OVER-TOURISM: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE RISE OF SUNNY BEACH BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

Coastal tourism destinations around the globe are chasing and face an increase in arrivals. The prevailing paradigm in tourism development is focused on "the more, the better" concept. International bodies, national and local governments, and stakeholders are working toward future growth in numbers with little to no attention to the impact of mass tourism on the destination's image, tourist satisfaction, and related socio-environmental matters. This paper employing a case study approach to investigate the phenomenon of over-tourism in the most popular and famous coastal resort in Bulgaria - Sunny Beach, and how current pro-growth policies affect the destination development and the destination image. This research is using qualitative methods, namely analysis of documents, analysis of relevant literature, and on-the-spot observations. Results of the research exposing that the Bulgarian government and the tourism stakeholders are ignoring the existence of over-tourism and the consequential impacts. A revision of present strategies, policies, and practices are necessary for assessing the tourism components as time and duration of stay, expenditures, the purpose of visit and destinations carrying capacity. In conclusion, such knowledge may ultimately contribute to addressing over-tourism issues and implications in Bulgarian coastal resort of Sunny Beach, while constructing a more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable destination.

Keywords: coastal tourism, over-tourism, development policies, Sunny Beach, Bulgaria.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, international tourist arrivals grew by seven percent to reach 1.4 billion in 2018 compared to 2017, expecting the number of tourists to reach 1.8 billion in 2030 (World Tourism Organization, 2019). In Europe alone, the growth of tourists (overnight visitors) in 2018 is eight percent or an increase of 55 million tourists more, compared to 2017. The issue of over-tourism, caused by social media influence, DMOs, governmental, and stakeholders' policies, is a challenge that many coastal destinations around the world are facing (Séraphin, Zaman, Olver, Bourliataux-Lajoinie, & Dosquet,

2019). Coastal areas share the most significant part of this growth, being the leading tourism destinations, and coastal tourism is the most considerable in terms of importance as an income generator. "Over-tourism" is a relatively new term, that describes a situation where residents and visitors feel that there are too many tourists, as a result of which the quality of their life and the quality of experience gained by tourists deteriorates sharply, the destination loses its authenticity (World Tourism Organization, 2019). Therefore, there is a sound correlation between the number of visitors, the type and time frame of their visit, and the carrying capacity of a destination. Two factors are of utmost importance in recognising over-tourism - tourism density (tourists/km^2) and tourism intensity (tourists/locals), as shown in Figure 1 (Capocchi, Vallone, Amaduzzi, & Pierotti, 2019). At the same time, governments and tourism boards around the world have firm confidence that the higher the number of arrivals, the better for the destination and the country's development. Given the pro-growth paradigm, the question is to what extent the government and stakeholders will continue to look at increasing arrivals?

Figure 1. The ratio of international arrivals/residents (2017)
Source: TRAN Committee

Rising the visitor's numbers is a global trend, and Bulgaria also records an increase in arrivals in 2018, with a 6.7 % growth from 2017 and reaching 12.3 million in

2018 (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2018) . A substantial part of the increase is shared by coastal tourism, being the leading contributor to the GDP. Similar to many EU coastal destinations, seaside resorts in Bulgaria are not resistant to over-tourism, especially Sunny Beach, which recently struggle to manage the growing number of arrivals. Overall, tourism is Bulgaria's leading export earner, with international tourism direct contribution of nearly EUR 1 billion, or 3.4% of the country's GDP, reaching a total contribution of 12.5 % of the GDP in 2018 (Figure 2). The benefits of tourism to the Bulgarian economy are evident, particularly in terms of tourist expenditures. Whereas the adverse effects of the rapid growth of visitors, when visitor arrivals are seasonal and concentrated in one destination, are ignored. The negative impacts of tourism policies, focusing on the growth of visitors only, such as congestions, pollution, privatisation of public spaces, destruction of green zones, historical sites, and the natural environment are soundly evident in Sunny Beach (Agyeiwaah, 2019). In 2017 57.6% of total nights spent by tourists were in the Bulgarian coastal regions, while the area is occupying 5.2% of the country's territory and 8.85% of the population (NSI, 2018). The population density in Bulgaria's coastal municipalities is estimated to be 223 people/km^2 on average (within 10 km of the coastline), but during the peak of the season in particular areas increase over 320% (NSI, 2011). Such a colossal disproportion of visitor/inhabitant ratio, induced by the government tourism strategies, is the main contributing factor for the over-tourism in Sunny Beach. Indeed, the development and marketing policies of Bulgaria and Sunny Beach as the most prominent coastal resort over the past two decades as an attractive place for a holiday has been beneficial if the increasing number of visitors is the primary assessment instrument (Vurnek, Brozinčević, Čulinović, & Novosel, 2018).
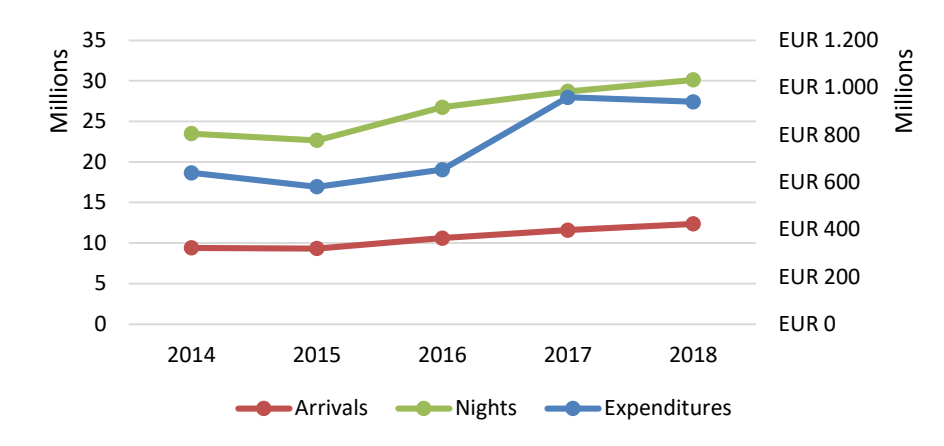
Figure 2. International tourist arrivals, nights spent and expenditures in Bulgaria
Source: Authors, data from the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2018

The study focuses on Sunny Beach development as a coastal tourist destination. The goal of the study is to analyse and to derive the main contextual factors contributing to the image of the destination as well as to propose principles and policies for the successful and sustainable development of the destination. The study examines the current national and international tourism destination development policies, their implementation, and their effect on the destination. The main research questions are:

1. What is over-tourism?
2. How the current tourism development policies contribute to the arising over-tourism in Sunny Beach?

RESEARCH METHODS

To answer the above-stated research questions, the authors chose to employ a qualitative case study approach (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tetnowski, 2015). Case studies are an adequate and appropriate in-depth investigation method, when complicated phenomena, as over-tourism, is under study. Authors perfomed the data gathering through a comprehensive analysis of related tourism development policies and practices adopted on a national and international level. The technique was finding, selecting, understanding and synthesising information from the documents. The documents that were analysed were mainly researchers' papers, online articles, organisational and institutional reports and books.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Geographically, Bulgaria occupies the Balkan Peninsula, South-East Europe, with an area of 110,842 km^2. The Bulgarian Black Sea coast is located in the east part of Bulgaria, on the west of the Black Sea coast, and has a length of about 378 km and a width of 30 to 50 km. A characteristic feature of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast is the presence of 78 beaches, occupying 34% of the Bulgarian coast, or 14 out of 262 municipalities (Figure 3).
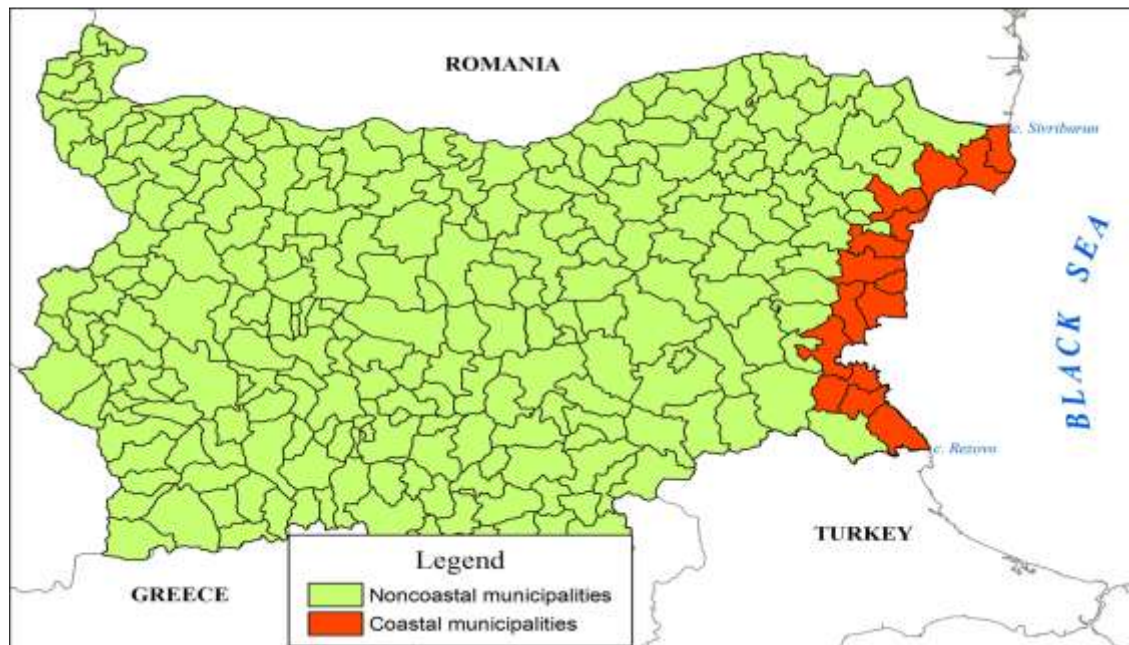

Figure 3. Coastal map of Bulgaria
Source: Authors

On an international level, Bulgaria emerged as a tourism destination at the beginning of the 60s. The biggest coastal resort in Bulgaria - Sunny Beach is located roughly 35 km north of the city of Burgas in Municipality of Nessebar, Burgas Province (Figure 4). The resort has approximately eight kilometres long and 30-60 m wide beach line with fine yellow-gold sand, an average of 250 sunny days per year, and a calm and warm seawater. The planning of the Sunny Beach began in 1958 with Decree №120/30.06.1958 of the Council of Ministers.

Figure 4. Geographical Location of Sunny Beach
Source: Authors

The initial idea of Sunny Beach is to be a resort for family tourism, where visitors can enjoy the sea and relax in vast green zones, build in unity and harmony with the hotels, and at the time was promoted and recognised by visitors as such. By the end of the 90s, the buildings (including hotels, restaurants, clubs, and bars) are occupying only 20% of the territory of the resort, and the rest were walkways, parks and green zones. Nowadays, building density already has a range of over 80%, and the former green zones are a pale memory. In recent years, marketing strategies of Sunny Beach are targeting at young foreign tourists (predominantly from EU-member state countries) looking for entertainment, predominantly drugs, sex, and alcohol (Anastassova, 2011; Tutenges, 2015). Planned as a resort with for up to 30 000 tourists, now Sunny Beach has more than 160 000 beds, according to the official data (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2018). Numerous publications in Bulgarian mass media (TV, newspapers, and magazines), as well as authors' observations, claim that, in fact, the beds are more than 300 000, and the former green resort is popular among Bulgarians as a "concrete jungle." The "boom" in the development began in 1998 after the deregulation of urban and territorial planning, privatisation and not the least the ease of travelling, generated by the rise of low-cost carriers (Simancas Cruz & Peñarrubia Zaragoza, 2019).

Although the signs of over-tourism in Sunny Beach are evident, especially during peak times, this does not create a sense of concern in the government and tourism business (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2009). The adverse effects caused by over-tourism, soundly visible in the resort, are related to drugs and alcohol abuse, prostitution, clogged infrastructure, and destruction of natural landmarks such as dunes (Hesse & Tutenges, 2011; Tutenges, Jaeger, & Hesse, 2012). The over-development of Sunny Beach is evident from the NSI's data. The number of accommodations in coastal municipalities from 2010 to 2017 increased from 322 to 640, beds number increased by 28 %, arrivals increased by 86%, reaching 841,608 in 2017, and the overnight stays reached 5.3 mln (67% increase). Despite these positive numbers, the average length of stay plunged from 7,07 days in 2010 to 6,52 days in 2017. It must be noted, however, that the foreign tourist expenditure rose by 133% for the same period. Another fact, which is continuously ignored by the authorities and DMO's is the main characteristic of tourism in Sunny Beach – the apparent seasonality, when 94% of international arrivals are in June – September (Seraphin, Gowreesunkar, Zaman, & Lorey, 2019). The biggest and most famous Bulgarian Black sea resorts are recording the highest growth in arrivals – Sunny Beach, Golden Sands and Albena, which represent 76 % from the hotels, 84 % from beds, and 88 % from all spending on the Bulgarian Black coast (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2018). There is a significant imbalance between these three municipalities and the lasting 11, which indicates that particular coastal areas, one of which is Sunny Beach, are massively overcrowded. However, the chaotic urban development of the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts was exposed in 2011 as well as put in question the reliability of the NSI's data. An example of the considerable discrepancy in the tourist accommodation numbers is the Municipality of Nessebar, part of which is Sunny Beach. Various data indicate that the summer population of the Municipality of Nessebar is between 350,000 and 650,000 people at its peak, while the municipality has a population of 29,333 people (NSI, 2011). These numbers are in severe contradiction with the NSI report of 63,151 bed-places in Sunny Beach (National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, 2018). Drawing from the European Parliament study (Peeters et al., 2018), Sunny beach is already suffering from over-tourism with all of its

negative impacts, namely destination's image, environmental, and social (Ivanov, 2017; Stanchev, 2018).

The tourism development policies, adopted by the Bulgarian government, tourist boards and stakeholders play the primary role in the over-tourism in Sunny Beach. Moreover, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2030 (both the initial release in 2014 and the updated version from 2017) is still favouring the growth, based on numbers and not considering the impact of over-tourism on Sunny Beach's destination image (MoT, 2017). On the international, national, governmental, and local level, the success of tourism is continuing to be evaluated in numbers. A "successful" year in tourism is generally considered to be one in which numbers have increased substantially. As a result of such one-sided policies, Bulgaria is ranked 45th out of 136 countries in terms of tourism competitiveness, 37th for tourism services price competitiveness, and 6th for tourism accommodation prices in the annual Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (Calderwood & Soshkin, 2019). Despite the optimistic perspective that might appear from these relatively high positions, these rankings confirm the global image and perception of Bulgaria as a cheap tourist destination. At the same time, the report is revealing the complete failure of the Government strategies in creating a firm tourism brand as well as the effectiveness of the branding and marketing policies to attract new tourism segments, being ranked 103rd and 93rd, respectively. The assumption that tourism is a top-priority sector in Bulgarian economy as stated in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria (MoT, 2017) is proved wrong by the WEF report ranking the country an unenviable 93rd place in terms of tourism prioritisation (Calderwood & Soshkin, 2019).

Social media and ICT robustly and substantially impacting tourists behaviour. From smartphones to smart homes, digital technology is playing a significant role in people's lives and transforming progressively into the way people perceive a given destination. Visitors and residents express how they feel in social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and TripAdvisor, which in return significantly impact and influence on how people travel and where they "decide" to go (Muler Gonzalez, Coromina, & Galí, 2018). ICT, reduced travel time and costs, and peer-to-peer online accommodation

services are also major contributing factors. As a result, Sunny Beach, located in highly "instagrammable" and picturesque spot on Bulgarian Black sea coastline, is attracting predominantly party-loving youngsters, seeking wild parties, inexpensive drugs, drinks, and sex. Bar crawls trips, strip clubs and even drug prices (although drugs possession and consumption are illegal according to the Bulgarian law) are widely and freely discussed on social media and online and used as a promotion tool targeting young (18 – 30 years) Europeans (Pigram, 2019; Walpole, 2016). Traditionally, DMOs are responsible for promoting the destinations, but to comply with modern requirements and the spirit of Industry 4.0 (and the Internet of Things within it), DMO's are contributing in the creation of what is sensed by their social media audiences as a trendy destination that must be visited (Seraphin et al., 2019).
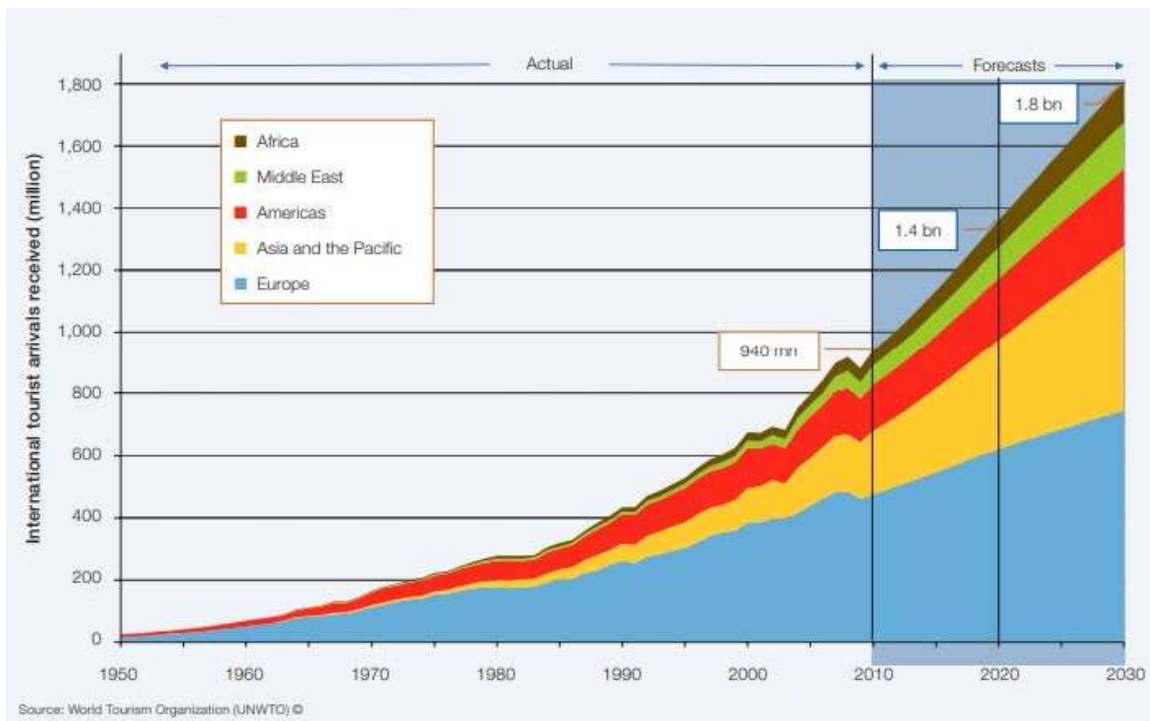

Figure 5. International tourist arrivals trends and forecasts 2030
Source: UNWTO, Tourism highlights 2018

The leading principle of government policies and DMOs strategies is toward increasing the number of arrivals and, as a sequence, raising the tourism contribution to the country's GDP and employment. Thus, the general paradigm is that the growth of the number of arrivals is all that matters. Following its suggestion in growing arrivals number, the UNWTO's estimation shows an astonishing increase of arrivals, reaching

1,8 bn tourists by the year 2030 (Figure 5). When examining the impacts of over-tourism, the destination's carrying capacity becomes the primary assessment tool in revealing the correlation between environment and tourism (Koh & Fakfare, 2019; Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018).

The term "tourism carrying capacity" (TCC), despite its subjectivity and lack of unified definition, is revealing the following link between the visitors and the destination (Sati, 2018; Sharma, 2016). TCC refers to the stage, where numbers of visitors exceed the destination's capacity (Figure 6) which, in return, generate negative impressions and feedback from visitors, and simultaneously may cause irreversible damages to the environment, and denial from the local population, exposed to the crowds (Ansofino, 2019; Milano, 2017).

Figure 6. Sunny Beach in the 1960s (up) and 2017 (down)
Source: www.lostbulgaria.com and www.novinite.com

As per the initial development plan, the carrying capacity of Sunny Beach is determined to be 30,000 beds. Currently, the resort capacity is extending to over 300,000 beds (although the official data from NSI states, that the beds are a bit over 160,000), which gives a beach availability of 0.4m2 per visitor, while the Bulgarian Territorial Management Regulation requires at least 8m2 per person.

The subjective nature of TCC and the lack of sound definition makes the assessment extremely challenging. TCC of each destination vary massively, and the effects are primarily psychological, yet interrelated to the environmental, social, economic, and political aspects of tourism. The characteristics of the destination and type of tourists are in strong interaction when determining visitors' effect and impact on the destination and whether the destination is struggling to cope with visitors or not (Muler Gonzalez et al., 2018). Proper evaluation tools to determine when a destination is suffering from over-tourism are still under discussion among scholars and institutions on an international level (Llausàs, Vila-Subirós, Pueyo-Ros, & Fraguell, 2019).

It is a positive step that the EU parliament recently recognises and consider over-tourism as an imminent threat to the future of the tourism industry, that need immediate measures. However, Bulgarian government and tourism businesses and stakeholders

demonstrate staggering ignorance to see beyond the increase of arrivals' number, which resulted in the current over-crowded and over-urbanised state in Sunny Beach. Being developed as a family resort, nowadays, the marketing and the promotion of Sunny Beach is entirely toward as a party destination, where rules and local laws are widely ignored, except with some sporadic actions, against the noise pollution, and tax and labour law violations. Given measures have little to no effect, and according to Bulgarian on-line media are seeking primarily political dividends, rather than improving the situation and the perceived image of Sunny Beach.

CONCLUSION

Aiming at the future development and sustainability of Sunny Beach as a popular coastal resort can not be possible without examining and addressing the impact of over-tourism and the consequences for the destination. The initial impression is that Sunny Beach is experiencing over-tourism with all of the latter's impacts - environmental, social, economic, and political. The complexity and multidimensionality of these impacts, as they represent the unity of various aspects of the tourism components, make it difficult for recognition and assessment.

At present, the national tourism development policies, strategies, and measures implemented in the development of Sunny Beach are still focused on increasing the visitors, thus ignoring and even denying that over-tourism is already manifesting itself. Despite some government efforts, performed recently, their efficiency still seems weak, fragmented, and there is no particular proof of a comprehensive plan to address the problems. Furthermore, it seems that all parties involved in Sunny Beach's development and marketing – DMOs, tourism business, stakeholders, and policymakers, are not considering the over-tourism as an issue, which hampers the understanding and preventing the over-tourism. Therefore, over-tourism problems are likely to continue to occur within such a mindset, impacting, and leading to future degradation and diminishing the image of Sunny Beach as a quality leisure destination. There is a need for re-evaluating the current "pro-growth" paradigm where success is not entirely measured in arrivals, but on seeking enhancement of the offered tourism products and services. Regardless of the still relatively low number of destinations affected by over-

tourism, the impact of over-tourism is potentially critical to the extent, where a destination could suffer the loss of its uniqueness and attractiveness. An alternative to "pro-growth" paradigm is optimisation - a destination marketing and development, aiming at sustaining - or even decreasing - arrivals' numbers and increasing return through offering alternatives, such as unique activities, specific to the destination and neighbouring areas. Despite some indications that shorter length of stay can lead to higher expenditure per day, policies supporting more extended stay might affect distribution positively across the destination - tourists visiting adjacent areas, attractions, and places of interest, thus resulting in a longer length of stay. Not the least, government, DMOs, policymakers, and stakeholders should guarantee that offered products and services are sustainable in terms of energy use, waste management, and other adverse environmental effects and assuring protection against activities leading to rising a negative social, financial and environmental impacts.

In order for a destination to thrive and to develop the tourism sustainably, government, tourism planning authorities, entrepreneurs, investors, legislators, and community groups need to understand to what extent the destination can accommodate future anticipated tourism growth and the resulting challenges and opportunities that the destination may encounter. Government and decision-makers with the involvement of all stakeholders must create long-term plans, taking into account the needs of both visitors and residents at the centre of investment and destination development plans. Some of the measures, that might be considered involve: regulating and limiting the number of tourists' arrivals; using digital technologies to prevent the congestions in real time; extending the season and shifting the promotion's focus and target; promoting less-visited attractions in the vicinity of Sunny Beach and developing new attractions.

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