

The Role of Vitosha Mountain in the Development of Sofia as a Tourist Destination: Current State and Attitudes

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Abstract: Vitosha Mountain is inextricably linked to the development of tourism in Sofia from the very beginning. It has evolved as an area for weekend recreation of the capital inhabitants, as well as a destination for domestic and foreign tourists both in summer and winter, due to the particularities of its resource potential and location. The diversity of user groups and tourism development options, together with the protected status of the area, create a number of conflicts that have exacerbated in the recent years and which are typical problems of sustainable development.

Based on a brief review of the recreational potential and the history of tourism development, this paper examines the current role of Vitosha Mountain for Sofia as a tourist destination. The research is grounded on secondary and primary data, including official tourism statistics and two surveys of hoteliers in Sofia municipality that were carried out in 2011 and 2012 for the local government. The focus is put on the accommodation sector in Vitosha District – one of the 24 administrative districts in Sofia municipality, adjacent to Vitosha Nature Park. Results make it possible to outline the features of modern tourism development of the studied area, as well as, the view of local entrepreneurs on key issues concerning farther development of Sofia as a tourist destination and the role of Vitosha Mountain in it.

Key words: *Vitosha Mountain, destination Sofia, tourism development, potential, problems, attitudes.*

1. Introduction

There is hardly a European capital, which is so beautifully close to the mountain the way Sofia is. Less than 10 km away from the city center, Vitosha Mountain offers various possibilities for recreation and fun, being the closest place for hiking, skiing, climbing and other outdoor activities. The most frequented mountain of the 1,3-million large Bulgarian capital is attractive in any season. In the summer, people find there refreshing coolness. In the winter, they go up above the smog-blanketed traffic-fumed city. Indeed, due to the climatic inversion, Sofia is often deeply immersed in thick fog while Vitosha offers sunny skies and higher temperatures. Trekking routes and skiing

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facilities attract between 2,5 and 4 million visitors annually. In Vitosha's lower parts suggests the exciting opportunity of combining nature-based activities with visiting noteworthy historical sites such as the UNESCO enlisted Boyana Church, with its unique frescoes, dating back to 12th century, the 14th-century Dragalevtzi Monastery and the National Historical Museum, which is also situated at the footsteps of the mountain in the Sofia suburb of Boyana.

The massif of Vitosha occupies an area of 278 sq. Km. It is separated into four parts, which main ridges gather at the crown of Cherni Vrah ("Black Peak"). This is the highest point (2290 m) that ranges Vitosha fourth in altitude among the Bulgarian mountains. Vitosha is known for its unique rock formations and preserved biodiversity. Almost 90% of the mountain belongs to the territory of Vitosha Nature Park – the oldest one on the Balkan Peninsula (1934). Within its boundaries, there are two wild life reserves protecting spruce forests and high-mountain turf lands. More than 180 bird species inhabit Vitosha Mountain as well as a stunning diversity of insects and wild animals. More than 50% of the plant species common in Bulgaria have habitats in Vitosha. There are 31 Balkan endemics and 52 species included in the Red Book of Bulgaria.

Vitosha Nature Park falls into the area of three administrative regions (oblasti) and four municipalities among which is Sofia municipality with its picturesque quarters² at the North-East footsteps of the mountain that form one of the 24 administrative districts of the capital city (Vitosha District). Adjacent to the park are four other settlements³ and 25 second-home zones within Sofia municipality. Tourist infrastructure is most developed on the North slopes of the mountain that are close to Sofia while it is almost lacking in the remote South and South-East portions of the massif, where the existing resources are low adopted. On the city side, there is a dense network of hiking trails surpassing 270 km in length as well as two ski zones (Aleko and Vetrovala-Koniarnika) situated within the protected area of the park at the altitude of 1800 m and 1507 m respectively.

Vitosha is easily accessible from Sofia by car or bus, with several city transport lines going to the main tourist locations of Aleko and the Golden Bridges. Aleko is the principal tourist and winter sports center and the starting point of a number of popular hiking routes. It is directly linked to the outskirts of Sofia by a 6300 m long gondola lift. There are two shorter lifts providing a direct connection of Sofia to other frequently visited places in the mountain, but one of them is not functional since 1995 for technical reasons. The access to Vitosha was seriously hampered in the last few months as all the lifts and ski facilities stopped operating from November 2011 until August 2012, under the decision of the owner company Vitosha Ski. This decision was officially grounded on

²Simeonovo, Dragalevtzi, Boyana and Kniajevo

³Bistrizza, Jeleznitza, Vladaia and Murchaev

legal constraints resulting from the newly accepted in 2011 Forestry Act⁴. However, it was widely associated with the earlier blocked project of the company to build new ski facilities and significantly expand the area for winter sports in violation to the requirements of Vitosha Nature Park Management Plan (2005-2014)⁵.

In fact, tourist infrastructure on Vitosha Mountain is currently in quite poor condition because of a number of conflicts and unresolved problems regarding the property of land and tourist facilities as well as the large-scale investment intentions vs. the protected status of the area. Some of the problems are relatively new while others have evolved from the earlier periods of tourism development.

Tourist infrastructure development on Vitosha Mountain started in the first decades of the 20th century with the construction of mountain chalets. After the Second World War, the existing network of chalets widened and many rest homes owned by different institutions or the Trade Unions were built to serve the needs of state-subsidized tourism. At that time, Vitosha primarily attracted local residents for short-time recreation throughout the year as well as visitors for summer vacation from the rest of the country. In the late 1970s when the establishment of foreign market-oriented winter resorts became a national tourism policy priority, the ski center of Aleko expanded as one of the three leading ski resorts in the country, due to its favorable snow conditions and the proximity to the capital city. Several hotels and modern ski facilities were constructed there which gave Sofia the opportunity to host two Winter Universiades (World University Games) – in 1983 and 1989 as well as to apply for the Winter Olympic Games in 1992⁶ and 1994⁷. However, for the first time it seriously put the conflict between utilization and conservation of natural resources, between economic benefits and environmental protection and the corresponding question of desired priorities regarding different tourism development options. In the late 1980s,

⁴ Vitosha Ski Company stated that the amendments to the Forestry Act made it impossible to run the concession legally. Specifically, the company could not clear the ground near under the lifts, as required by law, because it had no management rights on the land. To acquire such rights from the forestry authorities, the company needed a detailed development plan, which the Ministry of Environment rejected earlier, citing the faulty environmental impact assessment.

⁵ The project was developed in 2008 and would cost between 50-80 million EUR for creation of a new, bigger ski zone within Vitosha Nature Park (for farther information see <http://www.bulgariaski.com/vitosha/articles-reports-news>). It provoked a number of green protests that escalated to large demonstrations and civil disobedience in June 2012 when the Parliament adopted new changes in the Forestry Act in the favor of large investors in ski tourism in Bulgaria. Meanwhile, in the summer of 2011 the Minister of Environment cancelled the procedure of adopting the detailed plan for a bigger ski zone on Vitosha developed by Vitosha Ski Company on the grounds that it did not meet the legal requirements and should be reworked (for farther information see <http://www.forthenature.org>).

⁶ Sofia lost the competition to host the Winter Olympics in 1992 from Albertville (France) but occupied the second position by voting results leaving behind prominent rivals such as Falun (Sweden), Cortina D'Ampezzo (Italy), Berchtesgaden (Germany), Anchorage (USA) and Lillehammer (Norway).

⁷ Next time Sofia lost the voting for the Winter Olympic Games in 1994 from Lillehammer (Norway) with 16 polls.

the bed capacity of Vitosha reached nearly 4 thousand beds (60% in rest homes, 18% - chalets, 17% - hotels and 6% - children's camps), there were around 6000 second (leisure) homes and the tourist flow was estimated at 300 thousand nights in accommodation and 2,5-3 millions day visitors (Marinov, 1991).

Deep political and economic changes after 1989 seriously challenged farther development of all resorts in Bulgaria, including Vitosha, by reason of property fragmentation and break-down of the previously unified system of resorts planning, management and marketing (Marinov et al., 1998). Over the last 20 years, the ski-center of Aleko has lost its international markets and has reduced its functions to day visitors' service only. No serious investments have been made in renovation of accommodation and ski facilities. Some of the establishments (including hotels) have even been closed while those that are still operating currently offer basic standard. Meanwhile, small and medium tourism enterprises (mainly family hotels) have expanded in the settlements at the footsteps of the mountain within Sofia municipality. Besides being a place of residence of the local population incorporated in the urbanized area of the capital city, these settlements traditionally have performed the functions of short-time recreation zones for Sofia dwellers and have recently developed as tourist centers attracting domestic and foreign overnight visitors for business tourism, incentives, etc. On the other hand, the attractiveness of these settlements as a residential area has increased (the number of the population grew by 43% between 2001 and 2011), which has led to significant expansion of the built-up area.

Despite the widely recognized tourist potential of Vitosha Mountain, its actual tourism development has been a subject of research in few academic publications, in the last decades, (Marinov, 1991; Popova, 2003a). Moreover, the state of tourism in the mountain and the adjacent areas is vaguely referred in the latest planning documents, concerning tourism development of Sofia (Sofia Municipality Development Plan 2007-2013; Sofia Tourism Strategy and Action Plan 2006-2011; Master Plan of Sofia Municipality, 2009), although Vitosha is recognized as one of the prominent tourism development factors of the capital city. The strategic objectives are unclear, inconsistent and to some degree controversial and the required implementation resources are unknown (except the extremely limited tourist tax revenues). Furthermore, tourism development is considered in isolation from the outdoor recreation of the local population in the above mentioned planning documents. The need for a detailed analysis of the current situation and the development of a complete tourism strategy for Vitosha Mountain has been officially recognized by a group of councilors in the local parliament of Sofia (Zaimov et al., 2009), but no particular steps in this direction have been undertaken by the municipal authority.

It is undoubtedly clear that the future development of Vitosha is related to the exacerbation of old conflicts and the emergence of new ones. Therefore, a thorough

study is necessary not only of the factual situation but also of the attitudes of different stakeholders involved. Some relatively new publications present the outlook of visitors to ecotourism development in Vitosha Nature Park (Popova, 2002), as well as the attitudes of local communities in the adjacent settlements towards tourism development, (Popova, 2003b). The views of local business entrepreneurs have not been a subject of research.

This paper applies a two-fold approach offering a brief analysis of both the current situation of Vitosha accommodation sector and perceptions of local entrepreneurs concerning their business. It is focused on three central questions: 1) What is the position of Vitosha Mountain in the contemporary tourism development of Sofia, regarding the volume and the most important structural characteristics of tourism supply and demand; 2) What is the level of utilization of Vitosha accommodation establishments and how do their prices and occupancy rates differ from those in Sofia municipality; 3) What are the entrepreneurs' assessments, opinions and expectations regarding present problems and desired future tourism development.

1. Data and Methods

The study is based on both secondary and primary data including official tourism statistics at the local level (Sofia Tourism in Figures 2011, Register of ..., 2011) and two questionnaire surveys of Sofia hoteliers that were carried out in 2011 and 2012 for the local government. The empirical surveys were not focused on Vitosha Mountain in particular but the state of the accommodation sector in the whole municipality as well as on the business representatives' assessments, opinions and expectations regarding local tourism development and policy. The first survey (Dogramadjieva, 2011) included in total 130 accommodation units with 11 103 bed places. The next survey (Marinov et al., 2012) together covered 167 accommodation units with more than 12 000 bed places representing 51% of all registered establishments and 80% of the available bed capacity in Sofia municipality.

The current analysis presents just a small part of the survey results that are relevant to the scope of the paper. It is focused on Vitosha District which is adjacent to Vitosha Nature Park and is the area of the greatest concentration of tourist infrastructure and visitors' interest in the mountain vicinity. The answers of the respondents from Vitosha District are compared to those from the rest of Sofia municipality so that the similarities and differences in contemporary tourism development and the respondents' views could be easily seen. It should be noted that the survey in 2011 covered 22 accommodation units in Vitosha District with 847 bed places while the survey in 2012 covered 35 establishments there with 1 124 beds (about 60% of the registered units and bed places in Vitosha District). It should be also stressed that the survey samples mostly include amenities in Vitosha suburbs, outside the nature park boundaries as

many of those within the park are not currently operating. Although, no specific questions regarding the problems of Vitosha Mountain were included in the two questionnaires, results make it possible to outline the main features of contemporary tourism business in the studied area, as well as the view of local entrepreneurs on key issues concerning farther development of Sofia as a tourist destination and the role of Vitosha Mountain in it.

2. Results

2.1. Volume and Structure of Tourism Supply and Demand

According to the official statistics Vitosha District with its 61,5 thousand inhabitants makes up 5% of the capital population, but is ranked first among all other administrative units of Sofia municipality by the number of accommodation establishments and bed places, concentrating respectively 18% and 12% of the total volume of supply (Table 1). It holds a comparatively lower position in regards to the volume of employment in tourism industry with 9% of all provided work places in the sector of accommodation (4th position) and only 5% of those in the food and beverage sector (9th out of 24 districts).

Table 1. Main indicators of the volume of tourism supply in Sofia municipality and Vitosha District.

	Sofia municipality (number)	Vitosha District (number)	Share of Vitosha District	Rank of Vitosha District
Inhabitants	1 291 591	61 467	5%	10
Accommodation units	329	58	18%	1
Bed places	15979	1906	12%	1
Average capacity (beds)	49	33		14
Employees in accommodation sector	4 620	428	9%	4
Employees in food&beverage sector	30 243	1 512	5%	9

Source: Sofia Municipality, 2011

Mostly small hotels, family hotels, separate rooms and guest houses are offered with an average capacity of 33 bed places. More than 70% of the accommodation units are of low category (1-2 stars), followed by 3-star (16%) and 4-star establishments (12%) while 5-star accommodation is not available. Compared to Sofia municipality (Figure 1), Vitosha District is characterized by a lower share of hotel beds at the expense of beds in family hotels as well as by a higher share of uncategorized and 1-2 star accommodation at the expense of high standard accommodation.

Despite the favorable resource potential and the leading position of Vitosha District in the volume of accommodation supply, tourist demand is relatively low. The area is ranked 9th among all other administrative units in Sofia municipality by the total

number of overnight visitors and nights spent occupying the 5th position in regards to the nights spent by Bulgarian residents (7%) and only 10th position (3%) in regards to the nights spent by foreigners (Table 2).

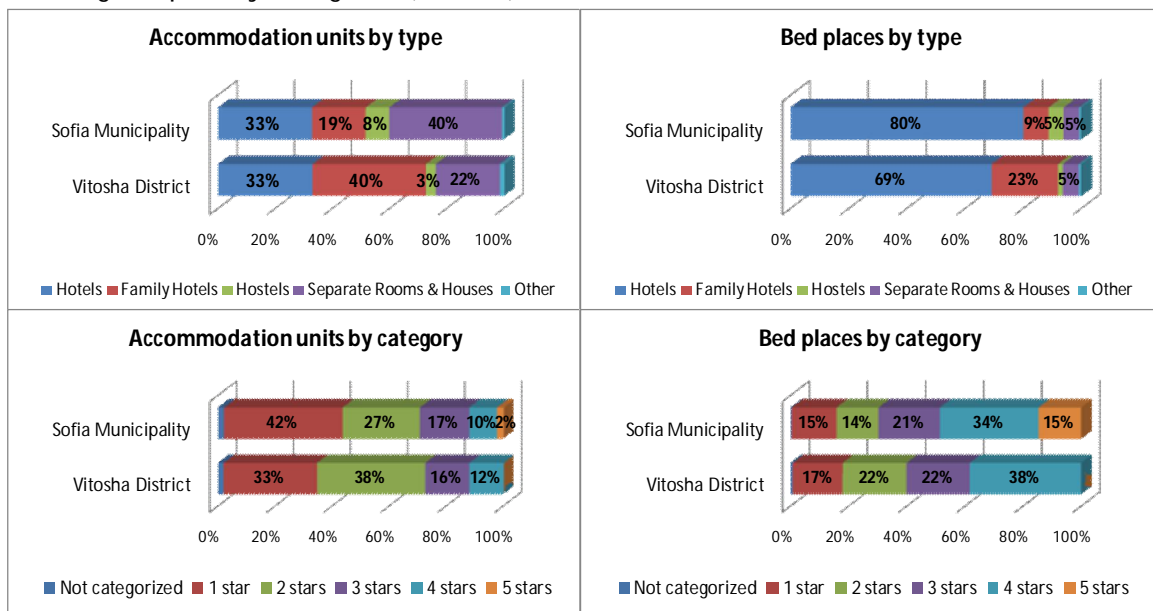


Figure 1. Structure of accommodation establishments and bed places by type and category.

Source: Register of Categorized Accommodation Establishments in Sofia Municipality, 2011

Table 2. Main indicators of the volume of tourism demand in Sofia municipality and Vitosha District.

	Sofia municipality (number)	Vitosha District (number)	Share of Vitosha District	Rank of Vitosha District
Overnight visitors	746 381	35 612	5%	9
Total nights spent	1 206 275	52 916	4%	9
Nights spent by BG residents	447 184	32 548	7%	5
Nights spent by foreigners	759 091	20 368	3%	10

Source: Sofia Municipality, 2011

Such an arrangement is tightly related to the structure of demand by nationality, which is quite different in the studied area, compared to the whole municipality (Figure 2). While incoming tourism strongly predominates in the capital city (more than 60%), the District of Vitosha relies mainly on domestic market that forms nearly 70% of overnight visits and 62% of all nights spent.

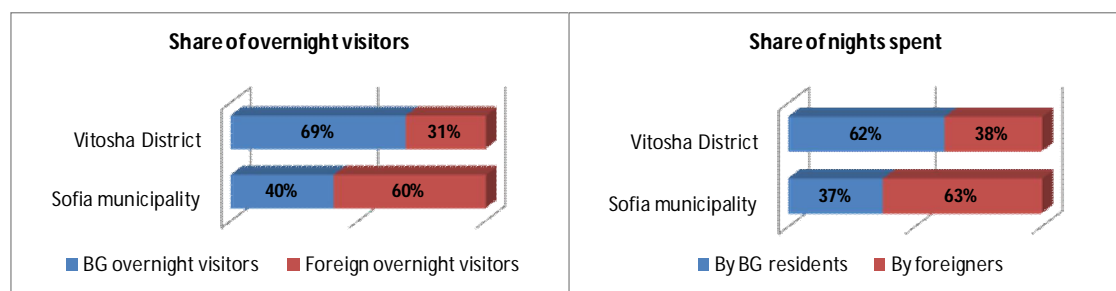


Figure 2. Structure of demand in Sofia municipality and Vitosha District by nationality.
Source: Sofia Municipality, 2011

In fact, the share of domestic tourism in Vitosha Mountain is even higher due to the great number of day visitors (mainly Sofia residents) who go there for hiking, skiing and other outdoor activities, especially in weekends. The total annual number of visitors to the mountain varies between 2,5 and 4 million and in the busiest periods there are 20 000 – 40 000 people per day (Vitosha Nature Park Management Plan, 2005). On the other hand, the survey of accommodation establishments in Sofia (Dogramadjieva, 2011) has shown that just a small share of all hoteliers in the capital city serve guests who visit Vitosha Mountain (32% of all respondents state they have such Bulgarian clients and 42% have such foreign clients). Moreover, these tourists compose a negligible part of the studied entities' total clientele (respectively 5% and 8% of Bulgarian and foreign customers). Even the sample of hoteliers in Vitosha District alone reveals similar results – less than 1/3 of the respondents declare that some of their guests go to Vitosha Mountain for hiking or skiing while these guests make up just 3% of their Bulgarian customers and 11% of their foreign customers.

The low interest of overnight visitors to outdoor activities in Vitosha Mountain could be explained by the structure of demand in regards to the main goal of visit which shows very small difference between Vitosha District and Sofia municipality in general (Figure 3). In both cases, business tourists predominate – their cumulative percentage in the studied area is slightly smaller (57% against 61%). Tourists, who come for fun, recreation and sightseeing form an significant segment of Vitosha District market, but their share (38%) is not much higher than in the whole municipality (26%). Still, when considering the above mentioned data it comes out that most of them do not visit the mountain but are more interested in other activities offered in the city. This indicates either inadequate offering or insufficient information about the existing possibilities provided in Vitosha Mountain.

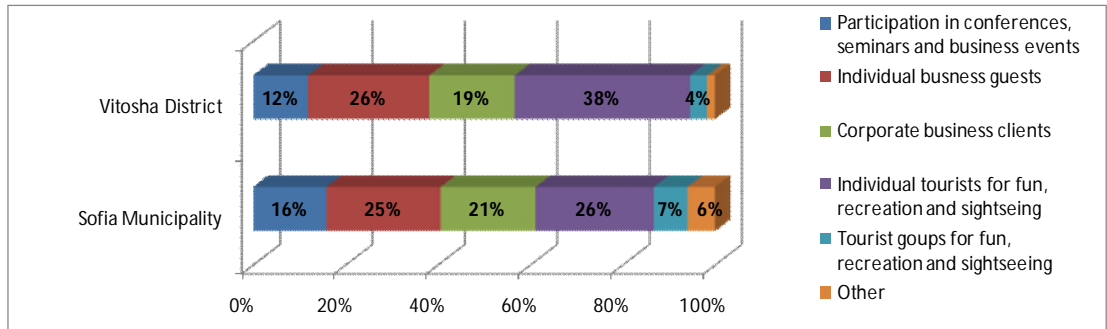


Figure 3. Structure of demand in Sofia Municipality and Vitoshka District by the main goal of the visit.

Source: Questionnaire survey of the accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

Another important feature of Vitoshka District overnight visitors is that the greatest majority of them do not use intermediary companies or internet reservation systems but make direct reservations in accommodation establishments (63%) or even do not make any reservation (20%). The share of clients provided to local hoteliers by tour operators, travel agents or internet reservation systems is three times smaller compared to the whole municipality of Sofia - 14% against 41% (Figure 4). Such a structure of demand is quite risky and puts the local business in an uncertain situation with reference to successful product selling and utilization of the existing accommodation capacity.

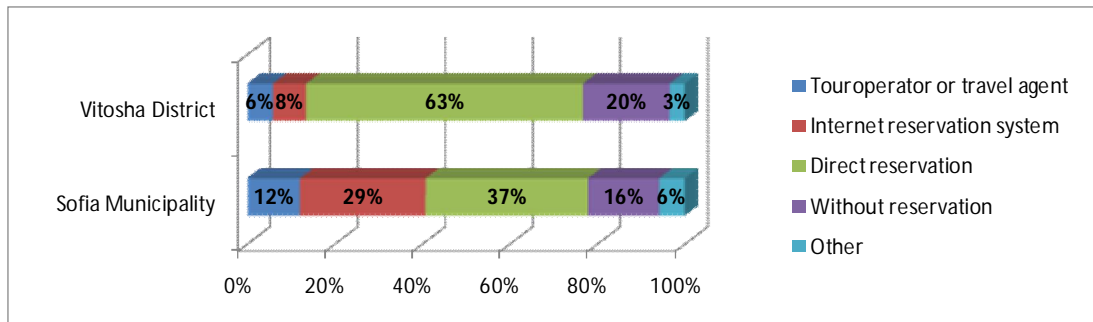


Figure 4. Structure of demand in Sofia Municipality and Vitoshka District by the source of reservation.

Source: Questionnaire survey of the accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

2.2. Average Price Level and Occupancy Rates of Accommodation Establishments

The average price level of lodging facilities in Vitoshka District is much lower than in the capital city, although Sofia in general offers cheap accommodation (Figure 5). In nearly 70% of the studied establishments, the average daily rate of the prevailing type

of rooms does not exceed 30 EUR and only 11% of the respondents fall into the price segment of 55 – 70 EUR per room while no higher average daily rates are achieved. The break-down of the results by accommodation units' category, (Figure 6) shows that lower prices in Vitosha District could not be explained by the different structure of supply only (the higher share of low standard accommodation and the lack of 5-star hotels), as in the whole municipality rooms of the same category are sold at higher prices.

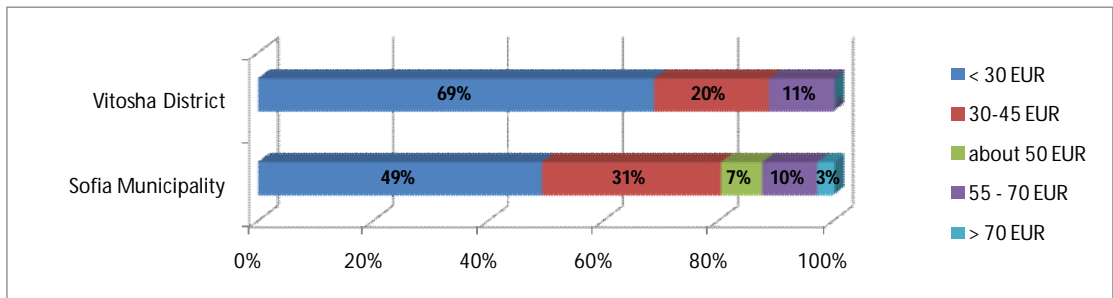


Figure 5. Average Daily Rate per room in 2011 - % of respondents

Source: Questionnaire survey of the accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

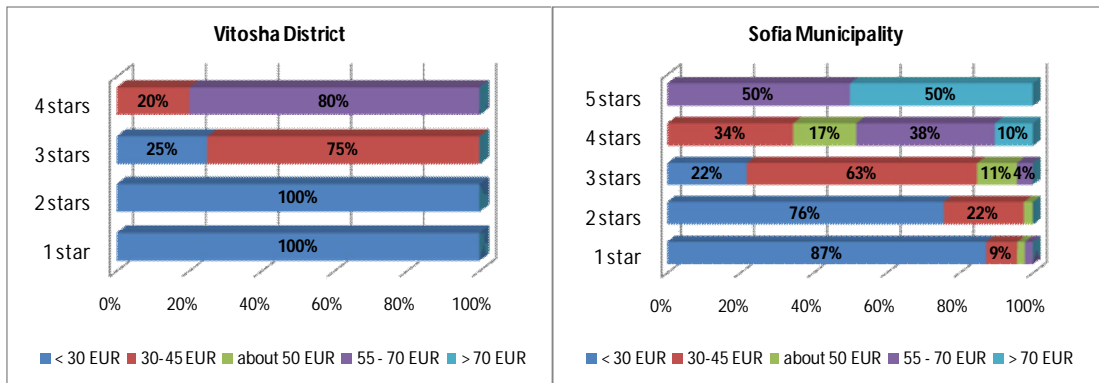


Figure 6. Average Daily Rate per room in 2011 by the category of accommodation establishments - % of respondents

Source: Questionnaire survey of the accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

Even more, disturbing in terms of business effectiveness is the fact that the average occupancy rate of available rooms in Vitosha accommodation facilities is extremely low compared to the unfavorable values of Sofia municipality. In 77% of the studied units in Vitosha District, the annual occupancy rate is below the crucial level of 30%. The situation is unsatisfactory during the working days (less than 30% occupancy in 74% of

the establishments) but gets even worse during the weekends and holidays when in the same position are 83% of the respondents, many of them stating they have no clients at all during these periods. It should be stressed that the highest average occupancy rate achieved by few lodging units in Vitosha District is in the range of 50-60%. Not a single respondent has pointed out higher value - neither during the working days, nor during the weekends.

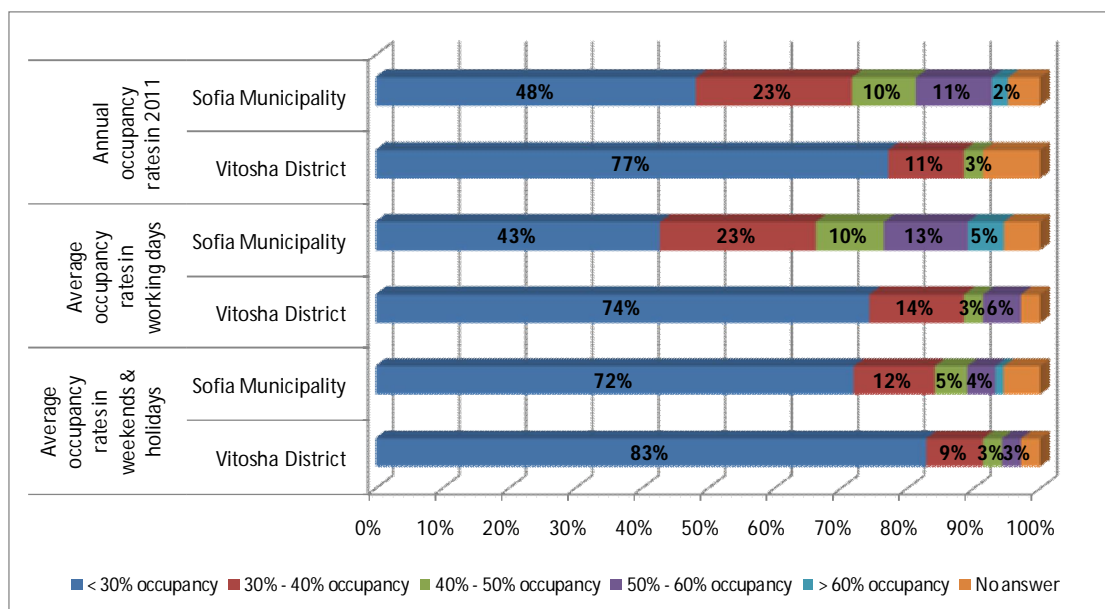


Figure 7. Average occupancy rates of available rooms in Sofia Municipality and Vitosha District - % of respondents

Source: Questionnaire survey of the accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

It is also worth mentioning that similarly to the general situation in Sofia, cheap accommodation establishments in Vitosha District suffer much stronger by the extremely low occupancy rates. Almost all of the respondents who sell their product at prices below 45 EUR per room achieve annual occupancy rate of no more than 30%. On the contrary, more expensive 4-star hotels (55-70 EUR per room) accomplish better utilization of their capacity (Table 3). These results verify that not the prices but the quality of supply and the professional management of accommodation facilities are the leading factor for achieving better utilization of the existing bed capacity. It is also signified that the improvement of the current situation should be seen not in farther price reduction forced by the contemporary economic and financial crisis, but in more competent marketing policy, including better product development and utilization of Vitosha mountain potential.

Table 3. Annual occupancy rate in relation to average daily rate in Vitosha District – share of respondents

Annual occupancy rate for 2011	Average Daily Rate			
	< 30 EUR	30-45 EUR	55 - 70 EUR	Total
< 30% occupancy rate	83%	86%	25%	77%
30% - 40% occupancy rate	8%		50%	11%
40% - 50% occupancy rate			25%	3%
No answer	8%	14%		9%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of respondents	24	7	4	35

Source: Questionnaire survey of accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

2.3. Entrepreneurs' Assessments, Opinions and Expectations concerning Main Problems, Future Development and Local Tourism Policy

Generally, Sofia hoteliers recognize a number of factors impeding their business that are related to local tourism policy. Primarily, they point out unfavourable condition of infrastructure, difficult access to tourist sites and poor marketing of Sofia as a tourist destination as well as other problems such as the high level of direct and indirect taxes, insufficient communication with local authorities, weak control over taxi drivers and illegal accommodation supply etc.

According to the survey results Vitosha District appears among the most problematic administrative units within the municipality of Sofia in regards to the state of infrastructure and public transport. There are numerous reasons for dissatisfaction of local entrepreneurs, but the most frequently mentioned ones refer to common infrastructure in Vitosha suburbs (bad roads and scarce walking areas, irregular snow cleaning in winter and lack of sewerage), as well as to specialized tourist infrastructure both in the settlements and the mountain area (especially the insufficient tourist information and the outdated ski facilities). Some respondents put peculiar emphasis on closing of ski facilities during the last winter season 2011 / 2012. A major problem for the area is also the organization of public transport and the limited connections with the city center, the airport and the main bus and railway stations.

The overall condition of infrastructure and the local government's commitment to its development are scored as poor by 73% of the studied hoteliers in Vitosha District (against 38% of the respondents in other parts of the capital city) while the cumulative share of positive assessments is limited to 14% against 34% for the rest of Sofia municipality (Table 4). Respectively, the average score for the state of infrastructure is extremely low (1,45), and the score is even poorer in regards to the local government's commitment (1,36). This reflects the respondents' assumptions that no adequate solutions of the continuously piled up problems have been implemented. Almost 2/3 of

the survey participants from Vitosha District consider that the overall state of infrastructure in their area has not been changed in comparison to the previous year and 18% of them think it has changed for worse while only 18% feel it has been improved.

Table 4. Assessment of the overall condition of infrastructure and the local government's commitment to its development – share of respondents and average scores.

	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Excellent	Total	Average score*
Overall condition of infrastructure							
Vitosha District	73%	14%	9%	5%	0%	100%	1,45
The rest of Sofia municipalty	38%	28%	31%	0%	3%	100%	2,02
Local government's commitment to infrastructure development							
Vitosha District	73%	18%	9%	0%	0%	100%	1,36
The rest of Sofia municipalty	39%	27%	25%	5%	4%	100%	2,08

* *The assessment is made on a 5-grade scale: 1 - lowest score; 5 – highest score*

Another important and partly surprising finding of the survey is that entrepreneurs in Sofia accommodation sector do not strongly associate future tourism development options with Vitosha Mountain. Despite the widely recognized the potential of the mountain and the fact that it has become one of the city symbols, the future development of the capital as a tourist destination is seen mostly in other directions. Thus, distinct differences in the opinions of hoteliers from Vitosha District and the rest of Sofia municipality could be outlined (Figure 8). The overall survey results show that winter sports are ranked 8th among 13 possible options (supported by 61% of the respondents), while other nature-based activities are ranked 12th next to the last (supported by 40% of the respondents). In the preferences of Vitosha entrepreneurs mountain-related options are ranked much higher - winter sports and other outdoor activities occupy leading positions supported respectively by 83% and 74% of the respondents. However, even in their perspective these options share the same support as the development of Sofia as an attractive place for business and investments together with the organization of sport, music and other culture events.

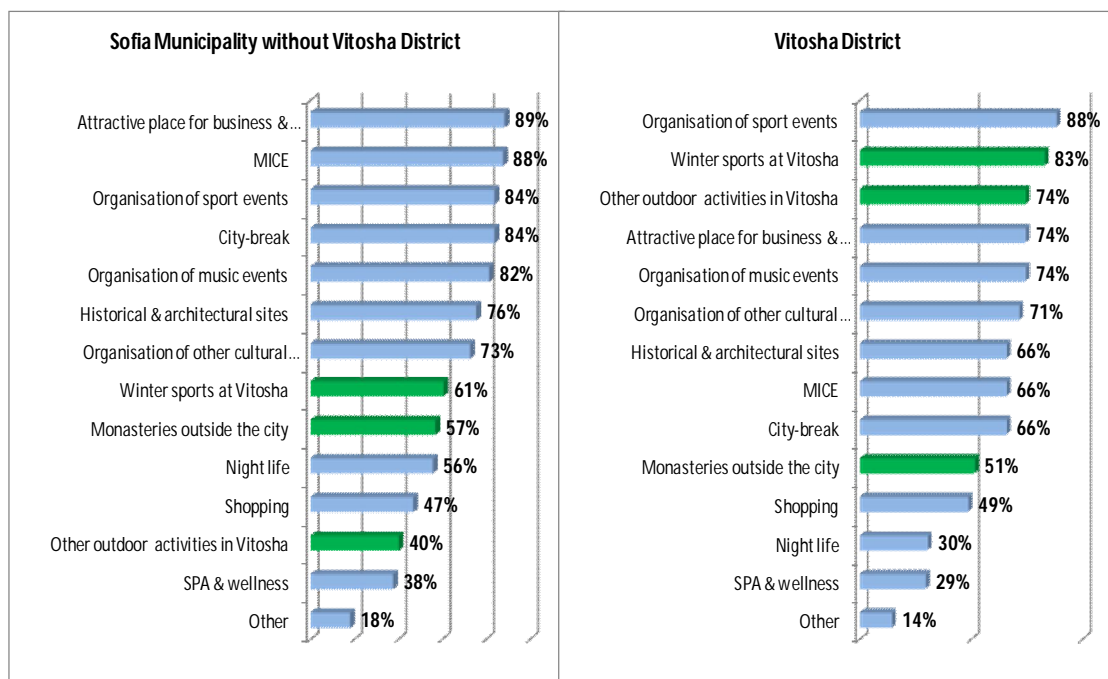


Figure 8. Desired future development options of Sofia as a tourist destination – share of respondents.

Source: Questionnaire survey of the accommodation sector in Sofia (Marinov et al., 2012)

3. Conclusions

Currently, the role of Vitosha Mountain in tourism development of Sofia is much lower than it could be expected to regard its rich and diverse resource potential and its significance in the past. While the studied Vitosha District holds the first position among the 24 administrative districts, in Sofia municipality with 12% of the total bed capacity, the accommodation sector there is featured by the prevalence of smaller facilities with a lower standard, lower price level and lower occupancy rate that attract a greater share of domestic visitors compared to Sofia as a whole.

Despite the outlined differences between Vitosha District and the rest of Sofia municipality, the accommodation sector there is rather related to the city than to the mountain. In the view point of local hoteliers, the proximity to the mountain appears more as an obstacle than as an advantage as it hampers infrastructure development of the area and limits its connections with the city center which badly influences their business.

So far, the rich tourism potential of the mountain is not sufficiently utilized by the local entrepreneurs who are mainly oriented towards business tourism and do not offer enough nature-based options to diversify the visitors' stay. In regards to desired future development options, the respondents emphasize rather on retaining the present

products and markets than on making good use of the existing mountain-related opportunities.

Generally, entrepreneurs in Sofia accommodation sector do not strongly associate future tourism development options with Vitosha Mountain. Still respondents from Vitosha District rely on the development of winter sports and other nature based tourist activities more than other hoteliers in the capital city, although these options share similar support as the development of Sofia as an attractive place for business and investments together with the organization of sport, music and other culture events.

In conclusion, the survey results indicate that the future of Vitosha Mountain tourism development is not bright at least in short to medium term and to a significant degree stands outside the local business control. It seems that it will depend on a more strategic and consistent vision on the position of Vitosha in the development of Sofia as a tourist destination as well as a residential area. Such a vision should be based on and should integrate the existing often conflicting interests of different stakeholders and should serve as a platform for coordination of the activities of relevant authorities.

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