Development of a Tourism Destination Competitiveness Model for Serbia –A Participatory Approach

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Abstract— Tourism destination competitiveness has been studied by many research scholars who proposed different destination competitiveness evaluation models. However, there is no single set of indicators applicable to all destinations and a more specific approach for each destination is required. The aim of this paper is to present development of a novel tourism destination competitiveness model for Serbia (TOURCOMSERBIA), which creation is based on the participatory approach which was overlooked in the previous models. Participatory approach is mirrored in the application of the DELPHI method which was used for defining the model indicators by key tourism stakeholders in Serbia. Prior to application of Delphi method, a thorough literature review on destination competitiveness was performed which resulted in the total of 165 indicators extracted. Then, the Delphi method was applied through three rounds of indicators evaluation, where stakeholders estimated how relevant each of the 165 indicators is for measuring destination competitiveness of Serbia. After literature review, a targeted workshop where Delphi was applied, and pilot testing the final model was established, containing 101 indicators. The model is useful for policymakers to evaluate tourism competitiveness of Serbia over time and to guide them in their policy choices. This study presents and discusses the stages of model development and offers theoretical and practical contributions with generally applicable insights for Serbia and similar destinations.

Keywords: Competitiveness; Tourism Destination; Sustainability; Participatory Approach; Serbia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Destination competitiveness remains a popular topic [1, 2], as maintaining a competitive position, especially in uncertain times, represents a challenge even for the most developed destinations. The increasing amount of research in this area has been a result of the growing interest in the competitiveness of tourism destinations [3] acknowledging its importance for countries' development and prosperity. Besides scientific papers, destination competitiveness is being measured and presented through Tourism&Travel Competitiveness Report presented by World Economic Forum (T&TCI WEF) every two years [4]. However, this report does not take into account specificities and differences between countries and leaves space for significant improvements in terms of the measurement model. This is also highlighted by Shariffuddin et al. [1] who state that TTCI is disputable since it does not consider the importance of market size, the economy's state of the destination and its degree of dependence when dealing with the tourism industry [5].

On the other hand, most of the scientific studies focusing on destination competitiveness still rely on Ritchie and Crouch's [6] model and Dwyer and Kim's model [7], while the literature lacks some specific competitiveness models that are more suitable to measure and monitor destination competitiveness of developing countries. Moreover, participatory, and sustainable approaches are often overlooked in studies on destination competitiveness. This creates room for improvement of the existing evaluation models and the creation of a more specific model based on the participatory input of all relevant tourism stakeholders at the destination. One of the studies that recognized the importance of a sustainability approach for destination competitiveness was the study of Hassan [8], who introduced a competitiveness model that analyzes the relationships between all stakeholders involved in creating and integrating additional values to maintain a favorable market position concerning other competitors [5], However, such models are quite rare. Additionally, the existing destination competitiveness model often takes into account only evaluations coming from one target group – mostly stakeholders, while visitors, tour operators and local communities are very often neglected in that process.

Having in mind this literature gap, this paper aims to present the development of a novel tourism destination competitiveness model for Serbia (TOURCOMSERBIA), which creation is based on the participatory approach which was overlooked in the previous models. A participatory approach is mirrored in the application of the DELPHI method which was used for defining the model indicators by key tourism stakeholders in Serbia. Prior to the application of the Delphi method, a thorough literature review on destination competitiveness was performed to generate the basic sub-indicators of destination competitiveness evaluation. After the literature review, a targeted workshop has been conducted with a Delphi method applied to evaluate experts' opinions. The paper discussed the process of indicator

development, the evaluation of indicators by stakeholders, but also the importance of the model for policy-making and destination development.

II. METODOLOGY

A. Delphi method

The Delphi method is used to find consensus on which indicators are the most relevant for measuring the tourism destination competitiveness of Serbia. The authors discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the model [9] point out that the search for a consensus by use of the Delphi method may appear in different phases of the research process and for solving various research problems. Thus, its main aim is to obtain a consensus among experts rather than compromised opinions. Delphi method is usually applied in a way that firstly the research scope and theme are determined, followed by experts being selected and answering questionnaires in three to four rounds. The first round mainly revolves around the theme and knowledge provision. Opinions are exchanged and a consensus is achieved between the experts throughout the rounds. During the final round, previous conclusions are provided to the experts to yield a conclusion [10].

B. Participants

Taking into account that the Delphi method is based on experts' opinions, the participants who are selected to be included in the study are experts and scholars who represent important stakeholders in the tourism of Serbia. The participants were from the public, private and NGO sectors in tourism. The study included 42 participants in the first round, 35 participants in the second and 35 participants in the third round. The participants were experts from Academia (researchers, and professors), Tour operators, and representatives of Tourism organizations, Non-governmental institutions, Hotel managers and other public and private
tourism-related enterprises and organizations.

C. Instruments and procedure

As a preparation for applying the Delphi method, a thorough literature review has been done to extract the destination competitiveness indicators for further purification and evaluation [5]. The Scopus database was used, and about 272 papers were extracted for analysis. This resulted in a total of 165 relevant indicators that were selected and included in the research.

The Delphi method was applied through three stages/rounds of the research. The first round of the Delphi method was performed to select key tourism stakeholders in Serbia (experts in the industrial, governmental, and academic sectors) who were invited to fill in the questionnaire before the official workshop (first round). The respondents were asked to estimate how relevant each of the 165 indicators is for measuring the destination competitiveness of Serbia. For these purposes, a Likert scale from 1 to 5 was used (1-not relevant at all, 5 – very relevant). A total of 42 answers were collected. Afterward, the answers were analyzed and indicators were ranked based on the mean values of the answers. All indicators with a mean value below 4 were marked to be excluded from the study. Also, indicators with high standard deviations were marked to be discussed at the workshop. After this step, the 131 indicators were extracted for the second round.

The second round of Delphi was performed during the workshop held in Belgrade in June 2022. The response rate was 83.3%, as 35 answers were collected. After the discussion of indicators, the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire again (third round). The procedure of analysis and elimination was the same as in the first round, and for the third round, 103 indicators were left to be estimated. After repeating the procedure for the third time (35 experts), a total of 101 indicators were extracted as relevant for measuring the tourism destination competitiveness of Serbia. The indicators extracted in this research process and divided into thematic categories can be seen in tables 2-7.

III. RESULTS

After conducting three rounds of the Delphi method, the authors have extracted a total of 101 indicators that are suitable to be evaluated by tourism stakeholders. The following tables show indicators grouped in thematic categories, with mean values based on stakeholders' evaluation. Such groups and indicators will be further tested and validated after the implementation of the survey in practice.

The first table shows **Natural and cultural heritage - Inherited resources**, with seven indicators being extracted. It can be seen that almost all indicators have very high mean value, except for *Tourism is well-developed in the protected natural areas of Serbia*, meaning that Serbia is not yet competitive in these terms so the additional effort is required to assist tourism development in protected areas.

Table 1. An overview of indicators and stakeholders mean values for Natural and cultural heritage Inherited resources

Indicator	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
As a tourist destination, Serbia has unique natural resources and beauty of nature and landscape (the beauty of the natural environment and	4.56	0	2.2

biodiversity/flora and fauna, untouched nature, national parks and reserves)			
As a tourist destination Serbia has unique cultural resources	4.39	0	4.4
Serbia as a tourist destination has unique architectural features (local architecture)	4.00	0	0
The climate in Serbia is pleasant (climate conditions are suitable for tourism)	4.39	0	4.4
Tourism is well-developed in the protected natural areas of Serbia	3.31	0	0.00
Serbia as a tourist destination has a rich tangible cultural heritage (monuments. buildings, archaeological/historical sites/parks, monasteries and other heritage objects, museums, etc.)	4.46	0	6.7
Serbia as a tourist destination has a rich intangible cultural heritage (unique traditional values, oral tradition, language, social practices, rituals, festive events, traditional crafts, etc.)"	4.44	0	0.00

The second indicator group is related to **Created resources,** containing 16 indicators. This group of indicators requires specific knowledge of tourism stakeholders. Indicators with mean values are shown in table 2.

Table 2. An overview of indicators and stakeholders' mean values for Created Resources

Indicator	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
Serbia has diverse and high-quality hotel accommodation facilities	3.42	0	2.2
Tourist information centers are available and high quality	3.11	2.2	
Serbia has a high-quality restaurant offer (quality of food and service in restaurants)	3.79	0	4.4
There is a quality offer of amusement and theme parks in Serbia	3.00	6.67	0
In Serbia there is a wide selection of complementary accommodation capacities (family houses. camps, Couchsurfing, etc.)	3.32	2.2	0
Tourist activities in Serbia are high-quality and diverse (tourist activities that complete the experience - activities on the water. adventure activities, activities in nature / e.g. walking in the forest, hiking, outdoor activities, etc.)	3.54	0	2.2
There is a high-quality offer of nightlife and entertainment in Serbia (bars, discotheques, clubs, rafts, casinos, etc.)	4.24	0	4.4
Serbia has frequent and high-quality events (special events/festivals excluding business tourism events)	3.95	2.22	2.2
Tourism products in Serbia enable tourists to stay longer at destination	3.61	2.2	2.22
Serbia has a rich and high-quality offer of skiing and mountain tourism	3.49	0	0.00
Serbia has a rich and high-quality offer of rural tourism (village tourism, agritourism...)	3.54	0	2.2
Serbia has a rich and high-quality offer of health, spa and wellness tourism	3.38	0	0
Serbia has adequate capacities for business tourism	3.62	2.2	2.2
Serbia has a rich and high-quality offer of content and activities for domestic tourism (offer for trips of domestic tourists in the country)	3.77	2.2	2.2

The offer of foreign tour operators for visiting Serbia is rich and diverse	2.70	6.7	0
Local food and cuisine in Serbia are high-quality and authentic	4.28	0	2.2

It can be seen that created resources have much lower mean values compared to Inherited resources. This means that Serbia as a tourist destination has immense potential in natural and heritage resources, however, tourism infrastructure and substructure as well as activity offer is on a low level. The most critical points according to stakeholders are the offer of foreign tour operators for visiting Serbia which is very obscure, the availability of tourist info centers, the offer of amusement and theme parks in Serbia and a wide selection of complementary accommodation capacities.

The third extracted group is labeled **Supporting factors and resources** and it contains 18 indicators.

Table 3. An overview of indicators and stakeholders' mean values for **Supporting factors and resources**

Indicators	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
The Tourist Organization of Serbia establishes adequate connections with tourist companies (travel agencies. tour operators, airlines, hotel chains, etc.)	3.30	6.7	2.2
The visa policy for entering the country is favorable	3.73	6.7	2.2
Serbia provides quality health services to tourists	3.32	11.1	4.4
In Serbia. Wi-Fi, Internet and telecommunications infrastructure are highly available for tourists	3.72	0	2.2
In Serbia. there are applications (internet and mobile) that support the tourist experience in the destination	3.35	4.44	2.2
The application of modern information technologies and electronic commerce in tourism in Serbia is in line with the trends in the tourist market.	3.05	6.7	2.2
Serbia as a tourist destination is accessible (proximity to the destination in relation to the main markets. transport accessibility, etc.)	3.74	0	4.4
Locations and attractions of importance for tourism are accessible to tourists	3.41	0	2.2
Local tourist and traffic signage meets the needs of tourists	3.03	0	2.2
The road transport infrastructure in Serbia is of high quality	2.95	4.4	2.2
The air transport infrastructure in Serbia is of high quality	3.43	4.4	0
Cycling and hiking trails in Serbia are of high quality and adequately maintained	2.81	6.7	0
The local population in Serbia is hospitable	4.26	0	4.4
The atmosphere in Serbia as a tourist destination is pleasant/relaxing	4.21	0	4.4
Taxi and public transport services in Serbia are of high quality and reliable	3.18	2.2	2.2
In Serbia. there are adequate signs in English as well as menus in English in restaurants	3.13	0	0.00
Local population and employees in tourism adequately use foreign languages in communication with tourists	3.42	2.2	2.2
The level of hygiene and cleanliness in Serbia is high	2.90	0	0.00

The results for supporting factors and facilities show even lower mean values than the previously analyzed categories. In this group, the most critical points are The level of hygiene and cleanliness, the quality of Cycling and hiking trails in Serbia, and the quality of road transport infrastructure in Serbia.

The next thematic category of indicators is labeled **Destination management**, containing 33 indicators, which makes it the most comprehensive group in the model. This also means that tourism stakeholders consider Destination management as a very important element of the overall tourism destination competitiveness.

Table 4. An overview of indicators and stakeholders' mean values for Destination management

Indicator	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
The government determines sufficient funds for the activities of the Tourist Organization of Serbia	2.92	6.7	0
Tourism companies in Serbia have access to funds from the tourism development program	3.22	4.4	0
In Serbia, there are adequate tax incentives for the tourism industry	2.54	11.1	0
Subsidies from the public sector for Serbian tourism are adequate and available to all actors	2.74	11.1	2.2
The public sector has clear training programs for tourism businesses	2.70	4.4	0
The existing tourism policy, tourism planning and development are in line with the vision of Serbia as a tourist destination	3.00	6.7	0
The local community in Serbia support tourism development	3.50	2.2	2.2
The level and volume of realized public-private partnerships in Serbian tourism are at a satisfactory level	2.73	6.7	0
Key actors in Serbian tourism are involved in the decision-making process and long-term planning of tourism	2.69	6.7	2.2
Local communities in Serbia are engaged in the production of food for the needs of tourism	3.14	6.7	11.1
Tourist companies/destinations in Serbia have defined risk and crisis management strategies	2.50	2.2	0
The private sector in Serbian tourism recognizes the importance of sustainable tourism development	3.18	4.4	0
The public sector in Serbia recognizes the importance of sustainable tourism development	3.08	2.2	0
Certified sustainability programs / green (eco) certifications exist/are implemented in Serbia as a tourist destination	2.74	11.1	0
Positioning Serbia as a tourist destination on the international market is efficient	3.11	6.7	0
The NTO of Serbia (TOS) clearly identifies the target markets of Serbia as tourist destinations	3.11	8.9	0
The effects of marketing activities in Serbia are regularly monitored by TOS	3.18	15.6	0
Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) are effectively used to support the marketing activities of Serbia as a tourist destination.	3.41	4.4	0
The value for money ratio in terms of the tourist experience in Serbia is positive	3.54	2.2	2.2
In Serbia, there are clear standards for food production and preparation	3.22	8.9	0
Tourism companies monitor/survey the satisfaction of their visitors/users of services	3.08	2.2	0
Tourism companies in Serbia develop and promote innovative tourism products	3.17	2.2	4.4
In Serbia as a tourist destination, there is a clearly established framework for quality management in tourism	2.77	8.9	2.2
Tourist products and services in Serbia are accessible to people with disabilities	2.69	6.7	0
In Serbia, products, contents and activities in tourism produce a quality tourist experience	3.44	2.2	4.4
Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in tourism have clear standards regarding the achievement of performance in the provision of services	3.00	11.1	2.2

Large companies in tourism have clear standards regarding the achievement of performance in the provision of services	3.28	13.3	4.4
Tourism companies operate following the ethical principles	3.32	6.7	0
In Serbia, there are favorable conditions for the development of entrepreneurship in tourism	2.97	2.2	2.2
In Serbia, there are adequate education programs in tourism	3.00	4.4	4.4
There is a high level of awareness among employees in tourism in Serbia about the importance of delivering quality services (to visitors, guests, tourists...)	3.33	2.2	4.4

This group of indicators contains the lowest grades given by stakeholders, is clear that there is a lack of quality tourism management, the incentive for tourism entrepreneurship but also a lack of attention related to sustainability, certifications and education.

Situation conditions include 13 indicators and refer to the political relations and conditions, investment opportunities, prices and workforce, with the most critical points being salaries of employees in tourism and unfavorable legal framework for tourism development with emphasis on the need for greater investments in Serbia as a tourism destination.

Table 5. An overview of indicators and stakeholders mean values for Situation conditions

Indicators	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
The legal/regulatory environment in Serbia is favorable for the development of tourism	2.97	8.9	2.2
The investment environment in Serbia is suitable/favorable for the development of tourism	3.36	6.7	2.2
There is a greater need for foreign direct investments in Serbian tourism	3.76	2.2	2.2
There is a greater need for investment in Serbia's tourism from domestic sources (domestic investments)	4.16	0	2.2
Political relations between Serbia and the main emission markets are favorable	3.59	4.4	2.2
Political values, the overall political situation and stability in Serbia are favorable for the development of tourism.	3.43	2.2	2.2
As a tourist destination, Serbia has qualified workers in tourism	3.45	0	2.2
Salaries of employees in tourism in Serbia are at an appropriate level	2.11	6.7	0
Tourism in Serbia provides benefits to the local community	3.69	0	0.00
Opportunities for employment of the local population in tourism are high	3.41	2.2	0.00
The prices of tourist services offered at destination (accommodation, transportation prices, and other elements of the service offer in the destination) are favorable	3.13	2.2	0
Tourist destinations in Serbia are adequately supplied with electricity	3.82	0	0
The supply of high-quality drinking water is ensured in the destinations in Serbia	3.74	2.2	0

The next group of indicators is **Demand conditions,** containing nine indicators. The results of the mentioned group of indicators point out that Serbia still does not have a clear position in the market and that there is a strong need for developing a clear brand and branding strategy to create destination awareness in the market.

Table 6. An overview of indicators and stakeholders mean values for Demand conditions

Indicators	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
There is a clear awareness in the international market of Serbia as a tourist destination	2.97	6.7	4.4
Serbia is an attractive tourist destination	3.87	0	0.00
The image and perception of Serbia on the market are	3.31	4.4	2.2

positive			
Information about Serbia as a tourist destination is easily available on the international market	3.24	4.4	2.2
Tourist information is easily available to tourists during their stay in Serbia	3.10	0	2.2
Booking travel services and online booking of products and services are easy and reliable	3.59	2.2	2.2
The brand of Serbia as a tourist destination is recognizable on the international tourist market	3.08	4.4	2.2
Experiences in Serbia as a tourist destination correspond to the needs and expectations of tourists	3.49	0	6.7
Tourists are ready to recommend Serbia as a destination to visit	3.69	4.4	4.4

A final group of indicators is labeled as Sustainability indicators and it contains seven indicators.

Table 7. An overview of indicators and stakeholders' mean values for Sustainability indicators

Indicators	Mean	% Not enough info	% not well formulated
Cultural assets in Serbia are adequately managed	2.94	6.7	4.4
The natural environment in Serbia is adequately managed	2.69	4.4	4.4
In Serbia. there is adequate care for environmental protection	2.51	6.7	2.2
Companies in Serbian tourism efficiently manage waste and wastewater	2.38	8.9	4.4
The air in Serbia is polluted	3.62	0	4.4
The noise in destinations in Serbia is very pronounced	3.24	0	2.2
The waters in Serbia are polluted	3.26	0	2.2

Again, the low mean value indicates that the aspect of sustainability is currently neglected in Serbia and that there is a large room for improvement in this field.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper demonstrates the initial but very important steps in creating a specific tourism destination competitiveness model for Serbia. It demonstrates how the Delphi method was applied to enable a participatory approach in model development based on expert opinion. Moreover, the paper shows that a multi-method approach is usually necessary to achieve objectivity and the most relevant data about which indicators to include in the model. The research resulted in a comprehensive list of indicators (101 indicators) divided into seven categories describing the main aspects of tourism destination competitiveness. The results of the experts' evaluation also pointed out the main weaknesses and good strengths of Serbia's competitive position. It shows that major drawbacks lay in created resources, destination management and destination sustainability.

On the other hand, Inherited resources are the biggest strength of Serbia's competitive position. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report [4], Serbia is not holding a favorable position in the global market. The country was ranked 83rd among 140 countries listed in the report. This emphasizes the fact that constant monitoring and evaluation of key competitive indicators is necessary in order to improve the major drawbacks of tourism. This is the way the creation of a specific evaluation model for Serbia is of great importance.

Apart from this, the results show that the items of the created scale are quite clear and understandable to all respondents. There are only a few questions that were marked as "not well formulated" by more than 10% of the sample. These items should be considered for reformulation as well as the items respondents marked as they do not have enough information to answer. Results show that Internal stakeholders considered all questions as understandable and clear, which was quite expected, as they were largely involved in scale creation through three rounds of the Delphi method. It is important to mention that the model is intended to measure destination competitiveness not only based on tourism stakeholders' opinions, but also based on the evaluation of tourists, local community and stakeholders' opinion. In order to make the model suitable to evaluate the opinions of other target groups, the indicators will be pilot tested to obtain information about which indicators can be evaluated by each group. Afterwards, the models will be applied and validated.

V. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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