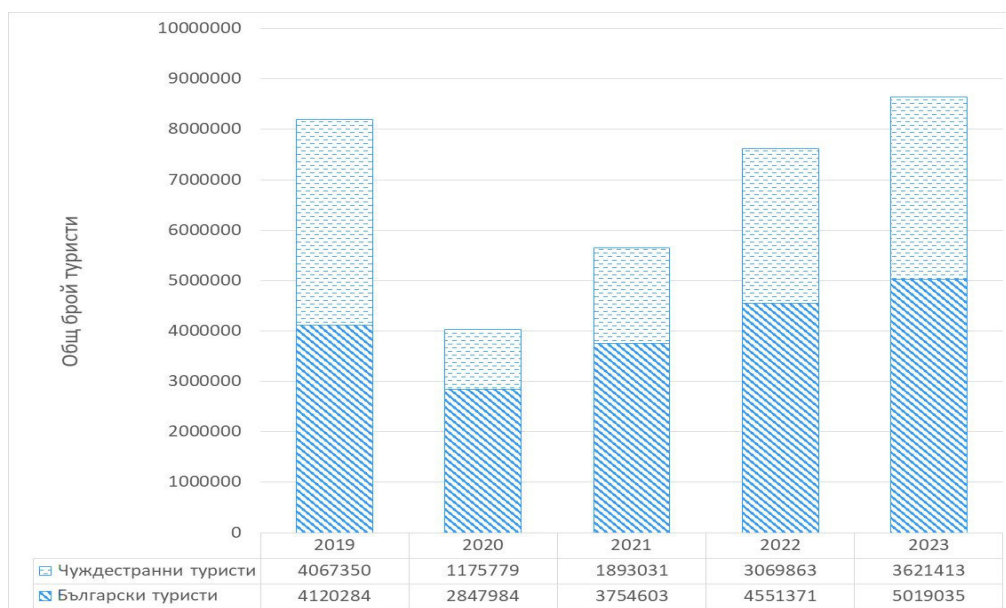


**Source:** MT, Statistical data for 2023.

**Figure 2. Monthly number of stays of Bulgarian and foreign tourists over the period June-September in 2019, 2022 and 2023**

The analysis of the aggregate tourist inflow during the summer months clearly proves that there is a negative trend in the incoming flow of foreign tourists in the peak of the summer tourist season. In each month from June to September, there is a discernible lack of improvement in the data for 2023 compared to 2019. The overall decline in foreign visitors has decreased from 2,804,469 in 2019 to 2,523,508 in 2023, which is a decrease of 10%.

The decline in the number of foreign visitor arrivals on a monthly basis is as follows: in June 2023, there was a decrease of 19.2%, or a total of 501,537 individuals; in July, the decline was 5.7%, amounting to 766,349 individuals; in August, the decrease was 7.4%, with total arrivals at 834,609; and in September, the decrease was 10.3%, resulting in a total of 421,013 visits.



**Source:** MT, <https://bit.ly/4dk2IsZ>.

**Figure 3. Number of stays of Bulgarian and foreign tourists in accommodations with 10 or more beds over the period 2019 – 2023.**

**Table 1**

**Descriptive statistics of the number of stays of Bulgarian and foreign tourists in accommodations with 10 or more beds over the period 2019 – 2023.**

Number of stays	AVE	SD	CV	Range
<b>Total</b>	6824143	1937765	28.40%	4616685
<b>Bulgarians</b>	4058655	825692	20.34%	2171051
<b>Foreigners</b>	2765487	1205037	43.57%	2891571

**Source:** Author's calculations with data from the NSI.

The data derived from the descriptive statistics regarding the number of stays of both Bulgarian and foreign tourists in accommodation facilities with ten or more beds over the period from 2019 to 2023 unequivocally confirms the strong negative effect of the pandemic. The range dynamics, which exceeds 4.6 million tourist stays (including both Bulgarian and foreign visitors) with a coefficient of variation of 28.40% and a standard deviation of 1.94 million individuals, reveals significant foregone opportunities for the tourism

sector. The provision of services at prices below the accounting breakeven point (Zahariev A. , Financial Analysis, 2022) is a typical accounting loss at all other conditions (including depreciation plans) being the same.

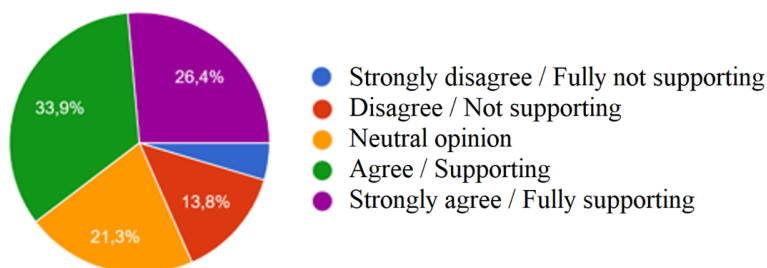
The data concerning foreign tourist stays is even more alarming. The coefficient of variation stands at a striking 43.57%, which shows a substantial disparity from the average of 2.765 million individuals who visited accommodation facilities with ten or more beds between 2019 and 2023. This indicates a vast potential for loss of sales to targeted groups and markets. The adverse effect of the pandemic was compounded by the negative effects of the war in Ukraine resulting in a practical loss of two strategic markets that previously contributed significantly to the foreign tourist category.

All of this clearly illustrates that the recovery of the sector's export component is a wish rather than real possibility. Consequently, the need for a strategic transformation of Bulgaria 's tourism sector and a drastic enhancement of its export potential and capacity should become a priority for both the relevant ministry and all economic operators in the sector.

## **2. A survey regarding the potential for rebranding and strategic transformation of the tourism sector**

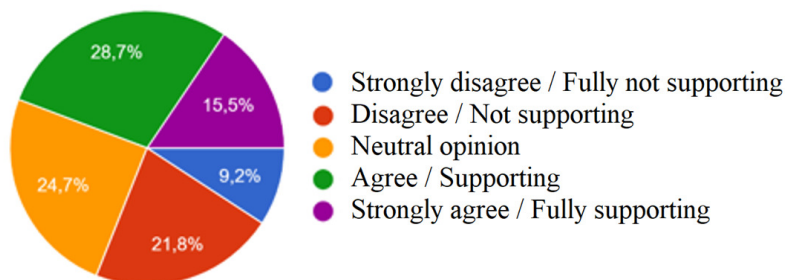
In the summer of 2024, a survey using the Likert scale methodology was conducted among 174 respondents (benchmark economic operators and customers) to assess the opportunities for strategic transformation and rebranding of the tourism sector to achieving a year-round provision of a sustainable, internationally-demanded product. The Likert scale ranges from "1" to "5" (a five-point scale where 1 = "Strongly Disagree"; 2 = "Disagree"; 3 = "Neutral Opinion"; 4 = "Agree"; and 5 = "Strongly Agree") and measures the expert and customer opinion of the respondents. The scale provides a methodological framework for the subsequent construction of correlation matrices. (Zahariev, et al., 2023). Every question can also be examined using descriptive statistics.

Some researchers (Lehmann & Hulbert, 1972) use scales with different number of answers (Jacoby & Matell, 1971), (Zahariev, Zaharieva, Mihaylova, & Nikolova, 2022). Such scales have their specific advantages and disadvantages (Hubert & Blalock, 1960). Using a bipolar five-point Likert scale (responses ranging from 1 to 5) allows for categorization of the responses into three distinct groups: a positive segment of the scale, a negative segment, and a neutral category represented by the response "3."



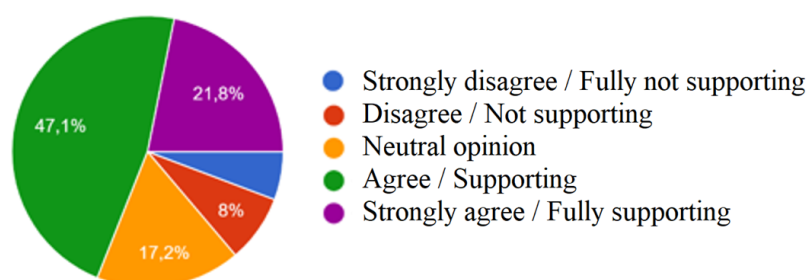
**Figure 4. Summer holidays in Greece are more attractive than in Bulgaria due to the better service quality**

The majority of the respondents support the statement that the quality of services in Greece is superior to that in Bulgaria (60% of the respondents agree).



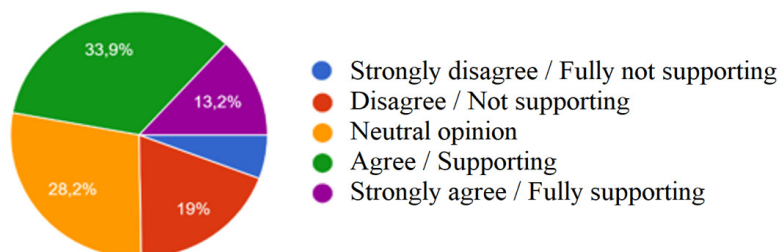
**Figure 5. Summer holidays in Greece are more attractive than in Bulgaria's Black Sea resorts due to the better climate conditions**

The ratio of respondents supporting the statement regarding the superior climate in Greece to that in Bulgaria is 3:2. This is primarily attributed to the warmer sea water temperatures. However, the heatwaves and wildfires during the summer in Greece are factors that should be taken into consideration.



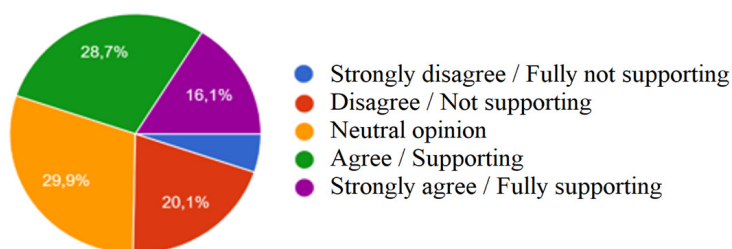
**Figure 6. Summer holidays in Greece are more attractive than in Bulgaria's Black Sea resorts due to the longer season**

The longer season in Greece is axiomatic and, logically, about 70% of the respondents support this statement.



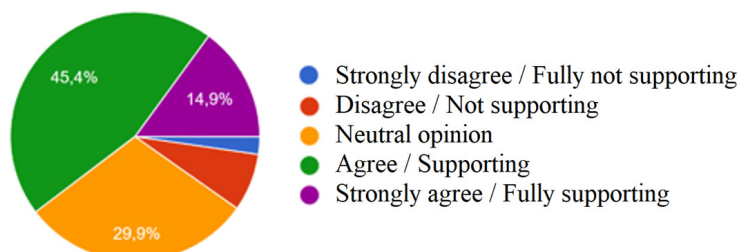
**Figure 7. The extremely long queues at the border crossing points with Greece during the summer hinder Bulgarian tourists' holiday visits to our southern neighbor.**

The queues at the border crossing points are problematic for 46% of the respondents. Nevertheless, over one quarter of them would agree to endure this inconvenience and travel during the peak season for a holiday in Greece.



**Figure 8. The unfinished Struma Motorway and the challenging trip via the Kresna Gorge significantly hinder Bulgarian tourists' holiday visits to our southern neighbor.**

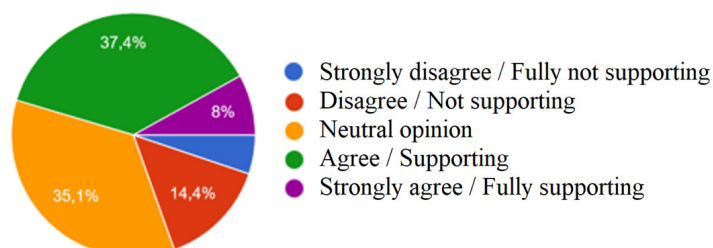
The bottleneck along the main route for the tourists use to travel by car via the Kresna Gorge has a pronounced restrictive effect for the visits of Bulgarian tourists. This statement is supported by 45% of respondents, while 30% hold a neutral opinion and 25% disagree.



**Figure 9. During the winter season, Bulgaria attracts ski tourists from Greece and Turkey due to its with its natural resources and established resorts.**

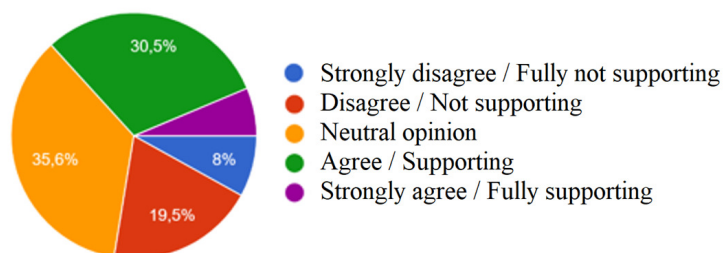


The responses clearly show that Bulgaria has absolute and comparative advantages over Greece and Turkey during the winter season (Дамянов, Спиридонов, Захаријева, Саркисян, & Стефанов, 2011).



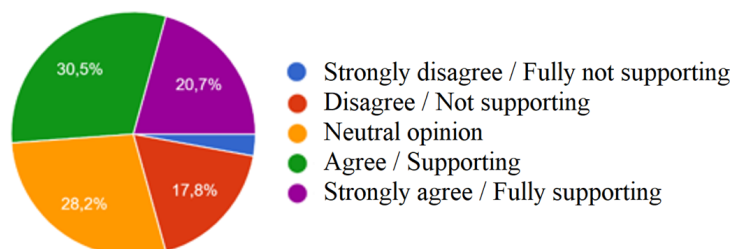
**Figure 10. During the summer season, the Bulgarian Black Sea coast offers the Romanian tourists a tourist product which is competitive to that of Greece.**

The statement that Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast is more attractive to the seacoast of Greece for the Romanian tourists is supported by 45% of the respondents, the ratio of positive to negative responses being 2:1.

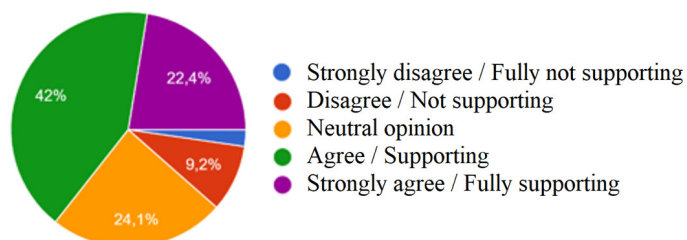


**Figure 11. During the summer season, the Bulgarian Black Sea coast offers the Romanian tourists a tourist product which is competitive to that of Turkey**

The statement that Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast is more attractive compared to Turkey’s is supported by 65% of the respondents, with a positive to negative response ratio exceeding 4:1. The subsequent questions examine the potential for altering the country's promotional slogan by means of various new messages and are supported by an average of over 50% of the respondents.

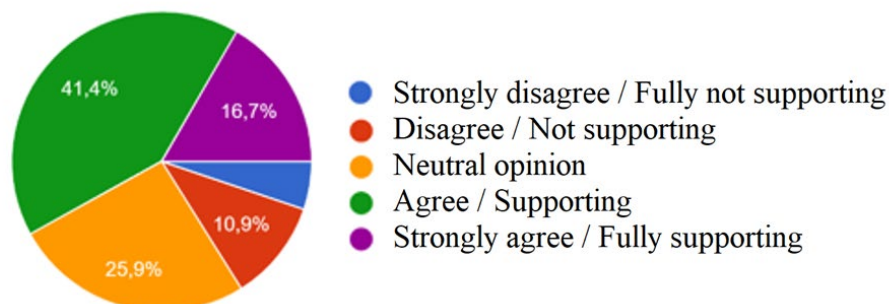


**Figure 12. Would it be appropriate to promote our country internationally as a tourist destination with the slogan: Bulgaria – A Land of Empires, Civilizations, and Religions?**

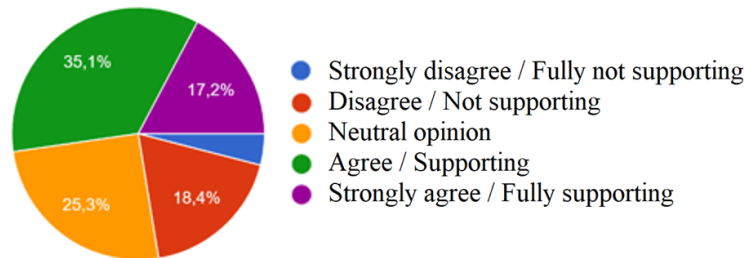


*Figure 13. Would it be appropriate to promote our country internationally as a tourist destination with the slogan: "Bulgaria – A Land of Roses and Beauty"?*

The “roses and beauty” slogan is supported by 65% of the respondents. The currently used slogan “Bulgaria – A Discovery to Share” is supported by 58%.

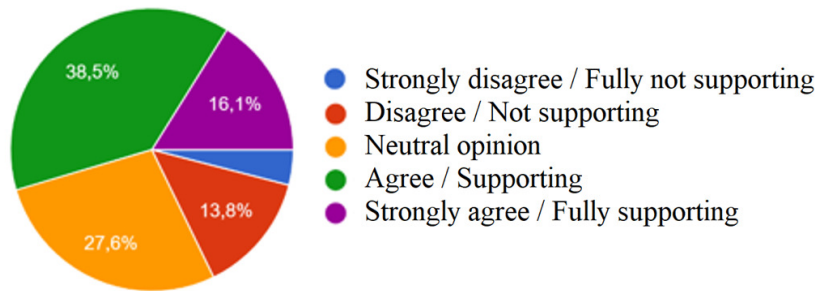


*Figure 14. Is it appropriate to promote our country internationally as a tourist destination with the slogan: "Bulgaria – A Discovery to Share"?*

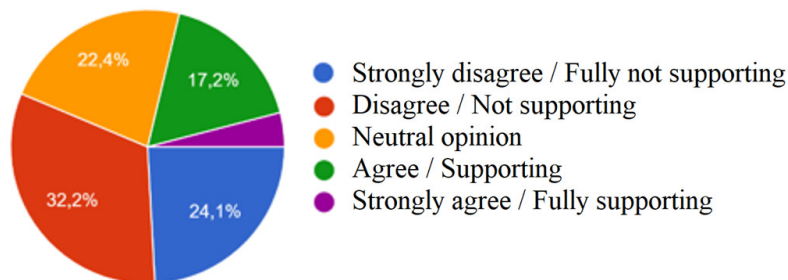


**Figure 15. Would it be appropriate to promote our country internationally as a tourist destination with the slogan: "Discover Bulgaria – Ancient and Young"?**

The “ancient and young” slogan is supported by 52% of the respondents. The slogan “Bulgaria – Beautiful and Mysterious” is supported by 55% of the respondents. Overall, the slogan “Bulgaria – A Land of Roses and Beauty” is supported most strongly by the respondents.

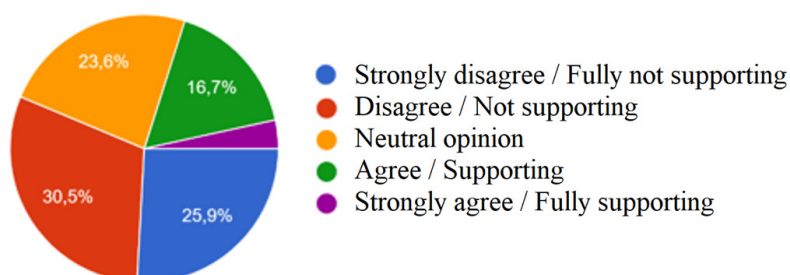


**Figure 16. Would it be appropriate to promote our country internationally as a tourist destination with the slogan: "Bulgaria – Beautiful and Mysterious"?**

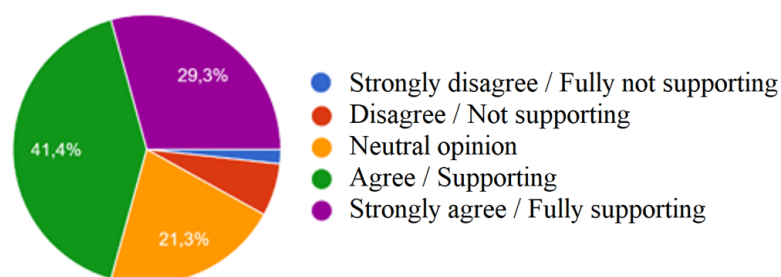


**Figure 17. Do you agree that the Ministry of Tourism effectively promotes Bulgaria as a summer tourist destination?**

The negative attitude among the respondents regarding the advertisement of our country as a summer holiday destination by the MT reaches 56% and exceeds the positive attitude at a ratio of 2.5:1. The same responses were reported for the advertisement of our country as a winter holiday destination.

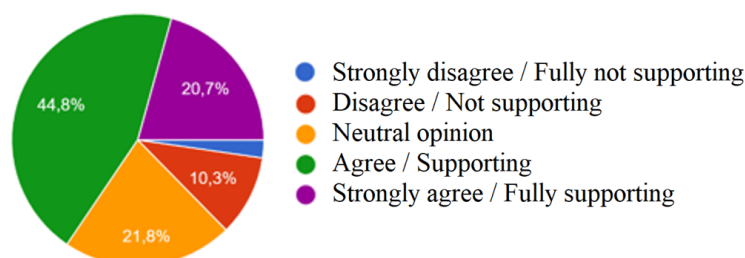


*Figure 18. Do you agree that the Ministry of Tourism effectively promotes Bulgaria as a winter tourist destination?*



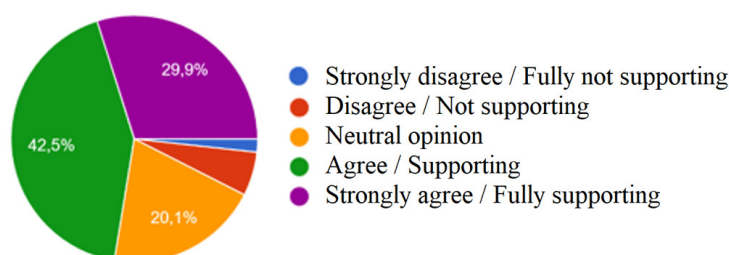
*Figure 19. Bulgaria's tourism has the potential to become a year-round sector*

The intention to make tourism a year-round business stated in the strategic documents (Ministry of Tourism, 2023) is supported by over 60% of the respondents.



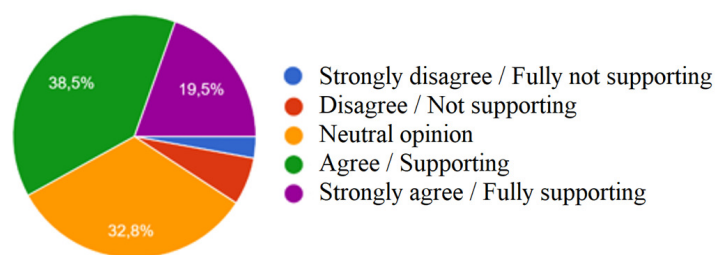
*Figure 20. The movement "Discover Bulgaria – 100 National Tourist Sites" supports the development of domestic tourism*

Respondents' opinion regarding the movement "Discover Bulgaria – 100 National Tourist Sites" as a significant factor for the development of domestic tourism is overwhelmingly positive (supported by over 65%). Established in 1966 by the Bulgarian Tourist Union (BTU), the movement aims to promote the most beautiful and patriotic natural and historical landmarks cherished by every Bulgarian. The BTS website highlights that "the uniqueness of this movement lies in its multifaceted nature, encompassing not only historical but also cultural, natural, and archaeological sites. The list is updated annually by including new points of interest thereby providing participants with a broader selection of tourist sites to visit in our country." (BTU, 2022)



*Figure 21. The inclusion of new Bulgarian sites in UNESCO's World Heritage list will enhance the country's position as an attractive tourist destination.*

There are ten UNESCO's World Heritage Sites listed in Bulgaria, of which seven cultural and three natural<sup>1</sup> (National Geographic, 2023). Over 60% of the respondents agree that the effect from the inclusion of Bulgarian sites in this list is positive. Note that the UNESCO's list includes more than 50 sites in the neighbouring Greece.

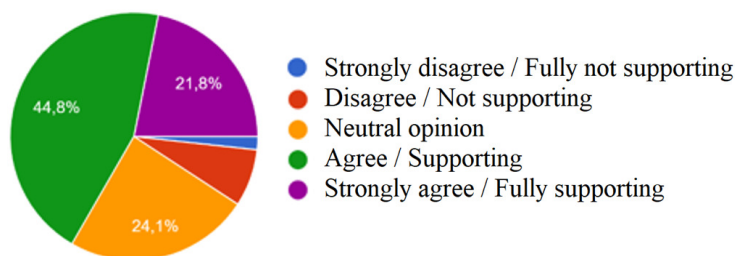


*Figure 22. Do you support the opinion that Bulgarian students should receive their Bulgarian Tourist Union booklet "100 National Tourist Sites" upon organized school trips to the Aleko Konstantinov House Museum in Svishtov?*

<sup>1</sup> They are: Boyana Church, Madara Rider, Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak, Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari, Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo, Rila Monastery, Ancient City of Nesebar, Srebarna Nature Reserve, Pirin National Park, Central Balkan National Park (as a part of the Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe), (National Geographic, 2023).

The Aleko Konstantinov House Museum is located in the town of Svishtov and was established as a museum in 1926. Historical records indicate that during his lifetime, the illustrious Bulgarian writer bequeathed his family home to the municipality of Svishtov, with the donor's will that it should be used for the cultural needs of the town. In 1979, the native house of the writer Aleko Konstantinov was established as a memorial museum and listed as the 12<sup>th</sup> site in the Bulgarian Tourist Union's list "Explore Bulgaria – 100 National Tourist Sites." The idea that students should be given a booklet from the Bulgarian Tourist Union as part of the "Explore Bulgaria – 100 National Tourist Sites" campaign is supported by nearly 60% of the respondents.

The final question in the survey concerns the use of advanced digital technologies. The use of augmented reality (AR) devices is supported by nearly two-thirds of the respondents and can certainly enhance the financial and economic returns for operators in the sector.



*Figure 23. A significant aspect of the future of tourism lies in the provision of augmented reality devices during visits to tourist sites.*



*Source: <https://www.greeknewsagenda.gr/olympia/>*

*Figure 24. Ancient Olympia – as a museum and an AR exhibition*



The author's assessment of the financial returns from such investments indicates that, based on pricing strategies for access to these devices, revenue could potentially exceed up to five times the cost of an entry ticket to a corresponding historical or natural site, with the option for full-day access. For instance, at the archaeological site of "Ancient Olympia," home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (the Temple housing the statue of Zeus), the fee for three hours of using an augmented reality device with an audio guide is EUR 20, while the cost of a day ticket granting access to the site and its affiliated museums is only 12 euros and grants access only from 8:00 AM to 7:00 PM.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the following ex-ante critical comments and recommendations for immediate amendments of the strategic documents governing the development of the tourism sector should be emphasized. Among the key issues are: 1) Absence of national and international advertising; 2) Lack of targeted promotion in our national media and foreign outlets displaying Bulgaria as a destination for spa, adventure, historical, therapeutic, coastal, and winter tourism; 3) Insufficient funding through European programs, in stark contrast to our neighbouring direct competitors; 4) Omission of tourism in the national recovery and resilience plan, unlike our neighbours and direct competitors; 5) Constant volume of the budgets of the Ministry of Tourism over the past decade in contrast to our neighbouring competitors; 6) Insufficient recognition of tourism as a national priority, which undermines the efforts of the Ministry of Tourism in contrast to our neighbours and direct competitors; 7) Failure to leverage our advantageous position as the second-richest in mineral springs country in Europe; 8) Neglect of our status as one of the top five countries in the world for cultural heritage; 9) Critically low level of digitalization in the sector of tourism; 10) Lack of a national policy regarding the import of labour from third countries. The analysis of the data clearly indicates a challenging post-pandemic recovery and an urgent need for strategic transformation in the tourism sector, including rebranding efforts aimed at establishing the offered product as a year-round attraction.

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**YEAR LXXVII, BOOK 3 – 2024**

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