

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN GEORGIA

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Abstract. In 2020, the spread of COVID-19 and the associated pandemic proved to be the biggest devastating factor for all areas. The pandemic has had a major economic impact on international tourism. In 2020-2021, the tourism industry has lost hundreds of billions of dollars and millions of jobs. To overcome the crisis, anti-epidemic measures were implemented in many countries, which accelerated the transformation of world tourism, resulting in increased demand for domestic tourism and rural tourism. The article discusses the changes in the tourism sector of Georgia caused by the pandemic: a) the growing demand for domestic and rural tourism, b) the acceleration of digitalization processes.

One of the important branches of the world economy is rural tourism and agro tourism complex, which largely determines the employment of the population and the growth of income in tourist regions. During the pandemic, the lack of a full-fledged information service turned out to be an obstacle for consumers of domestic and rural tourism services in Georgia. Technical progress and extensive use of the Internet have created the so-called New Economy. Digitization has become a global trend, which by itself has led to the introduction of digital technologies in the tourism industry. Modern tourism requires the activation of digitization processes, which ensures the development of tourist products. The research confirmed that the active penetration of digital technologies in the field of tourism in Georgia will contribute to the development of domestic and rural tourism in the country.

Keywords: *Tourism development, digital technologies, digitalization processes, tourism product, domestic tourism, rural tourism.*

In the modern world, the tourism industry is presented as one of the most dynamically developing industries. Prior to the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it was one

of the most important sectors of the global economy, accounting for 10% of global GDP. The pandemic had a significant impact on the health of the population and the economy in almost all areas, but hit the tourism industry especially hard. Countries have imposed travel restrictions to contain the spread of the virus, significantly reducing domestic and international travel in early 2020. If before the pandemic, spending on travel and tourism around the world amounted to almost five trillion US dollars, then in 2020 this figure fell to 2.33 trillion. The global travel and tourism sector also suffered a significant loss in terms of employment, at around 62%. Since tourism is characterized by a multiplier effect, the crisis has spread to other sectors of the economy that are interconnected with tourism. Various sectors have been significantly affected, and in some cases even their structure has changed.¹

Despite all the negative consequences of the crisis, after the coronavirus pandemic, the modern tourism industry has been transformed: the need for changes has arisen, and the demand for domestic and rural tourism has increased. The increased demand for domestic tourism during the crisis period was primarily due to the fact that the sanitary-epidemiological situation and social distancing were almost resolved. Accordingly, in 2020, the existence and development of “new demand” tourism products, which include the following areas: wine tourism, protected areas, rural tourism, eco and agro tourism, and mountain resorts, became part of the anti-crisis plan of the tourism sector of Georgia. Rural tourism and agro-tourism largely determine the employment and income growth of the local population.

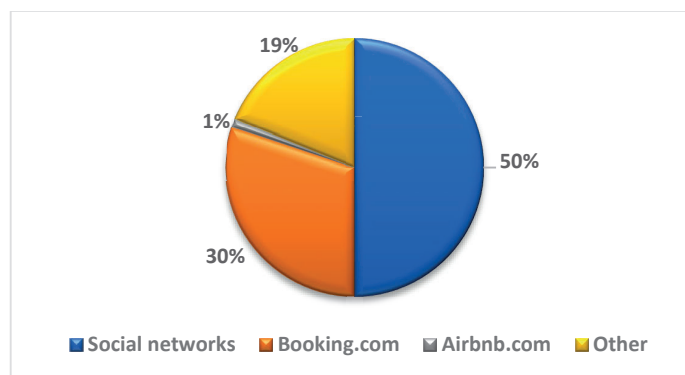
Rural tourism and the market system of cultural tourism are two of the priority areas in the communities adjacent to the administrative border in Georgia (Gori, Kareli, Kaspi, and Zugdidi). However, as a result of the research of non-governmental organizations, there were factors that hindered the development of tourism in this direction. For example: lack of accommodation facilities for short-term tourist arrivals; insufficient marketing of events and festivals (an example is the Anaklia Music Festival). It was revealed that 25% of family hotels in the Zugdidi municipality do not use any online platform and do not make it known that they manage to attract visitors through personal contacts. The shortcomings of the objects presented on various e-commerce channels are manifested in the provision of information, which indicates their lack of knowledge about digital marketing. This circumstance makes it difficult to turn an “intangible” tourist product into a “tangible” one for potential customers, which

¹ Letandze N., International tourism during the pandemic and its aftermath: challenges and perspectives, “SEU and Science”, SEU scientific peer-reviewed journal, No. 13, 2022;

ultimately leads to the loss of the object by a potential buyer or makes it difficult for the visitor to make the right choice when booking a product or service.²

The digitization of tourism is not a new direction in the industry. Along with the development of the global Internet, certain changes were observed in the tourism industry. For example, Airbnb was founded in August 2008 and is now a global short-term rental platform. Such services and platforms as Skyscanner and Booking.com, which expand the opportunities for the development of unorganized tourism, began to gain popularity in 2008-2009. The trend of digitization in tourism implies the gradual movement of all market participants into the online sphere. This means the appropriate reorientation of financial flows, which becomes a prerequisite for the profitability of the tourism industry. Currently, the development and promotion of digital products for both traditional and new tourist destinations is considered a promising area.³

We conducted research in Zugdidi municipality, in the villages adjacent to the occupation line: Anaklia and Ganmukhuri. 50% of the surveyed owners of small family-type hotels use social networks; 30% have posted on Booking.com; and only 1% refer to the online platform Airbnb.



In Georgia, as well as in the whole world, the main challenge in the post-pandemic period is the necessity of the digitalization process of the tourism sector, which is very important for the full recovery and further development of the tourism industry, promoting domestic tourism and rural tourism.

In general, the adaptation of the Internet to the tourism industry leads to the involvement of more people in this field every year. In the process of planning their trip, modern tourists increasingly use various digital channels. As a result, the scale of the industry and the demand for travel are increasing. Although the demand for domestic tourism has increased, the trends of more active implementation of virtual and augmented reality (augmented reality allows for

² Design services for the development of the urban planning plan of the city of Zugdidi

³ Tvardadze S., Digital challenges in the tourism industry - Gtuni, collection of works #12, 2022

achieving several marketing goals at the same time) technologies have become relevant. The tools for meeting the needs of tourists are changing, but their needs remain the same: a safe socio-political and ecological environment. Rural tourism meets these needs to some extent. Accordingly, it is necessary to strengthen the existing tourist facilities in the village with digital technologies, which will help to integrate them into important online platforms and increase the opportunity for tourists to visit villages.

Digitization of tourism is a necessary condition for progress; it is necessary for each party involved in the industry to adopt modern technologies and communicate with customers using digital channels, which will directly affect the tourism industry and positively affect its development. It is desirable that the implementation of digital technologies in tourism be encouraged by the state by conducting trainings, events, and presentations on the importance of data analysis and creating “tech-incubators” where interested parties will be taught data analysis and AI and work on their implementation in the tourism industry in various ways.

Conclusion. In Georgia, the specifics of rural tourism and its impact on the economic and agrarian sectors have not yet been properly studied. The development of rural tourism in the country is most effective from a social and economic point of view if it is carried out through strategic plans and programs developed at the regional, national, or international level.⁴ Also, more active involvement by the private sector using digital technologies will increase the number of tourists much more. It is necessary to strengthen the existing tourist facilities in the village with digital technologies, which will help integrate them on important online platforms.

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**ციფრული ტექნოლოგიების გავლენა სოფლის ტურიზმის
განვითარებაზე საქართველოში**

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

აბსტრაქტი. უდიდესი დამაზარალებელი ფაქტორი აღმოჩნდა 2020 წელს გავრცელებული COVID-19 და მასთან დაკავშირებული პანდემია ყველა სფეროსთვის. მან უმძიმესი ეკონომიკური გავლენა იქონია საერთაშორისო ტურიზმზე. 2020-2021 წლებში ტურიზმის ინდუსტრიამ დაკარგა ასობით მილიარდი დოლარი და მილიონობით სამუშაო ადგილი. კრიზისის დასაძლევად მრავალ ქვეყანაში გატარდა ანტიეპიდემიური ღონისძიებები, რომლებმაც დააჩქარა მსოფლიო ტურიზმის ტრანსფორმაცია, შედეგად გაიზარდა მოთხოვნა შიდა ტურიზმზე და სასოფლო ტურიზმზე. სტატიაში განხილულია კორონავირუსული პანდემიით გამოწვეული ის ცვლილებები, რომლებიც აღინიშნება საქართველოში ტურიზმის მიმართულებით: ა) მზარდი მოთხოვნილებები შიდა ტურიზმზე და სოფლის ტურიზმზე, ბ) ციფრული ტექნოლოგიების როლის ზრდა ტურიზმის (სოფლის ტურიზმის) დინამიურ განვითარებაში.

მსოფლიო ეკონომიკაში ერთ-ერთი მნიშვნელოვანი სექტორია სოფლის ტურიზმი და აგროტურისტული კომპლექსი, რომელიც ტურისტულ რეგიონებში მნიშვნელოვნად განსაზღვრავს მოსახლეობის დასაქმებას და შემოსავლების ზრდას. პანდემიის პერიოდში საქართველოში შიდა ტურიზმის მიმართულებით მომხმარებლების გადაადგილებისა და სოფლის მონახულების შემაფერხებელი ფაქტორი აღმოჩნდა სრულფასოვანი საინფორმაციო სერვისის არქონა. ზოგადად,

ტექნოლოგიურმა წინსვლამ, განსაკუთრებით კი ინტერნეტის ფართო გამოყენებამ, შექმნა ე.წ. ახალი ეკონომიკა და დიჯიტალიზაცია გახდა გლობალური ტენდენცია, რამაც თავისთავად გამოიწვია ციფრული ტექნოლოგიების დანერგვა ტურისტულ ინდუსტრიაში. თანამედროვე ტურიზმი საჭიროებს დიჯიტალიზაციის პროცესების გააქტიურებას, რაც უზრუნველყოფს ტურისტული პროდუქტების განვითარებას. კვლევამ დაადასტურა, რომ საქართველოში ტურიზმის სფეროში ციფრული ტექნოლოგიების აქტიური შეღწევა ხელს შეუწყობს ქვეყანაში შიდა ტურიზმის განვითარებას.

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