

REVIEW ARTICLES AND REPORTS**Marin BACHVAROV*****DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST SETTLEMENTS
IN THE BULGARIAN BLACK SEA COAST****1. INTRODUCTION**

Bulgaria, the former Riviera of the Soviet Bloc, has developed a network of 178 resorts and other settlements specialised in tourism and recreation (cf. table 1 and figure 1), harbouring both foreign and domestic visitor flows. This is the primary tourism/recreational settlement network, comprising legally recognised resorts and tourist centres. However, most of the domestic recreation is bound to the auxiliary or secondary recreational network embracing over 400 000 second residences and rural houses, located usually outside the resorts.

Table 1. Structure of the tourism/recreation settlement network in Bulgaria

Settlement types	Number of the resorts and permanent population in 1995				
	>1 000	1–5 000	5–10 000	10–30 000	<30 000
Seaside	9	12	2	3	2
Balneotherapy	5	24	6	5	1
Mountain	18	16	5	5	–
Heritage	14	11	5	11	24
Total	46	63	18	24	27

The Black Sea region of Bulgaria is the most developed tourism area in the country, leading both in international tourism with almost 80% nights of the foreigners and 40% of the statistically monitored nights of the Bulgarian holiday makers. In 1995 out of 507 hotels, 297 are in the coastal region (*Tourism...*, 1995). The latter is a major summer holidays destination on international scale

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with a high level of touristification (Dewailly and Flament, 1993). The climax of its development was reached in the end of the 1980s. The political changes since 1989 and the total crisis which hit Bulgaria have created a difficult environment for the development of the foreign and domestic tourism in the country. This is having a strong negative impact on the recent tourism development of the Black Sea region.

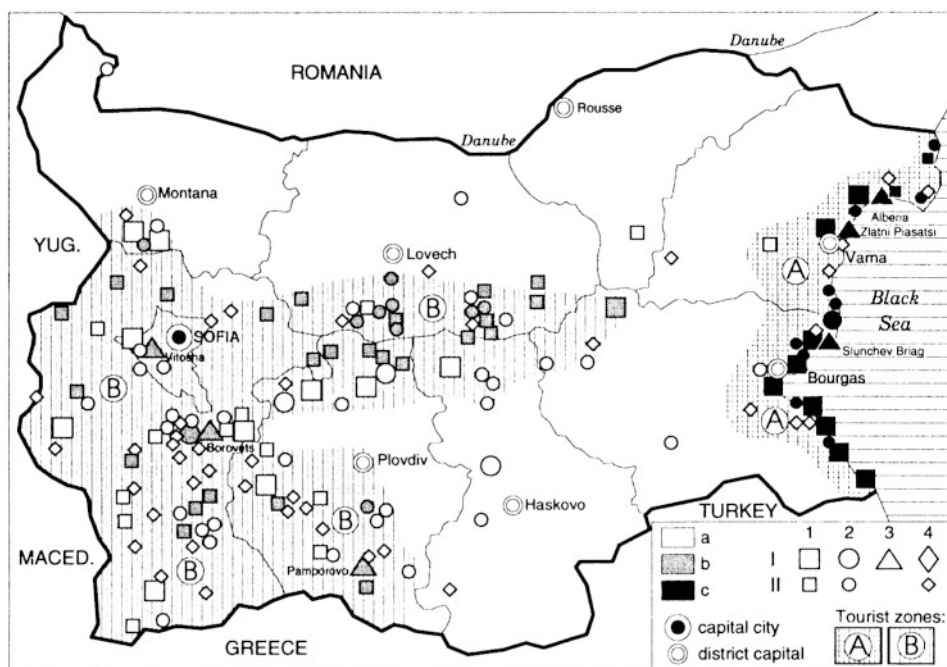


Fig.1. Types of resorts and tourist regions in Bulgaria

Legend: I – national resorts, II – regional resorts, 1 – towns, 2 – villages, 3 – resort complexes outside permanent settlements, 4 – statutory resort sites outside permanent settlements, a – spa resorts, b – mountain resorts, c – sea-side resorts

In fact, since 1990, the Bulgarian Black Sea coast is a spectacular example of a decline destination. Of course, the recent history offers a number of cases displaying stagnation and even total disappearance of the tourism sector, such as the Caucasus, former Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Cuba, some resorts and zones in the European Mediterranean, etc. The difference is that in the quoted instances this is the hostilities, embargo or ecological deterioration, which are causing the decline. The Bulgarian coast case is neither a battlefield, nor an ecologically dangerous destination. The decline is primarily a result of the collapse of the centrally planned economy and the accumulation of mismanagement problems. Here we can observe a major tourist area in the critical stage of its development (Butler, 1980).

So, we can speak of exhaustion of the model of prior development and the necessity of a new concept of tourism, which can hopefully provide a restructuration and rejuvenation of the region and can again attract investments and guests on the basis of its doubtless natural and cultural heritage.

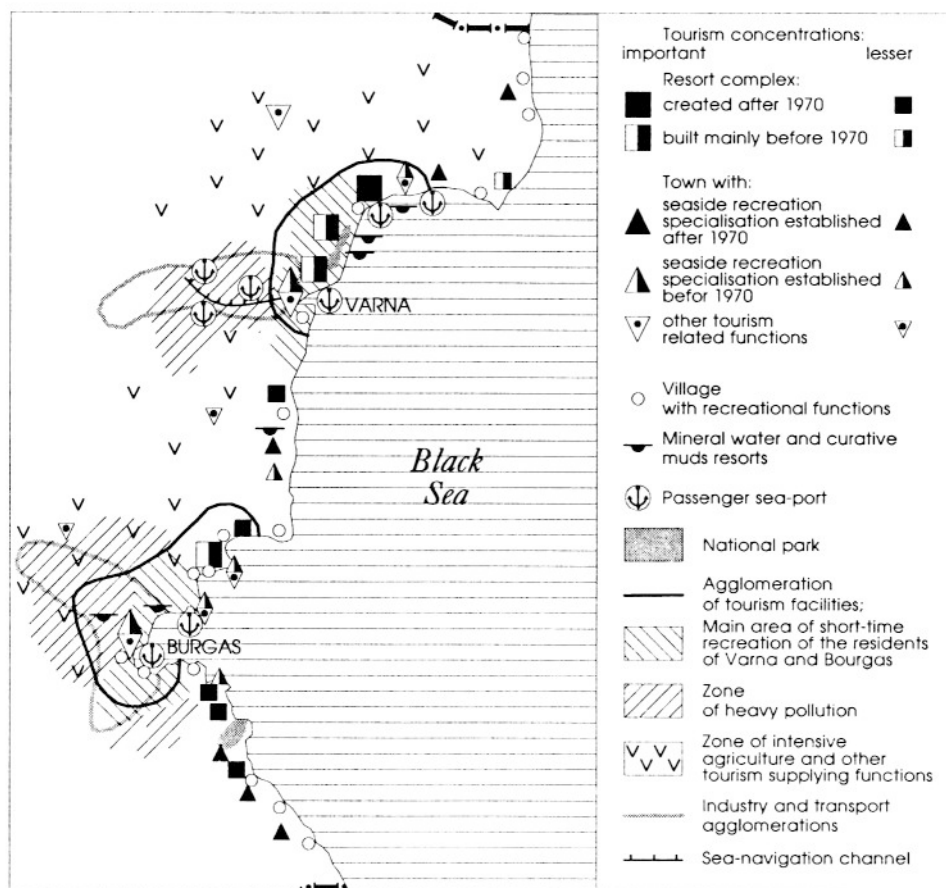


Fig. 2. Spatial structure of the Bulgarian Black Sea region

One of the most original aspects of the former development of the tourism in the Bulgarian Black Sea coast is its relationship with the existing or specially created settlements (Barbaza, 1970; De Kadt, 1979). In the light of the concepts of tourism area cycle of development (Butler, 1980) and the sustainable development, it is crucial to develop and manage the tourism system on a regional rather than sectoral basis, which implies strong mutual penetration and impacts between rather the settlement environment and the tourism industry.

At the end of the 1980s in Bulgaria 70% of the tourist beds and 80% of the respective nights were associated with purely settlement environment. This spatial distribution tendency is even more pronounced in the Black Sea region. The Bulgarian Black Sea 387 km coastal band includes 2 major ports and urban centres Varna and Bourgas, 10 smaller towns and 20 villages. Within and outside the settlements exist about 1600 separate tourist facilities. They tend to cluster in two zones around the towns of Varna and Bourgas (figure 2) as parts of larger residential, industry and transport conurbations. The tourism component is playing an important role in their shaping and functioning, although it occupies mostly their sea-side facade.

In fact, the Black Sea region comprises only 20% of the tourist localities in Bulgaria, but the latter attract nearly 80% of the nights effectuated by foreigners and 40% of the Bulgarian tourists' overnights.

2. THE TOURIST SETTLEMENTS SITUATION

The tourist/recreational network in the Bulgarian Sea coast consists of three types of settlements: small towns and villages, resort complexes, and bigger towns.

2.1. Small towns and villages

They combine relatively unchanged seaside environment with conditions for recreation in the towns and the vicinity. All these settlements are very old, often ancient, in which the tourist function, although relatively new (since 1950s) marginalised the older functions, such as agriculture, fishing and sea trade or forestry. At the same time the development of tourism has underlined the role of surface transportation, as well as the relevant services and industrial activities. Usually the infrastructure of the small towns and villages is tuned to social tourism of modest quality. With the rise of the club holiday centres, rural tourism and ecotourism, the small coastal resorts can develop with a new impetus, provided the technical and ecological infrastructure is improved, as well as promotion and marketing of the places as complex destinations. At present the state of the infrastructure, especially sanitation and sewerage, is the basic weakness of the small coastal resorts, while the natural and architectural attractions, as well as the low levels of air and water pollution are ranking among their strengths.

2.2. Resort complexes

This is how the constellations of big and average hotels in specially designed areas are called in Bulgaria. They were planned and constructed according to the state investment policy in several free coastal areas during the 1960s–1980s. In a relatively short time state budget investments were concentrated and holiday resorts created aimed primarily at foreign guests.

As a matter of fact, the resort complexes are not settlements in conventional meaning, as they have insignificant permanent population, neither a settlement status granted. So, the resort complexes are built up areas occupied by different tourism facilities belonging to tourism state enterprises. According to the volume of the infrastructure and activities two types of complexes can be distinguished:

A. Big tourist complexes – such as Slunchev Briag (Sunny Beach) with 25 000 hotel beds, Zlatni Piasatsi (Golden Sands), Sveti Constantin and Albena.

They were put up from early 1960s until late 1980s. Most of the facilities are getting old and need thorough renovation and upgrading. One of the technical problems is the size of the rather small rooms. The facilities in the big complexes are state property, which in 1991 was re-organised in 130 state holdings on geographical basis. Within the holdings many restaurants, cafeterias, practically all shops, big part of the services and some smaller hotels are being leased to private managers. The total accommodation capacity of the big coastal complexes is about 60 000 beds mostly in 2- and 3-star hotels situated within a walking distance from the sea front.

B. Holiday centres. They represent smaller groups of 3- and 2-star hotels and bungalows numbering to 2000–3000 beds each (Roussalka, Beli Briag, Eleni, Duni, Primorsko, Kiten, Lozenets). They are smaller and more up-to-date centres providing better sporting facilities if compared with the big complexes. The oldest centre of the kind is Roussalka created in 1970s as a typical village *de vacance* leased to Club Mediterranee. Their share in the accommodation capacity of the Black Sea region is relatively modest (up to 8000–9000 beds). Some of the holiday centres are in remote places, so transportation problems exist, as well as limited entertainment opportunities.

In 1970, Barbaza (1970) noticed that the big resort complexes of Bulgaria and Romania can be perceived as an innovation in man's impact on the coastal environment. Today put it first however, they present groups of outfashioned hotels, 'tourist ghettos' as De Kadt (1979).

The strengths of the tourist complexes used to be their quick construction in a vacant space within an unified town plan, so initially problems with conflicting sectoral functions, as well as reclamation of land and personnel by other economic branches, were avoided. Nevertheless, they were not regarded as separate settlements with a respective legal status. The resorts as a rule are

included in the administrative units of the nearest (sometimes quite distant) towns or villages' lands.

In practice, however, the resort complexes were managed at least until 1991, by the local branches of the state organisation Balkantourist. Apparently, this conflicting identity is leading to interference between the local and sectoral governments and is one of the deficiencies of the tourist complexes. The existing model provokes some important consequences. For instance, the absence of resident population intensifies the commuting of the labour force. This requires sufficient development of regular passenger transportation between the complexes and the settlements of personnel recruitment. The lack of residential quarters makes the complexes dependent on the neighbouring settlements and urban infrastructure. Therefore the complexes are much more sectoral location units with no legal status than typical settlements.

The hierarchy of the tourist units network can be presented as follows: tourist object/facility – enterprise – resort complex – settlement (urban or rural). So, considering their character, planning and infrastructure, the complexes are closer to the tourist enterprise than to the settlement as such. As a matter of fact the infrastructure in the resort complexes has been developed through investments from the national budget directly, or via the budget of the specially created state enterprise Balkantourist. It is true that the 1991 splitting of the state property into a great number of independent holdings created competition between them, but at the same time the maintenance of the common resort infrastructure became marginalised in the priorities of the tourist enterprises. It is a serious weakness, considering the current privatisation of the tourist facilities, leaving the general infrastructure, on which the resorts are heavily dependent, to itself. This is undoubtedly deteriorating the quality of the resort services and overall functioning.

Actually, the model of the resort complex permits the activities of sectors other than tourism only in the field of technical infrastructure (electricity supply, water supply, sewerage, communications, lighting and hygiene of the streets, parks maintenance), as well as in social infrastructure (health service, security, sporting facilities, cinemas, etc.). It is important to add that the non-tourist activities are almost exclusively offered to tourist population of the resort. As a rule, the non-tourist services in the resort complexes are organisationally bound and subordinated to tourist enterprises.

As a result of the above presented model of development, the resort complexes in Bulgaria used to play an important role on the national level, but had lesser significance for the socio-economic life of the neighbouring region. This is manifested by the relatively limited co-operation with the nearby settlements, with the exception of commuting and transport access, and corresponds with the weak integration between the resorts and their hinterland (Batchvarov, 1984).

We assume that an improvement can be achieved through granting settlement status to the resorts. But according to the Bulgarian law this is conditioned by the availability of autochthon population. Besides, the local governments are strongly objecting to the separation of the resort complexes in independent settlements. If during the communist regime the adjacent settlements used to have little benefit from the giant neighbours on their land, now they receive considerable part of the complexes' profits without making any efforts and significant capital allocation. This parasitic attitude developed after 1989 is a 'dark side' of the post-communist transition in the region.

Generally speaking, the resort complexes do possess a number of positive features deriving from the planning of the complex as an enterprise in a locality reserved only for tourist activities. This facilitates the sectoral management and the offer of a complex tourist product, as well as the environment protection.

Over the time however, it is more and more evident that this model is suffering from basic weaknesses, such as isolation from the regional settlement network and absence of local resident population. Off the season the complexes are inactive; the sea, sun and sand monoculture and until recently the state monopoly limited the diversification of the tourist offer.

Although the Bulgarian tourism infrastructure has been long designated for privatisation, only 2 luxury hotels and 3 others were effectively sold from 1991 to 1996. The privatisation is under the auspices of the respective State Agency in co-operation with the State Committee for Tourism. One of the reasons for the serious delay in privatisation in the Black Sea region is the difficulty to assess the market value of the facilities, while the inflation of the national currency is very high. As a matter of fact, one of the sources of the inflation is the artificial devaluation of the lev, so that industrial plants, transport and tourist facilities could be bought cheaper by the Bulgarian nouveaux rich.

Another difficulty is related to the general infrastructure of the resorts, which cannot be split between the private firms.

A negative development is the disappearance of the resort promotion, as a complex product, while the individual firms are doing marketing and promotion of their products only and in a less competent and effective way. Another weak point of the resort complexes is that the delinquency is more difficult to control. Usually this is not the tourists who suffer from the criminal activity, but the property, the owners and the staff through different forms of racket.

This is not surprising then that there was little interest in purchases and investments in the Black Sea coast by foreign business groups. This is likely to change now, as a new central-right government replaced in February 1997 the former very ineffective socialist government, declaring among its priorities the attracting of foreign investors. The new authorities managed to stop the inflation in the period from February to April 1997 and have sharply accelerated the privatisation procedures.

The expectation is that with the progress of privatisation, the managers, the personnel and some of their families will prefer to settle in the resort complexes. Considering the seasonality of the coastal tourism it will require alternative jobs and provision of services for the permanent population of the complexes. This will end in reducing the tourism monoculture and in more varied economic activities, while the urbanisation of the complexes will intensify. The latter is conflicting with the initial objectives and definition of the complexes' model, as well as the ecological requirements. All this can only mean that further development of the complexes should be stopped and their urbanisation put under control.

2.3. Bigger towns

There are two bigger residential, socio-economic, administrative and distributive centres in the Bulgarian Black Sea coast – Varna (304 000 inhabitants) and Bourgas (200 000), both important ports organising their hinterlands in a T-like conurbations (figure 2). The urban population of the region exceeds 600 000, which is 70% of the total population. The tourist functions are concentrated in the sea-side facades of the conurbations but are present in the residential plasma and communication axis as well. As centre of the tourist region and a resort Varna is much more important. Bourgas is specialised in heavy industry and seaport activities creating serious pollution of the adjacent area.

Historically Varna is the first Bulgarian officially recognised resort since 1909 and still is attracting tourist and recreational flows. In 1990 the town offered 28 000 tourist beds, including 8 000 in hotels. The foreigners' overnights in 1995 reached 1.5 million mostly spent in the resort complexes of Zlatni Piasatsi and St Constantin, which administratively belong to the Varna county. Considering the urban municipality proper, the tourism, though important, is not a priority branch. On the level of the conurbation including the resort complexes the specialisation of Varna in tourism is of primary importance. This paradox is relevant to the organisational and distributive functions of the town aimed at the exterior parts of its hinterland.

The Bourgas conurbation is smaller and newer. However, its industrial and seaport capacity is exceeding Varna. On the other hand Bourgas, though situated on the sea-side and surrounded by lakes is not, unlike Varna, a resort destination. The high air and water pollution in the Bourgas bay is caused mainly by the biggest Bulgarian industrial plant- the petrochemical combinat linked with a special port. In 1990 in Bourgas were available 11 000 tourist beds, less than 2% of them in hotels. The rest is in private rooms used mostly by recreationists using the mineral waters and muds of the nearby lakes. Only 1% of the foreigners nights were registered in Bourgas.

Although tourism as an innovation in the Bulgarian coast was first introduced in big towns, their respective functions are now less overwhelming than in the resort complexes and in the smaller sea-side settlements. The main weakness of the towns is the ecological degradation, while the basic strength is the developed infrastructure and well organised supply and distribution. A characteristic feature distinguishing it from other forms of tourism location is the availability of massive short-time recreational demand of the local population. Interestingly, the vacation holidays of the local residents are directed as a rule to the interior of the country. Varna has a relatively well developed recreational suburban zone, while the Bourgas weekenders tend to visit more distant localities, due again to the poorer ecological conditions of the vicinity. A 1989 survey with 400 inhabitants of Sofia, Pleven and Bourgas discloses a similar model in which the home is the likely recreational venue in both winter and summer and this proves the passive character of the free time usage. In Bourgas the urban recreation is effectuated usually within a walking distance, while the weekend trips are bound mostly to the sea coast in an isochrone of 30–90 minutes by car.

The recreational flows from Varna and Bourgas to the coastal resort complexes, are less numerous than anticipated due mainly to the lower purchasing power of the Bulgarians as compared to the foreigners booked in advance and paying in hard currency.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The comparison of the three basic types of the tourist settlements (figure 3) points at differential dynamics, the small settlements leading in that respect.

The least stable are the resort complexes due to their monocultural sea tourism profile. The bigger towns are displaying stable growth not bound exclusively to the sea tourism, while the tourism is only one of their socio-economic specialisations.

Only 4 out of 32 coastal settlements do not have a resort status. These are the smaller resorts where considerable development can be expected. There are observed the best results in privatisation.

The model of prior development, based mainly on the establishment of big resort complexes is exhausted. So, new options and ways to rejuvenate (Butler, 1980) and rehabilitate the resort complexes are an absolute priority. We deduce that the big resorts should be linked with the smaller tourist settlements and holiday centres/club centres, using the marketing experience and personnel skills of the former, while orientating the recreation activities to the latter.

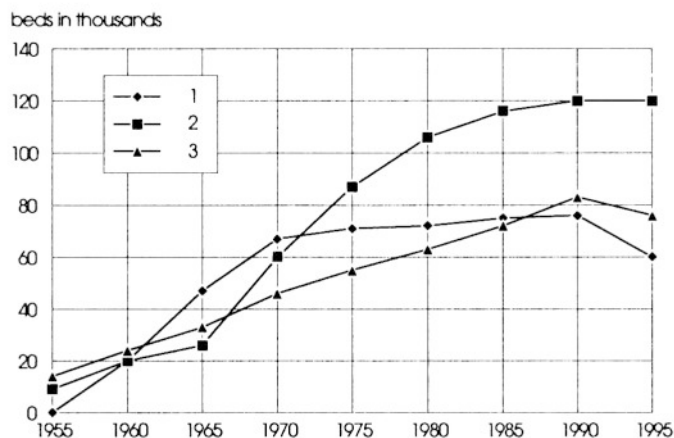


Fig. 3. Dynamics of the tourist accommodation capacity in the Bulgarian Black Sea coast in approx. 1955–1992

Legend: 1 – resort complexes; 2 – big towns Varna and Bourgas; 3 – small settlements

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