

## THE CONCEPT OF THE STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE OHRID PRESPA TOURISTIC REGION

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***Abstract:** This study scrutinizes the intricacies of tourism destination development in the Ohrid and Prespa areas, renowned for their natural beauty and cultural heritage. The crafted destination development plan, shaped through stakeholder consultations, aims to augment competitiveness and enhance the visitor experience. Unlike conventional administrative boundaries, this destination is defined by its collective attractions, facilities, and services, centred around Lake Ohrid. Encompassing Ohrid, Struga, Vevcani, Prespa Lake, and Galicica National Park, this region presents a diverse array of assets, forming a cohesive and distinctive identity. Relevant conclusions regarding the regional touristic strategy are derived.*

***Keywords:** tourism, destination, development, sustainability, challenges, strategic investment, cultural heritage, supply, demand*

This tourism destination development plan has been created in consultation with and with inputs from stakeholders from the areas of Ohrid and Prespa the surroundings. The destination development plan is designed to be used to inform implementation of critical activities that will increase competitiveness and improve the visitor experience.

The ‘destination’ is not defined by administrative boundaries, but rather by key elements that make up a destination from a visitor perspective. This destination therefore includes the natural, cultural and man-made attractions, facilities, services and resources that make up this particular hub of tourist activity, centered around the focal attraction of Lake Ohrid. This destination therefore includes tourism assets in Ohrid, and the nearby areas of Struga, Vevcani, Prespa Lake, and Galicica National Park. These surrounding areas are included under the Ohrid destination because they are all within the catchment area (one day excursion) of the tourist hub of Ohrid, and they have all have assets and attractions that are complimentary and well suited to each other, creating a strong identity.

The following shows a graphical representation of the frequency of terms and phrases that were used by stakeholders to express their vision of how tourism in the destination will look by 2030. This can also be interpreted as an aspirational unique selling proposition (USP).

**Picture 1** Vision of how tourism in the destination will look by 2030



**Source:** Local and Regional Competitiveness Project (2021) Tourism Development Plan for Ohrid, Struga, Prespa and Surroundings, Volume II – Destination Development Plans – Plan No.1

These words are aspirational and reflect the ambition of stakeholders to develop and build on their core strengths, particularly around ideas of adventure, culture and quality as a tourism destination.

The following vision for the destination has therefore been developed

“In 2030, we will have retained our position as Macedonia’s best-known and most visited destination, whilst also increasing the profitability and sustainability of the tourism industry and its economic impact. We will offer year-round adventure, wellness, culinary and cultural experiences and a series of new events and festivals, including Ohrid food and wine festival. The strength of our offer will also have been broadened through ecotourism development in UNESCO’s Prespa and the National Parks sites, – also extending the distribution of tourism’s benefits more widely Local and Regional Competitiveness Project (2021) Tourism Development Plan for Ohrid, Struga.”

## **1. Challenges in the Development of the Destinations**

The main tourism development challenge at this destination is the high concentration of tourism traffic and activity especially around Lake Ohrid itself, as well as the increasing focus on low-value segments. Uneven distribution of tourism flows leads to high level of pressure in areas around Lake Ohrid, which leads to negative environmental footprint and damages the quality of the experience of many guests . At the same time, areas that are immediately next to Ohrid have

little to no visitation and generate few benefits from tourism. Enhancing the Ohrid offering by creating linkages with surrounding areas will also lead to a more even distribution of tourism flows and less pressure on valuable tourism assets. The second challenges as growing visitor arrivals impose increasing pressure on the city, both in physical and environmental terms (such as congestion, traffic, pressure on facilities and infrastructure) and in social and cultural terms (community tolerance, crime, quality of life). Its carrying capacity is exceeded, as rapid tourism growth in conjunction with inadequate infrastructure leads to overcrowding, particularly in the high season (the third-quarter of the year). Too much visitors aggravated by seasonality as in the case of Ohrid, is among the main causes for negative consequences of tourism known as visitor ‘overkill (Rosenow and Pulsipher, 1979).’

The third significant challenge with tourism development in Ohrid is the focus on low value segments driven mainly by the strategic prioritization of quantitative measures (such as number of visitors) vs. qualitative measures (such as spending and impact). Growth in tourism in the recent years has been measured solely on the basis of arrival numbers but these arrivals are driven from low-spending charter tourists who come in large numbers but have limited positive socio-economic impact .

All challenges can be addressed by changing the traveler mix attracted to Ohrid and its surroundings. By targeting travelers (segments) who are willing to spend more time and money, and venture outside of Ohrid to enjoy the less visited natural and cultural attractions, the destination can increase the positive socio-economic impact of tourism and achieve more balanced development. It is important to note that while some challenges are more urgent than others, a real and visible strengthening of the competitiveness of the destination is only possible if the full array of gaps and challenges are addressed.

The Prespa region is identified as ‘destination to be’ and one of the (nature wise) biggest potentials for tourism development. Yet, large efforts needs to be done in the first line the accommodation, which is a challenge and may be solved with more than just renovation plans, but rather new direct investment in resorts and hotels. The improvement of tourism promotion and more substantial involvement of travel agencies and foreign tour-operators is another priority. The transport agencies are not operating on regular basis or at least not with a capacity to transfer larger groups of tourists. The road as well as overall tourism infrastructure limits further development in tourism manner. Yet, in certain circumstances, it may not be a problem, but rather an opportunity.

Namely in most cases the tourists will not like to drive or travel unpleasantly for an hour in a narrow and full with curves road (from Ohrid to Resen via the National Park Galicica). However, the “Forbes” magazine announced it as “the World’s 20 must drive routes” due to the landscapes, the adrenaline curves, the apple yards, the wind and the view.

The ecosystem “Ezerani” is protected nature park located on the northern part of the Lake Prespa and is promoted as an area for scientific tours. The beauties of the natural park “Ezerani” combined with other features (lake, cultural, rural, mountain and eco-tourism) may lead to creation of specific tourism product, which will attract tourists all over the year. So far, “Ezerani” offers only daily tours with only one tour per day during the summer season. This site presents good starting point and a huge potential for developing ‘Bird Watching Tours’ since almost 90% of the birds that may be seen at the Balkans sky appear in this ecosystem (living here or just passing through).

The Prespa region may offer additional tourism services in the line of production of local food specialties, honey products, souvenirs and hand-made handicrafts, thus offering to the tourists not just ‘sight-seeing’, but ‘life-practicing’ as well. A good example is the village Brajcino, which has big potential for mountain tourism. Yet, without substantial support from all tourism market players, one may not set tourism development on sustainable ground. Moreover, low prices for accommodation and additional services compared to Ohrid are also very big advantage and opportunity for the destination.

Although tourism is not the primary focus of this region and is not the main source of income, the local population gains positive attitude towards this issue. Namely, the residents share optimistic view for tourism development by stating that tourism can contribute and enhance development of the local community. Proper education and training may raise the awareness of the local citizens for provision of additional services like (handicraft and souvenirs, provision of guided tours, visits, provision of local dishes and gourmet specialties etc.) that can make tourism supply even stronger.

Undertaking identified interventions may be two-folded (Petrevska, 2015):

- (i) To create more competitive tourism in the destination; and
- (ii) To enable systematic change in terms of improving tourism services.

In the line of making the current tourism more effective, several profound strategic improvements should be applied.

- Firstly, tourism along with the local community must be convinced that the micro region has potential for improvement by introducing and developing tourism. In this line, launching series of Tourism Awareness Program Activities (forums and debates) in order to raise awareness of all tourism stakeholders on the issue of the importance of tourism development for the destination may be set.

- Secondly, the region must move forward in its tourism life cycle by making big steps of improvement. The current stage of ‘involvement’ must be replaced with ‘development’ phase in the shortest period of time. This will lead to more substantial results by creating more recognizable tourism. The destination should be put on the list of domestic and foreign tour-operators as a ‘must-see’ and ‘must-experience’ destination. This requires completely new “push-pull” marketing strategy, with the main accent on the application of the IT technology for tourism promotion purposes. By developing sophisticated software module, the tourists will be assisted in creation of ideal holiday within the destination. Such intelligent promotion increases the awareness of the destination that is capable of fulfilling travelers’ preferences, and respectfully supports the local economy by improvement of tourism supply in more qualitative manner.

- The third strategic direction for improving tourism competitiveness is to strengthen the coordination with local government in the line of improving its contribution. At the same time, by forums and debates one must urge the necessity of cooperation among all key tourism players. In this line, the objectives and aims set within regional tourism development plans and programs must be in-line with those created at local level.

Besides undertaking interventions in the line of creating more competitive tourism development, the vision of change incorporates systematic change in terms of improving offered tourism services.

In this line, the first strategic direction is detected in improvement and enlargement of existing tourism facilities, in the first line, the accommodation facilities. Namely, it is often a case when the tourism product is identified by the quality and comfort of the accommodation, and missing the overall impression. Therefore, the current facilities should be improved and should obtain a star-rank categorization, thus ensuring that the international tourism criteria and standards are fulfilled. In case of enlargement, it must be taken into consideration to look after the natural and environment impacts.

The second strategic direction refers the improvement of knowledge of foreign languages, as well as behavior of employees in tourism sector. Namely, series of capacity building trainings should lead to upgrading the skills of the tourism workforce by developing a high performing, highly qualified and multi skilled employees. The tourism workforce is lacking the professional and customer oriented approach, which is an indispensable factor for destination's development. Language and communication skills, as well as teamwork are at extremely low level. Besides the tourism employees, the training may be expanded to local residents as well. Namely, the local population represents the hospitality of the hosts in general, so it is of great importance to establish direct first contact with foreign tourists. The outcome will be creation and development of a stable, high performance environment for tourism development of the Prespa region.

## **2. Analysis of the National Strategy for Tourism 2016-2021**

The importance of the tourism sector is emphasized in national and regional strategies, and therefore better dialogue and coordination with the public sector is needed in their implementation. The policy framework of the sector is composed of the National Strategy for Tourism 2009-2015 (and its thematic sub-strategies); the law and the Strategy for Regional Development 2009-2019; the programs for regional development 2010-2015 for each of the eight planning regions and the Program of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia for the period 2014-2018. The government, through its Ministry of Economy, prepared the new National Strategy for Tourism from 2016-2021.

Although often very detailed and well documented on the supply side (assets, products, facilities), existing strategic materials guiding the sector lack significant demand analysis (understanding why and how tourists visit the country). This means that any entity involved in the design or planning of an intervention (at any scale) to address the challenges of the sector. Like many other industries, tourism is a highly competitive business run by the private sector and it is critical to have a deep understanding of both the supply side and the demand side. It is also very important from the point of view of destination planning. The destination planning process works in such a way that activities are determined that will be financed and implemented in the short and medium term, and therefore a solid market confirmation of the choice of these activities is needed. In the initial work on these destination development plans, it was clear that much of the data collection and analysis of the missing demand-side perspective would have to be done before

determining the actions that might follow. The analysis and evidence base for these activities is derived from existing strategic materials (primarily focussed on supply) and from additional analysis focused on of the demand that was collected by the team that prepared the development plans. Development plans are not designed to compete with or replace the national strategy but to support the implementation and present priorities at the destination level.

Eight key strategies have been defined to support the professional tourism development of North Macedonia strategic goals (National strategy for tourism 2016-2021):

- 1) Raising awareness of North Macedonia as an attractive tourist destination
- 2) Improving the attractiveness of North Macedonia as a tourist destination
- 3) Improvement of organizational structures in tourism
- 4) Improvement of the investment climate for Macedonian entrepreneurs in relation to the development of additional facilities for accommodation
- 5) Improving the quality and quantity of available data on tourism
- 6) Improvement of framework conditions for the development of tourism
- 7) Improvement of tourist knowledge and quality of services
- 8) Improving the awareness of the local population regarding tourism

The Action Plan 2016-2021 is an integral part of the National Strategy for the development of tourism in the Republic of Macedonia. The action plan for the implementation of the Strategy until 2021 is an operational document according to which the dynamics of the activities for the realization of the national priorities given above in the text, as well as the holders of the stated priorities with financial implications, are determined. Several activities are planned within the Action Plan, namely:

- 1) Increasing the amount of available budget for marketing of the Promotion and Support Agency;
- 2) Developing a "brand strategy" for Macedonia;
- 3) Developing new leading projects for Macedonian tourism;
- 4) Establishment of a Tourism Development Fund;
- 5) Reorganization of the organizational structures for tourism at the national level; 6) Establishment of regional Destination Management Organizations (DMOs);
- 6) Establishment of Hotel Development Fund.

## Accompanying activities

As accompanying activities to the main activities from 1-7 would be the following:

- A) Introduction of a Satellite Tourist Account for Macedonia;
- Investing in necessary general infrastructure as support for the development of tourism in Macedonia;
- Organizing trainings in institutions and study trips for the employees of the Department of Tourism and the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism;
- Assessment of secondary education for tourism and improvement of attractiveness for students;
- Organizing a special annual Summer Tourism Academy (in cooperation with universities);
- Development of a training program for people responsible for tourism at the local / regional level (municipalities or OUD);
- Organizing a Macedonian Tourism Award ceremony to celebrate achievements in tourism and reward best practices in different categories;
- Developing national tourist routes;
- Developing at least one cave as a tourist attraction;
- Implementation of the action plan from the Study on the Development of Tourist Activities on Water in Rivers and Canyons (kayaking, sailing and driving through canyons and gorges).

### **3. Conclusion**

Identified challenges in destination development encompass concentrated tourism around Lake Ohrid straining the environment, increased visitor arrivals taxing infrastructure and cultural integrity, and an overemphasis on low-value segments hindering sustainable growth. Addressing these issues necessitates a shift towards longer-stay, higher-spending visitors. The Prespa region, though harboring untapped potential, requires strategic investment in accommodation and transportation. Furthermore, the "Ezerani" natural park offers opportunities for scientific tours and bird-watching.

In conclusion, we advise a balanced approach between supply and demand-side considerations in destination planning. By addressing identified challenges and implementing outlined strategies, the Ohrid and Prespa areas can realize their potential as thriving and sustainable tourist destinations.

In the end we may say that "It is not enough just to adopt a strategy for the growth of tourism. Once approved, they must be supported by national policies aimed at creating a network with sufficiently developed urban and economic potential that it can positively affect the entire national territory and to face international competition" (Mustatea,2013).

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