DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR EVALUATING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF SERBIA AS A TOURISM DESTINATION – A TOURCOMSERBIA FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:
The competitiveness of tourism destinations is a new phenomenon that has been the topic of much research in recent years. The issue of tourism destination competitiveness evaluation arises from many research studies. Most tourism destinations analyse their competitive position by following the rankings published in the World Economic Forum Tourism & Travel Competitiveness Index (T&TCI – Report published until 2019). Recently T&TCI transformed into Tourism & Travel Development Index (T&TDI), offering a new construct in the model. The World Economic Forum T&TCI and T&TDI model defines the advantages or constraints of a destination position but has certain disadvantages: the limitations in providing quality information to decision-makers with a limited significant link to tourism performance criteria. Beside T&TCI, and T&TDI various indicators and theoretical models have been developed, in different studies, to address specific aspects of tourism destination competitiveness. However, no single model applicable to all destinations exists. Thus, we propose an approach to setting up a model for a particular destination competitiveness evaluation.

This study presents the TOURCOMSERBIA model framework for Serbia's competitiveness evaluation. TOURCOMSERBIA framework introduces three competitiveness assessments provided by internal and external stakeholders. The proposed model makes foundations for continuous competitiveness evaluation of Serbia and similar destinations and a clear framework and methodology.The proposed framework in this paper is a part of a more comprehensive study on destination competitiveness indicators analysis.

Keywords:
tourism destination competitiveness, Serbia, competitiveness model, evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The competitive position of Serbia as a tourism destination evaluation is mainly related to the World Economic Forum Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report (WEF T&TCR). The WEF T&TCI (WEF, 2019) is an official globally accepted approach to assessing the competitiveness of tourism destinations worldwide, with one of the most popular synthetic indicators developed (Fernández, *et. al.*, 2020). In 2022 World Economic Forum started publishing the Travel & Tourism Development Index (T&TDI) (WEF, 2022), which represents an upgraded construction of the WEF T&TCI model reflected in new and updated pillars, sub indexes, and indicators in T&TDI.

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Besides WEF T&TCI and T&TDI, there are different approaches to destination competitiveness evaluation and proposals for indicators and various models. Many competitiveness models are based on Porter's diamond (Porter, 1990). Poon (1993) went a few steps forward by introducing the principles of competitive success: put the environment first; make tourism a lead sector; strengthen the distribution channels in the marketplace and build a dynamic private sector. Keyser and Vanhove (1994) suggested five key competitiveness indicators: tourism policy, macro-economic, supply, transport, and demand factors. Go and Govers (1999) point to the seven attributes: facilities, availability, service quality, overall accessibility, image, climate and environment as an attribute and attractiveness of a destination. Kim's model (Kim & Lee, 2005) assesses competitiveness by dividing indicators of destination competitiveness into primary sources of competitiveness, comprised of environment, subjects and resources, and secondary sources of competitiveness – politics, planning, management (methods for running tourism policies and tourism management), investments, taxes and prices, and tertiary sources of competitiveness – tourism infrastructure, a system for accommodating tourists, the attractiveness of resources, labour force.

Ritchie and Crouch (Crouch, 2006, p. 7) suggested a competitiveness model that complies with five indicator groups (supporting factors and resources; core resources and attractors; destination management; destination policy; planning and development; qualifying and amplifying determinants).

A certain number of variables, defined in the Ritchie and Crouch model, were included in the integrated destination competitiveness model (Armenski *et. al.*, 2011). Testing the validity and data accessibility of the integrated model confirmed that its structure covered important tourism destination competitiveness factors and indicators (Dwyer *et. al,* 2014). As basic indicator groups or competitiveness factors, this model implies natural and cultural resources; created resources; supporting factors; destination management; situational conditions; and demand conditions. Model is used for competitiveness assessment of Korea and Australia (Kim & Dwyer, 2003). The same methodical approach is used for the competitiveness assessment of Slovenia as a tourism destination (Gomozelj& Mihalič, 2008) as well as the competitiveness of Serbia as a tourism destination (Armenski *et al*., 2011, Popesku & Pavlović, 2013).

The essence of using a competitive model, or rather a competitive analysis, should be based on evaluating competitiveness for marketing and tourism destination management decisions. As mentioned, the widely accepted practical model of destination competitiveness evaluation, the World Economic Forum Tourism & Travel Competitiveness Index (WEF, 2017), was used by many countries to rank their competitiveness position as tourism destinations. Further scientific thinking implies the question: Does this model provide sufficient information and foundation on which every country as a destination should compare its competitive position? Should alternative models be used? To these questions, academics point out that emphasizing this approach limits the quality of information for policymakers (Wu *et al*., 2012). WEF T&TCI has been the subject of methodological criticism, especially because many competitive countries were left out of the top countries (Pulido-Fernández & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016). Mazanec and Ring (2011) also state that the report cannot achieve its objectives unless the competitiveness indicators compressed into the overall index exhibit significant relationships with tourism performance criteria. Such views indicate the need to examine more thoroughly the relevance of this model to establish a more comprehensive model for measuring the competitiveness of Serbia as a tourism destination. Alternative models have emerged and proposed a range of indicators to ensure that the results of competitive analysis of the tourism destination can be used better for policymakers' decisions. Ritchie & Crouch's model emphasizes the importance of destination management by focusing on activities that may affect other factors of the model. Therefore, the role of destination management in the competitiveness of the tourism destination has additional weight and significance. This model proves that the importance of factors in this model is not equal to the competitiveness of a tourist destination, but it is impossible to separate them because their interdependence is obvious. It led to further thinking of a more advanced model developed by Dwyer and Kim (Integrated model of destination competitiveness). An integrated model introduces demand as a specific determinant of competitiveness. Also, this model divides resources into inherited and created ones. The main feature of this model is that it shows the interaction between all sources of destination competitiveness, indicating that the competitiveness of a tourism destination cannot be the only tourism policy goal but rather a means of achieving regional and national economic development. Success in creating sustainable well-being for its residents is crucial for a competitive destination (Dwyer and Kim, 2003).

It shows the multidirectional and interconnectedness of the elements contained in this model. Accordingly, it can serve as a basis for establishing a model for measuring Serbia's competitiveness as a tourism destination. Developing/emerging destinations rely on WEF T&CI when monitoring their competitiveness in tourism, but the most successful ones should develop their models for overall competitiveness analysis, generally or for a specific purpose. An example is a Canadian approach, where the observations of the global competitiveness of Canada as a tourism destination provide consumer-based intelligence in 12 core markets. This approach defines some indicators to: monitor awareness; assess perceptions of Canada; identify the general experiences; identify motivators and barriers for travel to Canada; and determine the influence on destination selection, which is also crucial for the overall assessment and analysis of competitive position for key markets (Destination Canada, 2016).

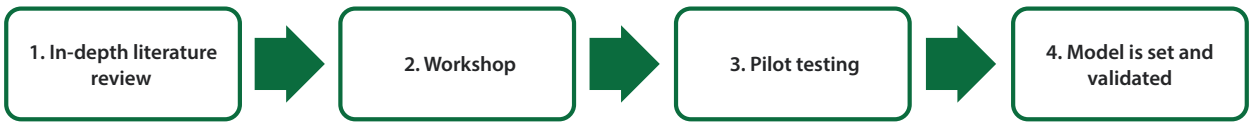
A conclusion by modern approaches in the competitiveness evaluation, as well as the author's views on existing models, is driven. Each destination should develop its approach/model that provides more specific guidelines for competitiveness development for decision makers (marketing and tourism destination management decisions). Although the NTO of Serbia conducts research for marketing support and promotion as the main activity at the national level of destination management in Serbia, there is still no established model for competitiveness assessment.

In this paper, we introduce the TOURCOMSERBIA evaluation framework for destination competitiveness of Serbia and similar destinations. TOURCOMSERBIA model will provide a model for longitudinal measurement of Serbia's competitive position in tourism, implementing a more comprehensive and participatory approach to tourism destination competitiveness evaluation. It may answer the essential question regarding Serbia's current competitive position as a tourism destination. Moreover, the TOURCOMSERBIA framework identifies tourism competitiveness indicators, which should be considered high priority areas for decision-makers to improve the competitiveness of Serbia as a tourism destination and enhance sustainable tourism development.

METHODOLOGY

We define the main objectives in creating a framework for the TOURCOMSERBIA model. The first step in developing a Framework of a novel tourism destination competitiveness model for Serbia requires a multi-step approach, as presented in Fig. 1.

Figure 1. A process of developing tourism destination competitiveness model for Serbia



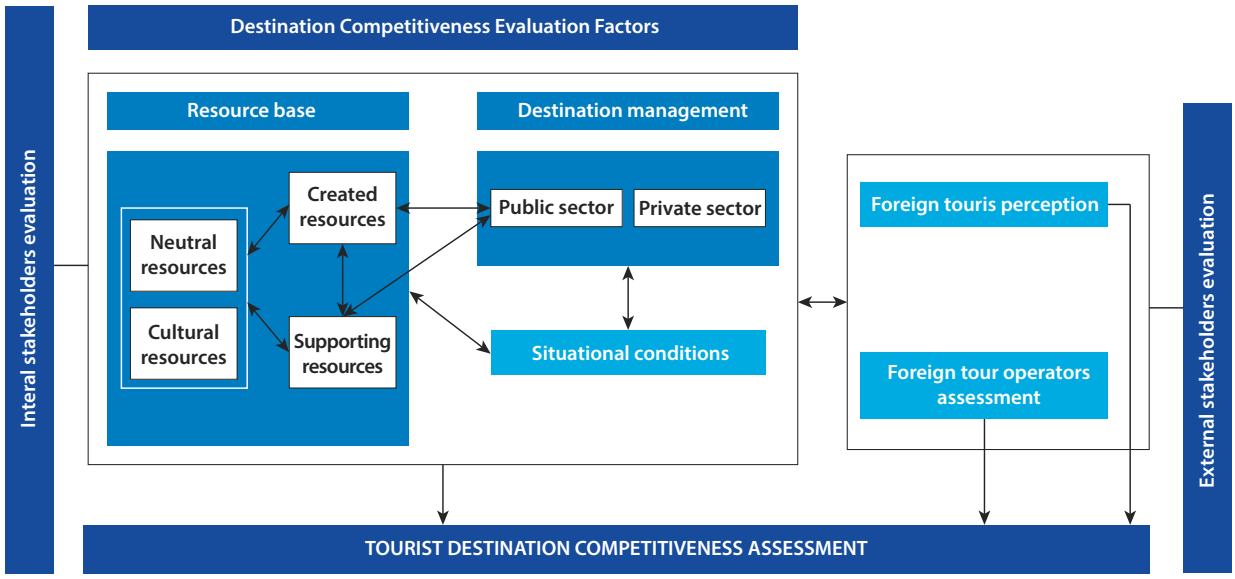
Source: Authors' illustration

The general approach defines internal (the public and private tourism sector and residents) and external (foreign tourists and tour operators) stakeholders in the country's tourism competitiveness evaluation. In-depth literature review covers the analysis of 559 papers from SCOPUS database since 2000. From the analyzed studies, we extract a set of the total number of identified tourism destination competitiveness and sustainability indicators. To find the most relevant ones For Serbia, during a workshop organized with relevant tourism industry stakeholders and other stakeholders like NTOs, LTOs, academia experts, etc. a set of indicators for pilot testing is established. Then we conduct pilot testing among internal and external stakeholders. By the pilot testing results, the model is set and validated. As a result, an innovative and more applicable model with a specific methodological approach is provided. The framework serves as a basis for a more precise definition of competitiveness indicators and formulation of a competitiveness model. Based on a broader literature review, synthesis of existing models and destination competitiveness indicators, and meetings and discussions with the key stakeholders and international experts the conceptual framework is elaborated.

RESULTS

The framework consists of Destination competitiveness evaluation factors. They include Resource-based factors (natural resources, Cultural Resources, Created Resources and Supporting Factors). Also, as followed by Kim and Dwyer's (2003) analysis, the framework implements the interdependence of Resource-based factors with Destination management and situational Conditions. Foreign tourism demand as a separate group of stakeholders singles out. The goal is to obtain more specific evaluations of competitiveness and other data related to the satisfaction of the tourist experience during their stay at the destination. The second group of external stakeholders emphasize foreign tour operators. Consequently, a more comprehensive point of view about destination competitiveness is acquired. As a result, the framework includes precise and more relevant indicators than the WEF T&TCI model. Involving a wide range of relevant internal and external stakeholders provides a comprehensive competitiveness evaluation (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. A conceptual TOURCOMSEBIA model Framework



Source: Authors' elaboration

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

TOURCOMSERBIA Framework represents a proposal of continuous activities on competitiveness monitoring and assessment on the national level with guidelines and recommendations for short-time or long-time strategies for tourism destination development and competitiveness improvement. The expected impact of the TOURCOMSERBIA model application is in the innovative, more accurate and reliable model as a tool for competitiveness evaluation for Serbia and similar countries. This paper contributes to the scientific thinking on reliability and wide range application of WEF T&TCI and T&TDI model by providing a proposal for the application of a more accurate model with significant relationships with "tourism performance criteria" and "quality of information for policymakers". This model emphasizes a balance between economic development and the impact of tourism, at the same time focusing on sustainability.

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