

DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN THE BLACK SEA REGION OF GEORGIA IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN MEDIA

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Abstract. Russian news media cover and analyze the development of tourism in the Black Sea region of Georgia quite frequently. As we all know, they consider the development of tourism in Abkhazia, as an independent state, separately, while regarding the rest of the Black Sea area as Georgia. As long as Georgia has no control over its state borders, we are obliged to keep an eye on the development of tourism in Russia-captured Abkhazia.

According to the Ministry of Tourism of Abkhazia, 45% of the 1.15 million tourists vacationing in Abkhazia in 2022 stayed overnight. By the end of 2022, 858 accommodation facilities with 39,000 beds were registered in Abkhazia (8.3% more than in 2021) [1]. Tourists also stay in the private sector. In 2022, 1 million 150 thousand people visited Abkhazia for vacation and excursions. This indicator was a record for the last 29 years.

“According to the verbal survey and monitoring of tourist facilities and collective accommodation facilities, the average number of people arriving in Abkhazia in 2022 is about 1 million 150 thousand people. These are one-day tourists, sightseers and those who stayed in collective accommodation facilities. And in the private sector”, said Inara Benia, head of the Department of Analysis, Forecasting and Development of the Resort and Tourism Industry of the Ministry of Tourism of Abkhazia [2].

Keywords: *Tourism in Georgia, Tourism in Abkhazia in the post-pandemic period, global code of ethics, tourist destinations.*

Relevance of the topic. The study concerns the development of tourism in the Black Sea region of Georgia according to Russian sources. Georgia does not have the means to conduct

independent research. Russian news media write and analyze quite a lot about the development of tourism in the Black Sea region of Georgia. As it is known, they separately discuss the development of tourism in Abkhazia as an independent state, while in the rest of the Black Sea they consider the whole of Georgia. As long as Georgia cannot control its state borders, we are obliged to keep an eye on the development of tourism in Russia-captured Abkhazia.

According to Benia, 2021 was an unprecedented year in terms of the number of tourists coming to Abkhazia, and there is an explanation for this. “There is such a phenomenon as pent-up demand, when people have not been anywhere for vacation for two years, and then, such an opportunity arose and they took advantage of it - travel became a necessity for people, not a luxury. In 2021, due to the imposed demand, people came to us in search of an ecologically clean place, where they could recover from the COVID infection, breathe fresh air - it is known that Abkhazia has been prominent since Soviet times as therapeutic for people with lung diseases. All this played its role and everyone who could not vacation during the pandemic, chose to come here”, said Benia.

As for 2022, according to Benia, it had a good start, there was significant activity in property bookings, but then the sales decreased due to the newly emerged situation in the world. In addition, the demand was affected by the increase in prices of many products and services, due to which tour operators were forced to mark prices up by an average of 20-40%. “Later, due to low demand, prices began to decrease gradually, various promotions and discounts were organized, and the season entered a stable course, in summer the occupancy of tourist facilities reached 100% in some areas, with an average level of 85-90%. Comfortable hotels, in which it was already difficult to reserve places in July-August”, said the representative of the Ministry of Tourism. According to the Ministry of Tourism, as of December 26, 632,189 people visited Lake Ritsa, 392,065 people visited New Athos Cave. In general, according to Benia, the 2022 season “showed stable results and highlighted the development prospects of new destinations such as ecological, rural, health and wellness, pilgrimage tourism, caravan and camping” [3].

To date, 788 accommodation facilities with a total of 39,323 beds are officially registered in Abkhazia. Of these, 112 facilities and 22419 beds are legal entities, 543 objects and 15700 beds are entrepreneurs, 133 objects and 1204 beds are individuals. For reference, it was in 1980-1990 when tourism was developing in Soviet Abkhazia, and in 1990 there were as many as 125 facilities with a total of 34502 tourist beds [4].

In the summer of 2022, 14% of tourists from Russia visited Abkhazia. As the news agency REGNUM reports, according to Roman Garev, associate professor at the Department of Hotel and Tourist Business at the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, in 2023, Russian citizens will maintain their interest in vacationing in Egypt, Turkey and Abkhazia.

The fact is that Russians have found themselves with limited vacation options and they are looking for new destinations to compensate. Georgia would not be considered such a place, as they do not have diplomatic relations with us. Flights were one-sidedly terminated by them, while citizens of Georgia had limited visas. All of a sudden, Russia lifted these restrictions. Why? One answer may be to protect the interests of their own population and allow new recreation areas. An analytical magazine, Forbes, made an analysis of how the European tourism industry suffered due to restrictions on tourists from Russia.

Russians have traditionally been a significant contributor to the growth of tourism revenues for many European countries, with European visa refusal rates being one of the lowest for them.

But the pandemic has halted the growing tourist flow, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict has almost brought it to a standstill. According to the data of ATOR (Association of Tour Operators of Russia), in the summer of 2022, tourist trips from Russia to Europe decreased by 90-95%. In September, the European Union suspended the simplified visa regime with Russia, and some European countries stopped accepting visas for Russian citizens. What income were Europeans receiving from Russian tourists?

On September 12, 2022, the decision of the European Union to suspend the agreement on the simplified visa regime with Russia entered into force. Since 2007, the agreement has made it easier for Russians to travel to EU countries, with its signing, visa fees have been reduced, it has become easier to obtain multiple-entry visas, and the list of documents required to obtain them has been reduced.

According to the statement of the Association of Tour Operators of Russia (ATOR), the representative offices of Belgium, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Estonia have already stopped accepting applications for tourist visas from Russian citizens. Among the “loyal countries” of the European Union, which have not yet stopped accepting documents from the Russians, are Hungary, Greece, Italy, Spain, France, as well as Cyprus with its national visa.

Before the pandemic, Russian tourists traveled in Europe to a great extent, increasing their spending in these countries year by year. According to the data of the Russian Border Service, nine of the 20 foreign countries popular among Russians in 2019 (in terms of outbound tourist flow) were from the Schengen area. Germany (1.42 million tourists), Italy (1.36 million tourists) and Spain (1.06 million tourists) are the top three, and 900,000 tourists stayed in Greece.

According to the OneTwoTrip travel planning service provided by Forbes, in 2019, the share of Russian bookings in the Schengen countries was 32% of total sales to all foreign

destinations. In terms of popularity, Italy ranks first among European countries (6.4% of all foreign orders), followed by Germany (5%), and Spain.

How much were Russians spending?

According to the data of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in 2018 Russians' spending on foreign trips amounted to \$34.5 billion, which is 11.2% more than in the previous year. Russia was then seventh worldwide in terms of spending on foreign travel by its citizens. Chinese tourists spent the most in overseas travel markets in 2019 at \$277.3 billion, followed by US citizens at \$144 billion and Germans at \$94 billion.

What did the Europeans lose?

Italy lost about 1 billion euros from Russian travelers who are traditionally in the top three after Chinese and Americans. The most popular Italian destinations among Russians were Rimini - with 15% of the tourist flow from Russia, Rome - 10% and Venice - 9%. According to preliminary estimates of Federberg Hotel Association, by the end of 2022, the capital of Italy alone will lose about 150 million euros due to the absence of Russians.

In 2021, Greece reached the pre-crisis level in terms of the number of Russian tourists. Before the pandemic, in 2019, 600,000 Russians vacationed in this country. In 2013-2014, up to 1 million Russians vacationed in Greece per year, with the average cost of the trip at about 1,000 euros per person. It turns out that in the best years, Greece received about 1 billion euros a year from Russian tourists.

Cyprus, which has long been a favorite holiday destination for Russian and Ukrainian citizens, has already lost 600 million euros as for 2022, mainly due to the closure of EU airspace to Russian planes [5].

At the same time, during this agitation, it is important to remember the obligation of the private sector according to the UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism:

The above-mentioned code defines the norms and frameworks of the behavior of tourists, as well as the responsibility of the receiving countries. The UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism is responsible for and represents a road map for the development of sustainable tourism, approved by the UN General Assembly in 2001.

Its 10 principles, which cover the economic, social, cultural and environmental components of tourism, aim to help the sector maximize benefits while minimizing potentially negative impacts.

- Tourism industry should promote tolerance and gender equality and respect for human rights, while simultaneously fighting against the exploitation of the most vulnerable groups of the society;

- Tourism practitioners (not just the state) must protect the environment and natural heritage, conserve resources and avoid waste production, ideally agreeing to limit their activities in highly sensitive areas;
- Tourism companies should involve locals in the economic and social structures of destinations, giving priority to the local workforce. It is also necessary to study the impact of development projects and dialogue with the host population;
- Tourism professionals must provide tourists with objective information about the travel country and its conditions, show concern for the safety of clients, provide assistance through appropriate insurance and assistance systems, and promote the cultural and spiritual fulfilment of tourists;
- Tourism enterprises should not use their positions, just as they should not impose socio-cultural models on host communities. They should be involved in local development, avoiding excessive repatriation of profits and ensuring the fundamental rights of employees [6].

The World Committee on Tourism Ethics (WCTE), an impartial body which reports directly to the UNWTO General Assembly, met under a new chair and with a new composition. After deliberations, the Committee agreed to issue the following statement:

The World Committee on Tourism Ethics, welcoming the statement of UN Secretary-General that “Continuing the war in Ukraine is morally unacceptable, politically indefensible and militarily nonsensical”, in firm belief that tourism is a vital force for peace and a factor for friendship and mutual understanding among the peoples of the world, urges the Russian Federation to end its invasion against Ukraine which is putting millions of lives at risk, threatening their peace and security. Guided by Article 1 of the UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, the Committee calls on all efforts to be extended towards peace negotiations in accordance with the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter.

While the right to tourism is forcibly taken away during conflicts, tourism is always a reminder of the importance of dialogue, peace, tolerance, and sustainable development among countries.

The WCTE functions are to interpret, apply, and evaluate the provisions of the UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, in addition to ensuring the promotion of its ethical principles and the monitoring of its practical implementation by governments and the private sector [7].

Consequently, tourism business should not be politicized. On the contrary, the duty of tourism is to serve tourists regardless of their origin and views.

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წარდგენილია ცხუმ-აფხაზეთის მეცნიერებათა აკადემიის I საერთაშორისო კონფერენციის სამეცნიერო კომიტეტისა და გეოგრაფიისა და ტურიზმის ინსტიტუტის მიერ

აბსტრაქტი. კვლევა ეხება ტურიზმის განვითარებას საქართველოს შავიზღვისპირეთში რუსული წყაროების მიხედვით. საქართველოს არ გააჩნია საშუალება დამოუკიდებლად აწარმოოს კვლევა. რუსული საინფორმაციო საშუალებები კი საკმაოდ ბევრს წერენ და ანალიზს აკეთებენ ტურიზმის განვითარებაზე საქართველოს შავიზღვისპირეთში. როგორც ცნობილია, ისინი ცალკე განიხილავენ აფხაზეთში ტურიზმის განვითარებას, როგორც დამოუკიდებელ სახელმწიფოში, ხოლო დანარჩენ შავიზღვისპირეთში მოიაზრებენ მთელ საქართველოს. სანამ საქართველო ვერ აკონტროლებს თავის სახელმწიფო საზღვრებს, ჩვენ ვაღიარებთ ვართ თვალი მივადევნოთ ტურიზმის განვითარებას რუსეთის მიერ მიტაცებულ აფხაზეთში.

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- რუსეთს შეეზღუდა დასვენების არჩევანი და ისინი ეძებენ საკომპენსაციოდ დანიშნულების ახალ ადგილებს. საქართველო არ მოიაზრებოდა ასეთ ადგილად, რადგან მათ არა აქვთ ჩვენთან დიპლომატიური ურთიერთობები. ფრენები მათ მიერ იყო ცალმხრივად შეწყვეტილი, ხოლო საქართველოს მოქალაქეებს - ვიზები შეზღუდული ქონდათ. სრულიად მოულოდნელად რუსეთმა გააუქმა ეს შეზღუდვები.

- რუსეთის ტუროპერატორთა ასოციაციამ (ATOR) განცხადების თანახმად ბელგის, დანიის, ლიტვის, ლატვიის, ნიდერლანდების, პოლონეთის, სლოვაკეთის, ჩეხეთის რესპუბლიკისა და ესტონეთის წარმომადგენლობებმა უკვე შეწყვიტეს რუსეთის მოქალაქეებისგან განაცხადების მიღება ტურისტულ ვიზებზე.
- იტალიამ დაკარგა დაახლოებით 1 მილიარდი ევრო რუსი მოგზაურობისგან, რომლებიც ტრადიციულად შედიან პირველ სამეულში. 2019 წელს, ამ ქვეყანაში 600 000 რუსი ისვენებდა. 2013-2014 წლებში საბერძნეთში წელიწადში 1 მილიონამდე რუსი ისვენებდა, მოგზაურობის საშუალო ღირებულება ერთ ადამიანზე დაახლოებით 1000 ევრო იყო. გამოდის, რომ საუკეთესო წლებში საბერძნეთი რუსი ტურისტებისგან წელიწადში დაახლოებით 1 მილიარდ ევროს იღებდა.
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- მისი 10 პრინციპი, რომელიც მოიცავს ტურიზმის ეკონომიკურ, სოციალურ, კულტურულ და გარემოსდაცვით კომპონენტებს, მიზნად ისახავს დაეხმაროს სექტორს სარგებლის მაქსიმალურ გაზრდაში, ხოლო პოტენციურად უარყოფითი ზემოქმედების მინიმუმამდე შემცირებაში.
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