

## DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE BULGARIAN DISTRICT OF SLIVEN

**Blaga Stoykova** (*Trakia University Stara Zagora, Bulgaria*)<sup>✉</sup>

**José Luis Vázquez** (*University of León, Spain*)

**Ivan Georgiev** (*Trakia University Stara Zagora, Bulgaria*)

### Abstract:

The diversity of natural and cultural resources are one of the key factors for success in the race for a successful sale of tourist services and attracting a large number of tourists. The District of Sliven is located in the South East planning region (NUT2) of Bulgaria. The development of tourism in the area is to the highest extent predetermined by its proximity to the Southern Black Sea coast. Specifically, the District has diverse natural and cultural resources that are a precondition for the organization of multiple alternative forms of tourism.

This paper discusses the conditions for sustainable development of tourism on the territory of the District of Sliven based on statistic data for the activity of shelter points and places of accommodation in the area for the last 7 years. The used research methods are analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction.

**Keywords:** *tourism; sustainable development; natural and cultural resources; Bulgaria; District of Sliven*

## DESARROLLO Y PROMOCIÓN DE ACTIVIDADES TURÍSTICAS EN EL DISTRITO BÚLGARO DE SLIVEN

### Resumen:

La diversidad de recursos naturales y culturales es uno de los factores clave del éxito en la carrera por una exitosa venta de servicios turísticos y para atraer un mayor número de turistas. El Distrito de Sliven se encuentra localizado en la región de planificación Sudeste (NUT2) de Bulgaria. El desarrollo del turismo en la zona está hasta el máximo extremo predeterminado por su proximidad a la costa sur del Mar Negro. Específicamente, el Distrito tiene diversos recursos naturales y culturales que son una condición previa para la organización de múltiples formas alternativas de turismo.

Este artículo analiza las condiciones para el desarrollo sostenible del turismo en el territorio del Distrito de Sliven en base a datos estadísticos de la actividad de puntos de refugio y lugares de alojamiento en la zona durante los últimos 7 años. Los métodos de investigación utilizados son análisis y síntesis, inductivo y deductivo.

**Palabras clave:** *turismo; desarrollo sostenible; recursos naturales y culturales; Bulgaria; Distrito de Sliven*

---

<sup>✉</sup> Faculty of Economics (Trakia University Stara Zagora), Student Campus 6000-Stara Zagora (Bulgaria)  
e-mail: [blaga\\_st@abv.bg](mailto:blaga_st@abv.bg)

## 1. Introduction

The District of Sliven is located in the South East planning region (NUT2) of Bulgaria. As mentioned in the *Regional Development Strategy for the District of Sliven 2005-2015*, there are a number of remarkable natural, cultural and historic resources in the territory which could contribute to the development and promotion of tourism activities in the area.

Among the natural resources in the District a special place is held by The Sinite Kamani Natural Park and the Kutelka Natural Reserve, located on its territory. The latter is of international significance with respect to preserving the habitats of the rare birds (imperial eagle, golden eagle, lesser spotted eagle, black vulture and white-tailed vulture). Other natural sights include Zhrebchevo Reservoir, Prikazna Cave, one of the highest peaks in the Central Stara Planina-Chumerna peak (1,536 meters) as well as several mineral water springs (in the region of Sliven Spa Resort and the village of Banya).

With regard to the cultural and historic resources on the territory of the District there are 1,255 registered cultural monuments (including the Districts of Sliven, Nova Zagora, Kotel and Tvarditsa). The cultural and historical heritage in the District is diverse and scattered all over although most sites are located in cities. More than 120 prehistoric settlements and burial mounds have been registered in the District of Sliven. The greatest cultural interest is drawn to the Karanovskata and Dyadovskata burial mounds in the municipality of Nova Zagora. Especially significant and unique is the Karanovska settlement mound. It is the first monumental benchmark for studies and research of prehistoric civilizations in the South East of Europe. The oldest among them date back to almost 6200 B.C. Another source for development of cultural and educational tourism is related to the prehistoric settlement mounds in the villages of Zlati Voivoda, Blatets, Gavrailovo and Zhelyo Voivoda, all of them located in the municipality of Sliven<sup>1</sup>.

More than 300 well-preserved Thracian burial mounds (according to data taken from the History Museum in Sliven) are located in the area. There are also archaeological findings from Roman and Byzantine periods all over the territory of the District but of particular interest is the stronghold of Tuida on the territory of the town of Sliven, in the South Eastern part of the Sinite Kamani Natural Park.

**Figure 1.** Location of the District of Sliven in the NUT2 South East planning region and Bulgaria



<sup>1</sup> A number of publications list and highlight these ones and other resources in the area. As an example, we could refer to those by Konstantinov (1978), Tabakov (1993) and Koychev (1997).

The well-developed network of museums in the region includes 16 museums (excluding galleries and exhibition halls), some of which are unique in the country. This cultural offer includes, for example, the National Museum of the Textile Industry in Sliven, and the Galatan School Museum in Kotel, which preserves an unique collection of old Kotel carpets and modern textile wall panels. In addition, tourists can visit the District houses, the Regional Historical Museum in Sliven, the Museum of Nova Zagora and several other fine art galleries.

Additionally, different renowned festivals –some of them with a considerable international participation–, attract many visitors to the District. These events include, e.g. the Festival of Folk Costumes in the village of Zheravna, and the Karakachan Festivities in Karandila area.

So, the territory of the District of Sliven has a huge potential for a successful implementation of mountain, rural and eco-tourism –these three closely related to the geographical location and natural resources in the area–, together with complementary activities, as sports, cultural and educational tourism (as the District of Sliven holds the third place amongst the other districts in the country regarding the number of cultural monuments) or spa tourism (thanks to the availability of mineral springs in the territory).

Such a huge and diverse tourism resources potential provides unique opportunities for the sustainable development of the tourism sector, just as in case of other selected locations in the country (e.g. Zheliazkov et al. 2013a, Zheliazkov et al. 2013b, Ivanova et al. 2014) when dealing with the topic of alternative tourism in Bulgaria, the growing demand at global level becomes a crucial issue (Vázquez et al. 2005), just as in case of close neighbouring countries, both from an internal and external perspective (Naghiu et al. 2005).

## **2. Tourism infrastructure and superstructure in the District of Sliven**

The geographic location of the District of Sliven is suitable when aiming the development of the tourism industry. At the least, and due to the proximity of the District to the South Black Sea coast, it is a transit area in the country that transports a large number of visitors to their popular seaside resorts and holiday coastal destination.

Accordingly, there is a well-developed national road network in the District of Sliven which holds a huge potential to transport people from the one to the another of the highest populated places in the country, as well as to develop economic contacts (including touristic ones) among firms and/or individuals. This road network also provides convenient connections between the municipalities in the area and the District centre. Specifically, the territory of Sliven is crossed by the Pan-European transport corridor VIII (Bari / Brindisi / Durres / Vlorë - Tirana - Skopje - Sofia - Plovdiv - Stara Zagora - Sliven - Burgas / Varna), that is, a traffic route congregating most transit flows to the Trakia Highway.

The main road servicing the District of Sliven and the District's centre is the first-class road I-6 (Macedonian Border / checkpoint Gyueshevo - Kyustendil, Pernik - Sofia - Karlovo - Kazanlak - Sliven - Karnobat - Burgas). This road is the main transport axis connecting the District town of Sliven with the capital, as well as the regional centre of Burgas with the Black Sea coast in West-East direction. However, nowadays the newly constructed highway Trakiya is the one that covers for the long-distance transport connections, a modern infrastructure which has resulted in significant decrease of traffic load off the first-class road.

As mentioned in the *Regional Strategy for Improving Road Safety (2011-2020)*, both roads have a traffic load of over 11,000 vehicles per day. During the summer season the traffic throughput of both roads is up to their limit. Long lines of vehicles are often formed leading to traffic jams. In view of the fact that the District of Sliven serves as a connecting point to the most popular sea destinations, this is a serious economic basis for transport investments. For this reason, a long section of the Trakia Highway passes this way. Its commissioning has improved the traffic conditions in the District.

On the periphery, the first class road I-7 (Silistra - Shumen - Yambol - Elhovo - Lesovo / Turkey) crosses through the Eastern part of Sliven District carrying out the international traffic from Bulgaria to Romania and Turkey, and vice versa. The road is the main transport connection of the District with the Northern and Southern Bulgaria.

As highlighted in the *Regional Development Strategy for the District of Sliven 2005-2015*, two of the main railway lines in Bulgaria go through this geographical territory: on the one hand, the IIIrd main railway line (Sofia - Karlovo - Sliven - Zimnitsa - Karnobat - Varna) is linking the capital with the Black Sea coast via the established Sub-Balkan route; on the other hand, the VIIIth main railway (Plovdiv - Stara Zagora - Nova Zagora - Karnobat - Burgas) also crosses the territory.

The District of Sliven holds only a small share of all accommodation facilities in the tourism sector of Bulgaria (it ranks 15th in terms of bed capacity when compared with other districts) and these facilities are mainly concentrated in the city of Sliven and town of Kotel, as these two are the main places of interest for visiting purposes. Hotels dominate in the structure of accommodation facilities and the municipality of Kotel is featured mainly by small family hotels. Due to the lack of investments and the lost market position in the last decade many tourist sites (as recreation facilities, hotels, and bungalows) have been closed. Other travel sites do not utilize their facilities to the fullest extent, since they operate only during the high season (approximately three months along the year) and earn a minimum profit to survive.

According to the data from the National Statistical Institute for the period 2008-2014 the number of shelter points and places of accommodation in the District of Sliven has increased with a slow rate from the existing 65 in 2008 up to 80 in 2014 (see Table 1). There was a substantial increase at the beginning of the period, with a maximum figure of 99 in 2011, but it was followed by a substantial decrease down to 79 in 2012.

### 3. An overview on statistical data regarding the activity of shelter points and places of accommodation in the District of Sliven

In the sphere of tourism activities, number of shelter points and places of accommodation and the number of nights spent by tourists are key factors and indicators of the development and growth of the sector. In this same line tracing the attendance rate in the shelter points and places of accommodation in the District of Sliven appears as really interesting. Table 1 shows some of main related data based on the figures from the official site of the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (*Activity of the Places of Accommodation Divided into Statistical Zones, Statistical Regions and Districts*) from 2008 up to 2014.

**Table 1.** Activity of shelter points and places of accommodation in the District of Sliven (2008-2014)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of shelter points and places of accommodation	65	82	91	99	79	83	80
Number of beds	2,011	2,477	2,676	2,799	2,822	2,557	2,489
Bed days number	702,366	818,464	952,847	972,275	877,733	897,361	896,468
Actual nights spent (total)	85,042	82,700	71,872	94,177	97,289	112,701	104,897
Actual nights spent (incl. foreigners)	13,234	12,009	10,216	15,001	19,080	16,837	15,076
Persons stayed over (total)	49,654	47,235	39,752	48,248	50,648	50,958	46,026
Persons stayed over (incl. foreigners)	5,657	4,450	4,629	5,938	7,415	6,098	5,935
Receipts (BGN) from overnight stays (total)	3,120,326	3,295,965	2,705,147	3,218,570	3,229,071	3,259,536	3,507,450
Receipts (BGN) from overnight stays (incl. foreigners)	957,240	957,433	714,211	904,346	953,095	716,800	906,428

Source: Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2015)

As above mentioned, there was an increase in the *number of shelter points and places of accommodation* in the area during the considered period. To be precise, taking the 2008 figure of 65 as a basis, the increase at the end of the period has been 23.07%. However, the accumulated increase in 2011 was even higher, 52.31% if compared to the basis year.

At the same time, the *occupation rate (in bed days number)* increased from 702,366 in 2008 to 896,468 in 2014, that is, a 27.64%. As in the previous case, such increase was even higher in 2011 (38.43%).

There was also an increase in the *number of nights spent*, but this figure decreased in the first part of the considered period from 85,042 in 2008 to 71,872 in 2010 (-15.49%), even when the final figure in 2013 was 104,897, that is, a 23.35% increase. The maximum was registered in 2013, with 112,701 spent nights (32.52% increase if compared with 2008).

If considering only the *number of nights spent by foreign tourists*, the 2008 figure of 13,234 decreased to 10,216 in 2010 (-22.80%) and then raised up to a maximum of 19,080 in 2012 (44.17%). The final figure in the period was 15,076, that is, a 13.92% higher than the reference one in 2008.

However, the *number of persons staying* in 2014 reduced a 7.30% between 2008 (49,654) and 2014 (46,026). The biggest decline was registered in 2010 (39,752 tourists, -19.94% regarding the 2008 basis year and -15.84% if compared with the previous 2009 year). There was only a slight increase in 2012 (50,648 tourists, a figure what was a 2.00% higher than the one in 2008) and 2013 (50,958 tourists, that is, a 2.63% increase regarding 2008).

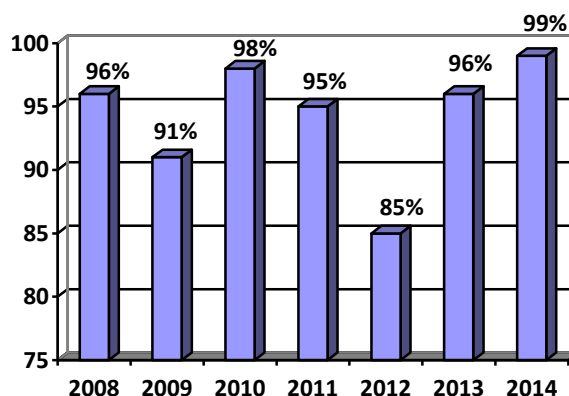
Considering the *number of foreign tourists*, the figure slightly increased in the considered period, from 5,657 in 2008 up to 5,935 in 2014 (a 4.91% increase), with a maximum in 2012 (7,415 tourists, that is, a 31.08% increase regarding 2008).

Due to the monitored statistical indicators, the *total receipts from overnight stays* registered a sharp decline in 2010 regarding 2008 (-13.31%), but then the figure raised up until the end of the considered period, ending with a 12.41% increase in 2014, when the maximum figure was registered. However, this result is likely resulting from an overall increase effect in prices and inflation rates as a whole.

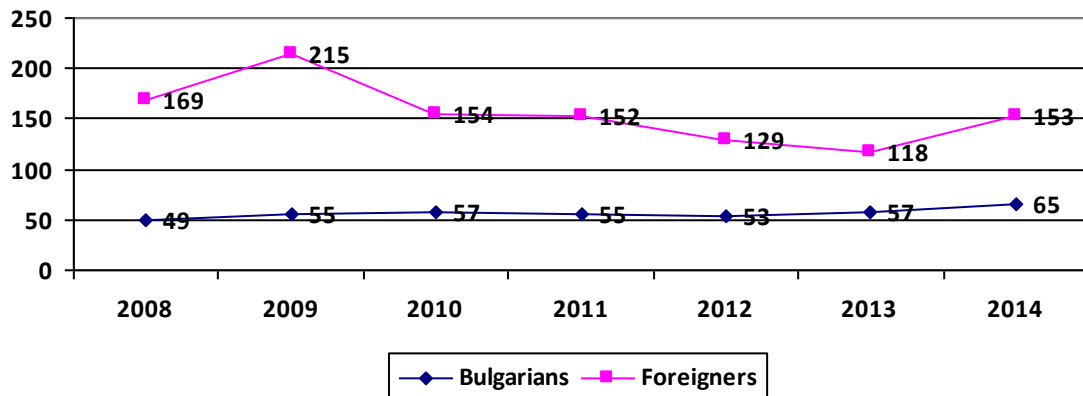
In a similar sense, the *receipts from overnight stays by foreigners* clearly decreased from 2008 until 2010 (-25.39%), then the figure partially recovered its initial level by 2012 (-0.43% regarding 2008), decreased again in 2013 (-25.12% regarding 2008, and -24.79% regarding 2012), to conclude the period with a new recovery (26.45% regarding 2013), but not enough to reach the initial level (-5.31% regarding 2008).

At any case, the registered workload of accommodation facilities or *annual occupancy rate* in the District of Sliven was clearly high (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, a strategic aim should be achieving a sustainable tourism development by improving the competitiveness of the tourist destinations in the area as a whole. Taking in mind this purpose, increasing the share of the tourist base with year-round operations could be promoted.

**Figure 2.** Annual occupancy rate in the District of Sliven (2008-2014)



Source: own elaboration based on Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2015)

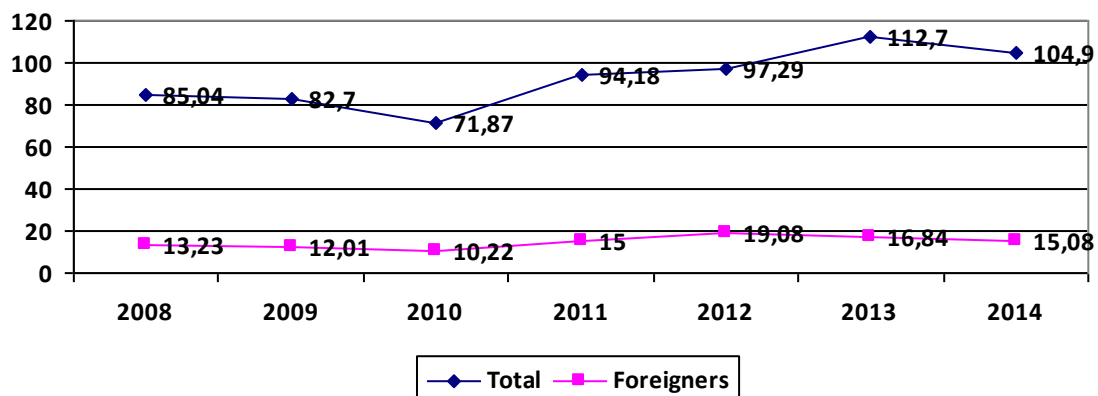
**Figure 3.** Average income from tourism products (BGN per person) in the District of Sliven (2008-2014)

Source: own elaboration based on Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2015)

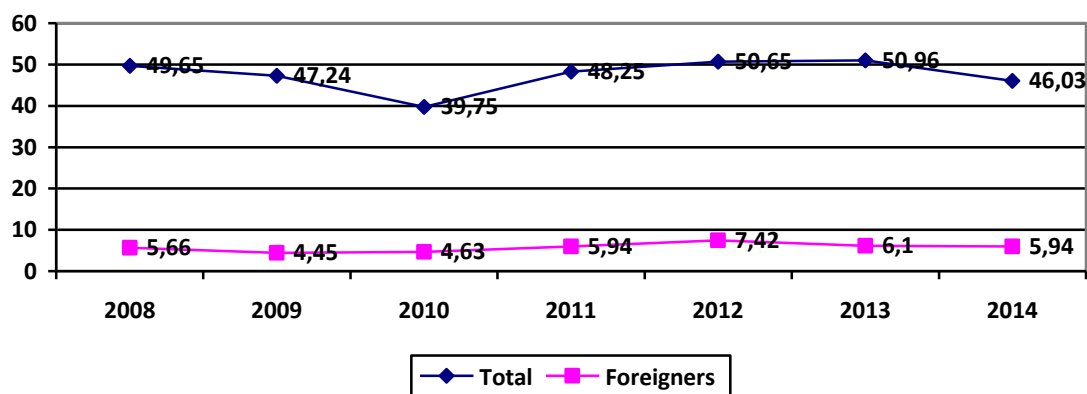
Having a look on all statistical data, it seems clear that despite the relatively small number of foreign tourists, they bring more *income* from the use of tourist services (see Figure 3). Therefore, we can state as appropriate to conduct effective and massive national advertising campaigns focused on the domestic market and consistent with priorities and demands of the Bulgarian tourists. The goal would be achieving an increase in the quality of the provided services, as well as in the added value figures. Such goal can be achieved through tourism offering during the off-season in order to get tourist activity or providing field-specific packages through the whole year.

The higher number of *nights spent* by Bulgarian tourists when compared to foreign ones (see Figure 4) requires to join efforts towards facilitating the procedures for the registration and stay of foreign tourists in the country. In this sense, the development of international cooperation with neighbouring countries is very important in terms of the geographical location of the region, moreover when taking into account the fact that through the territory of the District of Sliven is crossed by important international routes. However, it is also important to devote efforts to modernize and optimize the transport infrastructure.

The number of arrivals of Bulgarian tourists (*persons stayed over*) is also significantly higher than the number of foreign ones (see Figure 5). The commitment to the previous schedule indicates the need of targeted advertising of the Bulgarian tourism product in the international market, aiming to maintain the traditional markets and to progressively develop new market niches/segments. With this purpose, conducting targeted research is advisable, as well as an analysis of international tourist markets with their demand trends. As a result, the District of Sliven could design a specific package based on the overall assessment of tourist resources, so meeting the specific tourists' interests.

**Figure 4.** Actual nights spent in the District of Sliven (2008-2014)

Source: own elaboration based on Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2015)

**Figure 5.** Persons stayed over in the District of Sliven (2008-2014)

Source: own elaboration based on Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2015)

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Recent years marked a time period when tourism activities have faced certain difficulties along with all other industries of the country economy. In these years salaries have been frozen – and so the purchasing power of most citizens – in sharp contrast to the increase in prices and the climbing inflation. However, at the moment the domestic and international tourism in Bulgaria plays a key role for the growth of the whole economy. Specifically, the receipts from tourism have demonstrated a certain stability and even slightly increased.

An analysis of the tourism potential of the territory of the District of Sliven shows that:

- The transport infrastructure is well-developed, but there have been and there are not enough investments in the maintenance and renovation of the shelter points and places of accommodations that constitute the basic tourism superstructure. At the same time, there is being an increase in the number of these establishments, which should be taken as a sign for future sustainable growth.
- The development of sustainable tourism is to a greater extent hampered by the seasonal nature of tourism in the territory.
- No efforts have been focused on attracting the random visitors passing through the territory on their way to destinations located on the South coast of Bulgaria and its resorts. When aiming to popularize those sites offering alternative forms of leisure tourism, at the least it is necessary to install more information signs.
- At any case, in spite of the economic crisis, the statistical data from the shelter points and the places of accommodation located in the territory have reported an increase in terms. e.g. of *number of bed days* and *receipts from overnight stays*. These positive results could be explained due to the increase in the accommodation rates – as a result of the crisis – and the subsequent result in the cost of goods and services.

On this basis, recommendations regarding the possibility of developing tourism would be as follows:

- The role of the tourist agencies that could attract more tourists to the town of Sliven and the various villages in the District is weak and should be revitalized. The vicinity of the Black Sea coast and the subsequent linked possibilities are not utilized enough as well as the options of organizing daily trips to landmarks and cultural sites as alternative for making use of the time of the visiting tourists staying at the Black Sea coast, specifically when the weather is bad.
- The efficient utilization of the places of accommodation in the territory of the District throughout the whole year should be improved by stimulating alternative ways of tourism as, for example, rural tourism, eco-tourism, spa tourism and cultural-historical tourism.

- As the District of Sliven occupies one of the leading positions in the country according to the number of cultural and historical monuments and natural sites in the area, these resources should be used for the development of the so called “smokeless industry”, this way contributing to the economical growth of the District. Aiming this goal an “innovative tourist product” should be introduced to bring the focus on the specific local products and turn the local offer into a registered trademark.

Additionally, we should point out that the services sector, including tourism, is the second one in terms of economic importance in the District of Sliven. Nevertheless, and according to the updated document for implementation of the *Strategy for the Development of the District of Sliven (2011-2013)*, the growth of tourism activities in the District, as well as in case of other Bulgarian regions located in the heart of the country, have suffered –and still suffer– from a lack of overall governmental policy.

In this same sense, there is also a lack of common vision and purposeful actions of the shareholders in the District, namely entrepreneurs and public authorities. In order to turn the tourism industry into a leading branch of the local economy it is necessary to join together the efforts of all involved key agents, including businesses, local administrations and non-governmental organizations. This could guarantee a more sustainable growth to a larger extent.

However, in order to properly obtain and generalize conclusions, further research on representative samples of both national and foreign tourists is required, as well as in-depth interviews with managers of tourism establishments.

## References

- Bulgarian Government (2009). *National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria (2009-2013)*. Sofia: Bulgarian Government.
- Bulgarian Government (2011). *Regional Strategy for Improving Road Safety (2011-2020) - District of Sliven*. Sofia: Bulgarian Government.
- Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (2015). Activity of the accommodation establishments by statistical zones, statistical regions and districts. Annual Data. Bulgarian National Statistical Institute. <http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/1978/%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B8>. Accessed 28 March 2015.
- District Administration Sliven (2004). *Strategy for the Development of the District of Sliven (2005-2015): vision, strategic goals, specific objectives, priorities, measures, possible activities*. District Administration Sliven. [http://www.sliven.government.bg/doc/EN\\_Strategy\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.sliven.government.bg/doc/EN_Strategy_Summary.pdf). Accessed 28 March 2015.
- Ivanova, D., Milev, O., Ivanova, D., & Georgiev, I. (2014). Promotional strategy for wine tourism development. *Responsibility & Sustainability*, 2(3), 57-62.
- Konstantinov, V. (1978). *Kotel: the city of springs*. Sofia: Resorts.
- Koychev, N. (1997). *History of Nova Zagora*. Stara Zagora: Kota Publishing.
- Naghiu, A., Vázquez, J. L., & Georgiev, I. (2005). Rural development strategies through rural tourism activities in Romania: chance for an internal demand? *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 2(1), 85-95.
- Tabakov, S. (1993). *Opit za istoria na grád Sliven [An attempt for the history of the Town of Sliven]*. Tom I-II. Sofia, 1911. In *The Ethnic Situation in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Club '90.
- Vázquez, J. L., Álvarez, R., Georgiev, I., & Naghiu, A. (2005). Role of Bulgarian country image as international rural tourism destination. *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, 3(7), 37-40.
- Zheliakov, G., D. Ivanova, I. Georgiev (2013a). On the planning of the socio-economic development of the municipality of Tvarditsa (Bulgaria). *Responsibility & Sustainability*, 1(2), 69-74.
- Zheliakov G., Vázquez, J. L., Ivanova, D., & Georgiev, I. (2013b). A strategy for alternative tourism development in the framework of cross-border cooperation between Bulgaria and Greece. *Responsibility & Sustainability*, 1(1), 61-65.