

BULGARIAN–GREEK CULTURAL-HISTORICAL TOURISM CORRIDORS

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Introduction

The present work considers some aspects of one of the types of specialised tourism in Bulgaria, namely the cultural-historical one. An attempt is made for juxtaposition with Greece, a country having rich traditions in this respect; and situated in the geographical neighbourhood of Bulgaria.

This choice for comparison and combination, except the geographical proximity and rich experience of Greece, is determined also by the fact that most of the cultures and civilizations that emerged on the Balkan Peninsula have left similar monuments in both countries exactly due to this geographical neighbourhood.

As a result of the geographical situation of the Balkan Peninsula, a crossroad, shortest way and “bridge” between Europe and Asia, it has attracted the attention and interests of different conquerors since the ancient age. On account of that, it has been the object of aggressors’ aims; and for long historical periods partly or entirely had been dominated by a variety of Balkan and foreign civilisations. All these civilizations, independently of their modern assessment, objectively left many and various ruins, which represent the interest, not only for the specialists, but for a lot of tourists. Some part of these monuments is included already in tourist turnover, but it can’t be claimed that an optimum is reached in this respect. The knowledge of these monuments, together with other types of tourism, historical sites etc., have to gain a greater priority in the supply of tourist packages and services.

Possibilities for cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and Greece in the cultural-historical tourism sphere

Bulgaria disposes over a number of internationally known and confirmed sea, mountain and balneological resorts, hunting parks, historical, religious, ethnographic and other centres and complexes, drawing many Bulgarian and foreign tourists (*Figure 1*). Over 5 million foreigners, excluding transit-passing, visit this country every year. On its territory are found about 40,000 historical monuments, sanctuaries, historical sites etc. 8000 of them have a proven high cultural-historical

value. That fact arranges Bulgaria in the third place after Italy and Greece among countries richest in cultural-historical monuments in Europe. Not accidentally, this kind of tourism and tourist products is indicated among the perspectives of the 2005–2015 National Strategy for Regional Development of Republic of Bulgaria.

Figure 1

Borderline of the Republic of Bulgaria



Source: Atlas of Bulgaria.

An important prerequisite, which facilitates to a great extent mutually favourable cooperation with Greek partners, is the accession of Bulgaria in the European Union, Greece being a member-country for several decades. The development of tourism in both Bulgaria and Greece in this context has to be in conformity with the new global tendencies, determined by the 1995 “A Charter for Sustainable Tourism”, developed by UNESCO in cooperation with the World Tourism Organization (WTO). Many authors already make the correct observation that the new

characteristics of tourist demand and supply, marketing and advertising strategies are determined by the higher interest of the tourists in the environment, the increasing interest in the healthy types of recreation, in the cultural-historical heritage.

Trends for the growth of tourism should correspond also with priorities of the 2004 “Programme for development of the tourism”, accepted by the same organizations in Beijing, which request the protection and development of the cultural-historical heritage, traditions and manners of the local population etc.

There is also an objective competition in tourism, as in the case of all other economic activities and sectors. It is expressed in various ways – offering of preferential seasonal prices, additional free-of-charge services, tourist package subscriptions, aggressive advertising activity etc. The different tour operator companies use still more effectively a great variety of advertisement approaches to attract tourist flows. This is a normal practice between competitors. But, having in mind the constant diversification of the offered packages or separate tourist services and the certain surfeit of the tourist market, wouldn't it be possible for the competitive subjects to be transformed into partners? This imposes the necessity of searching for new possibilities for the enrichment of the tourist potential, available in both countries.

Naturally, one of the most important possibilities for bilateral cooperation is the funding of joint projects. Certain financial resources are available within the framework of the EU PHARE Programme. More than 5.4 million Euro are envisioned in this programme for supporting projects related to the development of cultural, tourist and human resources on both sides of the Bulgarian-Greek border. The districts of Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Kardzhali and Haskovo are included in this range from the Bulgarian side and the prefectures of Thessaloniki, Seres, Drama, Xanthi, Rhodopi, Evros – from the Greek side.

The local authorities and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are among the factors, on which the submission for financing of projects depends, related to the more comprehensive investigation and use of the existing tourism, including cultural-historical tourist resources in this area.

A good example in this respect is the agreement between the ministers of tourism of Bulgaria and Greece for offering a joint tourist product (programme) “The Rhodopes – the native land of Orpheus”. There is hardly need to argue what the nationality or tribal affiliation of Orpheus or some other real or semi legendary personality, but it is important to try to find the common aspects into the discovered historical and archaeological monuments and to incorporate them in similar bilateral projects. This is the most effective way of using the discovered cultural-historical sites as the subject of cognitive tourism, which may be advantageous for both countries. It is exactly the creation of similar common tourist products and

their joint offering on the tourist markets, exhibitions and stock markets that will strengthen further on the cross-border cooperation as a whole.

Another common activity, is a tourist centre at the Perperikon ancient Thracian complex, will be created in the Bulgarian–Greek East Rhodopes mountain region. The EU PHARE Programme finances this project with 2.4 million Euro. The Project aims to increase tourist interest in the common cultural-historical heritage.

Substantiation of creation cultural-historical tourist corridors in Bulgaria and Greece and their definition

The paper contains a proposal for differentiating the cultural-historical monuments and sites that had been left as traces from various civilizations and had been built during different epochs in this part of the Balkan Peninsula – Bulgaria and Greece, as respective cultural-historical corridors. Here is the place to clarify what is the exact meaning of the concept of a “*cultural-historical tourist corridor*”. This is a geographically (territorially) differentiated sequence (chain) of cultural-historical objects of similar historical age, origin and features, belonging to a given epoch, which represent a tourist interest. Very often, except within the territory of one country, these corridors spread beyond its present borders. Depending on the historical period, in which these axes or corridors are created, they might be *prehistoric, ancient Greek, Thracian* etc. In the case when the aims of the visits are monuments and sites from one historical epoch, the cultural-historical corridor is “*thematic*” or “*mono-temporal*”. When objects from different epochs are included, which are in territorial proximity and have transport accessibility, the axes or corridors provisionally might be called “*complex*” or “*poly-temporal*”.

The development of similar topics related to proving the existence of cross-border cultural-historical corridors between the two countries, as well as their differentiation as an important segment of the tourist potential, will not only enrich this potential but will also contribute to its more complete and rational utilisation.

The work takes into consideration only these civilisations and cultures that have been reliably and authentically historically documented in our territories without taking into account the eventual remains from some cultures that have not been permanently established on the Balkan Peninsula – for example Celts, Goths and others. The reliable evidence for them is rather fragmentary and scarce. In this context, various remains have been scientifically established in the two countries from the following historical ages and civilizations:

- Prehistoric;
- Classical Greek antiquity and Hellenistic period;
- Thracian;
- Byzantine (East Roman Empire).

Of course, some of these epochs or civilizations existed and developed in parallel (synchronously) in the respective historical period and exerted mutual impact on each other to a certain extent, except that each of these civilisations had inherited something from the previous ones and this influence had also been reflected in the monuments that had reached the contemporary epoch.

The geographical distribution of main Bulgarian-Greek CHC (cultural-historical corridors)

The concept of *CHC*, however, is provisional and it should not be perceived in the direct geometrical sense. The aim is to point out the common aspects of the cultural-historical monuments that had been created throughout the ages by the single peoples and to outline their connection with the respective historical epochs and civilisations, as well as their significance as a common Balkan heritage.

The cultural-historical sites of the aforementioned epochs, and objects of cultural-historical tourism, are situated in different parts of the territory of Bulgaria and Greece. But the main Bulgarian-Greek CHC are situated in the Rhodope Mountains and at the Black Sea coast.

Rhodope CHC includes numerous antiquates from the mentioned epochs but the special feature of this corridor is the existence of a great number of prehistoric rock monuments. Two basic groups are mainly distinguished between the preserved remains: megaliths and caves. It is considered that most of the megaliths (menhires, steinkreise, hochkreuze – kromletsi and dolmens) were created during two of the three epochs of the Stone Age – the Mesolithic (10,000–6,000 B.C.) and the Neolithic (6–5,000 B.C.) periods. Science has not yet succeeded at explaining with certainty what the purpose of these stone structures was, but the most widespread opinion is that they had cultic functions. Some of them were used later as dwellings and for other purposes. According to *Ovcharov* (2005) megalithic structures of various forms have been discovered in Sakar, Strandzha, East Rhodopes, East Stara Planina Mts. and in other areas in Bulgaria. A part of the dolmens (their number being about 100) are found on both sides of the contemporary Bulgarian-Greek state border in East Rhodopes and they are dated as Early Iron Age. According to some authors (for example Gyurov and Rangelov, Zacharieva, etc.), other rock objects, which are widely distributed all over the Bulgarian territory, belong also to the megalithic culture – stone sanctuaries in caves, rock niches and other formations as these in East Rhodopes, the caves used as dwellings during the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age. Interesting rock sepulchres are found near the Pchelari and Ovchevo villages in Kardzhali district. Numerous domestic objects, weapons etc., have been discovered in many caves, but the rock images on

their walls, preserved to different extents, have the highest value. The first settlements in Greece also date back to the Paleolithic. Their remains are found in North Greece near the Bulgarian border, as well as in many other places. The megalithic culture in Greece was created by the Kars and Pelasgi tribes. Those were the first autochthonous settlers in continental and insular Greece and predecessors of the ancient Greeks, which have not been established to possess expressed megalithic practice and traditions. The considerations mentioned so far represent a sufficient argument for the differentiation of the prehistoric monuments at that part of the border as an individual cultural-historical tourist configuration. It is to be regretted that most of them are not sufficiently renowned and there is no good transport to ensure access to them. In this corridor are situated also objects from the Thracian epoch (Perperikon sanctuary, the Mezek tomb near Svilengrad, Aleksandrovo tomb near the city of Haskovo etc.) and Byzantine objects (remains of mediaeval towers and fortresses).

Black Sea coast corridor – the sites of this corridor are situated along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast and had been created during various epochs, but the most typical monuments are from the *classical Greek antiquity* (mainly from the period VI – IV B.C.) and the Hellenistic epoch. Classical Greek antiquity is also called the “Golden Age” or “Golden Centuries”. This was the period when all basic classical samples of Greek art and culture were created. Most of the eminent Greek writers, philosophers and scientists worked during this period. Large scale construction took place, accompanied by vigorous development of the arts, sciences, law, trade etc. Classical Greek antiquity by means of ancient Greek colonization at the Bulgarian Black Sea coast had left numerous traces. Such interesting remains have been discovered and are fit for tourist visits in the areas of the ancient towns-states of Apollonia Pontica (now Sozopol), Mesembria (present Nesebar), Odessos (Varna) and others, created by Milethian, Dorian and Ionian Greeks. The section of the fortress built by the ancient Mesembrians in the VI century B.C. is well preserved. It surrounded the peninsula of the present Nesebar for protection against rivals during this epoch – the Ionian colony of Apollonia Pontica; the remains of an ancient well are preserved – a part of the temple of Aphrodite in Sozopol, built probably in IV B.C., as well as many other monuments, a significant part of them being restored and prepared for tourist visits. The numerous stelae, weapons, utensils, coins and other exponents are exhibited in the rich collections in museums.

The Hellenistic epoch was the epoch when the first Eurasian intercontinental empire of Alexander The Great, was created, through which the ancient Greek (Hellenistic) civilization was distributed over almost the entire Balkan Peninsula, Asia Minor and the Middle East. A large share of the Thracian monuments bear its specific features. In this context, many of the remains of the Thracian and Hellenistic epochs overlap with respect to time, construction style etc., which is due to the certain hellenisation of the Thracian tribes and is the product of the influence of

Hellenistic culture and traditions especially on the Thracian ruling strata. Such monuments with respect to their images, building structure and other features, are concentrated mainly in the towns – Balchik (Bizone, Dionisopolis), Varna (Odesos), Nesebar (Mesembria), Sozopol (Apolonia Pontica), Pomorie (Anhialo).

Examples of cross-border tourist axes could be prehistoric sites on both sides of the Bulgarian–Greek border, monuments of Thracian and Ancient Greek cultural-historical heritage, visits to Byzantine and Bulgarian churches and monasteries – i.e. the formation of religious tourist axes etc. These are examples of thematic tourist axes.

In the geographical respect, for example, the Rhodopes-Strandzha cultural-historical corridor could be successfully combined with the Macedonian-Thracian one on Greek territory.

And since, as already mentioned, in the historical plan the cultural-historical monuments were created during epochs, when the whole or almost the whole Balkan peninsula was under the reign or range of one civilisation (Hellenistic, Roman etc.), it is possible not only to establish connections between the axes but also to offer and advertise them in the form of cross-border cultural tourist corridors, and to form respective tourist products, presented and offered at international exhibitions and stock-markets.

Of course, similar cross-border cultural-historical tourist connections, routes and products may and have to be created with other neighbouring countries too.

Along the Danube River, for example, cross-border tourist corridors presenting still preserved cultural-historical objects from the Roman Empire could be created. At that time a large-scale construction was started. A specific feature of this corridor is the large number of fortresses, built near the river banks. Plenty of roads, fortresses, well planned towns urbanised for their epoch with water supply conduits, theatres, therms (public baths), temples and other public buildings were erected in the conquered Thracian lands. Significant number of towns emerged around the military camps of the legions allocated at the Danube coasts. In the present Bulgarian territory, these are the ancient fortress Ratiaria (now Archar village), fortress Nove (near the present town of Svishtov), Dorostorum (now Silistra), Bononia (Vidin), Almus (Lom), Sextaguinta Prista (Ruse), Transmariska (Tutrakan) and others. Some of the Roman towns in the interior of the country were created around or on top of already existing Thracian settlements, mineral springs, defiles and strategic places. Others were entirely newly built. Ancient Roman towns – Nicopolis ad Istrum (now near Nikyup village), Abritus (present town of Razgrad), Ratiaria (Archar village) and some others have been partially uncovered until now. In the town of Silistra there is a Thracian sepulchre, which is a unique monument of world importance from the IV century B.C., with its rich ornamentation of well preserved frescoes. The alignments of the most important Roman roads are preserved along significant distances, for example the diagonal road “Via Militaris”,

passing throughout the entire Balkan Peninsula, “Via Egnatia”, passing along the northern Aegean coast of present Greece and many other roads, along which numerous post stations existed, the remains of some of them being preserved until now.

Conclusions

Regardless of the great ethno-religious diversity of the people inhabiting the Balkan Peninsula, they possess many common features both in psychology and traditions, life style and folklore, etc., which result from the common past and destiny during the previous historical periods. The concept, briefly proposed here, can overcome or at least mitigate the real or assumed rivalry between the countries on the peninsula, since all of them have created significant cultural monuments, representing incontrovertible tourist interest and being one of the most attractive in tourist respect not only in Europe but also in the world.

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