

Interreg – IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia



Project: CB007.1.11.075 “Balneological tourism - the future of health”

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR JOINT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN SAPAREVA BANYA MUNICIPALITY, BULGARIA, AND SOKOBAJKA MUNICIPALITY, SERBIA 2019-2024



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Introduction

The development of tourism and especially balneological tourism with an emphasis on spa and wellness services is particularly promising and of crucial importance for the development of areas possessing climatic and natural resources to treat people.

Bulgaria and Serbia have relatively good tourist potential – balneological and spa tourism occupy fourth place in all types of tourism, forming 6.6% of all tourism products and services in Bulgaria, the situation being similar in Serbia.

The resort villages of Sapareva banya in Bulgaria and Sokobanja in Serbia have a very similar profile in their tourism potential and development. Unfortunately, the products on the market for this type of tourism are not mass-produced or unified, and the potential consumers are under-provided for, especially given the enormous potential that the two countries have for developing this type of tourism. There is a strategic interest for investment in these areas for year-round balneological and spa tourism with mineral water. In the future, there will be greater importance in the combination of Balneological - Spa - Wellness services with other forms of specialised tourism - cultural-historical, ecotourism, wine and gourmet tourism, festive, adventurous, and more. According to a EU survey, 48% of guests using a spa product look to find yet another type of tourism, and 27% look for at least two other types of tourism. The main reason for this is the increasing aging population of Europe, which implies the development of a strategy that is oriented to tourists aged 65+.

In this context, the overall objective of the Cross-border Cooperation Programme with Serbia is to strengthen territorial cohesion in the regions along the Bulgarian-Serbian border, as well as competitiveness and sustainability of each one's development, through cooperation in the fields of the economy, the social sphere and environment, regardless of administrative boundaries. For this reason, the current **Strategic Plan for joint and sustainable development of tourism in Sapareva banya Municipality, Bulgaria, and Sokobanja Municipality, Serbia 2019-2024** is being developed with an emphasis on balneological and spa tourism, as well as the so-called wellness services (the combination of water procedures, as well as other therapies and activities, reflecting favorably on the psychological and physical condition of a person).

Given the above, it is important to note that the current development is in the result of work on the project: CB007.1.11.075 “Balneological tourism – the future of health” implemented under the Interreg-IPA Bulgaria–Serbia Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2014 – 2020, a procedure with reference number No. 2014TC16I5CB007 - 2015 – 1. The municipality of Sapareva banya is in its capacity as Beneficiary under contract №RD-02-29-362/ 14th of December 2017, concluded with the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works. The Serbian municipality of Sokobanja is the other project partner. The border region covered by the project is characterised by a variety of natural features and encompasses a large number of places recognised as tourist centres for cultural, spa,

mountain, adventure and eco-tourism. The other biggest strength of the border region is its rich and unique culture - in both material (various archaeological sites, monasteries, museums and galleries) as well as intangible heritage (i.e. traditions, festivals, and more), which is a key prerequisite for creating an attractive tourist product and could easily be used as a powerful instrument for regional development, recovery and prosperity. Culture is one of the most important factors within the Cross-border Cooperation Programme because it gives a clear picture of common features, and ensures a shared identity for the region. Professional culture institutions are very well developed both in Bulgaria and Serbia. Traditional cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, galleries, community centres, cultural centres, and others, have a long-standing presence and have been well accepted in local communities. Despite its overwhelming potential, the cultural and historical heritage needs some renovation and somewhat additional investment in the development of tourist attractions and sites of cultural and historical heritage.

Another distinctive feature of the Bulgarian-Serbian border region is its great biodiversity. It is rich in national parks, protected areas and nature reserves. A part of it is the largest national park in Bulgaria - Rila National Park, which is also a part of the Sapareva banya region. The Seven Rila Lakes are a protected area. The Moravitsa River Gorge, which is located in the Serbian region of Sokobanja, as well as the Bukovik Mountain, is rich in a variety of plants, trees, and interesting animal species (there is also a deer reserve).

Many natural sites in the Bulgaria-Serbia border territories are already part of or are due to become part of the NATURA 2000 territories. Numerous geomorphological phenomena (caves, natural bridges, gorges, and canyons), hydrological (springs) and dendrological sights and smaller nature reserves are also protected under statutory documents.

Both regions, as a tourist destination, have exceptional opportunities to provide a variety of different types of tourism. Apart from the traditional touristic options - cultural and mountain tourism - including skiing, they have the potential to offer many alternative forms including eco, rural, health, balneological, spa, wellness, cultural, adventure, wine, gourmet, event, hunting, camping, and congress tourism. Thanks to this, the regions of Sapareva banya and Sokobanja have many opportunities to unleash their potential most rationally. Increasing the attractiveness of the two tourist destinations could be achieved through the more appropriate use of the natural and anthropogenic resources available to them while at the same time emphasizing the sites with tourism potential and the opportunities they offer for the development of specialised forms of tourism.

In conclusion, the favourable natural and ecological characteristics of Sapareva banya and Sokobanja, combined with their rich historical and cultural heritage, are unique regional assets and one of the key factors for sustainable development of the border region and for increasing their attractiveness as a tourist destination. We believe, that the **Strategic Plan for joint and sustainable development of tourism in Sapareva banya Municipality,**

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Bulgaria and Sokobanja Municipality, Serbia 2019-2024 - with an emphasis on balneological and spa tourism, and wellness services will contribute to the diversification of the currently existing tourism products and services, as well as the sustainable development of tourism, which will have a variety of positive social and economic impact to improve the quality of life in the region.

Part 1

General framework

1. Vision and aim. Prerequisites for strategy development

Balneology has its traditions ever since the time of the Thracians, the Slavs and the ancient Romans, who built flourishing towns near the abundant hot springs, turned them into balneological centres and places for sports, culture, and entertainment. Today, despite the great discoveries and achievements of modern healing therapy methods, balneology continues to show its growth. The use of balneological resources in combination with the bioclimate is expanding and proving its worth both in the traditional field of high-efficient treatment and in the activities of mass preventative healthcare, recreation, and leisure. It is also necessary for the development of wellness services.

Taking into account the experience of countries with developed balneological and spa tourism in Europe such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, Austria, France and Germany, it will be confirmed that any region possessing a scientifically proven hydro-healing or hydropathic water potential, which has sufficient prerequisites to use it as a natural resource for local development, is a factor for attracting investment. Investors may not only be local and foreign corporations specializing in this type of tourism service but could also be specialised funds and insurance consortiums, pension and social associations working in partnership with local administrations and industry communities.

The set of conditions for the development of the investment potential is a combination of factors including: professionally and linguistically prepared medical and non-medical local staff, newly built infrastructure and water network, roads and communications, sewage treatment plants, well-built facilities for healing or rehabilitation procedures, parks, sports grounds, recreational sites, and well-made equipment. Considered to be alternative forms of year-round tourist activity, spa tourism and spa medical programs provoke a discussion on the development of a specific local municipal economy - agro-production, commerce with various goods and souvenirs and services, by analogy to the countries in Europe in this direction. Keeping such a base of hundreds of young people in these regions is a social prospect that justifies efforts to change laws and regulations with a major goal - a EU marketing approach to the decentralisation of the management of water resources, suitable for balneological tourism, spa and wellness programs.

The opportunities for the development of balneological tourism and the related forms of tourism in the municipalities of Sapareva banya and Sokobanja as a priority sector are directly dependent on the abundance of resources - natural (mineral springs, comfortable climate, preserved natural environment, biodiversity), anthropogenic (preserved intangible and tangible cultural and historical heritage, events and festivals), infrastructure (accessibility, road network, facilities, communication), administrative (capacity to manage the tourist destination), product (services, trade) and human resources (experience and professionalism,

education of personnel). There is enormous potential, and the specific nature of the natural resources on the territory of both municipalities favours the development of balneological tourism and mountain tourism as a basis for an attractive compound and competitive four-season tourist product.

The vision for joint and sustainable tourism management is in the development of the positive images of Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia as popular, modern and accessible all-year-round tourist destinations with balneological, spa and wellness services.

The specific focus of this vision includes the realisation of the potential of the territories for improving the image of the border region as a tourist destination by creating a joint cross-border touristic brand and diversifying the tourism product and the related accompanying services:

- Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia - distinctive year-round tourist destinations with a good reputation and recognisable by local and foreign tourists;
- Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia - municipalities with preserved natural resources and modernised tourist conditions - including attractive accommodation facilities, convenient transport infrastructure, and a variety of specific tourism products;
- Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia - sustainably developed tourist regions based on a partnership between all stakeholders.

The main aim of this joint strategy is to help the municipal administrations of Sapareva banya and Sokobanja to strengthen health tourism in these regions and to achieve the optimal combination of traditional therapeutic activities such as balneotherapy, rehabilitation and health prevention with modern wellness and spa programs.

The development of the product line of this type of tourism requires the improvement and diversification of the existing groundwork, and the creation of specialised niche products based on the idea "Sapareva banya and Sokobanja - friends for your health".

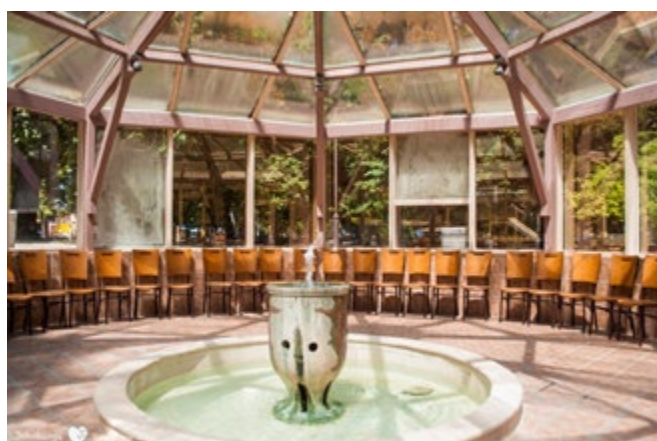
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Strategically looked, the health tourism (which combines balneological, spa and wellness services) has great potential in its development for a combination with almost all other types of tourism - mountain tourism, cultural tourism, summer and holiday tourism, sports tourism, business tourism, gastronomic tourism, festival and event tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism, religious tourism, and others.



*The geyser fountain of 103° C
in Sapareva Banya*



*Inhalation room - part of the Turkish bath in the
centre of Sokobanja*

All this, however, is closely related to the need for the municipal administrations of Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia to develop and implement a coherent and purposeful policy to promote their tourism potential by creating a favourable regulatory, economic, social, cultural, historical, civilly active environment for sustainable development.

2. Strategic framework

The current strategy is created within the framework of the project “Balneological tourism – the future of health” co-funded by the European Union through the Interreg-IPA CBC Bulgaria–Serbia Programme 2014 – 2020.

The Bulgaria-Serbia IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 is designed within the framework of the European strategy for a smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth and the relevant national strategic documents. The overall objective of the Cross-border Cooperation Programme with Serbia is to strengthen territorial cohesion in the Bulgarian-Serbian cross-border regions, its competitiveness and sustainability of its development through cooperation in the fields of the economic, social and environmental spheres across administrative borders.

The main policy framework at a European, macro-regional, and national level reflected in the Programme and consequently in this strategy is as following:

♦ Europe 2020: EU strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth

The Europe 2020 Strategy is shared among the European institutions, the member states and the social partners in order to be taken the necessary action to help reaching the Europe 2020 targets. It puts forward three mutually reinforcing priorities:

- **Smart growth**: developing an economy based on knowledge and innovations;
- **Sustainable growth**: promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy;
- **Inclusive growth**: fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

In the context of the Bulgaria-Serbia IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020, the synergy with the aforementioned EU actions is sought at both a national and municipal level, in this case, specifically for the Sapareva banya Municipality and the Sokobanja Municipality.

♦ The European Territorial Cooperation Strategy and the role of the Cross Border Cooperation

Affairs in the strategy include the increased impact of globalisation, demographic changes, social and economic exclusion, climate change and biodiversity loss, all relevant to the Programme area. Three categories provide a starting point for the typology of results of cooperation programmes, which reveals some crucial aspects, namely:

- **Integration related results**, i.e. the establishment and implementation of joint territorial governance mechanisms for common assets;
- **Investment related results**, i.e. delivering socio-economic benefits similar to mainstream programmes either by direct investments or by preparing such investments;
- **Performance related results**, i.e. inducing improvements on organisational and individual performance.

Complementary, the Commission working draft “*Elements for a Common Strategic Framework 2014 to 2020*” describes a number of other characteristics of cross-border cooperation:

- Supporting the **joint management** and promotion of the shared major geographic features - in this case, the demand for joint tourism products for Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
- Achieving a **critical mass** for success, especially in the field of innovation and ICT;
- Achieving **economies of scale** for more efficient investments in services and infrastructure.

The present Strategy is in line with the above cooperation programmes’ characteristics, while also adding the integration into macro area framework (international partnership based on

border location), that generates substantial challenges and opportunities of coordination and synergies.

- ♦ **EU strategic Frameworks: Bulgaria Partnership Agreement**

The last draft of the Bulgarian Partnership Agreement submitted to the EC in April 2014, highlights the central role of the CBC programmes participated by Bulgaria, for the contribution to the EU development strategy.

The Partnership Agreement emphasises the importance of promoting the EUSDR, since the macro-regional strategies offer a new, more substantial and consistent cooperation platform. The CBC programmes should also emphasise the importance of promoting employment, improving tourism and promoting cultural heritage, while enhancing the connection between the communities of the border areas. Improvement of the environmental system is also to be promoted.

- ♦ **EU Country Strategy Paper for Republic of Serbia (2014-2020)**

The country strategy document is defining the priorities for action for Serbia towards meeting the strategic objective of accession. Hence, IPA support will be directed to enhance the overall business environment, as well as the education, employment and social policies in order to reform the education and training system and make it more responsible to labour market needs. Further support will also be granted to strengthen administrative capacity for environmental protection, climate change adaptation and risk mitigation.

- ♦ **National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria 2014-2030 - updated version, 2017**

The strategic framework reflects the tourism development guidelines set out in the EU and Bulgaria strategic planning documents, as follows:

- The strategy and its strategic framework is in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy and contains objectives and actions for achieving the priorities of the National Development Programme: Bulgaria 2020, in the field of tourism.
- The strategic framework also reflects the strategic road map for tourism, developed at the initiative of the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria.
- Government policies and the priorities of the Operational Programs for the period.

- ♦ **National Strategy for Sustainable Use of Natural Resources in Serbia (main)** - the main goals set for achieving the strategy are: (1) sustainable use of natural resources, creating a basis for the determination of plans, programs, and an emphasis on every natural resource; (2) reducing the negative environmental impact of resource use in the economy, creating basic indicators, that will be monitored; (3) development of sustainable production and consumption.

- ♦ **Strategy for Development of the territory of Republic of Serbia 2009 - 2013 – 2020** - The strategy has a special role to play in Serbia's future territorial development, based on a long-term vision of the strategic direction of the development of the allocation of its financial capacity, the use of available funds and foreign investment, as well as the sustainable use of resources and territorial capital.
- ♦ **Strategy of Information Society Development in the Republic of Serbia until 2020** - The development of an information society should be geared towards harnessing the potential of ICT to increase efficiency, economic growth, employment, and improve the quality of life of all citizens of the Republic of Serbia. Indicators of an advanced information society are: open, accessible and high-quality Internet access; developed e-commerce, including e-government, e-shopping, e-justice, e-health, and e-education.

Overall, the strategic framework takes into account the guidelines and management practices for the development of the two countries as a whole and the sustainable development of tourism in particular and seeks a balance between the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development.

It takes into account the main principles of sustainability:

- Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity;
- Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance;
- Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

The specific framework of this document stemming from the ongoing partnership project is based on the specific objective and expected results of the Bulgaria - Serbia IPA Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020:

Table № 1

IPA Cross-Border Cooperation Bulgaria–Serbia Programme 2014-2020

Specific Objective	Expected result	Target group	Potential Beneficiaries
CROSS-BORDER TOURISTIC PRODUCT: Valorising the favourable conditions for diversified tourism in the border area through creating common cross-border touristic destination(s)	Strengthened joint and integrated approaches for preserving and managing the diversity of natural and cultural assets in the border region as a basis for sustainable development and growth strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touristic operators • Tourist associations • SMEs in the eligible border area operating in the field of tourism and hospitality sector • Young entrepreneurs • Cultural institutes (museums, libraries, art galleries, community centres, etc.) • Residents of the cross-border area and the visitors (tourists) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All levels of regional/local authorities • Regional touristic associations • NGOs • Business support structures - chamber of commerce, business association, business cluster • Education / Training Centres • Regional and sector development agencies • Central and regional offices and structures of relevant government institutions/administrations

The indicative actions to be supported under specific objective 1.2 are as follows:

- **Development of joint cross-border tourist destinations** (e.g. improve development strategies and action plans based on innovative service concepts and products; carrying out joint researches on tourism demand for new tourist destinations; adoption of joint visitor management plans to ensure that tourism does not damage natural and cultural resources; risk management plans for cultural and natural heritage sites exposed to climate change; elaborating joint monitoring programmes to measure trends and impacts, and facilitate adaptive management of natural, cultural and historical heritage in the region, etc.).
- **Development of sustainable cross-border touristic products and services** (e.g. research activities to identify tourist products with potential for cross-border branding; development of new and innovative tourist products and services; development of local brand/s based on natural, historical and cultural heritage of the border region; establishment of networks/clusters/entities for management of joint tourist products; creating knowledge networks for tourism innovations in the border area, etc.).
- **Joint marketing and promotion of cross-border tourist destinations and products** (e.g. joint market perception analysis with the aim to assess the customer understanding of the border region as a consistent tourism destination; application of best practices in tourism promotion; preparation and dissemination of information and advertising materials; studies of the impact of the implemented marketing and advertising activities; organisation of tourism exhibitions and fairs; visualisation of local tourist products/ brand/s/ destinations, incl. 3D visualisation; mobile applications, social networks, tailor-made internet platforms, and other innovative tools; creating multi-lingual online tourist platforms, etc.).

Part 2

Situational analysis of tourism, balneological tourism in particular, in Sapareva banya Municipality

The resort town of Sapareva banya is located in south-western Bulgaria, situated in the picturesque valley between Rila and Verila Mountains. It is 12 km east of the town of Dupnitsa and 28 km west of the town of Samokov. Sapareva Banya, in its current form, has 200 years of history. It also has hot mineral springs. Located there is the only "geyser fountain" in both of Bulgaria and Continental Europe, with a water temperature of 103 °C. The town's mineral water has exceptional healing qualities. In the past, it was highly valued and used for healing by the Thracians and Romans. It has successfully treated ailments in the human musculoskeletal system, the peripheral nervous system, from heavy metal salt poisoning (lead, manganese, etc.), the upper respiratory tract, central nervous system lesions (provided rehabilitation after a stroke). Geothermal resources in the area imply the strategic development of balneological (healing, spa, and wellness) tourism as the core of a compound tourism package, offering a rich variety of additional services, including almost all modern forms of tourism - mountain (ski), eco, route-cognitive, rural, cultural and religious, congress (business), equestrian, sports (extreme) and others.

In this part of the situational analysis and the next presentation of Sapareva banya as a tourist balneo-destination, it is necessary to determine which resources correspond to the market needs of the targeted tourism markets of the municipality, and what are the opportunities of the Sapareva banya Municipality and the tourism industry to transform these resources into assets during the creation of a competitive tourism product, incl. together with the Sokobanja Municipality. Emphasis is placed on the specific assets (natural-geographic, transport, cultural, as well as cultural heritage itself) that are available at the time, and the extent to which they can be turned into assets for sustainable tourism development. It is important to note that the development of tourism is directly dependent on the factors of the environment and the quality of natural resources. Given this, in addition to climate change, the constant pressure on the environment by both the tourism industry and the other economic sectors is a threat.

3. Sapareva banya Municipality's profile as a tourist balneo-destination

This profile is based on the Programme for Tourism Development in the Sapareva banya Municipality 2014-2020 and presents, in brief, the most important characteristics, which determine the prerequisites for the touristic development of the region.

3.1. General characteristics

Geographic location

Sapareva banya Municipality is situated in an area of 180.8 km² in south-western Bulgaria in the north-eastern part of the Kyustendil Province and borders with the municipalities of Samokov (Sofia Province), Rila, and Dupnitsa. It is in the Southwest Planning Region of Bulgaria. Sapareva banya is ranked 4th by population and 8th by territory among municipalities in the Kyustendil Province. According to NSI data at the end of 2018, the population of the municipality is around 7520 inhabitants. Both natural and migrant growth are negative.



Sapareva banya is the central town of the municipality. The town is situated 75 km southwest of the capital Sofia and 56 km away from the district - Kyustendil. The urban structure is made up of five settlements - the town of Sapareva Banya, and the villages of Saparevo, Ovcharts, Resilovo, and Panichishte. The location of the Sapareva banya Municipality has largely determined the small number of settlements and their close location to the municipal centre town. The municipality has a relatively in distribution of inhabitants in its individual settlements.

One of the main roads in the country passes near the Sapareva banya Municipality - the international route E79, part of the Pan-European transport corridor №4, whose economic importance for the municipality will increase after the construction of the bridge at Vidin-Calafat.

The Sapareva banya Municipality is situated on a territory with diverse terrain, including the Dupnitsa basin plains, parts of the Dzherman River valley, the steep slopes of Rila to Sapareva banya and the village of Ovcharts, and Verila - the low mountain range with rounded and easily accessible slopes. Sapareva banya falls on one of the fault lines crossing Kraishite (the endmost south-western region of Bulgaria), resulting in the town's mineral springs. Here is located there the only geyser fountain in Bulgaria and in continental Europe.

The altitude of the municipality varies greatly, from 600 to over 2600 meters, which is the reason for its diverse physiographic appearance. The natural resources, climate, and location of the municipality are a prerequisite for the development of balneological, spa, eco, rural and religious tourism.

The climate is favourable for the development of tourist activities. It bears the typical features of Eastern Europe: relatively cold winters for the relevant latitude, as well as relatively hot summers, with the average annual amplitude of the temperature predominantly between 23 and 24 °C and in some places reaching 25 °C. The maximum rainfall is in summer, the

minimum in winter, with an amplitude (the difference between their summer and winter sums) reaching 15-25% of the annual amount. The municipality falls into the transient continental climate sub-area, with the specificities of the terrain influenced by the specific climate zones. A transient Mediterranean climate influence enters through in the valley of the Struma River and the Dzherman River.

Economy

The economy of Sapareva banya Municipality is still in the restructuring process, depending on the initial stage of development of its private sector and entrepreneurship, as well as the unfinished processes of shaping the sectoral structure of the economy. Companies registered on the territory of the municipality are predominantly small and medium, many of them having a low potential for generating gross added value, and low economic activity. They are mainly engaged in a family business, in the sphere of trade and restaurant management.

As of the end of December 2018, the unemployment rate in Sapareva banya Municipality is 8.04%, which is 2.35% less than the unemployment rate in 2017 when it was 10.39%.

There has been a significant decrease in unemployment in the municipality, particularly in the resort town of Sapareva banya because of the high influx of tourists in the city, where there are 147 categorised sites (including accommodation, catering establishments, and entertainment), and in which the resort town has 8 outdoor and 4 indoor pools with the famous 103 °C mineral water.

Sapareva Banya's economy is mono-structural, based on the service industry, and highly dependent on the state of its core sector - tourism and, to a lesser extent, the other sectors of the local economy. Service, trade, tourism, and transport companies dominate the economy. Intensive development of technical and tourist infrastructure has been recorded in recent years.

In the Sapareva banya Municipality, the biggest concentration of companies is of those engaged in trade, hotel management, restaurant management, tailoring, production of bread and confectionery, wood processing, agriculture, and construction. In the timber sphere, there is also direct participation of the municipality - the forests in the territorial scope of the Sapareva banya municipal enterprise "Municipal Forestry Sapareva Banya" have a total area of 5 522.8 ha. Timber production is 10 000 cubic metres per year.

The municipality has favourable conditions for the investment of different sectors, especially for the creation of new, and development of the existing, holiday and hotel bases in the tourism sector.

Water resources

Sapareva banya Municipality has its unique resources - high-temperature thermal water, and spring water from Rila Mountain.

On the territory of the municipality there are two thermal zones - eastern and western, standing 250 - 300 m apart. In the eastern zone, there is a mineral spring called "Pariloto" next to the old bath with the same name, and in the western zone, there are three mineral springs found in the territory of a park above the bath. Almost all the springs are captured and have a flow rate of 12 L/s. The waters are the richest in Bulgaria in their hydrogen sulphide content (15.5 mg per 1 litre of water). They are characterised as slightly mineralised, hyperthermal, sulphate-sodium, hydrogen sulphide, fluorine waters with a total mineralisation of 678 mg/L. With their content, the mineral springs have a wide range for the treatment of various diseases - the human musculoskeletal system, the peripheral and central nervous system, skin diseases, gynaecological and others. The composition of the mineral water is largely sulphuric with significant levels of iron, calcium, and manganese. It is the hottest water in the Balkans (103 °C) and has the only Balkan geyser, which sprang out in 1957. A pleasant park and restaurant have been set around it. The hot water of the geyser is used to heat the municipality building, holiday hotels and holiday homes, the St. Anna nursery, and the town school. The mineral water in Sapareva banya has the highest content of fluorine in Bulgaria and also of hydrogen sulphide in Bulgaria – 15.5 mg/L.

Indications for treatment with Sapareva banya mineral water:

- inflammatory diseases of the joints, muscles, and tendons: rheumatoid arthritis, arthritis of another nature, Bekhterev's disease, myositis, myotendonitis;
- diseases of the bones, joints, and others of degenerative nature;
- diseases of the bones, joints, muscles, and tendons of traumatic nature;
- diseases of the peripheral nervous system: neuritis, radiculitis, radiculoneuritis, discopathy, paresis, paralysis;
- female genital diseases of a non-specific nature: endometritis, adnexitis, sterility;
- acute and chronic poisoning with heavy metal salts and their compounds: lead, mercury, bismuth, etc.; acute and chronic poisoning with heavy metal salts and their compounds: lead, mercury, bismuth, etc.;
- skin diseases: psoriasis, neurodermatitis, dermatitis of allergic nature;
- upper respiratory diseases: sinusitis, pharyngitis, laryngitis, tracheobronchitis.

All of the above shows the wide range of possible treatment based on the geothermal water resources in Sapareva banya Municipality.

The water resources, however, are not limited to geothermal springs. The territory of the municipality crosses from the southeast-northwest-west into the river Dzherman, which originates from the Seven Rila Lakes. Several Rila tributaries flow into the Dzherman river - the Skakavitsa river, the Perushtitsa river, the Valyavitsa river, the Fudinya River, the Goritsa River, and the Otovitsa River. Another river entity is the Dzhubrena River. On the Skavitsa river, there is a waterfall with the same name. It is 1750 m above sea level, and the height from which the water falls is 70 m. In the course of the Goritsa River, near the village of Ovcharts, are located the seven Ovcharchenski Waterfalls - the highest of which, Goritsa, falls from 39 m.

The mountainous area of the municipality is the location of the Seven Rila Lakes and Lake Skakavitsa. Panichishte village is also the location of the endorheic tectonic lake Panichishte. Its area is 12 decares, and its depth reaches 4 m. Because of its uniqueness, the lake is defined as a kind of natural phenomenon. Nearby is the Suhoto Lake (the Dry Lake), of which the leveled bottom is used for sports activities.

The main watercourse of the Sapareva banya Municipality is the Dzherman River (the left tributary of the Struma River). The river originates from the Seven Rila Lakes. It flows north and northwest into a deep and forested valley, which serves as a boundary between the two parts of Rila - north-western Rila and Lakatishka Rila (the lowest part of Rila). In the town of Sapareva Banya, the river leaves the mountain, turns westwards, flows along the south-eastern edge of the Upper Dupnitsa valley, and it leaves the municipality northwest of the village of Resilovo. Its main tributaries in the territory of the municipality are: left - Skakavitsa, Perushtitsa, Valyavitsa, Fudinya, and Goritsa; right - Dzhubrena. Its left tributaries originate from north-western Rila and the Dzhubrana River - from Lakatishka Rila. The water from the river and the tributaries gets collected in nine basins with a total volume of 4730 cubic metres. Water quality indicators meet the BDS standard for drinking and household needs.

Water sources for the municipality are the rivers Goritsa, Fudinya, Skakavitsa, Valyavitsa, Prav Iskar, and the springs Lago, Izvora and Belite Eli. The water from them gets collected in nine basins with a total volume of 4730 cubic metres. Water quality indicators meet the BDS standard for drinking and household needs.

The water resources of the Sapareva banya Municipality have a decisive positive impact on its development.

Land and forest resources

Out of the entire territory of the municipality, 41 121 decares (or 22.7%) are privately owned, occupied by fields, perennials, meadows, pastures, etc. 126 387 decares or 69.9% of the municipality's territory are state-owned. These are the lands of the national forest fund, the national land fund, the rivers, the canals, the roads, the airport, and others. The municipality owns 6 972 decares of arable land, meadows and pastures, field roads, unfit land, etc. Parts of the meadows (25 decares of the territory of the municipality) are owned by religious organisations. The group "other owners" (6 416 decares) includes the village territories of the populated areas, the resort complex "Panichishte", industrial and storage areas, and outbuildings outside the populated areas, part of the meadows and pastures.

From the entire territory of the municipality, 77 214 decares are destined for agricultural needs and 96 510 decares for the needs of the forestry sector.

The Sapareva banya Municipality owns 61 995.1 decares of forests and lands in a forest fund, which are divided according to their function as follows:

- Green area - 9.78%;
- Buffer zones - 0.20%;
- Water supply area - 8.73%;
- Forests with timber and environment formation functions - 66.79%;
- Forest resort - 7.52%;
- Lands unsuitable for forests - 0.39%;
- Natural landmarks - 0.01%;
- Rocky and steep terrains - 3.61%;
- Seed production plantations - 2.98%.

Major tree species, sorted by frequency of distribution, are the Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), White pine (*Pinus alba*), European silver fir (*Abies alba*), Balkan pine (*Pinus peuce*), Oak (*Quercus* sp.), and European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). By forest type, coniferous forests prevail 70.1% of the wooded area.

A part of the Rila National Park is located on the municipal territory. The total area is 4309.9 ha, the forested part is 3191.8 ha, and the unforested is 1118.1 ha. Four of Bulgaria's nature reserves are found in the territory of the park - Parangalitsa, Central Rila Reserve, Ibar, and Skakavitsa. Rila National Park is one of the largest protected areas in Europe. Two of its nature reserves - Parangalitsa and Marichini Lakes are part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves, under the "Man and Biosphere" Programme.

The proximity of the Rila National Park is also of chief importance for the tourism development in Sapareva banya Municipality.

Healthcare

Health infrastructure is designated by:

- Centre for Emergency Medical Assistance Kyustendil - Sapareva banya branch
- The former building of the polyclinic - Sapareva Banya
- Specialised Rehabilitation Hospital "Sapareva Banya"

Education

The municipality has one secondary school "Hristo Botev", offering education from 1st to 12th grade and a nursey called St. Anna, with branches in the villages of Resilovo, Ovcharts, and Saparevo. The "Hristo Botev" secondary school offers 5 years of specialised education after 7th grade: the profession "Tourist agent activity organiser", specialty: "Organisation of tourism and leisure" with an advanced study of the Russian language; and the profession "Economist", specialty: "Economics and Management" with an advanced study of English. The presence of these specialties with a profile in the sphere of tourism is a good prerequisite for personnel provision in the tourism sector.

3.2. Tourism statistics

Towards the end of 2018 in the Sapareva banya Municipality (including the village resort Panichishte) there are 147 categorised places, including accommodation, catering establishments and entertainment. The tourist accommodation bed capacity of the Sapareva banya municipality is 2 425 beds. In 2018 the Sapareva banya Municipality had categorised thirty guest houses, one family hotel, five restaurants, five cafes and one guest apartment.

As seen in the above-mentioned data, there is an increase of 49 categorised accommodation facilities in comparison to the 2017 data (98 categorised places). In 2018, the categorised tourist sites were 49, of which 36 in accommodation and 13 in catering establishments. The total number of accommodation beds in the town of Sapareva banya is 147 and in Panichishte – 15.

In Sapareva banya town there is a Specialised Rehabilitation Hospital, the former balneo-sanatorium with 150 available beds.

Compared to 2017, the number of accommodation facilities has increased and by the end of 2018 the total number of nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners has increased significantly:

- 2018 - 74 769 total nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners; overnight visitors - 47 213;
- 2017 - 67 115 total nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners; overnight visitors - 41 155;
- 2016 - 55 318 total nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners; overnight visitors - 23 189;
- 2015 г. - 38 794 total nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners; overnight visitors - 24 785.

It is evident from the above data that for a period of about 5 years the number of nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners has doubled; i.e. there is a growth of 100%. The same applies to the number of overnight visitors. This shows that there is a growing tourism interest in the region and the tourism policy, led by the municipality management, is giving good results.

3.3. Target markets and tourist profiles, including foreign tourists

A researching done by the Ministry of Tourism on updating the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2030 (version 2017) shows that about 40% of Bulgarians carry out at least one trip per year for recreation, excursion or entertainment purposes - total for both in the country and/or abroad. The younger the people are, and the more active their way of life is, the more numerous is the share of the travellers among them. There are also more travellers among graduates and people with higher incomes. The travellers are territorially concentrated - about 44% of trips

are carried out by residents of the south-western region (mostly citizens of Sofia). Those living in the south-central Region (mostly residents of Plovdiv) account for about 17% of the country's trips, while residents in the northeast region - 14%. Citizens of the northwest and the north-central regions travel the least. They rarely choose nearby destinations as compared to tourists from other areas. People's lifestyles have a strong impact on their tourist trips.

The more active the people are, the greater are also the share of travellers amongst them. About 2/3 of all and nearly half of the average active people travel around the country. Bulgarians are mainly searching cheap accommodations. This may motivate them to choose for a summer holiday towards the start or end of the season. Financial limitations and uncertainties, however, limit early registrations, which are also an opportunity to get a better offer. The most important factors for choosing Bulgaria as a travel destination are: their personal safety and security, the preserved nature of the destination, and the opportunity for rest. The main reason for Bulgarians to travel only in Bulgaria or not to travel at all is due to a lack of financial resources.

The most frequently practiced tourism by Bulgarians travelling in Bulgaria are sea, culture, mountain and health tourism (balneological, wellness, and spa). The choice of the type of tourism depends on age and the degree of activeness of the traveller. With the increase of age, the share of engagement in specialised tourism increases. This is particularly true for travellers over 50, many of whom are escaping mass destinations even in the summer months. Most people who own properties, or holidaymakers with close ones that have their own homes, tend to combine the holiday with an alternative form of tourism (eco, cultural, spa, hunting, and fishing, etc.).

The number of people seeking nature and eco-friendly lifestyles is increasing, with requirements for the appropriate use of natural resources and the practice of sustainable tourism. This allows Bulgaria to develop successfully alternative forms of tourism and reduce seasonality by encouraging the travel of Bulgarians in the country.

The main source of travel information is the Internet. Nearly 64% of the travellers in Bulgaria in the last year have used the internet at some stage of their trip (and 82% of those who travelled abroad).

In 2016, Bulgarians have spent 752 million leva on personal tourist trips in the country. For a total of 3 493 092 personal trips in the same period, this means approximately 189 leva per a trip. Over 98% of the travellers are fully or rather satisfied with their last vacation in Bulgaria - a situation similar to those who travelled abroad. The share of the fully satisfied among the travellers abroad, however, is even higher (81% compared to 68% of travels in Bulgaria), which is an indication of the better tourist experience - an element that Bulgaria should emphasise to improve.

The opportunity for complete rest and tranquillity is of paramount importance for the formation of satisfaction. Good weather also contributes to good evaluations. A variety of cultural and historical attractions are not a significant factor in the formation of satisfaction

at a destination. In the context of the recorded high frequency of trips for cultural tourism, this means that sightseeing is for Bulgarians an additional activity, but not a major reason for travelling.

Bulgaria has excellent prerequisites for the development of cultural tourism. But the Bulgarian population is still not well aware of these opportunities. It is necessary to implement campaigns to improve the awareness of Bulgarians about the cultural and historical heritage of the country and to create a custom for practicing cultural tourism in Bulgaria. In 2016, 62% of the visits of foreigners to Bulgaria are for holiday and leisure purposes, 17% for business and 8% for family and friend visits.

The factors that influence the choice of a holiday destination are many and different in their nature. **Among the most important are prices, accommodation and service conditions, climate, nature and cleanliness or at least the idea of them, security, the opportunity for sightseeing.** Nearly half of foreign tourists believe they have been influenced by advertising in the decision to take a holiday in Bulgaria.

Foreign tourists are more active than the Bulgarians - they combine experiences (the share of two or more types of tourism varies from 45-48% in autumn and spring, 55-58% in summer, to 66% in winter). In the active seasons "mass-specialised tourism" combinations can be observed, while during the inactive seasons - combinations of two specialised types of tourism. The most common combination (which is the combination with the greatest potential) is between cultural and other types of tourism. Foreigners use more diverse sources of information for making travel decisions than Bulgarians. During the summer of 2010, the proportion of "inquirers" to two or more sources is around 1/3, and in the rest of the seasons, it reaches over 50%. A Google study (2014) shows that online channels are the main source of information when planning both holiday and business trips.

There have been changes in the demand and type of tourism products and services due to an increase in the share of market groups such as the 50+ group, self-employed women, single men and women of active age, etc. The proportion of European travellers over 65 years old, who have spare time and money is also increasing. This makes them an important market for tour packages, which are preferred by this age group. There is a global decrease in the share of classic "sun, sea and beach" travel at the expense of increased mobility and frequency of travel, interest in health and fitness, visits to sports and cultural events, visits to friends and relatives, adventurous travel, and the search for authenticity and immersion in local cultures. There is a tendency to "escape" from the tense daily life, and increased sensitivity to the quality of life as a whole, and health.

This trend is entirely in favour of the tourist regions offering balneological, spa and wellness services - as in Sapareva Banya.

Between 2015 and 2018 the revenue growth from international tourism in Bulgaria is 34%, while the increase in the visits by foreigners is 31%. The revenues from international tourism in the current account of the balance of payments, according to data of the Bulgarian National Bank for 2016, amounted to 6 424.4 million leva. With a total of

8251995 visits for 2016, this means that the earnings from one visit are on average 779 leva. Among the foreign visitors, there is a very high degree of satisfaction with the stay in the country. Total satisfaction varies within narrow limits in individual seasons - between 88% and 95%. The factors that lead to the highest satisfaction vary in seasons but generally can be summed up to the natural resources, the relations with the local people, the accommodation, the local cuisine, the cultural and historical sights, and in the winter - the ski slopes. According to foreign tourists, Bulgaria is an attractive destination for practicing alternative forms of tourism - cultural, spa/balneological, eco, and rural tourism.

Factors that form dissatisfaction with foreign tourists are persistent in time and do not depend on the season of the stay. Dissatisfaction focuses mainly on infrastructure and roads, accessibility for people with disabilities, transport difficulties, and dirtiness.

Target markets for attracting tourists to Bulgaria are Eastern European countries and visitors from these countries make the highest share of tourists visiting the country. According to NSI data for the period January-December 2014, most foreign tourists have visited Bulgaria from: Greece (1 031 981 tourists), Romania (947 365 tourists), Germany (714 195 tourists), Russia (656 454 tourists) and Turkey (438 306 tourists). This also applies to Serbia, which is also a traditional holiday destination for tourists from the above-mentioned countries.

Analysis of the visits by foreigners in Bulgaria for the period 2013-2017 by country - the main indicator of the attractiveness of the destination - data for 2017 shows that the visits by foreigners Bulgaria are 11596167, which compared to the previous year shows an increase of 9.35% (see table below) (NSI, 2017).

Interreg - IPA CBC

Bulgaria - Serbia



Table № 2

Arrivals of visitors from abroad to Bulgaria for the period 2013-2017 by country

Country of origin	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
TOTAL	9191782	9408821	9316624	10604396	11596167
including					
European Union	5362776	5431145	5243220	6208793	6867671
Austria	192298	208344	175024	204489	216986
Belgium	94735	103754	100777	119429	152739
Germany	812189	898791	826142	1003030	1046219
Greece	1105437	1100789	1024526	1157062	1272997
Denmark	70915	55924	58290	74125	67502
Ireland	18405	12739	13849	25388	31617
Spain	59972	65407	58852	63497	89155
Italy	129115	143561	143446	152078	177250
Cyprus	17785	17231	19285	22181	24969
Malta	2988	1808	2228	4868	3984
The Netherlands	134683	143793	123578	147882	183755
United Kingdom	269656	256932	250038	281777	352054
Poland	283498	282105	285455	388833	424724
Portugal	6944	9825	11693	11817	17440
Romania	1465600	1439853	1499854	1743697	1943436
Slovakia	81488	81883	74770	78167	81318
Slovenia	22002	20178	22859	22591	25178
Hungary	115205	103068	102189	118805	111405
Finland	37812	32696	24914	30332	33533
France	180114	169581	171305	195571	231348
Croatia	23137	25744	23968	23464	29331
Czech Republic	171315	182948	160978	219349	209218
Sweden	39826	40259	39288	48066	56739
Other EU countries	27657	33932	29912	72295	84774
Other European countries	3047582	3067160	3105221	3378927	3601426
North Macedonia	429008	441107	506052	562365	583026
Norway	30768	33050	24629	46899	51142
Russia	695853	666538	493989	589844	565754
Serbia	428582	453891	501091	490668	541303
Turkey	1053046	1094985	1237841	1312895	1437276
Ukraine	379444	341524	310777	342214	388645
Switzerland	30881	36065	30842	34042	34280
Other countries	202181	241154	268019	298718	334278
Israel	101222	129961	155276	183846	209304
Canada	17082	19339	18402	17395	19113
United States of America	72609	79788	81979	82465	90963
Japan	11268	12066	12362	15012	14898
Rest of the World	579243	669362	700164	717958	792792

Source: NSI (National statistical institute)

The upward trend is a clear indicator of the increased interest of foreign tourists to the tourist destination Bulgaria and, in part, the Sapareva banya destination.

The figures from 2017 clearly show that the visits are made mainly by citizens from the countries on the borders of the Republic of Bulgaria, namely Romania, Greece, and Turkey, as well as from countries like Germany and Italy, which have over 1 million visitors registered.

Countries such as Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Poland and the United Kingdom have also reported increasing interest in the destination, with visits ranging between 300-500 thousand people. A significant increase in visits between 2017 and 2013 is noted by Israel, which marks an increase of 108 082 people; Belgium - 58 004 people and the US - 18 354 people. In spite of the overall positive trends, a decline of tourists from the destination is observed mainly in countries such as Denmark, Finland, and Hungary.

The general tendencies for the country also influence Sapareva Banya's tourist flow in particular.

3.4. Tourism products – Their potential and guidelines for development – on the basis of the approved Programme for Tourism Development in the Sapareva banya Municipality 2014-2020

Health tourism - *By its definition, health tourism is a certain type of specialised tourism that aims to satisfy the users' needs of rest, physical rehabilitation and maintenance of general mental and physical conditions outside the hospital setting. Closely associated with balneological treatment and rehabilitation, health tourism has many aspects and applications. The combination of medical and tourist services enjoys great popularity worldwide, with unexplored areas and opportunities becoming increasingly attractive to consumers - both patients and healthcare users.*

The mountains, the hot mineral springs, the unique lakes and waterfalls, the natural scenery, the clean environment, and the favourable climate are essential resources for the successful development of the tourism sector in the region. The magnificent combination of all these tourist resources characterises Sapareva banya as a "gold mine" for the development of compound tourism, focusing on balneology: mountain ski tourism, ecotourism, route-cognitive, cultural and religious, healing and spa tourism, horse tourism and extreme tourism. The mineral water - 103 C - the distinguishing resource of the destination for the development of health, spa and wellness tourism (balneological tourism) is fully utilised by the Specialised Rehabilitation Hospital "Sapareva Banya" (the balneo-sanatorium), Aqua Club "Kotvata", it is already used in the guest houses in the area, the hotels, and the swimming pool at the Hristo Botev school, which is also accessible for outdoor people for swimming lessons. The Rehabilitation Hospital offers preventive treatments and the healing of many diseases. The mineral waterpark of the sanatorium is renovated - with 2 swimming pools, mineral water showers, jacuzzies, beach volleyball playground, and a snack bar - it is an attractive place for the town residents, the guests of Sapareva banya and for all those who are being treated at the sanatorium during the summer heat. The "Kotvata" Aqua Club is an attractive guest club with all the amenities for relaxation and treatment. The complex is comprised of two large adult pools, two children's pools, contrasting pools with cold and hot water, with the necessary changing rooms and showers, as well as a restaurant and a fast-food place. The large swimming pools can be used both for sports and relaxation, thanks to the attached jacuzzies with hydro-massage nozzles, waterfalls and hydro-massage lounges for the lovers of spa procedures, with outdoor jacuzzies and a thermal stone pool with mineral water up to 40 degrees and contrasting cold pools. They have a beneficial effect on the

nervous system and are used as an effective method to enhance blood circulation. It is open all year round, complementary to the nearby renovated mineral bath with indoor pools and a spa centre. The renovated Nikolay Haytov town park, the Champions Factory Bike Park "Rila Lakes" for mountain biking, the eco-trails, the natural and cultural attractions of the municipality are rich resources for providing a good physical and mental state of the visitors.

Mountain and winter (ski) tourism - *This type of tourism is based on the presence of a mountain in the region and the possibility of tourist activities related to the following eco-trails, climbing peaks, the use of ski slopes and other winter sports tracks, hikes to the mountain lakes, waterfalls, caves, as well as ecotourism activities related to the study of nature.*

Within Rila National Park are over 100 peaks, rock faces, caves, canyons, and lakes. There are 70 glacial lakes. Rila Mountain is beautiful both in summer and winter. Its nature is accessible to tourists thanks to a network of routes and marked trails. Among the most popular destinations in Rila mountain is Mount Musala - the highest on the Balkan Peninsula (2925 m).

Mountain and winter (ski) tourism are mainly located around Panichishte resort and the higher parts of the mountain. It is remarkable for its natural riches and favourable conditions for the development of mountain tourism in the region.

The high mountain area of Panichishte also offers suitable conditions for winter sports - skiing and sledding. There is a total of 4 chalets in its territory - Skakavitsa, Pionerska, Lovna, and Rila Lakes. The Skakavitsa chalet is known for being the first chalet in Bulgaria.

The Panichishte village has several ski slopes:

- Bekarya - alpine ski area 470 m, equipped with a ski lift for 280 people in an hour.
- Azhdera - children's ski-area equipped with a "baby" ski lift, and a ski slope of 150 m with a tow rope for the capacity of 200 people in 1 hour.
- Children's ski slope 200 m in front of the Pionerska chalet.
- Cross country skiing track 1000 m next to Adzhera ski area. There is a chance for the extension of the runway up to 3000 m.
- Alpine ski slope (children's) with a length of 250 m and a ski lift with the capacity for 200 people in an hour.

The ski slope average length is about 500 m, and their variation deviates from 120 to 600 m. The longest and steepest ski slope is at the Rilski Ezera chalet - 1100 m and with a denivelation between 500 - 600 m. All the ski slopes in the village have ski lift except for the one at the Lovna chalet. Here is the only luge track in Bulgaria, which meets international standards, and the ski slope in the Azhdera area is used for regional competitions.

Cultural tourism - *Cultural tourism is a form of tourism where the main purpose of the tourists is the visit of places related to the culture and cultural characteristics of a certain age or a group of people (nation, ethnicity, tribe, etc.). Artefacts of the cultural tourism can represent different forms of art, they may be presented in art galleries or outdoors, they may be presented in places and sites of historical importance (historical monuments) - buildings, localities, settlements, physical objects, etc., they may be historical museums, archaeological museums and excavations, ethnographic museums, etc. Cultural tourism also includes visits to various cultural events such as festivals, theatre productions, presentations of local folk traditions, customs, rituals and more.*

An additional resource for the development of the tourist services and the tourist offering as a whole in the Sapareva banya Municipality is the rich cultural and historical heritage of the municipality. The prehistoric village of Kremenick and remains from the ancient city of Germanea, which originated around the healing mineral waters, can be found in this territory. Stone walls from the ancient Roman city, the remains of the Roman bath and several other archaeological finds can be seen in the park of the sanatorium and the garden of the medieval church "St. Nikola". St. Nichola's Church (7th-8th century) is one of the oldest in the Municipality of Sapareva banya and it was renovated and renewed under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020. There are also many other preserved ancient churches and several monasteries that are a prerequisite for the development of cultural tourism as an additional service.

The territory of the Sapareva banya Municipality is rich in churches, chapels, and monasteries, which provide a good prerequisite for the development of religious and pilgrimage tourism.

In 2019 for the tenth time, the "Rila's Wonderworker" pilgrimage which has already become a tradition, will be held. Its route passes through the ridges of the Vitosha, Verila and Rila Mountains, and also through the territory of the Sapareva banya Municipality.

Traditionally, the march takes place in the first days of August and is a pilgrimage to the venerable saint and protector of the Bulgarian people - St. John the Rila Wonderworker. The organizers are the Theological Faculty of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and Sofia Municipality, and the worshipers number more than 200 people.

Eco-tourism

Sapareva banya Municipality has the opportunity to develop eco-tourism, as several protected areas fall within its territory. Rila National Park was created due to its great variety of flora and fauna. The presence of endangered species recorded in the Red Data Book of Bulgaria, as well as the rich tree vegetation, has necessitated its formation as a National Park.

- Skakavitsa nature reserve (within the boundaries of Rila National Park);
- Skakavitsa Waterfall - the highest waterfall in Rila National Park;
- Natural landmark Goritsa waterfall - it is included as a natural attraction in a number of tourist trails.

The municipality also includes areas under the Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive:

1. Under the Birds Directive Rila Protected Area - BG0000495 (coincides with the Rila National Park) - with about 4300 ha on the territory of the municipality and represents the IBA (Important Bird Area with code BG055).
2. Under the Habitats Directive:
 - a. Protected zone Rila BG0000495 – as above 4300 ha.
 - b. Protected zone Rila Verila BG0000308 - around 74,4 ha.
 - c. Protected zone Rila – north BG000629

On the territory of the municipality up to now the biodiversity is preserved in an area of 10 984.1 ha - the majority of which is under the regime of the protected areas, and almost the entire remaining part under the regime of the two main nature conservation laws in Bulgaria - the Protected Areas Act (PAA) and Biological Diversity Act (BDA).

The majority of the habitats of the priority species and natural habitats, included as targets in the current tourism development assessment, fall into approximately these 11000 ha.

Rural tourism - *Rural tourism is a concept that has gained a lot of popularity over the past few years. It is generally equated with a holiday in a village, a villa, or a guest house in nature. Rural tourism is also associated with rural life as an atmosphere, a way of eating and spending leisure time. For many elderly people and children, eating organic products produced on-site is rare, and cows, goats, and pigs are only known from the pictures in children's books. Accommodation in the villages is usually in villas or guest houses.*

There is potential for rural tourism in Sapareva banya Municipality, but it is very poorly developed. A prerequisite for the development of this type of tourism is the presence of guest houses, but their owners lack proper orientation for additional services that can be provided to the tourists, and which could be an additional source of income.

All the above-described resources, as well as the analyses of their characteristics, highlight the great tourist potential of Sapareva banya Municipality. Demand in recent years is directed precisely at such a type of tourist product that Sapareva banya should be offering, given its natural and anthropogenic resources.

Unfortunately, on the territory of the municipality, tourism has modest dimensions. Resources for different types of tourism are only partly used.

The main problems for the development of sustainable tourism in Sapareva banya municipality are:

- *Lack of modern infrastructure and quality high-class accommodation;*
- *Lack of a well-developed tourist product with precise characteristics;*
- *Lack of a communicative and distributional network for the marketing of the tourism product - in the home country, but even more importantly - abroad;*

- *Insufficient qualified staff in the field of tourist services, incl. the existence of language barriers;*
- *Insufficient attractions;*
- *Insufficient quality of transport infrastructure.*

Tourist trips still tend to be based on individual tourists not organised by any agency, but there is an expected increase in the number of visitors from "tour operator - travel agent - tourist" systems, in proportion to the development of the information on the Internet. The highest incomes are expected to come from Bulgarian middle-class tourists that are not organised by agencies, and people with standard occupations in the Bulgarian economy. Tourists from abroad that are organised by agencies currently account for only a small percentage of the total visitors. Sapareva banya Municipality, however, has taken serious steps to improve the level of tourism infrastructure and the creation of an effective communication policy.

Sapareva banya Municipality's tourist offer may be developed into a wide range of specialised types of tourism - an alternative to a mass tourism product in terms of supply, flow and committed human resources. Such types of tourism are: ecological, adventurous (mountain bike trails, horseback riding, skiing and snowshoe hiking, boating, diving, exploring unlit caves, crossing alpine routes with a guide) and thematic (related to the cultural and historical heritage, to the esoteric, the religious, wine, traditional cuisine, ethnography and traditional music and crafts. Following the example of other regions in Bulgaria, it is possible to also develop niche tourism products - sports, town entertainment, and business (MICE) tourism. These specialised and niche products can be identified as products with potential.

3.5. Infrastructure

Basic infrastructure

The roads of the Sapareva banya Municipality's road network are maintained all year round in good condition. The total length of the municipal road network is 57 km, of which: a 2nd class road with a length of 15 km, 4th class roads with a length of 22 km, and local roads with a total length of 20 km. The street network in the settlements has a total length of 97.5 km.

All the main streets in the municipality are re-asphalted and reconstructed, providing access to the main roads and towards the village of Panichishte. There is fast and easy access by road to the village of Panichishte and Pionerska chalet thanks to the 4th class road 62084 Sapareva banya - Panichishte - Pionerska, which has been reconstructed and rehabilitated in the most dangerous areas and for most of its mileage. The road has a good surface, side-markers, and throughput capacity, which is a guarantee of comfort, safety, and security while travelling.

Transport services are organised very well thanks to the release of several transport lines that provide regular and quality transportation for the people of the municipality (buses

are accessible to people with disabilities of the musculoskeletal system) to the regional district, the capital city, and the neighbouring bigger cities. The number of parking spaces has increased and a blue zone has been introduced. There are approximately 130 designated parking spaces, out of which there are parking spaces for people with permanent disabilities. The new "blue" zone is part of the modernisation process of the Sapareva banya resort town, and it regulates traffic and parking in the busiest areas of town.

Communications

In the municipality, there is coverage of the three major mobile operators for Bulgaria, and provided Internet access as well as wireless optical internet, which is implemented by the municipal administration through a WiFi4EU initiative, organised by the European Commission and won voucher that provides free wireless internet in public places.

Sapareva banya Municipality maintains an official website at www.saparevabanya.bg, which informs the general public, visitors, and tourists about all the landmarks in the area, accessibility, transportation, services and more. The municipality has an accessible Facebook page where all the events in the region are published, as well as news and announcements. All hoteliers and owners of guest-houses use internet platforms and services that allow electronic reservations of nights in the tourist destination.

Culture

The territory of the Kyustendil Province, which includes Sapareva banya Municipality, carries traces of all historical eras. There is Thracian, Hellenic, Byzantine, Bulgarian National Revival, and contemporary presence, all with overlaying cultures and values. The high cultural, historical, and cognitive value of unique monuments from the ancient and medieval Bulgarian era make the region a field of research, a basis for the development of cultural tourism and a specific tourist product.

The medieval church and monument of national significance "St. Nichola" in the city centre was renovated with European funds in 2018 under the Rural Development Program 2014-2020. Since the end of 2015, the municipality has been operating the "Vasil Krapchanski" Art Gallery and the Ethnographic Museum, built thanks to municipal projects financed under the Rural Development Program 2007-2013. The City Gallery collects, preserves and exhibits the work of Sapareva-Banya artists, and other prominent ones. The ethnographic exposition shows the routine and everyday life of the Sapareva banya people in the past.

Other centres of cultural life are the five (community centres) on the territory of the municipality: Community centre "Prosveten lutch 1905", Sapareva banya town; Community centre "Ot izvora - 2013", Sapareva banya town; Community centre "Probuda - 1923", Ovchartsi village; Community centre "Nov zhivot - 1928 ", Resilovo village and Community centre "Narodni Buditeli 1926", Saparevo village, all which organize various cultural events, outdoor concerts, folklore performances, local customs: Lazaruvane, Koledari, literary readings, etc. The community centre "Ot izvora - 2013" in Sapareva banya

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town, in partnership with the Municipality of Sapareva banya and TV “Rodina” - a folklore television channel are organizing the annual Sapareva banya International Folklore Festival, under the slogan "A girl is singing, a forest is swinging", which brings great interest for the participants and the visitors of the town.



*An ethnographic exposition at the
Ethnographic heritage exhibition building*



The town Art gallery "Vasil Krapchanski"

Bulgarian tourists are interested in the Kukeri festival, and other more unusual festivals not found in the rest of the county. But for foreign tourists, all festivals, celebrations, and events related to the Bulgarian lifestyle and culture, and representing Bulgarian customs and traditions, are of great interest.

Tourist infrastructure

According to data provided by the Municipality of Sapareva banya, accommodation possibilities in the municipality region in 2018 were the following:

Table № 3

	Hotels	Other accommodations, incl. guest houses, apartments and more.
Number of accommodation sites	10	145
Bed capacity	2284	
% of foreign visitors using the accommodations	30	
Number of overnight stays in the accommodation sites	74 769	
Average daily rate per room in high season	60	

The number of nights spent in Sapareva banya has an upward trend:

- 2018 - 74 769 total nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners; overnight visitors - 47 213;

- 2017 - 67 115 total nights spent on the territory of Sapareva banya Municipality by Bulgarians and foreigners; overnight visitors - 41 155;

The accommodation bed capacity in the territory of Sapareva banya has also increased - in 2014 there were 1381 beds, including the chalets in the village of Panichishte, and according to 2018 data - 2284; i.e. a 100% increase is expected to be recorded.

At the present moment, hotels are mostly star-rated between 1 to 3 stars, with virtually no hotels that have a 4-star or 5-star rating. This greatly limits Sapareva banya Municipality's opportunities to continue the development of successful and profitable spa and wellness tourism, in terms of more luxurious accommodation. At the same time, many hotels offer quality spa services and outdoor and indoor pools. The newest boutique hotel in Sapareva banya was opened in 2019 - SPA Hotel 103 °, with an exceptional spa complex.

Tourists practicing spa, wellness and ski tourism, especially foreign tourists, also require the availability of modern accommodation sites that match the image of prestigious tourism consumption. Taking this into account, the municipality is currently attracting investors who are building 4-star and 5-star spa hotels to meet the modern demand for quality spa services.

Dining and entertainment

Catering establishments and entertainment in the Sapareva banya Municipality are around 50, concentrated mainly in the town of Sapareva Banya. They are restaurants, snack bars, pizzerias, and cafes. As a major component of tourist infrastructure in a destination, it can be deduced that at the moment there are not enough sites in the municipality to provide opportunities and variety in terms of "fun and entertainment", but there is a strive to create such.

In 2017 the cinema Kinopolis has opened in the town of Sapareva Banya. The cinema has the latest 3D cinema technology, and visitors have the opportunity to experience the magic of the cinema they know from the cinemas in Sofia and the other big cities. It is a desirable place for the locals and guests of Sapareva banya to visit. The cinema also offers theatre productions, which are of great interest to the town residents and the guests of the municipality.

In the immediate vicinity are several entertainment venues - the town art gallery "Vasil Krapchanski", the Ethnographic Museum at the Chitalishte "Ot izvora 2013", a library, the cinema, and two other chitalishta, which carry out cultural and educational activities.

The main weaknesses of the municipality are: the small capacity of the entertainment sites, suggesting an inability to absorb a large tourist flow (composed of groups organised by agencies); the lack of variety in menus at the restaurants, the lack of a specific local culinary specialty, which differs from the offered meals in the restaurants of the other municipalities; the lack of a recognizable entertainment programme for the region, like an evening show, an entertainment programme for restaurant guests, a presentation of Bulgarian traditions and customs - all factors with negative impact on the development of competitive tourism based on a local tourism product.

The positive side is the understanding and attitude for future development by the local entrepreneurs.

Eco-trails and touristic routes

Considering the natural resources of the Municipality of Sapareva Banya, it is not only an administrative centre but also a separate tourist destination, which offers the development of various forms of tourism - balneological, mountain-ski tourism, cultural, rural, sports, equestrian, etc., and also has serious favourable conditions for route-cognitive tourism and eco-tourism.

Several tourist routes and eco-trails cross the territory of the municipality, and tourists can hire the services of qualified mountain guides from the Tourist Information Centre "Geysera" and Panichishte Visitor Centre.

Well-designed routes are:

- The Rila Lakes chairlift (the chairlift from Pionerska chalet to the Rila Lakes chalet)
- Eco-trail Valyavitsa - On the path of living water;
- Eco-trail Goritsa around the Ovcharchenski waterfall and Falcon's View
- European long distance path E4
- Hiking trail: Sapareva banya town, Gurgevo neighbourhood - Monastery "St. Stefan" - Ruzhana
- Hiking trail: Saparevo village - Monastery "St. Stefan" - The Hanged Stone - Pionerska Chalet
- Hiking Trail: Sapareva banya – Consecrated church St. Varbara - Ezerishteto
- Hiking trail: Sapareva banya town - Panichishte - Seven Rila Lakes

Sports infrastructure

The Sapareva banya Municipality is characterized by good sports facilities and infrastructure, and this allows the development of mass sports events. The municipality's policy considers the future maintenance and creation of new sports infrastructure as part of tourism development, which will also be used by the local population to maintain the necessary standard of living and a healthy lifestyle.

The natural and climate resources provide excellent opportunities for the development of sports in the municipality in the following varieties:

- Alpine skiing (extreme skiing, snowboarding, and others)
- Biathlon
- Athletics
- Mountain running
- Mountaineering
- Auto racing
- Football – the Dzermaneya football club, with a woman's team
- Swimming
- Wrestling

- Cycling and Mountain biking
- Equestrian tourism
- Golf
- Hunting

Sapareva banya and Panichishte host:

- The children's ski competition for the Petar Popangelov senior Cup, with children participating from all over the country;
- Ski competitions for veteran skiers
- The ski competition for the Nevenka Peeva Cup;
- The summer cross-country skiing competition for the Sapareva banya Cup,
- The conduct of national mountain running competitions.

3.6. Human resources

The attractiveness of a tourist destination is also determined by the quality of the human resources involved in the provision of tourist services. In this sector, Bulgaria is in dire need of skilled, well-trained staff for human resources to be successfully implemented in tourism enterprises. The achievements that Bulgarian tourism has marked over the past few years require adequate staff training to provide premium reception and service to tourists. To achieve this level of staff training, it is necessary to maintain a close link between business and education. Some of the steps to achieve this are related to the establishment of a Training and Retraining Centre for tourism staff, initiated by the Ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). The overall idea of this project is to support and retain workers in the sector by enhancing their qualifications and overcoming the seasonality in the industry. According to NSI Labour Force data, in 2015 158 300 people are employed in the "Hospitality and Restaurant" sector, in 2016 they are 114 838 and in 2017 – 113 365 (NSI, 2018). This negative trend is due to several factors, only one of them being the seasonal employment of staff, but the greatest impact is the lack of staff. An additional part of the measures taken by the Ministry of Tourism to address the human resources problem in the sector is the implementation of dual education in secondary education (which is also successfully implemented in higher education), such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, where the system works exclusively well. Providing the sector with qualified staff is crucial for the more-successful development of the sector in Bulgaria, which requires maintaining close links between the state, businesses and training institutions.

However, it is a fact that low paid people in the sector, as well as the seasonal employment, makes the tourist business unattractive for people, especially lower-level positions. The shortage of human resources in recent years has become one of the most serious problems of the industry, which has not only found a solution but also deepens the problem. National and local measures need to be taken to reduce seasonality (e.g. promoting mobility between tourist sites that are open at different periods, and the development of alternative forms of tourism). The recruitment of low-skilled staff from abroad should be carried out with caution, as it is a risk factor for the quality of the tourist service.

A study in the project "The Transfer of Innovations in Tourism"¹ also identifies problems related to the development of human resources at the company level:

- Lack of corporate strategies for human resource development;
- Insufficient investment in the staff;
- Insufficient linguistic training - for the introduction of new technologies, and in connection to the activity;
- The low inclination of workers towards geographical and professional mobility;
- Lack of staff exchange programmes;
- Lack of accurate assessment of the employers' needs in tourism from a workforce with certain characteristics and skills;
- Lack of staff training in new professions in tourism (related to new technologies, innovations and industry trends);
- The shortage of well-trained staff in specific areas (e.g. tourist guides, rehabilitators, physiotherapists, etc.);
- The "outflow" of staff abroad.

At a national level, there is no comprehensive state strategy for the development of staff potential in tourism, and cooperation between educational institutions and business is still not active enough². The problem of the sector is also in the lack of an accurate assessment of the employers' needs of a labour force with certain characteristics and skills.

However, this data affects the economy as a whole and is based on a small share of enterprises in the sector. Regular studies need to be done to assess the state of human resources in tourism, company policies in their development, and the employers' needs in tourism specifically in the Sapareva banya Municipality, to provide the adequate groundwork for interaction with educational institutions.

Degrees in Tourism are not among the priorities listed in Decree No. 64 of March 25, 2016, on the conditions and procedure for validating the number of admitted students and Ph.D. students at universities and on the adoption of a list of priority degrees, since, according to data from the Bulgarian University Ranking System for 2016, the higher education graduates in the "Tourism" field have the lowest employment rate in their specialty, in comparison with graduates from other degrees.

The proportion of employers who said that in the next five years they expect to hire university graduates with degrees in "Tourism" is only 2%. For comparison, the share of those expecting to hire graduates with Economics degrees is 47%. The ranking system also recognizes a higher risk of unemployment for graduates in the Tourism branch than the average for all higher education graduates. The number of staff trained in tourism-related fields and specialties has been decreasing in recent years, further aggravating the human resource problem in the sector.

¹ Orma Travel Ltd., Project BG051PO001-7.0.07-0046-C0001 "The Transfer of Innovations in Tourism", 2013-2014, "Human Resources Development" Operational Programme 2007-2013.

² Round Table "Human Resources - a Factor for Successful Tourism", 2014

3.7. Institutional Framework

More than 100 000 tourists are visiting the 7 Rila Lakes during the active summer season of 2018, with an increase of over 12%, according to the Ministry of Tourism. This clearly shows that Sapareva banya has vast prospects for the development of spa, mountain, and cultural tourism, and the proximity of the town to the capital is a significant prerequisite for increasing the tourist flow. There is a positive trend of over a 17% increase in the number of overnight stays in the province and municipality, but day trips still prevail. It's preferred to keep tourists longer in the region by offering them more attractions and experiences.

At a municipal level, the Program for Tourism Development in the Sapareva banya Municipality 2014-2020 has been developed and implemented with clear and concrete objectives based on detailed analyses.

At a national level, the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria 2014-2030 has been updated, and the new version is from the end of 2017.

A product strategy for balneological and spa tourism is being developed (by the Ministry of Tourism) and is expected to be ready by the end of 2019.

In addition to this, Bulgaria has already introduced rules and order for the functioning of the spa sector in terms of the institutional framework. An important step in this direction was the passing of the Ordinance on Terms and Procedures for certification as a "balneotherapeutic (medical spa) centre", "spa centre", "wellness centre", and "thalassotherapy centres" to the Tourism Act. This is the first such secondary legislation and it introduces minimum legal requirements to be met by the specialised centres. This will break the practice of hotels with a pool or sauna having the opportunity to decide for themselves whether to call their facilities a "spa centre", and thus not meeting the expectations of tourists. Certification is voluntary, but only the sites that have been checked on-spot will be able to carry the acronym spa and will be signed in the National Tourist Register.

3.8. SWOT analysis

Based on the situational analysis and all the data, the strengths and weaknesses of the destination - Sapareva banya Municipality - have been presented so far, and the opportunities and threats to its future development have been identified.

Table № 4

STRONG SIDES	WEAK SIDES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diversity of tourism resources, relatively good tourism infrastructure with increasing tourist flows and significant untapped potential in various types of tourism - festival, eco, rural, spa and wellness, cultural-historical, religious, gourmet, and many others;• A relatively good geographical location with diverse terrain and high price competitiveness;• A favourable climate for year-round tourism;• A favourable high altitude geographic location and the ability to retain snow cover in winter;• Good transport accessibility (proximity to the international road E79, and corridors 4, 8 and 10), close location to the capital and international airport, provincial towns and external borders;• Unique landmark - the only geyser-fountain in Bulgaria and continental Europe - 103° C;• Floral and faunal diversity of species, and a large number of protected species on the territory;• Parts of the Rila National Park, Skakavitsa nature reserve, and Goritsa Protected Area are found on the municipal territory;• High potential for the development and establishment as a balneo, spa and wellness destination;	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short-falls in the maintenance and development of tourist attractions - cultural and natural landmarks and intangible cultural heritage;• Low income of the population, low standard;• Depopulation due to an aging population and migration to larger provincial cities;• The clear seasonal nature of tourist visits;• Absence of tour operators and travel agents on the territory of the municipality;• Lack of quality personnel in the labour market and those with training in new professions in tourism (related to new technologies, innovations and industry trends)• The shortage of well-trained staff in specific areas (e.g. tourist guides, rehabilitators, physiotherapists, etc.)• The "outflow" of staff abroad• Significant seasonal fluctuations in employment and high staff turnover;• Lack of high-quality material and technical bases;• Lack of enough entertainment sites and venues;• Small and medium-sized businesses predominate the market, without the ability to provide a competitive

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- A rich cultural-historical heritage, numerous churches, chapels and monasteries;
- Good opportunities for developing a traditional product in a traditional environment;
- High satisfaction in terms of basic elements for the experience of the tourists;
- An eco-territory without factory pollution;
- High potential for organic farming and eco-production;
- There is no overpopulation or lack of settlements; a scattered urban network;
- Competitive prices for the tourism product.

- product;
- Depreciated tourism infrastructure;
- Short average length of stays;
- Lack of a regulated landfill and the presence of many illegal ones that negatively affect the destinations image;
- Insufficiently developed wastewater treatment infrastructure;
- Low efficiency of energy;
- Lack of a comprehensive informational strategy;
- Lack of communication policy, advertising and product placement;
- Lack of horizontal and vertical communication between stakeholders in tourism development;
- Low level of development of elements out of the reach of tourist destinations;
- Insufficient development of information technology - Internet information and marketing;
- Untapped tourism resources;
- Lack of innovative ideas and preferences for tourism investments;
- Low levels of equipped stadiums, tracks and indoor arenas with innovative sporting attractions and high-tech amenities;
- Insufficient investment in the development of the museum network - poor use of new technologies, and a small number of visitors;
- Not enough opportunities to host major international events and underdeveloped infrastructure for conference needs;
- A difficult to find, inconvenient to use, and poorly structured event

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	<p>calendar, duplicated in different cultural and tourist institutions with different and incomplete content;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient and inefficient promotion of products with potential - eco, rural, adventure, religious, wine, and gourmet tourism, folklore events, singing festivals and traditional Bulgarian celebrations.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great tourism potential; • Development of sustainable tourism and establishing Sapareva banya Municipality as a unique, complex tourist product destination; • Building an image as a balneo, spa, and wellness destination not only in Bulgaria but also internationally; • Increasing the interest of foreign investors for Sapareva Banya; • Increasing the employment rate; • Population retention on the territory of the municipality; • Achieving energy efficiency by reducing heating and lighting costs through the use of geothermal resources, solar energy, hydropower, etc. and redirecting the savings to investments in modernisation; • High potential and conditions for development of multidisciplinary tourism (balneological, mountain, eco, spa, cultural, route-cognitive, sports, equestrian, rural, etc.); • Access to European markets; • Improvement of the infrastructure; • Strengthening international relations; • Improving the qualifications and skills of the tourism personnel; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The deepening of the financial crisis and economic downturn; • Insufficient investment; • Increasing migration outflows • Global climate change and high vulnerability of geographical regions; • Air, water and soil pollution, which alters the physical environment and anthropogenic resources necessary to tourism; • Strong competitors in terms of Bulgaria's dominant tourism products; • Demographic crisis and depopulation of the region, an aging population; • The outflow of skilled and young personnel to bigger towns and abroad; • The deepening of income disparities; • Climate changes that ruin tourist seasons; • The delay of the implementation of projects, programmes, and measures for the development of the municipality and tourism; • Risk of loss of resources under European programmes and funds due to suspension of EC funds; • An increase in natural disasters such as earthquakes, forest fires, floods;

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- Increasing the effectiveness of marketing and the promotional programmes and activities;
 - Opportunity for tourism growth despite the crisis due to the specifics of the destination;
 - An eco-territory, the opportunity for development of organic farming;
 - Tourism development and enhancement of the quality of the tourism product offered, incl. the creation of new and innovative tourism products and accommodations with categories of 4 and 5 star ratings;
 - Raising the living standards of the population;
 - The construction of a waste treatment plant and the introduction of non-waste technology to reduce pollution in the region;
 - Raising the awareness and motivation of the local population;
 - Promoting the development of tourist niches (e.g. eco-, ethno- gourmet-tourism), thus utilizing favourable conditions for diversification of tourism in the border region;
 - Improving access to sites of tourist interest and thereby supporting the use of natural and cultural heritage;
 - The use of cultural heritage as a possible generator for new products and employment opportunities;
 - Improving the reputation of the border region as a tourist destination by creating a joint cross-border tourism brand;
 - The increase of the number of people seeking nature and eco-friendly lifestyles with requirements for the
- Lack of funds to maintain transport infrastructure;
 - Inadequate management of tourist sites and establishments;
 - Loss of markets, leading to the closure of local industries;
 - Insufficient investment by the private sector in education and training in the workplace;
 - Lack of adequate spatial planning and zoning in tourist regions, incl. this as a result of political changes in governance;
 - The impact of campaigns targeting mass tourism from competing destinations;
 - Continued dependence on international tour operators for mass tourism;
 - Failure to reach utmost advertising due to insufficient funding.

appropriate use of natural resources and the practice of sustainable tourism;

- The increasing popularity of alternative types of tourism;
- The increasing price advantage for those looking for a tourist trip

The conclusions that can be drawn from the SWOT analysis of tourism development in the Sapareva banya Municipality show that the municipal territory is rich in natural and anthropogenic tourist resources, has an established tourist infrastructure and has the potential to become a leading tourist destination not only for the internal market but also of international importance.

The present SWOT analysis allows the summarisation that tourism in the Sapareva banya Municipality has considerable potential for its future development, especially in the directions for the development of alternative tourism - such as mountain, holiday, balneological, spa, wellness, cultural, religious, rural, eco, route-cognitive, sports, extreme, event, adventure and gourmet/culinary tourism.

The problems that the municipality faces are many, but they can be overcome. The main difficulties will be in dealing with the demographic and economic crisis, the low skill levels of the employees, the improvement and construction of new, more demanding tourism infrastructure, the preparation of a communication and image strategy and, above all, the preparation of a competitive tourism product.

Part 3

Situational analysis of tourism, balneological tourism in particular, in Sokobanja Municipality

The green heart of Serbia - Sokobanja Municipality is located in the centre of south-eastern Serbia. Situated between the Rtanj, Ozren and Bukovik mountains, it is one of the most visited Serbian balneological resorts. It is a town of eternal youth, a town that bestows health on everyone who visits it. In Sokobanja, apart from the thermal springs that treat diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, genital and urinary tract infections, skin diseases, various types of rheumatism, diabetes, anaemia, and low blood pressure, the air is also favourable for the treatment and prevention of chronic bronchitis. In this end of Serbia, the time has stopped, and its nature has remained intact. The old town retains its history from the Middle Ages to the present.

4. Sokobanja Municipality's profile as a tourist balneo-destination

4.1. General characteristics

Sokobanja is situated in the southeast of Serbia at an altitude of 400 m above sea level and is one of the most popular town resorts in Serbia. The town has been given several names over the centuries - Balnea, Banja, Velika Banja, Aleksinačka Banja, Sokol Banja, and in 1859 it was named after the ancient town of Soko Grad, which was destroyed in 1416.



Sokobanja is located in a valley of the same name, surrounded by medium-high mountains: Ozren (1174 m) to the south, Mount Rtanj (1560 m) to the north, Devica (1116 m) to the southeast ridge, Slemen (1099 m) and Krstatac (1069 meters) to the east and Bukovik (894 m) and Rozanj (897 m) to the west. The river Moravica which flows through Sokobanja forms the Bovan lake, in the western part of the valley. Sokobanja is 35 km away from the highway E-75 and the main rail-road. Sokobanja is 230 km away from Belgrade and the “Nikola Tesla” airport and 58 km away from Nis and the “Emperor Constantin” airport. It is also connected with the Timok region by the roads that go through Boljevac and Knjazevac. The Sokobanja Municipality occupies an area of 525 km² and has around 18 000 inhabitants, while the town itself has 8 500.

The climate is temperate continental. Its summer is moderately warm and the winter is cold. Autumn is warmer than spring and the nights are pleasant, especially in summer when there is less humidity. The natural water resources and air are clean and medicinal. The abundance of negative ion in the air contributes to the overall well-being of the body

and the rapid recovery of symptoms, mainly respiratory problems and the symptoms of stress.

The area is rich in mineral water, known for its healing properties. Sokobanja thermal springs are among the most healing in Serbia. There are a total of 6 thermal springs. Their temperatures range from 28 to 45 °C. The richness and healing properties of the mineral water attracts many tourists for treatment - particularly for the following diseases: chronic bronchitis, bronchial asthma, psychoneurosis, neurasthenia, high blood pressure, chronic rheumatism, sciatica, anaemia, some gynaecological diseases, chronic fatigue.

Sokobanja is a well-known spa resort, even beyond the borders of Serbia. The story goes that these healing springs were known and used back in the day as Roman baths, as Turkish hammams, as well as the famous historical landmark - the Bath of Miloš, which is currently being developed as a modern balneo-restoration centre.

The residence of Prince Miloš Obrenović, built in the 19th century is located in the heart of Sokobanja, as well as the Hammam, an old 15th-century Turkish bath. It was at the request of Prince Miloš Obrenović, that the first analysis of these therapeutic thermal waters was carried out in Vienna in 1834, and so the first official guest who arrived in Sokobanja was on June 8th, 1837, according to the Julian calendar. This demonstrates the long tradition of organized tourism in Sokobanja in the "Former Yugoslavia" region - already 183 years.

Sokobanja has an unique location - it's nestled on the slopes of Mount Ozren near to Mount Rtanj, adjacent to the Moravica River, Lake Bovan and the largest waterfall in Serbia - Ripalka. Sokobanja is also surrounded by numerous cultural attractions and historical monuments such as the ancient towns of Soko grad, Bovan and Vrmdža. A steep cliff with the Soko Grad medieval stone fortress, rises above the spa.

Sokobanja is rich in natural and healing thermal mineral springs. The fresh mountain air and mild continental climate contribute to its positive image. Sokobanja is well known for the prevention and treatment of many diseases.

In addition, Sokobanja offers many sports and leisure activities. Tennis, football, basketball courts and many recreational and leisure centres are available to guests of the town.

Among the region's resources are the rich hunting grounds along the slopes of the nearby mountains and the Moravica River, the Bovan and Vrmdža lakes, offering exceptional opportunities for anyone seeking an active vacation.

For adventurers, numerous hiking tours and visits to caves are offered.

All year long Sokobanja hosts numerous cultural and art performances, such as “Prva harmonika Srbije” (The First Accordion of Serbia), art colony “Sokograd” and “Banjsko kulturno leto” (Cultural Summer in Spa).

Today Sokobanja is one of the most visited destinations in Serbia, and it is considered one of seven most attractive tourist destinations in Serbia.

What’s makes Sokobanja an ideal destination specialized in treatment and rehabilitation is the beneficial influence of the continental climate, the high concentration of oxygen, ozone and negative ions in the air, the absence of air pollution, a small number of foggy and windy days, and the presence of specific elements in the air and oligomineral waters.

The largest towns near Sokobanja are Aleksinac (30 km), Boljevac (27km) and Knjaževac (47km). Sokobanja is connected to the Belgrade-Niš highway through Aleksinac and to all the other areas of Serbia through it.

Land usage

From total of 525 square kilometres covered by the Sokobanja Municipality, 30 357 ha is an agricultural land (data from 2000). Almost 23% (7 693 ha) of these areas are arable land. The rest are mainly meadows (about 5 500 ha) and pastures (10 500 ha). 1 300 hectares are orchards and vineyards. The total area covered by forests is about 17 100 hectares.

In the mountainous area, forests and land area under the forest fund cover a total of about 23 298,56 ha (36.79% of the total area), three quarters of which are forests.

The total area covered with beech trees is more than 70%. The remaining plantations are oak, hornbeam, and turkey oak forests as well as acacia plantations and small areas with conifer plantations. There are many fields of herbs and mushrooms, but there are serious preventative harvesting restrictions.

The Bukovik mountain is located to the west, 12 km from Sokobanja, near the Bovan Lake. There are plenty of wild animals and mushrooms in this mountain, especially boletes and truffles. There is also a deer reserve in the mountain.

In addition to the potential for mountain tourism, gorges also bring special interest to the area with their geomorphological value. The Moravica River creates two interesting gorges in its course: The Sokograd gorge, at the higher part of the river, and the Bovan gorge at the lower part, both of which offer good opportunities for the development of tourist services in the form of excursions, leisure and fishing tourism.

Also of significant and potential and of very attractive geomorphological value are the caves in the surrounding area. The largest of these is the Sesalačka cave, which is open for visitors.

Water resources

The territory of the Zaječar district, where the Municipality of Sokobanja is located, is characterised by a diverse hydrographic network, especially in hot and cold mineral water sources, which are the main resources for tourism development.

The healing mineral water of Sokobanja is the most valuable asset towards its tourist potential. There are hot, cold and cool mineral springs in Sokobanja, which are concentrated at three locations in the central spa park, in the Banjica area, along the Moravica riverbed. Most of the springs have not been exploited and their potential is yet to be utilised.

The water temperature ranges from 28 ° C to 45 ° C, of which the 6 main springs fall into two main groups - a water temperature between 28 to 34 °C, and a water temperature between 39 to 45 °C.

These waters are from the group of radioactive oligo sulphide hyperthermal or hypothermal water. Cold mineral water rich in manganese is also found at the Zdravljak spring, near the hotel of the same name.

The colder and mild mineral waters are warmed up in addition, and are used to treat the following diseases: chronic rheumatism, post-traumatic conditions, neurasthenia, chronic gynaecological disorders, moderate high blood pressure, psychoneurosis, anaemia, fatigue, etc. The thermo-mineral and naturally radioactive waters are used in various ways - for healing baths, therapeutic swimming, but also as drinking water and other therapies.

Thermal mineral water is also found at the Josanica spa. It belongs to the group of hypothermal oligo waters. Its healing properties help with chronic inflammation of the stomach and duodenum, diseases of the musculoskeletal system, disorders of the digestive tract and colon cancer, chronic urinary tract infections, and inflammation.

In addition to its thermal waters, Sokobanja also relies on its river resources in the area. The Moravica river is 60.4 km long, and a right-side tributary of the South Morava river. It springs at the foot of Mount Devica. To the west of the municipality, the river flows into Lake Bovan. The river is rich in zander, mullet, nase and trout. The tributaries of Moravica are clear mountain rivers and streams where crayfish live. There are six beaches along the river coast: Župan in the centre, Tesnac, Šest kace, Tri kace, Gentleman and Lepterija. Many mineral springs flow into the Moravica River.

Lake Bovan is located about 10 km from Sokobanja. There are several well maintained beaches. It's about 8 km long and the maximum depth of the dam is about 50 m. The lake is suitable for swimming, fishing, hiking and lake tourism, and at the beach near the Bovan village, you can rent to use pedal boats.

Lake Vrmdža is situated at the foothill of the Rtanj mountain, about 15 km away from Sokobanja, and 3 km from the Vrmdža village. The lake is a wonderful place for relaxation, fishing and for herb and berry picking. The village can be reached by an asphalt road, after which a forest road leads to the highland where the lake is located.

Climate

Sokobanja's climate is temperate-continental, with a tendency of becoming more mountainous in areas with increasing altitude. The main climatic characteristics of the area are cold winters, hot and sunny summers, and autumns that are warmer than spring. There is no air or water pollution in the environment of the Sokobanja Municipality. A special contribution to the quality of the air comes from “the rose of the winds”, which forms above the valley, bringing fresh and clean air. The air, rich in negative ions, contributes to the overall recovery of the body and is especially suitable for the treatment of respiratory problems and stress.

Economy

The number of companies in Serbia are measured by a specific indicator - the number of companies per 1000 inhabitants - for Sokobanja the indicator is about 5, while for Serbia as a whole it is almost 15.

The number of active entrepreneurs has been moving between 470 and 500 over the last 7 years.

The structure of the industries shows a predominant share of trade and a relatively small share of industry.

Unemployment is generally over 20%, compared to almost 25% for the country. In the region, the population is declining progressively, and so are training opportunities. The largest number of those employed are in the mining industry, followed by the sphere of hotels and restaurants. Third in terms of the number of employees, is the sphere of health and social activities. The other sectors are very under-represented and cover a relatively small number of people employed in the fields:

- Agriculture, forestry and water management
- Electricity, gas and water
- Wholesale and retail
- Transportation, storage and communications
- Administration
- Education
- Other community, social and personal businesses related to service

The smallest number of employees are in the fields of production, construction, and finances. There are no employees working in real estate.

The main problems of the economy are:

- No functioning Association of Private Entrepreneurs
- Insufficient communication between the public and private sectors
- Lack of interest for partnerships
- The large share of the gray market economy
- Too few manufacturing companies
- The large number of shops dominating the trade area (about 40%) and only 10% are food processing industries (bakeries, dairies, meat processing)
- A small and closed market
- Frequent bankruptcy of small and medium-sized enterprises
- The seasonal nature of tourism businesses
- Lack of information about the opportunities and conditions for starting a business
- Lack of qualified staff

4.2. Tourism statistics

As one of the most beautiful and famous tourist sites in Serbia, with a notable number of overnight stays per year, Sokobanja offers a wide range of private (over 5 000 beds) and municipal/state accommodations (10 000 beds).

Table № 5

Year	Number of tourists			Overnight stays			Average number of nights spent	
	Total	Private acomm.	Municipal/ state acomm.	Total	Private acomm.	Municipal/ state acomm.	Private acomm.	Municipal/ state acomm.
2010	48837	47572	1265	295098	290575	4523	61	36
2011	53402	52481	921	325207	321500	3707	61	40
2012	49175	48403	772	306568	303499	3609	63	40
2013	50629	49041	1588	306506	301179	5327	61	34
2014	42438	39682	2756	219755	209058	10697	52	38

Table № 6

Year	Number of tourists			Overnight stays			Average number of nights spent	
	Total	Serbs	Foreigners	Total	Serbs	Foreigners	Serbs	Foreigners
2015	65762	62251	3511	402306	389432	12874	625	36
2016	111503	102071	9432	724644	700112	24532	68	24
2017	115026	103725	11301	657524	626709	30815	585	273
2018	114360	101167	13193	535616	498463	37153	49	273

There are a number of problems that hinder tourism - among them are the poor quality of drinking water as a result of an outdated water supply network. The coverage of the water supply network in Sokobanja is over 95%, but the losses in the network are more than 45%. The secondary pipelines are over 30 years old. In addition, the biggest problem for Sokobanja Municipality is the lack of drinking water during the summer months. This sharply discourages potential tourists, and once faced with the problem, they don't return again.

The sewerage network coverage is about 90% in the town, while the villages have no sewage system. There is a sewage treatment plant, but given the fact that it was built in 1974, it is already obsolete and of inadequate capacity. This is also noticeable and an obstacle to the development of tourism.

4.3. Target markets and tourist profiles, including foreign tourists

Generating markets for Bulgaria and Serbia are mainly: Russia, Greece, Germany, England, Macedonia, Romania, Turkey and Israel. Promising markets are: Romania, Russia, Greece, Ukraine and Belarus.

Foreign tourists are active - they combine experiences and get the most out of every vacation (the share of two or more combined types of tourism ranges from 45-48% in the autumn and spring, 55-58% in the summer, and up to 66% in the winter). In the active seasons there is a combination of "mass + specialised tourism" and in the inactive seasons there is a combination of two specialised types of tourism. The most common combination, and probably the combination with the greatest potential, is that between cultural and other types of tourism. The typical combinations of the four specialized types of tourism are: cultural tourism with culinary, mountain and sea tourism; spa/balneological/healing tourism with seaside and culinary tourism; eco-tourism with mountain, culinary and cultural tourism; and rural tourism with culinary, mountain and wine tourism. With regard to specialised types of tourism, the main factors that determine the choice of a destination are similar between the four types studied: attractive nature, the feeling of an unique and special experience, the availability of health services, the

accessibility of the place, and the possibility of using additional tourist services. Foreign tourists in Bulgaria and Serbia have similar preferences in terms of arrival - 62% of summer visitors and practitioners of specialised tourism (cultural, spa / balneological, eco and rural) arrive to Bulgaria by plane, as well as 52% of winter tourists. Nearly 30% of summer and winter tourists and 23% of those doing specialised tourism travel by car. Foreign tourists from other Balkan countries most often use a car for their visit (over 80% of them). Air travel is preferred for visitors from Russia, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, as well as for guests from the United Kingdom and United States. The expenses of Bulgarians and foreigners on holiday are proportional to the income of the households. The funds allocated for summer vacation by tourists are approximately 26-28% of the average monthly household income, and in the other seasons - about 13-18%. For foreign tourists, holiday decisions are price oriented and this trend has been sustained over time. Advertisements have an impact on holiday decision-making, especially for more unpopular types of tourism such as eco and rural. This shows the need to increase the volume of advertisements for Bulgaria and Serbia as destinations, and to properly target them.

4.4. Tourism products - Their potential and guidelines for development

Given the structure of the economy, as well as its long traditions, Sokobanja municipality should base its economic development on:

- Tourism development
- Agricultural development and rural development
- Development of local entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises

Most important for the development of tourism in Sokobanja is the availability of natural resources (thermal mineral springs and geomorphological sites), protected natural sites, rich culture and history, and favourable climatic conditions. In addition, near Sokobanja there are numerous sites with great potential for tourism activities, especially excursions. Sokobanja Municipality has traditions in the sphere of tourism (the longest history of spa tourism in Serbia); it is characterised by numerous tourist events, a large number of accommodation and dining options, availability of a plan for the development of tourist destinations, the proximity of corridor 10 (E75) – all good prerequisites for harnessing potential.

The creation of a tourism product depends on one side on the primarily available capacity, such as natural resources; cultural, historical and ethnological heritage, and contemporary art, and on the other hand on the secondary capacity such as catering and accommodation, travel agencies, traffic planning. In addition to the above, attention should be paid to the fact that the environment in which tourists will spend their holidays must be carefully used and protected, because this is the only way to ensure long-term operation and use of local resources, while at the same time protecting them for future generations.

So far Sokobanja Municipality's development is based on several major tourism products: balneology, spa and wellness, as well as sports tourism, hunting, and fishing.

The potential is great in the development of other types of tourism, which have to be developed as products - holiday tourism, eco-tourism, business and conference tourism, mountain, lake, rural, event and festival tourism, and many others.

Protected areas in the region are:

1. Ozren Ozren Meadows - an area of utmost importance ливади - a part of the Ozren Mountain, under the protection of the state administration of the Sokobanja Municipality Secretariat since 1973, in accordance with the proposal of the Institute for nature conservation of Serbia in Belgrade: the protection of meadows and forests, caves and springs.

2. “Lepterijska - Sokograd” - the Moravica river gorge - a natural resource of great importance - it is an area of extremely diverse landscape with attractive geomorphological forms and development, as well as a great variety of flora and fauna, and cultural and historical values (the medieval fortress Soko Grad, a monument of national importance).

3. The Natural Monument Ripaljka “Small and Big Ripaljka” - a natural resource that the state has protected by law since 1948. The waterfall is formed on the Gradašnica river and is located 420 m above sea level, about 3 km south of the Sokobanja centre. The monument falls into the category of waterfalls and is 17.5 m high.

The ecologically important areas of the Republic of Serbia, which are located in the territory of the Sokobanja Municipality are Rtanj - an important green area with international recognition and a protected area for birds, Ozren and Devica - selected protected areas for butterflies.

Sokobanja Municipality organises large numbers of cultural, tourist and sports events - for example - St. Jovan Biljober (St. John the Herb Picker), the Golden Hands event, Spa Summer of Culture, the "Caricatures of the environment" biennale, and sports marathons.

Sokobanja Moravica has a theatre with 360 seats, a summer stage with 1800 seats and 5000 standing, a museum with a rich ethno-collection and a permanent exhibition for the development of health and tourism. The Sokobanja Public Library has been in existence for over 130 years and keeps over 30 000 books. There are several Orthodox churches in and around Sokobanja, some dating from the 6th and 7th centuries.

4.5. Infrastructure

Sokobanja is developing as a tourist and health center, with a significant role played by the state of transport, the road network and infrastructure in general to extend the season in Sokobanja, and to develop new tourism products. For this purpose, new sports facilities have been built and more and more sports teams are visiting the area during their professional training and preparation camps.

Many sites with cultural and historical potential for attracting tourists have been restored/ built up and are developing successfully. Among them are:

The ethno corner “Grudonjske vodenice”, located in the Gradasnica village (2 km from the center) on the small river. It has two mills, which are more than two centuries old. The larger mill was turned into an ethno kitchen, where each visitor can prepare various dishes from the local area using traditional recipes, with the help of instructors from the ethnological workshops “Etnos”. The other smaller mill is intended as a traditional crafts workshop. There is a small amphitheatre in the courtyard, where programs related to the history and traditions of the Sokobanja region take place.

In 2001, the Art Gallery - Legacy of Milun Mitrovic was opened by the initiative of Sokobanja's painter Milun Mitrovic and every year there are organised numerous exhibitions of renowned national and international artists. Milun Mitrovic was one of the founders of the Art Colony “Sokograd”.



The Art Gallery - Legacy of Milun Mitrovic in Sokobanja

The Ethno Museum in Vrmdža was opened in 2010 and it is located in the building of the parish home. There is a permanent exhibition of folk costumes, pottery, textiles and tools. Visitors can see the whole process of the making of national costumes in a traditional way.



Ethno Museum in Vrmdža

The entire area of Sokobanja is known for its churches, chapels, and their remains; there are also several memorials dedicated to important historical figures: Hajduk Veljko Petrović (in the Vrelo-Borici park), Ljuba Didić (in the centre) and Prince Miloš Obrenović (5 km away from Sokobanja towards Aleksinac).

In memory of the famous people who visited Sokobanja, memorial busts were placed all over Sokobanja: Stevan Sremca, Branislava Nušića, Isidora Sekulić, and Ivo Andrić. In the central park, there is a bust of the local partisan hero Aleksa Markišić.

The Tourist Organization of Sokobanja is registered as a public institution and has 8 full-time employees. The organisation's work is aimed towards more efficient tourism industry operations, expanding the scope of tourism advertising, cooperation with the media, as well as taking ventures in the field of culture and sport. The agency has its own guide (with service on a daily basis), which is available to all visitors of Sokobanja. The Podina Water Park is also managed by the organisation.

4.6. Human resources

The unemployment is generally over 20%, compared to almost 25% for the country. In the region, the population is declining progressively, and so are the opportunities for training.

Many of the unemployed are complaining about lack of information about opportunities, and the conditions for starting a business, while business representatives are complaining about the lack of qualified staff.

4.7. Institutional framework

The main national strategic documents that form the institutional framework of this strategy are:

- National Sustainable Development Strategy - aimed at a sustainable economic growth and economic and technological development, the sustainable development of a society based on social equality and environmental protection with the rational use of natural resources.
- The National Environmental Protection Program - one of the main documents used to protect the environment - a comprehensive, cross-sectoral, strategic policy that guarantees the planning and management of the area over the next ten years.
- Waste Management Strategy 2010-2019 - the main document that provides the conditions for sensible and sustainable waste management in the territory of the Republic of Serbia.
- National Strategy for Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Goods - the main goals that are set for achieving the strategy are: (1) targeting the requirements for the sustainable use of natural resources, the creation of groundwork for determining plans and programmes; (2) reducing the negative impact of resource use in the economy and the environment, by creating basic indicators to monitor with; (3) directing development towards sustainable production (through smaller and more efficient use of natural resources) and consumption.
- Strategy for the Development of the Territory of the Republic of Serbia 2009 - 2013 - 2020 - The strategy has a special role for Serbia's future territorial development, which is based on a long-term vision for strategic directions in developing its own financial capacity allocation, the utilisation of available funds and foreign investment, based on sustainable use of resources and territorial capital.
- Strategy for the Development of Information Society in the Republic of Serbia until year 2020.

- Developed Strategy of Railroad, Road, Air and Intermodal Transport in the Republic of Serbia
- Strategy and Policy for the Development of Industry of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2011-2020
- Competitive and Innovative Small and Medium Enterprises' Development Strategy for the period 2015-2020
- Strategy on Promotion and Development of Foreign Investments - The main goals of the strategy are aimed at attracting foreign investment for the development of the sectors in the country.

4.8. SWOT analysis for tourism development

Table № 7

Strong sides	Weak sides
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural resources (thermal mineral water and geomorphological sites of value) and balneological resources; • Rich cultural/historical heritage; • The presence of protected natural areas; • Favourable weather conditions; • The existence of excursions close to Sokobanja; • Traditions in tourism (the longest history of spa tourism in the Republic of Serbia); • Tourist events; • Clean and healthy environment; • The presence of the prerequisites for extreme sports; • The presence of restaurants, incl. healthy food provided by local suppliers, served at traditional Sokobanja restaurants; • Preserved old buildings and ethno 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of contemporary and modernised infrastructure; • Insufficient coverage of urban planning documents; • The gray market economy; • Complicated and non-transparent procedures for issuing building permits, leading to illegal and uncontrolled construction; • Short tourist season; • Lack of central heating in winter; • Not enough picnic areas; • Lack of variety of tourist products; • Insufficient capacity for extreme sports; • Insufficient promotion of tourist events • Outdated accommodation equipment (hotels); • Lack of trained staff to work in tourism (higher education, foreign language skills);

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> villages; • The existence of a master plan for the development of tourist destinations; • Proximity to Corridor 10 (E75); • Favorable geographical location and proximity to generating markets; • The diversity of natural and anthropogenic resources, mineral springs and mud deposits; • The competitiveness of the destination in terms of price offering; • The availability of sufficient resources for the development of alternative forms of tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpreparedness for foreign guests; • Lack of strategic approach to marketing and advertising; • Lack of unique souvenirs; • Lack of travel packages and programmes.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The implementation of joint marketing initiatives, both at national and regional level; • The promoting of intercultural relations and cooperation; • Opportunities for practicing sustainable tourism through the sparing use of natural resources; • Strengthening the popularisation of specialised types of tourism offered by the destination; • Redirecting tourists towards less popular destinations; • Extension of the tourist season • Provision of heating systems in the tourist sites in winter; • Utilizing the capacity of the Jošanice Bath; • The establishment of a university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial and economic situation in Serbia; • Inadequate legislation; • Lack of investors; • Maintaining the status quo of uncontrolled construction; • Population decrease (negative migration/depopulation); • Price competition from nearby tourist destinations, which in turn can lead to an outflow of tourists; • Mediocre diversification in the national economy; • Not well maintained infrastructure in most regions of the country; • Use of foreign, low-skilled and cheap labor, which leads to an outflow of skilled personnel, who in turn reorient themselves to foreign

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<p>for tourism and catering;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exploiting the potential of Ozren, Rtanj, Bukovik, and Lake Bovan;• Connecting villages and their unique peculiarities to the tourism industry;• Development of sports and recreational tourism;• Development of rural tourism;• Development of congress tourism;• Development of festival / event tourism.	<p>markets;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attracting mostly frugal tourists.
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Part 4

Strategic intents for the sustainable development of Sapareva banya Municipality and Sokobanja Municipality as tourist destinations

5. Overall strategic goals and expected results

The main objective of this strategy is to outline ways for more effective communication between the municipalities of Sapareva banya and Sokobanja, to make them a recognizable and preferred place for balneological tourism, visiting and entertainment.

The main goals of the joint development strategy are based on the objectives of the Bulgaria-Serbia Cross-border Cooperation Program and relate to the pooling of resources of the two municipalities - Sapareva banya and Sokobanja, and promoting the possibility of an interactive and dynamic intercultural program for getting to know two different cultures and their specificity through joint tourism products such as a single tourist trip or series of trips, joint festivals and cultural events, sports initiatives and more.

These are:

- **To bolster infrastructure and improve the environment on both sides of the border through enhanced access to transport, information and communication services, and cross-border systems for utilities and environmental protection;**
- **To increase economic synergies in the region and improve the capacity for joint use of shared regional potential to improve regional prosperity by developing policy and social networks;**
- **To promote the principles of sustainable development in the cross-border region by developing successful models for co-operation between business and co-operation between local stakeholders in key priority areas.**

Achieving the goals will contribute to:

- Creating conditions for joint work in addressing the common challenges of small, low-standard living areas through shared tourism products - the sharing of resources and competencies;
- Promoting tourism and hence the economic, cultural and social development of Sapareva banya Municipality and Sokobanja Municipality - border neighbouring regions;

- Increasing the level of satisfaction of tourists by offering new and varied tourist programs;
- Strengthening Bulgaria-Serbia relations - promoting partnerships for economic development in tourism based on pooled resources.

•Priorities

The main priorities are:

- Improving tourism related infrastructure as a whole
- Expanding the variety of tourist products and services offered
- Extending the tourist season and achieving year-round attractiveness
- Investing in staff employed in the field of tourism and providing opportunities for prospective training and development
- Pooling the resources of the two municipalities into joint products to attract more tourists for a longer period of time

•Vision for the development of a joint tourism product

The overall vision of the joint strategy is to develop the positive image of Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia as popular, modern and accessible year-round tourist destinations with balneological, spa and wellness services.

Based on the main motives of the leading issuing markets and the formulated strengths and weaknesses, the following directions can be outlined by which the tourist destinations Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia can increase their attractiveness:

- ✓ attracting foreign investors in the construction of a new high-quality material base, which will help to promote the image of Bulgaria and Serbia as a destination offering a high-quality tourism product;
- ✓ actively exploiting the potential of mineral waters as a specific resource that distinguishes the destination from its direct competitors and enables it to establish itself as a country offering excellent conditions for the development of health tourism;
- ✓ strengthening the ability of the two regions as places with many anthropogenic resources, rich cultural and historical heritages and preserved traditions, which attract with their uniqueness the interest of tourists interested in culture, history and preserved customs. These benefits are essential to both destinations in establishing them as attractive resorts offering health and cultural tourism;

- ✓ improving the skills of staff through close cooperation between secondary and higher education institutions, the state and the business, which will lead to the improvement of the quality of service, and hence to the attraction of more and solvent tourists.

The specific content focus of the vision includes realizing the potential of the territories to improve the image of the border region as a tourist destination by creating a joint cross-border tourism brand and diversifying the tourism product and related accompanying services:

- Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia - distinctive year-round tourist destinations with a good reputation and recognisable to local and foreign tourists
- Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia - preserved natural features and modernized tourist conditions - incl. attractive accommodation bases, convenient transportation infrastructure, various specific tourism products
- Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria and Sokobanja, Serbia – sustainable tourism areas based on partnerships between all stakeholders

The successful joint tourism product is an optimal combination of traditional spa therapeutic activities such as balneotherapy, rehabilitation, and preventive healthcare with modern wellness and spa programs and the creation of specialised combined niche products such as “Sapareva banya and Sokobanja - friends for your health”. However - because health tourism (integrating balneological, spa and wellness services) has a great potential for development when combined with almost all other types of tourism - mountain tourism, cultural tourism, summer and holiday tourism, sports tourism, business tourism, gastronomic tourism, festival and event tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism, religious tourism and more - it will be comprehensively presented.

The proposed measures take into account the basic elements of the attractiveness of the regions from a theoretical point of view.

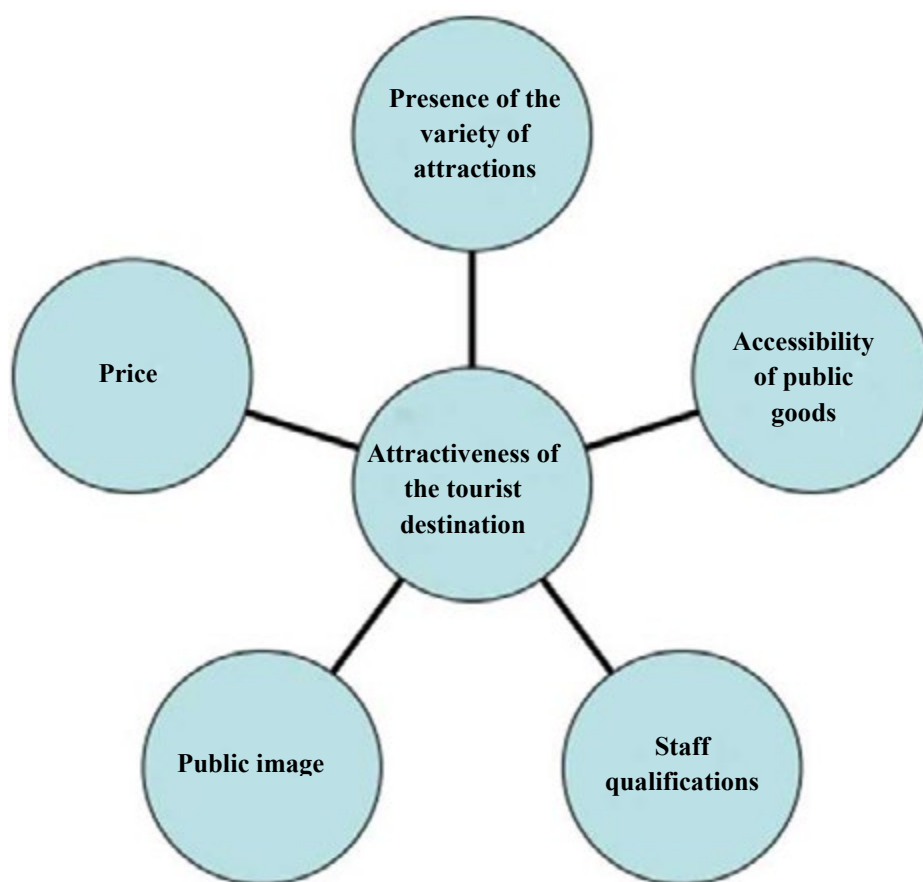


Fig. 1. Elements that make the tourist destination attractive

Source: Adapted from (Gorcheva, I, M. Bozhinova. Management of International Tourist Destinations, Faber, 2011)

The following statistics were also taken into account - The inbound tourist flow for 2017 from the EU was 6 867 671 people, from European countries outside the EU – 3 601 426 people, and from other countries – 3 342 78 people. Based on the statistics presented and the annual analyses prepared by the Ministry of Tourism concerning foreign tourists' visits to individual generating markets, the main prompting motives for visiting the destination by each of the issuing countries can be outlined (see Fig. 2) (Ministry of Tourism, 2017).



Fig. 2. Motives of the emitting markets to visit the tourist destination Bulgaria

Source: Ministry of Tourism

Notable is the importance of the image for the affirmation of the two regions - Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria, and Sokobanja, Serbia as attractive tourist destinations - building a reputation in a safe and secure place for tourists to use their leisure time is the leading intention. Safety and security at these destinations are the conditions that determine tourist movement towards it (Ivanova. P., T. Lichev, 2017). They are an important prerequisite for tourism development. Tourists need a safe and secure environment during their stay. This requires the establishment of security systems to ensure the safety of town residents and foreign visitors (Neshkov, M., Marinov, St., 2013). A factor that characterises the reputation of the destination is the tourist perception, which affirms a destination as attractive or unattractive to visitors.

Foreign tourists perceive Bulgaria mainly as a destination offering sea recreational tourism, which has the reputation of a cheap destination close to many European countries. A direct competitor the country is its southern neighbour - Greece. Compared to Mediterranean countries, Bulgaria does not show significant competitive advantages, especially in terms of tourism offerings and reputation. The overall perception of Serbia as a destination, is a cheap tourism product that mainly attracts frugal tourists. The same applies in part to Bulgaria. In the last few years, the Ministry of Tourism in Bulgaria, as well as the Government of Serbia, have been working to change this perception, and the

aspiration is for Bulgaria, as well as Serbia, to be perceived as destinations, offering a quality and affordable tourism product in the interior and edges of the country.

For Bulgaria - the goal is to maximize the benefits that the country has as a tourist destination, namely: the wealth of natural and anthropogenic resources, easy accessibility, safe territory, the presence of various attractions serving different types of tourism. It is necessary to adopt a unified national marketing strategy, which unambiguously presents Bulgaria's destination on the foreign market, as a country with original traditions and objects that have no analogue. Conditions that negatively impact tourists' perception of the destination are concentrated in poor and not-well-maintained infrastructure, which limits visitors' access to tourist sites; unfit services; a lack of commitment to ensuring accessibility for disabled tourists, and others.

These are specifics that are also relevant to Serbia.

A positive impact on the reputation of the two regions considered in this document would be to establish them as destinations that protect the interests of tourists. Imposing specific requirements for tourism enterprises, in terms of loyalty and fairness in tourist services provided, would lead to security for tourists. Where there is a difference in the quality of the services used, tourists should have the right to make claims against its service provider, with these complaints being dealt with by a specially created body (a tourist ombudsman). This body functions very well in Sweden, observing the rights of tourists and protecting their interests (Neshkov, M., Marinov, St., 2013).

The price levels of the tourist services offered are a determining factor for the attractiveness of the destination. Traditionally, Bulgaria and Serbia are perceived as tourist destinations offering a quality tourism product at a reasonable price (Ministry of Tourism, 2017). Increasing the price levels of tourist services, and hence attracting more financially sound tourists, can be achieved by improving the accessibility of the destination and, in particular, its infrastructure. An opportunity to achieve this is to target the destination to middle-income consumers while maintaining quality of service and maintaining a high level of satisfaction with the experience. The destination should enhance the popularity of its interesting sites, specific resources, services and the variety of alternative forms of tourism that it owns, and that would attract the attention of higher-income tourists. These elements presented are essential in characterising the attractiveness of a tourist destination. The type and variety of attractions provided, aided by the availability of tourist resources, the easy access to the destination, as well as the quality/price ratio for the acquisition of the total tourism product, are crucial in the choice of destination both for foreign and domestic tourists.

6. Strategy implementation programme

Group of tasks for developing tourism and improving its quality

1. The need for joint meetings of tourism representatives and an outline of development directions

It is very important that the overall policy is embraced by the public and all stakeholders. This happens by holding round tables, forums, conferences, consultations. Conducting them unites the community and goes together with the chosen direction.

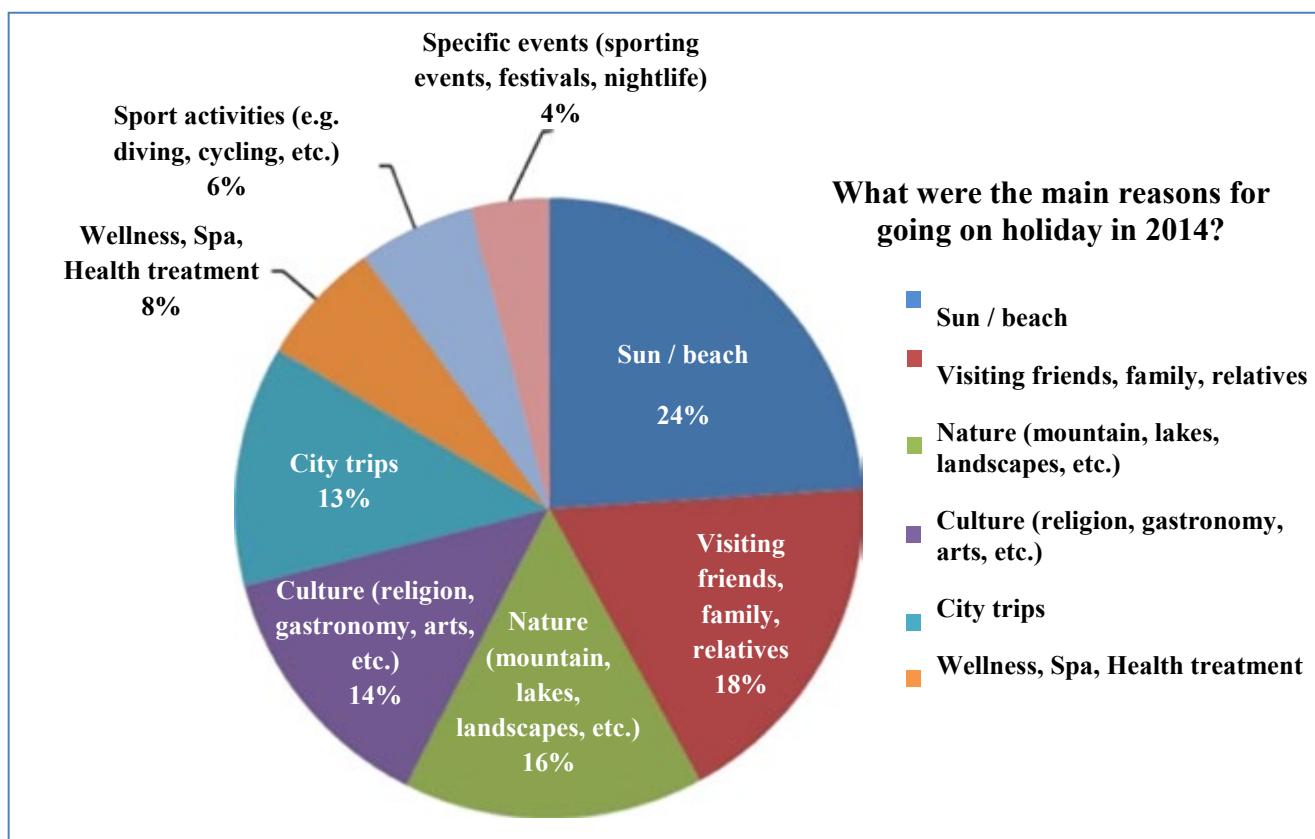
2. Development of specific products and routes uniting the two regions

Foreign tourists from distant markets have very serious potential to visit Bulgaria and Serbia, therefore, the development of these markets is a prerequisite for the growth of the number of tourists in both regions. However, the development of joint tourism products between the neighbouring countries is necessary, since the travel strategy of the tourists in question is to visit several destinations in Europe. The development of joint tourism products with Serbia is aimed for good co-operation in attracting potential tourists from promising markets such as China and Japan, since the tourists in question plan to visit at least two destinations in Europe when planning their trips.

It is essential to take into account the preferences of the target markets.

The graph below shows an indicative scheme for choosing a tourist destination:

The chart shows the main reasons for choosing a holiday in 2014 among the 28 EU Member States and Moldova, Turkey, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Iceland.



Excluding the attractiveness of the sea - the focus in both municipalities can be on the other water basins. In Sokobanja Municipality there are beaches along the river beds, and in Sapareva banya Municipality - near mineral pools. This shows the opportunity to promote the availability of a "beach" - a suitable product might be "Sun and Wellness Services for Your Health in Sapareva banya and Sokobanja". Considering the different chemical composition of the mineral waters in the two municipalities - an additional package for comprehensive health treatment may be offered, which is carried out on the territory of one municipality and then continues in the other municipality.

Second in importance is the nature - a characteristic that is typical of both municipalities and shows great potential for development. Both places have beautiful nature, mountains, lakes, rivers, thermal springs, lovely landscapes. The possibility of joint products is unlimited. Adventure tourism would be of particular interest. Adventure tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry, attracting financially sound consumers, supporting local economies, and promoting sustainable practices. It includes activities such as underwater safari and underwater archaeology, canoeing, white water rafting, mountain and road biking, horseback riding, types of jeep safaris, survival

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programs, mountain climbing, hiking with various difficulties, incl. ski hiking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, extreme skiing, mountaineering, snowboarding, and more. According to the Adventure Tourism Development Index, Bulgaria is among the top 10 of developing countries with the highest potential for the development of adventure tourism. A partnership with Serbia could increase this potential.



*Skakavitsa waterfall,
Sapareva Banya, Bulgaria*



Sesalačka cave, Sokobanja, Serbia

The Cultural tourism also accounts for a large proportion of reasons for making a decision.

Cultural tourism satisfies the specific aesthetic, intellectual and psychological needs of the individual and implies a high general sense of culture, increased curiosity and the presence of an investigative spirit in the practicing tourists. This type of tourism can be extremely exciting and satisfying. Meeting with foreign cultural traditions, customs, art, history, worldview, religion and value systems is always a test of the intelligence and character, often leading to a "culture shock". Tourists practicing cultural tourism are more mobile and spend more money than regular tourists, who have purchased tourism packages in advance. The most important cultural and historical monuments in the world are under the protection of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO. The organization includes every cultural and historical site of interest in its special World Heritage List. It lists about 900 cultural monuments and landmarks around the world. Bulgaria is on the list with 9 such sites, including the town- museum Nessebar, the Madara Horseman rock relief, the Thracian tomb of Kazanluk, the Boyana Church, and the Rila Monastery.

The benefits of cultural tourism products can be reduced in general to: rich cultural heritage from different historical eras and great diversity of types; territorial concentration and favourable location of cultural and historical attractions, preserved authentic local

folklore, a relatively developed museum network, the opportunity for cultural tourism to be combined with all other types of tourism, and to serve as a basis for the extension of tourist seasons. Weaknesses of cultural tourism are mainly due to the insufficient diversification of the supply of cultural tourism by its sub-types - cognitive, recreational, educational and others, highly expressed seasonal attendance of cultural tourism objects in the country, insufficient promotion of museums, deficits in the normative base in terms of the conservation and use of cultural values and anthropogenic tourism resources, and the development of the types and forms of cultural tourism. Religious tourism is also a part of the cultural and educational tourism product. The lack of religious restrictions, freedom of religion in Bulgaria in Serbia, the understanding and support between the government, society and church institutions provide good opportunities for combining religious elements with those of cultural and cognitive tourism and making full use of the available potential. Despite the countries' abundance of religious sites, this type of tourism is not significantly offered in neither tourist area. Weaknesses may be the unsupported or missing road infrastructure to the monasteries, the lack of signboards, the poorly maintained monasteries, the lack of well-trained tour guides in religious knowledge. Another disadvantage is the poor communication representation of Bulgarian religious sites as tourist sites. The product programs and offers for the offer of pilgrimage tourism are small in number and cover a small number of sites, which hinders the unlocking of the potential of the country as a destination for this specific type of tourism, as well as for its future development and its permanent establishment on the tourist market. Festival and event tourism is also an important element of the cultural and educational tourism product.

In recent years Bulgaria has begun to establish itself as a destination for meetings and congresses at international and national levels. There are requests for similar services to tourist sites in Serbia. The prerequisites for this are the spa and wellness hotels, attractive prices and the pleasant atmosphere. With the right infrastructure in place for congresses, conferences, exhibitions and other business events, the two municipalities can become a venue for industry and services exhibitions, agriculture and emerging technologies, tourism and others, well known in the world.

The Program for Tourism Development in the Sapareva banya Municipality 2014-2020 lists specific options for combining tourism packages. They can be used as a solid basis for upgrading and enriching the palette of alternative tourism combinations. There is an opportunity to add ideas in the field of culinary tourism, adventure tourism, event tourism, festival tourism and many more.

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BALNEOLOGICAL + MOUNTAIN (SKI) TOURISM

- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)
- Skiing, snowboarding



BALNEOLOGICAL + SPORTS (EXTREME) TOURISM

- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)
- Mountaineering, rock climbing
- Trekking
- Mountain Biking
- Rope courses



BALNEOLOGICAL + CONGRESS TOURISM

- Congresses, seminars, training, team building, presentations
- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)



BALNEOLOGICAL + ECO (ROUTE-COGNITIVE) TOURISM

- Eco-trails, paths, camping
- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)



BALNEOLOGICAL + RURAL TOURISM

- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)
- Sleeping at a guest-house and getting to know the local lifestyle



BALNEOLOGICAL + CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS TOURISM

- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)
- Visiting religious sites (churches, monasteries)
- Visiting archeological and historical sites and cultural monuments
- Participating in cultural events



BALNEOLOGICAL + EQUESTRIAN TOURISM

- Balneology (Health, spa and wellness services)
- Horseriding as a mean of healing the nervous system (and excursions)

3. Modernization of tourism infrastructure through various partnerships - project support, private investment, public-private partnerships, donations, etc.

- A detailed review of the status of the newly-formed tourism products and identifying concrete steps for reparation and modernization;
- Attracting funding for repairs and modernizations, including facilitating the process in terms of administrative permits;
- Implementation of repair tasks and modernisation under strict conditions of quality requirements;
- Finding opportunities for innovative solutions leading to sustainable development - for example, the predominant use of renewable energy sources, conservation, and expansion of green spaces, etc.

4. Conducting tours to introduce new tourism products, as well as upgrading the existing ones

- with representatives of tour operators and travel agents from both countries;
- photographic tours;
- youth exchange with trainees in the tourism sector - so that future staff in the tourist sites in both municipalities have a good knowledge of both regions.

5. Participation in tourism fairs and exhibitions. Joint municipality stands. Organization of targets workshops.

Tourism distribution is a fundamental element for the development of tourism. It represents a set of tasks through which the sale of the tourism package takes place, any tasks carried out for the effective realisation of consumption, or a way of ensuring customer access to the product. The travel agency is a specialised unit that organises, offers and sells packages of tourist services, or their components. Tour operators are the organisers of trips and stopovers who assemble various components of tourism products; the product comes in the form of a package, where along with the basic services can be included several additional services: tours, car rentals, guides and more. Contact with tourism distributors is fundamental and therefore they should be actively involved in meetings - both by invite and during specialised exhibitions and tourist exchanges.

Specific steps in the group of tasks:

- ✓ Holding local meetings between the two municipalities with all stakeholders for the outline of development guidelines - round tables, forums, conferences, working groups, community consultations;
- ✓ The creation of joint combined tourism products - with different forms of alternative tourism - health tourism (unifying balneological, spa and wellness services), mountain tourism, cultural tourism, summer and holiday tourism, sports tourism, business tourism, gastronomic tourism, festival and event tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism, religious tourism and others;
- ✓ Development and validation of new emblematic tourism products with event characteristics - for example:

- An annual conference on innovation in balneology treatments;
 - An annual conference on health treatment through climate;
 - Weekly Challenges - Sapareva banya and Sokobanja Eco Trails;
 - Traditional Cuisine Festival / Gourmet festival based on traditional tastes;
 - Photographic Week - The treasures of Sapareva banya and Sokobanja.
- ✓ Developing and promoting innovative tourism products in the field of adventure tourism, for example:
- Activity Maps - Get to know Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
 - Adventure Week in Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
 - Family Games - A treasure hunt in Sapareva banya and Sokobanja (and many others);
 - Construction of bike lanes in Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
 - Implementation of a bike rental service in Sapareva banya and Sokobanja.
- ✓ Development and authorisation of a common Internet portal with events from both municipalities - for year-round tourism - cultural calendar, sports calendar, events calendar, etc.
- ✓ The management of promotional tours for each area, including a joint tour in both municipalities;
- ✓ Creation of a concept for a joint tourist booth at fairs and exhibitions;
- ✓ Creation of a joint strategy for attracting investors.

It is important to keep in mind what the tourists require from the target markets and to create concepts and products for tourism based on this. That in mind, the following table may be particularly useful:

Table № 8

Markets	Products and segments offered	Products with development potential
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach holiday • family tourism • ski tourism • sea tourism • mountain tourism • balneological, spa and wellness tourism • cultural tourism • hunting tourism • medical tourism • city breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individual caravan holidays • eco-tourism • business tourism • wine and gourmet tourism
Russia and the other CIS countries (<i>Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach holiday • family tourism • children's activities • sea tourism • mountain tourism • ski tourism • balneological, spa and wellness tourism • cultural tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pilgrimage tourism • medical tourism
United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach holiday • winter tourism • cultural tourism • city breaks • eco and adventure tourism • trips of special interest • sea tourism • mountain tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • golf tourism • business tourism • rural tourism
Scandinavia and Finland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach holiday • cultural tourism • eco-tourism (hiking, biking, equestrian) • balneological, spa and wellness tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ski tourism (Denmark and Finland) • adventure tourism • golf tourism • wine and gourmet tourism

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Benelux (<i>Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sea tourism • explorative cultural and educational trips • family tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • balneological, spa and wellness tourism • ski tourism • city breaks • eko and rural tourism • individual caravan holidays • wine and gourmet tourism
France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sea tourism • balneological, spa and wellness tourism • cultural tourism • nature tourism (treking, adventurous) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • winter tourism • eco and rural tourism • city breaks • incentive tourism • wine and gourmet tourism
Central Europe (<i>Austria, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Switzerland</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach holiday • winter tourism • children's activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ecotourism • cultural tourism • wine and gourmet tourism
Balkan countries (<i>Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach holiday • winter tourism • cultural tourism • balneological, spa and wellness tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • city breaks • festival, concert, etc., tourism • wine and gourmet tourism
The Far East (<i>China, Japan, South Korea, India, Mongolia</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cultural tourism • natural tourism • business tourism (China) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • city tourism • business tourism (Japan) • city breaks and shopping tourism (China) • combined tourism products
The Middle East (<i>United Arab Emirates, Israel, Qatar</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sea tourism • balneological, spa and wellness tourism • hobby tourism (leisure) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • natural tourism • combined tourism products

A package of activities for image and information security

1. A need for a Trademark

The power of marketing lies in the presentation and creation of memorable images. Creating a brand by carefully selecting words, messages, colours, symbols, we achieve impact and memorable experiences. The promotion and recognition of the joint brand works in favour for both the two regions, as well as individually, and creates certain associations in the mind of the tourist.

The message that accompanies the trademark and its repeated use is almost hypnotic and subconscious - the name of the brand remains in the mind of the tourist. When they want to make a trip, this trademark must be their first association. This is how to create a reputation.

The trademark will be visible to the tourist, the target audience and other organisations – the main idea in marketing, and not only, is to make them see your trademark, for it to be well-known afterwards.

The trademark involves a relationship between a product and a buyer. It implies a set of qualities and services that are to be expected. Trademark loyalty is created by meeting the customer's expectations or even further than that, by exceeding their expectations, giving him or her a reason for joy and satisfaction.

In general, a trademark plays an important role in the popularisation of the product, its promotion, and recognition, as well as supporting the tourism package and the work behind it.

Each product at the beginning is generally unknown to the consumer. To be remembered in time by the tourists to whom the idea is addressed, it should be easy to remember, to prompt and refer to both project partners in the tourist package, and to use validated information to orient the tourist very quickly in the direction that interests them.



2. Development of a joint information strategy with specific information channels

For this purpose, in the frame of the strategy requires development of an information strategy to promote the abundance of natural and cultural heritage of the two regions, to present to Bulgarian and Serbian tour operators, potential tourists and all other interested parties, the importance of balneology for sustainable economic development of the two municipalities and the provision of competitive and high-quality alternative tourism products. It is of particular importance to work actively with the people living on the territory of the Sapareva banya and Sokobanja municipalities, who should be motivated to support the development of sustainable tourism in both regions and to promote their image as a good place to live. And the enrichment of the tourist product of the regions will lead to a rising of the image of Bulgaria and Serbia as attractive tourist destinations in the domestic and international markets.

Specific steps in the group of tasks:

- ✓ Creation of a common message - of the type "Sapareva banya and Sokobanja - friends for your health" or "Sokobanja - the heart of Serbia, and Sapareva banya - the soul of Bulgaria";
- ✓ Development of a common logo, with an emphasis on balneology, spa and wellness;
- ✓ Development and implementation of a joint information campaign for promoting joint combined tourism products - with different forms of alternative tourism - health (balneological, spa, and wellness), rural, eco, sports (mountain climbing, cycling, horse riding, swimming, mountain running, etc.), gourmet/culinary tourism, nature exploration, etc.

Impact indicators and result indicators by group 1:

Impact indicators:

- ✓ Achieving outline for the development of the two regions as a result of joint meetings;
- ✓ Achieving consensus on the specific tourism products and routes that will unite the two regions;
- ✓ Modernisation of tourism infrastructure through various partnerships initiated as a result of the created joint development document.

Result indicators:

- Number of organized meetings between the two municipalities with all stakeholders, including round tables, forums, conferences, working groups, community consultations;
- Number of joint participation in media events in the field of tourism;
- Number of joint combined tourism products created - with different forms of alternative tourism - health tourism (unifying balneological, SPA and wellness services), mountain tourism, cultural tourism, summer and holiday tourism, sports tourism, business tourism, gastronomic tourism, festival and event tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism, religious tourism and others;
- Number of developed and approved new emblematic tourism products with event characteristics;
- Number of developed and approved innovative tourism products in the field of adventure tourism;
- A minimum of at least one developed and approved common Internet portal with events from both municipalities for year-round tourism - a cultural calendar, sports calendar, event calendar, etc., including as a smartphone app.;
- A sufficient volume of funds for repairs and modernisations, including facilitating the process in terms of administrative permits
- A sufficient volume of completed repair and modernization tasks;
- A number of innovative solutions leading to sustainable development - for example, a predominant use of renewable energy sources, the conservation and expansion of green spaces, etc.;
- Number of tours conducted to present new tourist products, as well as upgraded existing ones;
- Number of youth exchanges with trainees in the tourism sector;
- Number of participations in tourist fairs and exhibitions, including joint stands and/or organized targeted workshops.

1. Group of tasks for reputation and informational provisions

Task 2.1. Creating and promoting a common trademark

- ✓ Development of a thematic regional branding of the tourist destinations Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
- ✓ A creation of a common message - of the type "Sapareva banya and Sokobanja - friends for your health";
- ✓ A development of a common logo, with an emphasis on balneology, spa and wellness
- ✓ Protecting and promoting a joint trademark.

Task 2.2. Developing and implementing a joint information strategy and establishing partnerships for sustainable development

- ✓ Development and implementation of a joint information campaign to promote joint combined tourism products - with different forms of alternative tourism - health (balneological, spa, and wellness), rural, eco, sports (mountain climbing, cycling, horse riding, swimming, mountain running, etc.), gourmet/culinary tourism, nature exploration, etc.;
- ✓ Creation and establishment of partnerships for sustainable development - sharing of resources, innovations, creation of specialised pages in social networks and the internet portals;
- ✓ Development of an application for the information strategy with a plan for participation with interactive presentations and videos at festivals, competitions, celebrations, tourist fairs, carnivals and any other mediums that represent potential for tourism development.

Impact indicators and result indicators by group 2:

Impact indicators:

- ✓ Achieving an agreement on thematic regional branding of the tourist destinations Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
- ✓ Achieving a recognition of the two regions due to the implementation of a joint information strategy and strengthening partnerships for sustainable development;
- ✓ Achieving a declaration of partnerships for sustainable development.

Result indicators:

- Achieved a thematic regional branding of the tourist destinations Sapareva banya and Sokobanja;
- Created a common message - of the type "Sapareva banya and Sokobanja - friends for your health";
- Developed at least one common logo, with an emphasis on balneology, spa and wellness;
- Reviewed common trademark proposals and a possible follow-up to approval;
- Developed and implemented a joint information campaign for promoting the joint combined tourism products - with different forms of alternative tourism - health (balneological, spa, and wellness), rural, eco, sports (mountain climbing, cycling, horse riding, swimming, mountain running, etc.), gourmet/culinary tourism, nature exploration, etc.
- Number of partnerships created and established for sustainable development - resource sharing, innovations, creation of specialised pages in social networks and the internet portals;
- Number of developed applications for the information strategy with a plan for participation with interactive presentations and videos at festivals, competitions, celebrations, tourist fairs, carnivals and any other mediums that represent potential for tourism development.

Conclusion

These days current searching for balneological, spa and wellness tourism and cultural tourism is increasing and has become a year-round trend. The sales highly depend on the provision of online services, online advertising and websites with customer reviews for impressions in terms of experience (positive and negative reviews). The number of tourist trips are increasing, and so is the trip duration time - tourism is now considered as a year-round option, not just a seasonal one.

The tendency of the aging population and the expected increase in the consumption of health services are a good prerequisite for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria and Serbia. Both countries have sufficient resources, but tourism products are underdeveloped, and some of them are completely undervalued (e.g. medical tourism). The promotion of health tourism itself is also not good enough, although it has been a priority product in recent decades. It is necessary to present the product in a new and original way, with an emphasis on the possibilities of the destination to combine therapeutic activities with modern spa and wellness treatments. In fact, Sapareva banya and Sokobanja have the potential to become actively involved in the global wellness industry as "The health centre of Europe."

In the mountainous and semi-mountainous regions of the two municipalities, there is an unique combination of remarkable nature, climate, and authentic rural atmosphere, which is highly sought after by foreign tourists. According to Eurostat, nearly 45% of the total number of EU tourist nights are spent in rural areas. Rural tourism can be developed anywhere wherever the natural environment is not too urbanized. Many Bulgarian and Serbian villages provide compound conditions for rural tourism due to biodiversity, different types of climatic conditions, and topographic features. But there is no tourism awareness about them, and also no development of them as a specific product to be offered to potential tourists. For the same reason, the villages face several problems, such as poor communicative, technical and road infrastructure, which hinders access to places of leisure, and poor social and living conditions in many of the village houses. The aging population and generally low educational level are also a problem for the sector, especially in mountainous and rural areas.

The analysis of tourism resources, as well as the analysis of their characteristics, highlight the great tourism potential of Sapareva banya Municipality and Sokobanja Municipality and the joint efforts would multiply the positive effect of the results. The planned and persistently motivated development will be possible only after all organisational and financial problems have been overcome. There's a need for a unified tourism programme for the development of local routes and products, with development in a cross-border, national and European scale and supply of a coordinated programme with priority interventions.

The opportunities for both municipalities to develop tourism are extremely favourable, and efforts should be directed towards making the region a place for year-round tourism; destinations offering a compound tourist package of services that includes almost all types of tourism.

The challenges facing the management of municipal administrations are: improving the local economy, creating new jobs, fighting the demographic crisis, and directing efforts towards more sensible use of the rich historical, natural and intangible cultural heritage.

Analyses in the strategy show that there is a unique opportunity for the design, planning and development of highly promising tourism products in the making of Sapareva banya Municipality and Sokobanja Municipality successful tourist destinations not only of local but also of national and international importance.

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Sokobanja – The green heart of Serbia



Local bagpiper



The “St. Dimitar” church

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Geyser-fountain 103°



Medieval Church "St. Nichola"



Sapareva Banya – The soul of Bulgaria

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