

Natural and Recreational Potential of Some European Regions

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Abstract – The natural-recreational potential of Eastern European countries is analyzed in this article. The potential for regional natural recreational resources use in order to develop an international tourism are shown, considering modern changes in the structure of tourists' demand and supply in the international tourist services market. Current trends in improving the efficiency of natural recreational resources use in tourism are revealed. Article shows the natural-recreational potential specifics and tourists' offer features of the Republic of Belarus, and identifies the possibilities for increasing competitiveness among the Eastern European countries.

Keywords – *tourism; recreation; ecological condition; attractiveness; environment; landscapes.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the study is associated with the acceleration of the natural-resource potential development in different regions and the environmental transformation, the uncertainty of structural and spatial changes in recreation and tourism. Nowadays, tourism is an important sector of the economy that can make a significant dissonance in the existing structure of landscapes, causing significant changes in the environment and directions of the national economic complex development.

Recreational resources, impacting the territorial tourist economy organization, the recreational areas formation and specialization and services economic efficiency, act as the objective basis for the tourism development. At the same time,

on the international tourist services market, the competitiveness of the recreational resources between transition economy countries became the main problem under the new economic conditions. Therefore, when analyzing the Eastern European tourist potential, special attention should be paid to the following aspects: the environmental condition and the possibility of developing tourism in natural areas thereupon intensive development of international tourism in the region during the 1990s; the possibilities of using recreational potential in order to develop various forms of international tourism. Thus, the main **purpose** of the work is a comparative geographical analysis of natural and recreational resources and the identification of modern ways to improve the efficiency of their use in international tourism in Eastern European countries.

To achieve this purpose, the following **tasks** were solved:

1. To assess the recreational potential condition of the Eastern European countries.
2. To offer specific measures for the tourism development in the regions.
3. To justify the creation of tourist and recreational complexes, taking into account socio-economic and environmental factors.
4. To use foreign experience with the experts from developed European countries involvement at all stages of the research.

Back in the 1980s, Eastern European countries conducted studies in order to assess their natural and cultural-historical

recreational potential. However, this was applied to individual countries (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and USSR). A comprehensive recreational environment assessment of foreign countries-members of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), highlighting areas as these environment territorial elements was carried out in 1987 by N.S. Mironenko [13]. Currently, questions of a comprehensive regional analysis of the recreational potential of CEE countries remain virtually unexplored. Therefore, in studying the recreational resources of European countries, we considered it appropriate to summarize the research materials of Soviet and foreign authors, taking into account the latest data on the state of resources and using well-known assessment methods (biomedical, scoring cognitive value of objects) to comparatively analyze the current condition of natural recreational potential. Analysis of natural and recreational resources was based on the assessment of natural factors that have a positive effect on the human physiological state. According to N.S. Mironenko [11] a comprehensive assessment of the diversity and quality of the recreational activities natural conditions in foreign CMEA countries includes: qualitative characteristics of how far the natural-territorial complexes properties are favorable for various tourism's types are; quantitative characteristics: duration of favorable and comfortable climatic periods, area of favorable for recreation properties distribution (area of lakes, forest cover, length of the sea coastline, etc.), recreational load on the territory [13]. Taking into account modern changes in the structure of tourist demand and supply, quantitative (number, area, share in the total area of the country) and qualitative (uniqueness, safety, accessibility, popularity) characteristics of natural protected areas were used as criteria for scoring the cognitive value of natural objects.

The study of the recreational conditions of the region using the above assessment criteria allowed identifying 11 recreation and tourism centers: 1) Baltic (coastal) plain-forest; 2) lake-forest plain; 3) flat hilly forest-meadow; 4) low and medium mountain forest meadow; 5) low and middle mountain forest; 6) low and medium mountain with a developed karst; 7) high mountain subalpine and alpine; 8) Mediterranean; 9) Black Sea plain-steppe; 10) Black Sea low mountain forest; 11) southern delta-lake [13].

A comparative analysis of the CEE countries' natural-recreational potential in terms of natural and territorial potential allows distinguishing three groups of countries with different natural attractiveness degrees, which main criterion is the number of different recreation and tourism NTCs (see table). Russia, Poland and Ukraine are distinguished by a high degree of attractiveness (5-6 NTC), which allows developing all types and forms of tourism that are common in CEE. Despite this, each of the countries has a specificity in the tourism products use. In Poland, the priority types of tourism are both traditional (preserved from the time of the CMEA) and new forms. Traditional types of tourism are mountain-sports, summer and winter wellness based on mountain-climatic resorts. The mountainous areas of the country can be use more efficiently due to the fact that most of the nature reserves (landscape, national parks) are located here, which have allowed the ecological tourism development. The exploitation efficiency of recreational areas in Russia and Ukraine lies in the combination

of health resort, bathing, beach and mountain sports tourism, which development is possible due to the fact that a compact territory (the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus, the Southern Coast of Crimea) has a combination of various NTCs. Despite this, the lack of a developed general economic and tourist infrastructure, as well as the lack of tradition in the development of these tourism types in the CEE tourist services market, ensured the orientation of Russia and Ukraine towards the development of domestic and regional tourism in frames of the former USSR countries. Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania have natural environment attractiveness of a medium degree (3-4 NTC). The countries of this group effectively use their recreational resources, which was achieved from the predominance of medium and high mountain NTC, distinguishing by significant aesthetic appeal and cognitive value. The rest of the regional countries, including Belarus, have a low degree of natural attractiveness, with 1-2 NTCs of recreation and tourism [2-8].

A comparative geographical analysis of the CEE countries natural environment attractiveness suggests that during the period of market transformations, the development of international tourism is determined by socio-economic factors, and the resource factor plays a significant role given the high level of country's socio-economic development. From this point of view, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia have the most favorable opportunities for the effective development of the tourism sector in CEE.

II. RESULTS

The natural-recreational potential of Europe distinguishes by the fact that many countries are characterized by similar climatic conditions, which led to the presence of the same NTC. In the Baltic States, Poland and Russia, the Baltic and Poozer Recreation and Tourism NTCs are common. The latter is also characteristic of Belarus. The main direction is health resort and bathing and beach tourism, which development is limited by short favorable period. In Hungary, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, flat or hilly forest-meadow and low- and middle-mountain forest and forest-meadow NTC of recreation and tourism became widespread. The main direction is mountain summer and winter tourism and medical resort based on spa and mountain resorts, which are widely known in Europe and have international status. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, low- and middle-mountain forest and forest-meadow NTC are common, including those with developed karst phenomena. The latter is also characteristic of the rest of the Balkan region states, where the Mediterranean recreation and tourism hardware and software complex also became widespread. The main profile of these countries' specialization is bathing and beach tourism in combination with mountain sports (mountaineering, caving). The basis for the development of these tourism types are the coastal mountain resorts, as well as coastal climate. In Romania, Ukraine, Russia, the Black Sea coastal plain-steppe, low-mountain and delta-lake southern recreational and tourist complex of recreation and tourism are developed. The similar NTC indicates that none of the countries in the region has an absolute advantage in the use of natural and recreational resources. In such conditions, it is difficult for countries to compete with each other, therefore

different directions are chosen in the field of tourism development. The determining factor in increasing the efficiency of using tourism resources is the comparative advantage of increased competitiveness established by the introduction of various innovations while maintaining the traditional tourism development forms in order to preserve the country's tourist image in the international tourist services market and improve tourism infrastructure [9-13].

The dynamic tourism development cause exacerbated environmental problems in the region. Therefore, environmental factors of tourism development are becoming increasingly important. In the 1990s, in most countries of the region there was an increase in recreational load on the territory. The impact of tourism is particularly noticeable in the countries that are the main regional centers of tourist arrivals. For example, in the Czech Republic, the number of tourists per unit area of the country had increased in 1.4 times, in Slovakia and Slovenia – almost in 2 times, in Croatia – more than in 4 times. While maintaining high international tourism growth rates, which have been noticed in the region since 1991, it is expected that in the near future the countries of the region will face problems of limiting tourist flows, especially in the most intensively visited areas: sea coasts, mountainous areas, national parks. Currently, in order to form the spatial basis for the tourist industry and rationalize the tourist nature management, the countries of the region are pursuing the expansion of the recreational areas network, including natural protected areas (national parks, landscape and tourist parks, recreational reserves, nature reserves, regional parks, nature parks – recreational areas) [13]. Protected areas' systems in the Central European countries are developing against the background of a densely populated and fully developed landscape. There, to a greater extent than in other regions, the strategy of identifying areas of nature that need protection depends on the location and size of the territories that still retain their natural character. They are scattered and small in area and most often contain derived or semi-derived ecosystems. Most of the national parks in Central Europe are confined to the mountain systems of the temperate and subtropical zones. National parks include the best preserved natural areas. Together with protected landscapes, natural and regional parks, they constitute, something like successive stages of combining environmental and recreational goals, nature, and cultivated lands. Natural reserves have features of both strictly protected and managed territories. Today, there are more than 440 natural protected areas in Central Europe, including 75 national parks, and 6 of them are natural monuments of global impact. The largest (more than 50 thousand hectares) are located in Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro [10]. Poland is the leader in the number of natural protected areas, including national parks among Central European countries. The indicator of the natural protected areas share, including national parks in the total area of the country may indicate the environmental sustainability to the recreational load. From this point of view, the most favorable opportunities for the development of eco-tourism have Slovakia and Slovenia.

In former USSR countries the reserves formation was widely used as a nature reserve in a special form that do not

imply their recreational use. In particular, the formation of reserves began in 1919, when the Astrakhan reserve was created in the Volga estuary. There are many reserves, with area exceeding 50 thousand hectares, on the territory of Eastern European countries. The largest of them (with an area of more than 100 thousand hectares) are located in the coniferous forest zone. But most of all protected areas formed in the zone of mixed forests. There are many reserves in the south of Ukraine, confined to the Black Sea coast. The first national parks in Eastern Europe were created in the Baltics in the 1970s. 1980s-1990s marked by the development of a parks network in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. Eastern European national parks occupy an area of more than 50 thousand hectares; they also present the primeval nature, not affected by anthropogenic impact, unlike parks of Central Europe. The leader in the number of national parks in Eastern Europe is Russia. The Baltic countries have also got favorable opportunities for the eco-tourism development. There the highest rates of natural protected areas are in the country's total area. The exotic nature, small corners of unspoiled "wild" nature specially attracts and with a certain infrastructure can compete with the national parks of Central Europe.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, the world's experience, including Eastern Europe, shows that one of the ways to increase the competitiveness of the national tourist product is the formation of new effective forms of tourist and recreational activities territorial organization.

1. The domestic tourism development, as a mean of the foreign currency outflow limiting and reducing the country's external deficit, is in priority in all countries. Domestic tourism is a necessary basis for the international tourism development; therefore, the support of the tourist business at the state and local levels is necessary. In formulating a strategy for the tourism development, changes in the nature of the demand and supply of the world market for tourist services are taken into account. The CEE tourist market innovative susceptibility has led to the development of non-traditional tourism forms (ecological, extreme, urban, agritourism, farming, nostalgic, folk-ethnographic, etc.) in many countries of the region. This direction was developed in the 1990s. World Tourism Organization experts called it "sustainable" or alternative tourism. Considering different approaches to the alternative tourism (AT) definition, which is mainly common in German-language literature, the main features of this concept can be defined:

- the ability to find and make new decisions in tourism development, which differ from the accepted standards of mass tourism; AT is considered as the opposite to modern mass tourism destroying nature;
- AT involves the development of new tourism destinations associated with close contact with the local population, and promotes respect for their culture, religion, rituals and traditions;

- adequate participation of the local population in income provision from tourism;
- AT can be quickly developed, as it uses public transport and simple living conditions; the quality of service and its prices are usually much lower comparing to traditional tourism; self-service also plays a big role;
- AT usually does not aim at developing tourist attractiveness, it is important in the tourist development of peripheral areas (with basic infrastructure, as well as in unsuitable areas with low-price offers);
- creation of conditions conforming to the ecological and humane principle of the recreational resources use [12].

2. The search for such tourism types where the country may have an absolute or comparative advantage is the goal of increasing competitiveness in the tourist services European market. Therefore, many tourist centers began to specialize in the provision of combined tourist services. In this regard, the number of multifunctional tourist centers, combined with the use of natural-recreational, cultural and historical resources, is increasing. Health and wellness programs are combined with cultural, entertainment and educational activities. For example, Czech resorts open chamber theater scenes, galleries and exhibition halls, dance cafes, gambling establishments, and nightclubs. They expand the possibilities of outdoor activities, creating conditions for playing golf and tennis, swimming, yachting, horse riding, karate, hiking and cycling [1].

3. In modern economic conditions, the factor of tradition continues to play an important role in the tourism development. Countries whose image in the certain tourism types development was consolidated during the CMEA existence period, are now more effectively selling their tourist product, which is reflected in the constant growth of income from international tourism during the 1990s. For example, Hungary and the Czech Republic are countries with developed health tourism, where many resorts have international status, and mineral waters have a long tradition in use. Hungary as a European hydrotherapy center has been known since the 19th century. A visit to the balneological resorts is one of the main motivations for traveling to Hungary. In 1998, 30% of tourists visited the country for the spa treatment [1]

4. In the competition for the consumer, special attention is paid to the improvement of the tourism infrastructure, which intensive development in a transition economy is impossible without foreign investment attraction. For example, Slovakia is reviving the resort business, gradually changing the country's image of ski tourism. With the help of foreign investors, thermal resorts are equipped with modern facilities and technology. Soon the country will be able to reorient tourist flows heading to neighboring Czech Republic [1]. The importance of integration processes is huge. From this point of view, it should be expected that tourism will develop most dynamically in the countries of the European Union.

Thus, the study of new ways to improve the use of recreational resources in international tourism on the example of the leading Eastern European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia) allows

elaborating recommendations for a strategy of tourism development in the Republic of Belarus, considering the specifics of recreational potential and country's socio-economic model peculiarities. The current tourism development state is characterized by an increasing role of investment factors and innovative technologies, while maintaining the role of ecological-geographical, natural-resource and cultural potentials. Only a rational combination of traditional development directions with innovative technologies can guarantee the successful development of this branch of the any national economy.

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