



*Original Contribution*

**TOURISM FOR HANDICAPPED PEOPLE – RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMITMENT IN THE PERIOD OF BULGARIA’S ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the commitments that Bulgaria has undertaken on the road to accession to the European Union is the overall (economic and social) adaptation of underprivileged people. The process of adaptation involves creating conditions for the development of tourism for handicapped people. The objective of the present study is to show the opportunities and obstacles in the development of tourism business in Bulgaria for the underprivileged people and compiling a system of prescriptive measures for solving the outlined problems.

It has been established that in Bulgaria it is necessary to adapt the tourism business since handicapped people and their families cannot enjoy their right of recreation and tourism. There are sufficient resources available in the country – natural recreation, anthropogenic, human and legislative regulation to offer adapted tourism, which will be competitive on the international tourism market as well; economic activity has great social significance and can be profitable for the tourism business. The approved practices in a number of EU countries comprise a serious argument in favour of investments for adapting the tourism environment.

**Key words:** tourism, social tourism, association tourism, social policy, social integration, handicaps, adaptation, social and economic effect

**INTRODUCTION**

During the past decades there has been fast development in the international tourism market. The new economic framework in Bulgaria has set greatly on tourism as one of the priorities in its economic development, especially with respect to maintaining a competitive stance.

In the past few years special attention has been paid to alternative forms of tourism as a factor for sustainable and supporting development of the natural and social environment and as an opportunity for establishing new relationships in the process of communication of people with cultural, ethnic, religious and social distinctions. Lasting economic and social results from the development of Bulgarian tourism sector can be achieved only with well formulated long-term strategy aiming not only at the development of alternative forms (eco-, rural,

cultural, health, religious tourism, etc.), but also at the variety of consumer market segments. One of the basic sectors for success in modern tourism business is the successful choice of target group (finding the appropriate *market segment*), along with the proper evaluation of consumer preferences. After that we can expect multiplication of the effect for the sectors providing tourism services and for the overall development of the regions, including rural ones.

Along with the efforts to develop local national tourism products we have to look for options to add new content to these products to comply with the strategic economic and social goals. We think that the adaptation of the tourism environment is a great opportunity to enlarge the market and to attract clients with various interests and needs, including ones with functional handicaps and dependence on the surrounding.

The democratic changes of our society in recent 15 years and Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union bring forth the principles of equality of people – subject and object of

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the civil society. These processes are even more outstanding with regard to our membership in the EU.

Creating conditions for development of tourism with handicapped people is a responsibility for the unique combination of natural recreation, anthropogenic and human resources, to the already existing facilities of the tourism sector in the country and to those potential clients, to which the social and psychological surrounding still shows lack of understanding. One of the commitments undertaken by Bulgaria on the road of its accession is the overall (economic and social) adaptation of people in underprivileged position.

Consequently, the objective of this study is to find out the possibilities and obstacles in the development of tourism business in Bulgaria for handicapped people and for architecturally-dependent people and to establish a system of advisory measures to solve the outlined issues.

## OWN STUDIES

### Opportunities for tourism for handicapped people in Bulgaria

Each tourism resource is suitable for handicapped people as well, as long as the surrounding is easily accessible to allow the consumer to make use of it. In that respect some of the unconditional factors for the development of the specified type of tourism in Bulgaria could be climate, forests, waters (especially thermal mineral waters), mud-curing materials, protected areas, the wide variety of herbs, plants, bee product manufacture, crafts, folklore, cultural historic and archaeological sites (1). Specialists with very good qualification in the sphere resort medicine, rehabilitation, sport and tourism activities, animation, etc. are a pre-condition that guarantees the provision of services to consumers of adapted tourism.

The established legislative and legal basis regulating the status of handicapped people in Bulgaria and their guaranteed right to accessible surrounding is appropriate and in conformity with the requirements stated by the European Union (2).

Bulgaria's accession to the EU is by itself one of the most significant resources for the development of tourism for handicapped people. On one hand, that is related to the financial resource expected to provide support both for the entire integration of that social group and for the diversification of the economic activities in rural areas. On the

other hand, the traditions of European countries to offer opportunities for tourist trips of all of its citizens bring new potential users of Bulgarian tourist products from the group of handicapped people.

Bulgaria is able to develop that market niche for the European consumer especially when a political and intellectual will to discuss and solve those issues is already available.

One should not omit the achievements so far as a resource for the development of tourism for handicapped people, no matter how little that is. According to information provided by the Ministry of Youth and Sport, for the period 2002 – 2004 there are three sites to which some financial resource is directed for the adaptation of the environment for handicapped people – the administrative building of the Ministry, “V. Levski” National Stadium and the national sailing boat facility at Iskar dam. Facilities for access of handicapped people are built in Ledenika and Prohodna caves using funds from the PHARE programme (3, 4).

### Obstacles in the development of tourism for handicapped people in Bulgaria

The objective of a study, carried out by the Centre for Living and by the Institute of Market Economy “Review-2002”, is to provide quantitative characteristics of the studied groups of handicapped people, to analyse the living and social environment in Bulgaria and to establish a standpoint about “handicaps”. According to these studies “a handicap is a problem related to the environment, and not to the individual, which makes it a social, not a medical issue” (5). According to Johanson (6) one can feel completion in some social situations and not in others. The data from “Review- 2002” provide good reason to assume that in an adequate market and social environment handicapped people can be treated as potential tourists. Concerning the access to recreation, sport and tourist areas and the access to cultural buildings (cinemas, theatres, cultural centres, etc), 67.3% of the surveyed people reply that they do not use recreation areas, and 77% have not visited any cultural centres for the past 6 months.

In 2005 The National Statistical Institute (NSI) carried out a survey comprising 3000 handicapped people aged 16 to 64. The project was financed by the EU and aims not only at ascertaining their health and social status but also the opportunities for social integration. The conclusion of the

survey was that the surrounding environment and social infrastructure was easily accessible only for 5% of the group, 46% experienced difficulty of varying degrees, and 24% characterised an inaccessible environment. Thus it is a problem for the occupational and social integration of handicapped people (7).

As early as in 1995 the University of North Carolina, USA, developed an interesting and vanguard concept. The objective of the study was to facilitate everybody's life by creating products, communications and architectural surrounding used by many people at minimum or no extra costs. A similar approach of universal solutions was based on "functionality-aesthetic beauty-business and social thrift" (6).

So far, the conservative business thinking in Bulgaria has been a serious obstacle in the development of tourism for handicapped people. According to it business cannot achieve maximum profit from adaptive tourism due to the specific economic characteristics of the basic consumers in that sector.

Not unimportant for the tedious integration of handicapped people in the tourism market is the social and psychological tendency as a whole. The issue about the low level of integration of handicapped people and their non-attendance of recreation and tourism sites are not perceived and assessed with regard to complexity and significance.

Undoubtedly one of the issues to be answered in the development of adaptive tourism in Bulgaria is to overcome the financial restrictions for tourism of handicapped people and their families. According to "Review-2002" 65.2% of the respondents live on income below 100 lv./per household member (5).

### **Tourism for handicapped people in the European Union**

In 1997 Eurostat conducted a study about the difficulties encountered by handicapped people in their everyday life. According to it 68% of the respondent handicapped European citizens replied that they were hindered to a very small extent in their everyday life (8).

Our personal observations start from France. Regarding holiday travels of handicapped people the data are: 1) under 19 - 77.4% travel; 2) 20-59 - 56.5% travel; 3) over 60 - 41.0% travel (8).

The tourism agencies in France that want to deal with functionally dependent customers approve a chart that stipulates national criteria

of accessibility in adapting hotels, accommodation and eating places, tourist sites, recreation and entertainment places (9). The criteria are developed by the "Tourism for the Handicapped" ("Tourisme pour des Handicapés"). This agency carries out selection and certification of the sites. By June 2005 a total of 1200 tourism sites have been certified as accessible for handicapped people and 98 of them are for people with all four groups of handicaps (visual, hearing, motor, mental) (10).

Local authorities in the rural areas of France, aided by the work of a number of efficient associations, look for optimum utilization of resources and contribute to the sustainable development of municipalities (9). The government and the local administration participated in the approval of various forms of tourism and adapted tourism is integrated in more and more of these. This is a basic factor for maintaining the well-being and welfare of local people. National networks, like, "Welcome to the farm" ("Bien Venus à la Ferme"), "Accommodation houses in France" ("Gîtes de France"), etc, have been established. One of the initiatives in the Agricultural chamber in France is related to the opportunity for agricultural producers to offer tourism on their farms and Chart for receiving tourists; criteria for product quality are developed, its members are advertised. Some examples of such farms are: pedagogical farms, cognitive farms, inn farms, horse farms, sojourn farms, camping sites and receiving farms, breakfast on a farm, etc. The authors of the present paper have information, data and analysis about the functioning of four tourist sites for tourism intended for handicapped people:

- 1) "Lou Bastidou" Holiday village near Querse, Province – pilot structure meeting the actual recreation needs of families from France and other European countries with children with one or more handicaps (**Photo 1**);
- 2) Pedagogical farm in Seüz (Ferme Pédagogique a Seüz) – offers advanced tourist product for mentally handicapped people (**Photo 2**);
- 3) "Les Carlines" Guesthouse – the house is from the national network "Gîtes de France". One of the rooms on the ground floor is accessible to handicapped people, mainly with motor deficits (**Photo 3**);
- 4) "Hacienda" Residence – fully adapted for people with restricted mobility and their families. Offers accessible and safe

environment, which conforms to the national criteria for voluntary certification of tourist sites and is the bearer of two national marks “Tourisme & Handicap” and “Handisport” (Photo 4).



**Photo 1:** “Lou Bastidou” Holiday village near Querse, Province



**Photo 2:** Pedagogical farm in Seiz (Ferme Pédagogique a Seiz)



**Photo 3:** “Les Carlines” Guesthouse

## CONCLUSIONS

- In Bulgaria it is necessary to adapt the tourism business because handicapped people and their families cannot enjoy their right of recreation and tourism and that deprives the tourism business of a very important market segment.
- Sufficient resources are available – natural recreation, anthropogenic, human and legislative regulation to offer adapted tourism which will be competitive on the international tourist market.
- There are already approved practices in a number of EU countries, which are a considerable argument in favour of

investments for adapting the tourism environment.

- Adapted tourism for handicapped people is economic activity that can be developed in Bulgarian conditions, profitable for the tourism business and of great social significance.



**Photo 4:** “Hacienda” Residence

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- To improve the process of gathering information for the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of that part of the population with limited autonomy due to functional restrictions.
- People and organizations really interested in participating in the tourist business to become familiar with the experience of European countries.
- All parties concerned should take part in developing projects, legal documents and measures for adapting the architecture and the adjacent surrounding: government and local authorities, professional branch organizations, including tourism, and the associations of handicapped people.
- To organize seminars with professionals from the tourist branch to popularise the idea of adapted tourism.
- To develop financial and tax mechanisms which will facilitate the companies from the tourism branch to start creating a product adapted for handicapped people.
- To study and implement the principle of certifying tourism sites reflecting the degree of their accessibility.
- To establish conditions for efficient dialogue between the institutions concerned with the issues of efficient social integration of handicapped people along with their right of access to cultural and sports and tourism sites and the unions of those citizens.
- To start to develop pilot projects for offering accessible recreational conditions for clients with restrictions.

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