

DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DRIVEN BY POLICIES, CONSUMER TRENDS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN POLAND AND SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The article aims to compare the approaches to sustainable tourism in Poland and Serbia. It analyzes current consumer trends in the European Union, Poland (as an EU member), and Serbia (as an EU candidate country). The article presents the objectives of both countries' latest available tourism development strategies. An attempt is made to indicate the desired directions of action in the near future from the perspective of changing expectations of tourists, environmental challenges, and the assumptions of the sustainable development concept. **Methods:** The methods included desk research (analysis of documents and public policies), content analysis (analysis of the websites of national tourism development agencies), and case studies (indicating specific actions). **Results:** The analysis of sustainable tourism development in Poland and Serbia indicates significant similarities, but also differences resulting from the political and institutional context. As an EU member, Poland systematically implements the recommendations resulting from a set of political initiatives under the common name of the European Green Deal and the industrial strategy published as the Transformation Path for Tourism, emphasizing the development of low-emission, digital tourism and supporting local communities. In the process of integration with the EU, Serbia is taking actions similar to EU standards, developing tourism based on natural values and cultural heritage. **Conclusions:** Both in Poland and Serbia, there is a growing interest in sustainable tourism among consumers and changing trends in the expectations of tourists. Environmental challenges, such as excessive pressure from mass tourism, loss of biodiversity, waste generation, and the effects of climate change, require an integrated approach and intersectoral cooperation; in this context, the assumptions of the circular economy are also relevant. This is necessary to balance economic development and the protection of natural resources. Poland and Serbia have significant potential for developing sustainable tourism but face different challenges. Poland should focus on reducing overtourism and better managing tourist traffic, while Serbia should invest in tourist infrastructure and environmental protection. Supporting innovation and ecological education for tourists and local communities is crucial.

Key words: sustainability, tourism, development policy, consumer trends

JEL codes: Q01, Z32, Z3

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INTRODUCTION

For many countries, especially developing ones, tourism is a significant economic sector that provides economic growth. Tourism and hospitality are essential economic entities in these countries for local employment and for maintaining and improving living standards. However, due to lower environmental standards, these countries are more exposed to the adverse effects of tourism, such as increased pollution and direct pollution (e.g., direct discharge of sewage into the sea, destruction of the natural environment due to overcrowding of tourists, and pollution caused by increased air and other traffic emissions) [Roblek et al. 2021]. Moreover, as Higgins-Desbiolles [2018] claims, the continued global drive to grow tourism is inconsistent with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Europe is the world's most popular tourist destination, with 54.6% of global foreign tourists in 2023, according to the World Tourism Barometer [UNWTO 2024]. France, Spain, and Italy were the most visited European countries by foreign tourists in 2023. Tourism is a key economic activity, especially in the European Union, accounting for 10% of its GDP, with a wide-ranging impact on economic growth, employment, and social development. It can be a powerful tool in fighting economic decline and unemployment [Pernice and Kuzhym 2024].

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the tourism sector, sharply reducing tourist flows and, therefore, the revenues of tourism-related businesses. In addition to this immediate shock, the tourism sector faces other, longer-term challenges related to its ecological and digital transformation, competitiveness, sustainability, and resilience [ECA 2021].

Sustainable tourism development is an approach that focuses on minimizing the adverse effects of tourism (such as environmental pollution, degradation of local communities, and destruction of cultural heritage) and ensuring long-term benefits for tourists, residents, the natural environment, and local development. Planning for sustainable tourism development is the only way to effectively prevent disorderly tourism development [Angelevska-Najdeska and Rakicevik 2012]. Torres-Delgado and López Palomeque [2012] note that sustainable tourism's most significant chal-

lenge is its appropriate application to changing conditions and times. The behavior and intentions of tourists are much more difficult to understand. Tourists have different perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors; they may even engage in counterfactual thinking, making sustainable tourism challenging [Geng et al. 2024].

Tourism is also an essential economic sector in Poland and Serbia. Both countries have a rich cultural and natural heritage but face challenges in environmental protection and tourism management. As part of the EU, Poland has access to a wide range of EU funds and regulations. Meanwhile, Serbia still strives to integrate with the EU, which influences its efforts to implement a sustainable tourism policy.

AIM AND METHODS

The article aims to compare the approaches to sustainable tourism in Poland and Serbia. It analyses current consumer trends in the EU, Poland (as an EU member), and Serbia (as an EU candidate country). The article presents the objectives of both countries' latest available tourism development strategies. An attempt is made to indicate the desired directions of action from the perspective of changing expectations of tourists, environmental challenges, and the assumptions of the sustainable development concept. The methods included desk research (analysis of documents and public policies), content analysis (analysis of the websites of national tourism development agencies), and case studies (indicating specific actions).

THE EVOLUTION OF CONSUMER ATTITUDES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN EUROPE

As the European Court of Auditors assumes in the "EU Support to Tourism" report [ECA 2021], tourist behavior is evolving into new patterns, reflecting some of the aforementioned challenges (Fig. 1). Future tourism demand will likely be driven by growing environmental awareness, increased use of digital services and new technologies, a shift towards more personalized travel experiences, well-being, better interaction with local communities and culture, and growing concerns about health and safety protocols.

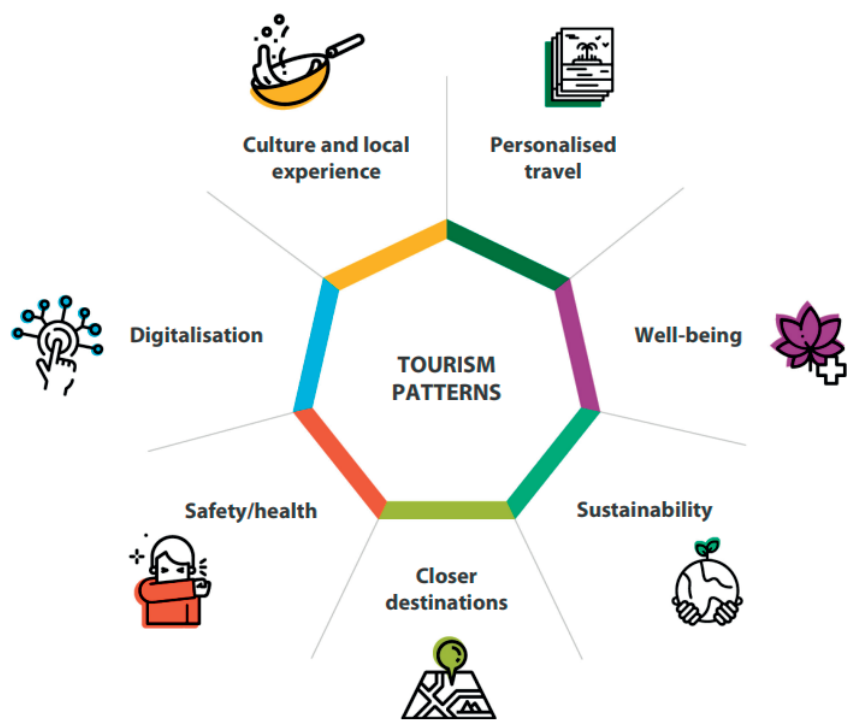


Fig. 1. New tourism patterns in the EU

Source: ECA [2021, p. 19].

According to a report by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (*Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości* – PARP), the pandemic and the war beyond Poland’s eastern border (Ukraine) may constitute a critical period for how the tourism sector functions. This does not mean a complete change in how

it operates, but both events have had a significant (perhaps even revolutionary) impact on the shape of the Polish tourism market (Fig. 2). At the same time, a substantial part of the changes initiated by these phenomena may remain permanent even after the events that became the impetus for change have ceased [Micek et al. 2023].

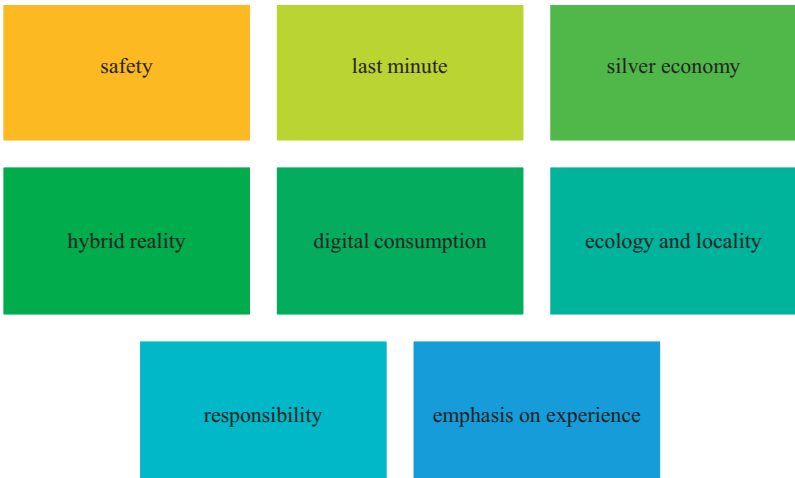


Fig. 2. New tourism trends in Poland

Source: own work based on Micek et al. [2023].

The Serbian Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications in the Tourism Development (*Ministarstvo Turizma i Omladine* – MTO) Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016–2025 [MTO 2016] emphasizes the need to pay attention to changes in tourist behavior and motivations, which are influenced by climate change, a shortage or lack of resources, and a lack of time, money, desire, or motivation to visit some “old” destinations. It lists several new trends related to ways of promotion and booking, new accommodation types, and modern motives for traveling in the world tourist market. Sekulovic [2015] also refers to new trends, pointing primarily to the decreasing role of paid promotion and the increasing role of word-of-mouth and social networks, as tourists prefer to be well-informed and independent due to their lifestyle changes since the COVID-19 pandemic (flextime jobs, shorter but more frequent holidays, searching for unique experiences and events rather than simple beach holidays) and new market segments (Fig. 3).

New tourism patterns in the EU (Fig. 1) are similar to the latest trends in Poland and Serbia (Figs. 2 and 3). The concept of security is understood here not only as sanitary security (connected with the COVID-19 experience) [Szlachciuk et al. 2022, Kapera 2024], but also as health and life security related to the tense geopolitical situation, which primarily applies to tourists coming to Poland due to the

war in Ukraine [Kiczmachowska 2025]. Additionally, the possibility of flexible cancellation of trips/ /bookings expected by tourists is becoming more critical than ever before, presenting a multi-faceted challenge for the tourism sector [Kim et al. 2023, Micek et al. 2023]. At the same time, they often wait until the last minute to book a trip/hotel, primarily because of attractive prices [Jang et al. 2019].

Information and communication technologies play a key role in obtaining information, processing this information, and storing data for further use [Ilić and Nikolić 2018, El Archi et al. 2023]. Therefore, they are essential both in reaching the modern tourist and in meeting their needs before, during, and after their trip/vacation, directly impacting the self-organization of holidays. The tendency to buy services online is increasing, and at the same time, expectations related to the quality of service in the digital world are growing. Tourists require that each digital service be intuitive and easy to use [Micek et al. 2023]. On the one hand, mobile phones are becoming personal holiday planners, with AI-based software acting as a virtual personal tour operator [MTO 2016]. On the other hand, however, tourists are seeking a detox from online communication [Egger et al. 2020, Pawłowska-Legwand and Matoga 2020, Arenas-Escaso et al. 2024].

According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016–2025 [MTO 2016],



Fig. 3. New tourism trends in Serbia

Source: own work based on Sekulovic [2015] and MTO [2016].

most tourists in Serbia expect a guaranteed cost-effective holiday filled with numerous activities, as they value their time [Kim et al. 2022]. Tourists are increasingly focused on discovering something new each time and living like a local [Štetić and Šimičević 2008, Paulauskaite et al. 2017, Lim and Lee 2020]. In addition to travel, blogs and social networks are an interesting way to discover hidden hotspots for a strong, authentic experience [Volo 2010, MTO 2016, Sharma and Arora 2022, Lupu et al. 2023]. Groups of tourists are increasingly choosing places to celebrate important events, from world wars and sites of significant battles to places known for traditional weddings, harvests, and family visits, as well as areas that rekindle fond memories from childhood and youth [MTO 2016].

As a result of the pandemic, remote and hybrid work models have developed [Hassan et al. 2022]. The boundaries between business and leisure travel are also gradually blurring because remote work can be performed anywhere in the world. This is associated with specific expectations of tourists (e.g., access to the internet and, at the same time, proximity to nature) [Micek et al. 2023].

The growing popularity of city breaks is likely due to the rise in cheap flights to various destinations, making this type of holiday more attractive to a broader range of people [Dunne et al. 2010, MTO 2016, Balińska 2020]. The main motive for this type of trip is relaxation and an escape from the routine of everyday life, and a few days' stay in the city is intended to satisfy these needs [Gralak 2016]. Cities are most popular among people aged 25–44, and this age group chooses them due to the restrictions associated with taking time off work [MTO 2016]. Among the most popular destinations in Europe are Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Barcelona. The most popular city break destinations in Serbia are Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Subotica, while in Poland, they are the Trójmiasto (Gdańsk, Gdynia, Sopot), Warsaw, Kraków, and Wrocław. City breaks are often combined with marathon tourism and other sporting or cultural events [Jie 2024, Gogarty 2025]. This trend, incorporating fitness and other sporting activities and events, sees a notable increase among middle-aged people [MTO 2016].

In Europe, the number of tourists aged 60 and older is increasing, which creates the need to adapt the offer for them [Kelly and Kelliher 2021, Buzuluova and Lobova 2023], including the offer related to health tourism [Micek et al. 2023] and wellness. Wellness holidays are not limited to silver tourists and encompass a wide range of activities: spa, yoga, detox, fitness, and stress relief. They are especially popular with business people seeking to recharge during their holidays [MTO 2016].

Another growing phenomenon is culinary tourism as a form of cultural tourism [Gheorghe et al. 2014, Charzyński et al. 2017, Kuhn et al. 2023, Kalenjuk Piariski et al. 2024]. In the development of gastronomic tourism, traditional strategies can offer the possibility to use the strategic tools to articulate the quality, variety, and uniqueness of local products and the gastronomy of a territory [Gheorghe et al. 2014]. An example of this is wine tourism in Serbia [Sekulić et al. 2016, Đenadić and Rudež 2018, Trišić et al. 2020] and some regional cuisines in Poland [Charzyński et al. 2017, Balinska and Zawadka 2019, Niedbała et al. 2020].

Contemporary trends indicate a growing demand for preserved natural resources and an ecologically clean environment, which is closely linked to the concept of sustainable tourism development [Kostić et al. 2018]. Additionally, ecological awareness among customers in various industries is increasing. Customers are becoming more responsible and aware. Hence, the role of entrepreneurs is not only to respond to these expectations, but also to meet the needs that consumers do not yet recognize [Polska Moc Biznesu 2024]. This opens up many opportunities and challenges in tourism activity [Mihalic 2016, Paul and Roy 2023, Samal and Dash 2023, Obradović 2024]. This trend is similar to another one – the circular economy, which is a new strategy for economic development that takes environmental factors into account, including in tourism [Gabor et al. 2023]. It assumes a departure from the linear model of production and consumption (“take, use, throw away”), which is inefficient for business and harmful to the natural environment, and a transition to a circular model (“take, use, reuse”) – in which waste becomes a raw material again, ensuring a reduction

in losses and maximization of resource use [Śliwa 2022]. This concept leads to human circular tourism [Nocca et al. 2023].

Changes in tourists' behavior and habits will require an adequate segmentation of consumers and the consequent market segmentation of tourism and hospitality products and services, keeping in mind gender, age, marital status, motivation, and all other essential tourist segmentations, as well as the constant need for adjustments to the domestic offer [MTO 2016].

POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Metodijeski and Temelkov [2014] note that the creators of tourism policy and strategies should be able to identify tourism trends and propose adequate mechanisms to develop high-quality tourism products and services. Moreover, actions toward sustainable tourism development may be more effective within the country and by combining the forces of a group of countries. The Charter for Sustainable Tourism [UNWTO 1995] recognizes tourism as an ambiguous phenomenon, as it can contribute positively to socio-economic and cultural achievements. At the same time, it can also lead to environmental degradation and the loss of local identity. It emphasizes that the resources on which tourism is based are fragile and that there is a growing need to improve the quality of the environment. Therefore, according to the Charter, tourism development should be based on sustainable development criteria, meaning it must be ecologically sound in the long term, economically viable, and ethically and socially just for local communities.

Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth [Communication COM(2010) 2020], announced in 2010, supposed enhancing the competitiveness of the European tourism sector. A few years later, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [UN 2015], tourism was referenced mainly in Goal 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all), Goal 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable), Goal 12 (Ensure

sustainable consumption and production patterns), and Goal 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development). The next EU document, the European Green Deal [Communication COM/2019/640], was integral to the Commission's strategy to implement the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Referring to the provisions contained in the European Green Deal, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has committed to accelerating progress towards low-carbon emission tourism [Co-Evolve4BG 2025].

The European Commission's latest strategy, the Transition Pathway for Tourism [EC 2022], focuses on achieving sustainable tourism, promoting the green transition, supporting a circular tourism economy, and improving resilience planning by investing in the circular economy (reducing energy consumption, waste, water use, and pollution), improving data sharing (to support innovative tourism services and sustainable destination management), and investing in skills (to ensure a skilled workforce and create attractive career opportunities in the tourism ecosystem) [TTP Reports 2024].

The European Commission highlights the need for more sustainable and responsible tourism, innovative technologies for tourism, and building resilience in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic [EC 2024]. Koščak and O'Rourke [2021] noted that before the COVID-19 pandemic, key concepts in the task of creating ethical and responsible tourism included responsible management, accessibility and social responsibility, the use of carrying capacity to avoid overtourism, and participatory planning. However, additional concepts have now emerged that emphasize the importance of health safety, social distancing among tourism participants, and the need to promote tourism close to consumers. This involves the transformation of development strategies and the search for new development paradigms that can no longer bypass the principles of sustainable and responsible tourism.

According to Obradović [2024], residents interact more often with the destination than tourists, and their activities have a stronger impact on the ecosystem and resources. Therefore, the education and involvement of residents in environmental activities can signifi-

cantly contribute to solving the negative environmental effects in tourist areas, thus supporting sustainable development initiatives. In turn, research by Sharma and Bhat [2023] confirms the positive impact of community engagement in social and environmental innovations to achieve sustainable tourism development. Residents' attitudes toward tourism activities are crucial for sustainable tourism development [Obradović et al. 2021]. Strzelecka and Wicks [2010] emphasize the greater effectiveness of implementing development plans if the community is able to consciously undertake joint actions for the well-being of a given locality.

Sustainable development refers to the use, without exploitation, of natural, cultural, and all other tourist resources of the present generation, and it means preserving them for future use by future generations. Since the development of tourism in a given area largely depends on the natural and anthropogenic attractiveness found in the environment, in the case of destruction or degradation of these resources, the attractiveness of the destination also decreases, not only from the point of view of tourists but also from the perspective of residents [Angelevska-Najdeska and Rakicevik 2012]. Sustainability has three aspects – economic, social, and environmental – and every tourist destination depends on all of them. It is important to anticipate and manage negative social, cultural, environmental, and economic problems arising from tourism. Sustainable development requires all economic activities to work together to improve the quality of life for local communities and the natural environment [Brendehaug et al. 2016, Yfantidou and Matarazzo 2017]. Governments and relevant bodies, with the involvement of non-governmental organizations and local communities, must take action to integrate tourism planning as a contribution to sustainable development [UNWTO 1995]. Moreover, as Erdeji et al. [2013] note, to manage the development of rural tourism effectively and sustainably, it is necessary to organize activities among stakeholders at the national, regional, and local levels (public and private sectors, civil society). Given the positive and negative impacts of tourism on several dimensions related to the Sustainable Development Goals, it is important to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between all

stakeholders, including the private sector [UNWTO 2018]. Furthermore, the role of the government should be to set the framework and stimulate entrepreneurship in the field of sustainable tourism, both at the central and local levels [Bramwell and Lane 2009]. Nocca et al. [2023] emphasize the role of tourists' knowledge and awareness in the context of sustainable tourism development. Appropriate actions, such as sharing good practices in the field of circular tourism, can increase their awareness and influence their choices and behavior.

The two most recent documents concerning the development of the tourism sector in Poland were the Tourism Development Program (until 2020) [MSiT 2015] and Regulation 22/2016 of the Minister of Sport and Tourism on the Program of cooperation with non-governmental organizations and other entities [Zarządzenie 22/2016 MSiT], also covering the period until 2020. In the mentioned ministerial regulation, one of the priority tasks was the organization of conferences, workshops, working meetings, training courses, or study tours with the participation of representatives of the Ministry of Sport and Tourism (*Ministerstwo Sportu i Turystyki* – MSiT) by non-governmental organizations, which is consistent, among others, with research by Kucner and Rutkowska [2023], who claim that tourism in Poland is one of those areas that require both the creation of a completely new concept of development and management, as well as a thorough redefinition of the roles of all stakeholders. Due to the ongoing economic transformation and existing environmental and climate challenges, the adaptation of the tourism sector to these challenges and changes must consist of defining new goals for tourism activities. Such a difference from previously known forms of tourism and their resulting diversity may constitute both a challenge and an opportunity for the development of those areas that have not been recognized in the tourism market so far.

The main objective of the Polish Tourism Development Program until 2020 [MSiT 2015] was to strengthen the development of competitive and innovative tourism by supporting enterprises, organizations, institutions, and initiatives in the tourism sector while respecting the principles of sustainable

development. Reference to sustainable development was also made in one of the operational objectives, which assumes the development and modernization of space for tourism and tourist infrastructure while maintaining the principles of sustainable development and environmental protection regulations. The objectives outlined in the Polish Tourism Development Program until 2020 were in line with the key challenges of Europe 2020 and were part of the broader context of the European Union's cohesion policy for 2014–2020. The Program also refers to changing consumer trends in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. Among others, technological factors (including the development of information and communication technologies in the context of increasing the availability of tourist services) and environmental factors (changes in the tourist offer as a result of increasing social awareness) were indicated.

Currently, there is no document in Poland that has a strategy focused on the tourism sector. Work on a new strategy for the development of the tourism sector started at the end of 2024. In the first half of 2025, Poland's presidency of the EU began. Poland intended to use the numerous events organized on this occasion to present itself as a safe tourist destination, as well as to raise the tourist attractiveness of less popular and peripheral areas and regions in Europe [Kamińska 2024]. Public consultations are taking place at the same time. The new Tourism Development Strategy for Poland until 2030 will cover issues related to, among others, an integrated approach to the country's tourism promotion, sustainable development of tourism in the regions, adaptation of tourism infrastructure to contemporary challenges, protection of cultural and natural heritage in the context of tourism development, and supporting innovation and digitization in the tourism sector [POT 2025].

The Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016–2025 [MTO 2016] assumes a systematic approach to tourism, not only through economic indicators (as a possible sustainable source of creating new added value and jobs in the Republic of Serbia), but also through the multiplier effects that tourism has on overall social development, local and regional development, development of culture and education,

improvement of the environment, and development of complementary activities (trade, agriculture, construction, etc.). Among the strategic goals, the sustainable economic, environmental, and social development of tourism in the Republic of Serbia and the improvement of the competitiveness of the tourism industry and related activities in the national and international perspective are indicated. The strategic assumptions are, therefore, consistent with the research by Maksin and Milijić [2010] and Maksin et al. [2014], who showed that coordination of policies is necessary in Serbia, including spatial planning and sustainable development, not only in the context of tourism. Štetić and Šimičević [2008] noted that identifying all the positive and negative factors that influence the development of tourist destinations is essential in creating and promoting destinations for the development of specific forms of tourism.

The agricultural sector in Serbia plays a vital role because it contributes to the employment of the working-age population, thereby exerting a positive influence on foreign trade and fostering the development of rural areas [Grujić-Vučkovski et al. 2023]. Enhancing the competitiveness of Serbian agriculture necessitates implementing changes and innovations [Vapa Tanskosić et al. 2023]. This particularly applies to rural tourism, which represents potential for economic diversification and sustainable rural development.

Rural tourist destinations attract visitors from urban areas, offering them an opportunity to relax. Numerous organizations study the development and characteristics of rural tourism, each providing its definition. One of the most well-known definitions comes from the UNWTO, which describes rural tourism as a type of tourism where the visitor's experience is connected to various activities related to nature, agriculture, rural lifestyles, culture, hunting, fishing, and sightseeing. These activities occur in rural areas, which are characterized by low population density, landscapes and land use primarily associated with agriculture and forestry, and traditional social structures and rural ways of life [Vuković et al. 2024].

Dimitrijević et al. [2024] noted that the tourism potential in Serbia is still untapped in economic terms, especially in rural areas, even though Serbia possesses remarkable natural resources and other potentials for

the development of all forms of rural tourism [Štetić and Šimičević 2008]. Research conducted in Poland by Widawski et al. [2023] showed that sustainable sharing is one way to protect local natural and cultural resources, which assumes rational use to the extent that can also benefit the local community. Both values are used in different ways but, in addition to their purely recreational value, their educational value is equally important. This is especially significant in the case of rural areas. Similar conclusions were reached by Cvijanovic et al. [2017]. They noted that the sustainable development of rural tourism is a part of the integral development of rural areas and means sustainable development from an ecological, economic, and social point of view. The sustainable development of rural tourism is crucial for the development of rural areas and for reducing local depopulation in rural areas in Serbia.

It is, therefore, essential to remember that local government authorities can play a significant role in sustainable tourism development at the local level [Petrović et al. 2018]. However, as the research by Churugsa et al. [2007] shows, insufficient resources and knowledge may constitute obstacles to properly planning and implementing such actions. Furthermore, Hall [1998] points out that government intervention and/or public-private partnerships are often needed to support the long-term sustainability of tourism and the physical and social environments in which it is located. This issue was considered in the analyzed strategic documents regarding tourism in both countries. Moreover, Brankov et al. [2015] emphasize the importance of local population support for tourism development in their research. A special dimension of this influence exists in protected areas, considering the clear, strong environmental component and the bond created between tourism, the protected area, and the inhabitants. Waligo et al. [2015] also emphasize the importance of embedding stakeholders in sustainable tourism strategies. This approach was also considered by the governments of both countries in the strategic documents.

Regional and local sustainable development programming requires the interpretation of the meaning of sustainable development as reflected in the destination vision, identifying stakeholder involvement, and strategic planning that necessitates a long-term

perspective and action [Simão and Partidário 2012]. It is also worth highlighting that Poland has an extensive legal framework for environmental protection and sustainable tourism development, including EU regulations. Serbia, on the other hand, implements regulations based on national strategies and EU association requirements. The key strategic documents in both countries are the national tourism development strategies (action programs), but their effectiveness depends on the level of implementation and available financial resources.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN POLAND AND SERBIA

Overtourism in Poland

Kraków, in the south of Poland, is one of the most frequently visited cities in Central and Eastern Europe. Tour groups come here in large numbers, and the central historic (UNESCO) parts of the city are crowded with tourists (Main Market Square, Wawel Royal Castle, and the Kazimierz district). The city's popularity at any time of year is the reason for gentrification and the displacement of residents by short-term rentals, price increases, and the tourist homogenization of the range of services. In recent years, party tourism has also become more visible here. Further south, there is another town, Zakopane, which, along with the surrounding Tatra Mountains, is heavily affected by overtourism, with the season lasting almost all year round. Due to excessive popularity, mountain trails in the Tatra National Park are heavily congested, and traffic jams are observed on access roads. An additional problem is the lack of parking spaces and insufficient toilets for thousands of tourists. Crowds cause noise and destruction of nature (trampling plants, leaving garbage on trails). Tourism in this area is of the Instagram type, characterized by one-day trips under seasonal pressure (at any time of the year). Another (smaller) national park near Kraków is Ojców National Park. It is also very popular with tourists and school trips. Overtourism here causes congestion of trails, parking cars in

undesigned places, and leaving rubbish – thus generating threats to flora and fauna and erosion of rocks.

The old towns of other cities, such as Warsaw, Wrocław, and Gdańsk, are also under siege from cultural tourism, regardless of the season. Crowds of visitors can be found in the old towns, especially in the summer and on long weekends.

Polish seaside resorts also attract many tourists in the summer season, especially the Trójmiasto (particularly Sopot) and Hel, as well as smaller towns along the Baltic Sea. As a result, we can observe overcrowding of beaches and promenades, an uncontrolled increase in the prices of rent, services, and food during the season (June–August), and, as usual, noise, littering of beaches, and trampling of dunes. Masurian Lakeland (northern Poland) is also popular in the summer. This results in overcrowding of ports, noise generated by motorboats, numerous events on the water, and water pollution and garbage in the forests. In addition, in response to tourist demand, the shores of the lakes are being developed, which results in irreversible degradation of the landscape.

Overtourism is not only an inconvenience for residents, but also for tourists themselves, who are increasingly looking for alternative ways (often untypical and innovative) to spend their free time away from crowded places and highway traffic jams. Consumer trends in recent years mean domestic tourists are more likely to choose less crowded, engaging, and unique locations for a one-day or weekend break. Tourists can opt for micro-adventures (i.e., short trips close to home), often following slow tourism and eco-travel concepts. Instead of popular and overcrowded places, they choose beautiful areas that tourists do not ruin. Mountain ranges stretch almost the entire southern border of Poland, so instead of the Tatra Mountains, they decide on the Bieszczady Mountains, located further to the east. Although, since the COVID-19 pandemic, this area, which was until recently peaceful, has been visited by more and more tourists every year, which can also cause periodic problems with overtourism, such as in the area around the dam on Lake Solina. Glamping has recently been developing in the Bieszczady Mountains, offering tourists luxurious tents, natural cottages, and amenities (e.g., saunas). An interesting way of spending free time is rail tourism, also on retro routes, where

tourists have the opportunity to ride in historic carriages or, more actively, drive bicycle railcars themselves.

Another example of tourism that fits both the concept of sustainability and is quite niche cultural tourism is related to beekeeping as a traditional profession and bee products in ecological, food, and medicinal aspects. Tourists have the opportunity to visit apiaries, open-air museums, and beekeeping museums, where they can observe the work of a beekeeper, learn about the method of producing honey, its properties and specificity, discover other bee products, observe how a bee colony lives, and recognize the ecological correlation between humans and bees [Woś 2014]. Among others, places related to api-tourism can be visited in the Lubelskie Voivodeship, Podlaskie Voivodeship, and Pomorskie Voivodeship.

Of course, the existence of lesser-known tourist attractions will not cause Kraków, which is part of the UNESCO list, to lose tourists. It is a place that foreign tourists eagerly visit. However, appropriate promotion of interesting places with both landscape and educational values, where a person can actively relax, can be an enjoyable and attractive alternative, especially for domestic tourists.

Rural tourism development in Serbia

In Serbia, one can observe the early phase of overtourism, but it is not as disturbing as in the areas indicated above in Poland or other famous places in Europe, such as Venice (Italy) or the Canary Islands (Spain). The most crowded city with tourists is the capital of Serbia, Belgrade – especially the Old Town, the Kalemegdan Fortress, and the artistic district of Skadarlija. Locals complain about excessive commercialization and noise resulting from the party tourism trend, similar to Krakow. In the high season and on weekends, overtourism is visible in Tara National Park and the surroundings of Drvengrad, one of Serbia's most beautiful natural areas. Similarly, Kopaonik (ski resort), like Polish Zakopane, attracts tourists in winter and summer. Appropriate planning can stop unfavorable trends related to the degradation of the environment and landscape, excessive pressure on local resources and residents, and excessive commercialization of the area. Of course, this requires a balanced approach to achieve a balance between

the expected economic benefits, the well-being and quality of life of local communities, and the preservation of the natural environment.

The development of rural tourism in Serbia aims to economically stimulate these areas and often improve the standard of living of their inhabitants. As shown by Obradović et al. [2021], local communities in the Bačko Podunavlje Biosphere Reserve in Serbia are open to tourists and focused on the economic and infrastructural benefits of tourism development, which are intended to improve their quality of everyday life. They do not yet notice any signs of overtourism. Similar conclusions were obtained from the research of residents in the National Park Đerdap area by Brankov et al. [2015]. Additionally, they indicated that residents more often evaluate benefits from the point of view of an individual, rather than from the perspective of the area or community as a whole.

Serbia, although less known as a wine country than, for example, Italy or France, has a long tradition of viticulture and wine production, and wine routes are becoming increasingly popular among both local and foreign tourists. Among the areas critical in this respect is the Fruška Gora Wine Route (Vojvodina, Novi Sad area), which is home to over 60 wineries, organizes wine festivals, and allows tourists to visit historic monasteries or walk around the Fruška Gora National Park in addition to tastings. Other famous wine routes in Serbia are located in the Župa region (Aleksandrovac) and Timok (Eastern Serbia). The first one is called the Serbian Tuscany; the vineyards are located in picturesque valleys between the Goč and Kopaonik mountains. Tourists can also visit the Wine Museum here and participate in the annual grape harvest festival, Župska berba. The wine route in Timok is located in less frequented areas, which allows for the development of enotourism on family farms [Sekulić et al. 2016, Đenadić and Rudež 2018, Trišić et al. 2020]. In turn, craft beer tourism in Serbia is a dynamically developing niche trend that combines local culture, crafts, and new travel styles – and, therefore, fits perfectly into the concept of sustainable tourism development [Gajić et al. 2021].

The case studies show that Poland and Serbia are taking different actions toward sustainable tour-

ism. Poland focuses on problems related to excessive tourist traffic and protecting sensitive ecosystems. On the other hand, Serbia emphasizes the development of ecotourism and nature protection in less urbanized regions. In both countries, effective tourism management through legal regulations, environmental education, and the development of alternative forms of tourism is crucial.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of sustainable tourism development in Poland and Serbia indicates significant similarities and differences resulting from the political and institutional context. As a member of the EU, Poland systematically implements recommendations from the European Green Deal and the Transition Pathway for Tourism strategy, emphasizing the development of low-emission, digital tourism and support for local communities. In the process of integration with the EU, Serbia is taking actions similar to EU standards, developing tourism based on natural values and cultural heritage. On the one hand, membership in the EU requires many adjustments; still, on the other hand, it provides broad opportunities to promote the entire country or its regions, as is the case during Poland's presidency of the EU in the first half of 2025.

Both in Poland and Serbia, there is a growing interest in sustainable tourism among consumers and changing trends in the expectations of tourists. Environmental challenges, such as excessive pressure from mass tourism, loss of biodiversity, waste generation, and the effects of climate change, require an integrated approach and intersectoral cooperation; in this context, the assumptions of the circular economy are also relevant. This is necessary to balance economic development and the protection of natural resources. Poland and Serbia have significant potential for developing sustainable tourism but face different challenges. Poland should focus on reducing overtourism and better managing tourist traffic, while Serbia should invest in tourist infrastructure and environmental protection. Supporting innovation and the environmental education of tourists and local communities is crucial.

Both countries should strengthen cooperation between public institutions, the private sector, and local

communities, and invest more in green infrastructure and digital innovation in the tourism sector. Expanding educational activities aimed at tourists and tour operators is also essential.

In the future, in the context of building new strategies for sustainable tourism development, it is worth analyzing the long-term impact of such policies on the local economy, local communities, and the state of the environment, especially in rural and protected areas. Comparative studies between EU Member States and candidate countries, showing the effectiveness of various tourism management models (also in the context of crises similar to the COVID-19 pandemic or the occurrence of extreme weather phenomena – e.g., floods), as well as activities carried out in the field of sustainable inclusive tourism, would be valuable.

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ROZWÓJ TURYSTYKI ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ ZGODNEJ Z POLITYKĄ, TRENDAMI KONSUMENCKIMI I WYZWANIAMİ ŚRODOWISKOWYMI W POLSCE I SERBII

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem artykułu jest porównanie podejść do turystyki zrównoważonej w Polsce i Serbii. Przeanalizowano obecne trendy konsumenckie w Unii Europejskiej, Polsce (kraju członkowskim UE) i Serbii (kraju kandydującym do UE). Przedstawiono cele najnowszych dostępnych strategii rozwoju turystyki w obu krajach. Podjęto próbę wskazania pożądanych kierunków działań w najbliższej przyszłości z perspektywy zmieniających się oczekiwań turystów, wyzwań środowiskowych i założeń koncepcji rozwoju zrównoważonego. **Metody:** Metody obejmowały analizę *desk research* (analiza dokumentów i różnych rodzajów polityki publicznej), analizę treści (analiza stron internetowych agencji krajowych rozwoju turystyki) oraz studium przypadku (wskazujące konkretne działania). **Wyniki:** Analiza rozwoju turystyki zrównoważonej w Polsce i Serbii wskazuje na istotne podobieństwa, ale także różnice wynikające z kontekstów politycznego i instytucjonalnego. Polska, jako członek UE, systematycznie wdraża zalecenia wynikające ze zbioru inicjatyw politycznych pod wspólną nazwą Europejski zielony ład oraz strategii przemysłowej Ścieżka transformacji dla turystyki, przy czym kraj kładzie nacisk na rozwój turystyki niskoemisyjnej, cyfrowej i wspieranie

społeczności lokalnych. Serbia, która dąży do integracji z UE, podejmuje działania zbliżone do standardów unijnych w ramach rozwoju turystyki wykorzystującej walory przyrodnicze i dziedzictwo kulturowe.

Wnioski: W obu badanych krajach obserwuje się rosnące zainteresowanie turystyką zrównoważoną wśród konsumentów i zmieniające się trendy w oczekiwaniach turystów. Wyzwania środowiskowe, takie jak: nadmierna presja ze strony turystyki masowej, utrata różnorodności biologicznej, wytwarzanie odpadów czy skutki zmian klimatycznych, wymagają podejścia zintegrowanego i współpracy międzysektorowej; w tym kontekście również założeń gospodarki o obiegu zamkniętym. Jest to konieczne, aby zachować równowagę między rozwojem gospodarczym a ochroną zasobów naturalnych. Polska i Serbia mają znaczny potencjał do rozwoju turystyki zrównoważonej, ale stoją przed innymi wyzwaniami. Polska powinna skupić się na ograniczeniu nadmiernej turystyki i lepszym zarządzaniu ruchem turystycznym, podczas gdy Serbia powinna inwestować w infrastrukturę turystyczną i ochronę środowiska przyrodniczego. Wspieranie innowacji i edukacji ekologicznej turystów i społeczności lokalnych ma w tym zakresie kluczowe znaczenie.

Słowa kluczowe: rozwój zrównoważony, turystyka, polityka rozwoju, trendy konsumenckie