

## DEVELOPMENT OF RUSE REGION AS A DESTINATION FOR APITOURISM

### DESENVOLVIMENTO DA REGIÃO DE RUSE COMO DESTINO PARA O APITURISMO

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#### Abstract

In addition to the development of traditional types of tourism on a global scale, we are constantly observing the increasingly rapid development of alternative (modern) types of tourism, including bee tourism. In recent years, a dynamic development of bee tourism has been observed in several countries, such as Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Ukraine, but Slovenia is the leader in this type of tourism. Bulgaria also has good opportunities for the development of this type of tourism, despite the difficulties and problems that accompany it. The country has unique features that must be exploited. From this point of view, it is necessary to use good practices and their application in Bulgaria. Of course, this should not be done mechanically, but should be developed mainly in the areas where there are data for this. One of these regions in Bulgaria is the Ruse region. Beekeeping in the Ruse region provides very good opportunities for the development of apitourism (or bee tourism), as well as related rural, wellness, cultural, culinary and other types of tourism. They offer opportunities for the direct sale of bee products, accompanied by additional beekeeping services that increase the complexity and added value of its products. Beekeeping tourism is a source for the creation of local markets, green economies, sustainable development, employment and an important tool in the fight against unemployment at the sectoral and regional level. There is an opportunity to ensure better competitiveness and profitability of the Ruse region, positioning it as a tourist destination for apitourism and related rural, wine, wellness, cultural, culinary and other types of tourism. The development of apitourism is important, including for overcoming the seasonality of tourism both in Bulgaria and in the Ruse region.

**Keywords:** honey and bee products, apitourism, bees, environment, traditions and culture.

#### Resumo

Além do desenvolvimento de tipos tradicionais de turismo em escala global, estamos constantemente observando o desenvolvimento cada vez mais rápido de tipos alternativos (modernos) de turismo, incluindo o turismo de abelhas.

Nos últimos anos, observou-se um desenvolvimento dinâmico do turismo apícola em vários países, como a Polónia, Alemanha, República Checa, Lituânia, Ucrânia, mas a Eslovénia é líder neste tipo de turismo.

A Bulgária também apresenta boas oportunidades para o desenvolvimento deste tipo de turismo, apesar das dificuldades e problemas que o acompanham. O país tem características únicas que devem ser exploradas. Deste ponto de vista, é necessário usar boas práticas e sua aplicação na Bulgária. Claro que isso não deve ser feito mecanicamente, mas deve ser desenvolvido principalmente nas áreas onde existem dados para isso. Uma dessas regiões na Bulgária é a região de Ruse.

A apicultura na região de Ruse oferece oportunidades muito boas para o desenvolvimento do apiturismo (ou turismo apícola), bem como de turismo rural, de bem-estar, cultural, culinário e outros. Oferecem oportunidades de venda direta de produtos apícolas, acompanhadas de serviços adicionais de apicultura que aumentam a complexidade e o valor agregado de seus produtos. O turismo apícola é uma fonte de criação de mercados locais, economias verdes, desenvolvimento sustentável, emprego e uma ferramenta importante na luta contra o desemprego a nível setorial e regional. Existe a oportunidade de garantir uma melhor competitividade e rentabilidade da região de Ruse, posicionando-a como um destino turístico de apiturismo e turismo rural, enoturístico, bem-estar, cultural, gastronómico e outros relacionados.

O desenvolvimento do apiturismo é importante, inclusive para superar a sazonalidade do turismo na Bulgária e na região de Ruse.

**Palavras-chave:** mel e produtos apícolas, apiturismo, abelhas, meio ambiente, tradições e cultura.

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by intensive economic development and increasing degradation of the natural environment. This leads to the decline of biodiversity and the malfunction of a number of ecosystems. The process of globalization threatens the behaviour, traditions and culture of local communities and, from an ecological point of view, it is necessary to counteract the negative processes.

Tourism is a sector of the economy that needs to preserve natural and anthropogenic tourism resources. There is a tendency to increase interest in alternative types of tourism and in particular to increase eco-tourism, rural tourism, cultural tourism, among others. Tourists seek new experiences and acquaintance with the natural and cultural assets of a region.

An interesting form of such travel is bee tourism, also known as apitourism (derived from the Latin name for "bee" – "apis"). It includes beekeeping, bee products and tourist services focused on environmental, nutritional and medical aspects.

Activities within the scope of bee tourism include visits to open-air bee families and bee museums, where the tourist has the opportunity to observe the work of the beekeeper, the method of honey production, to learn about its properties and specifics (including tasting of different types of honey), as well as find out about other bee products (pollen, wax, bee bread - perga, royal jelly, etc.), observe how the bee family lives, and get acquainted with the ecological correlation between man and bees. Bee tourism can be developed on the basis of already existing bee families (apiaries, bee farms). The development of bee tourism is an opportunity to activate rural areas, create new jobs, as well as an opportunity to renew the traditions and culture of the regions.

In recent years, there has been a dynamic development of bee tourism in the several countries like Poland, Germany, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Romania, Ukraine, but the leader in this type of tourism is Slovenia (Vladimirov, 2020).

Slovenia is a pioneer in the field of apitourism, which began to develop actively in 2003, when the country hosted the World Congress of Beekeeping "Apimondia" (International Federation of Beekeepers' Associations). Apitourism is promoted by the local association of beekeepers and a travel agency, which certifies the providers of apitourism services ([www.infotourism.net](http://www.infotourism.net), 27.05.2018). Slovenia is considered the cradle of apitherapy, which uses bee products, aromas and air from the hive for the prevention and treatment of diseases. It offers apitherapy as part of apitourism, which also includes "honey paths", tasting of bee products and culinary products, making candles from beeswax, attending seminars and beekeeping courses, among other activities.

While in Bulgaria apitourism is still mainly a theory (Grigorova, 2015; Yonkova, Grigorova et al., 2016) and an insignificantly developed practice (Lyubenov, 2018), Slovenia uses it in the most authentic way as a destination with exceptional natural advantages, in accordance with the adopted strategy for the development of sustainable tourism under the slogan "Green, active, healthy". Apitourism promotes respect for nature and raises awareness of environmental issues. It is in line with the concept of a green economy, which is a priority for the EU as they plan to finance more public action plans, such as

pollination carried out mainly by bees. Apitourism has the potential to generate additional business activity and growth in many green industries and services.

Beekeeping in the Ruse region provides very good opportunities for the development of apitourism, as well as related rural, wellness, cultural, culinary and others types of tourism. They offer opportunities for the direct realization of bee products, accompanied by additional services from beekeeping, which increase the complexity and added value of its products. Apitourism is a source for creating local markets, green economies, sustainable development, employment and an important tool in the fight against unemployment at the sectoral and regional level. It has the opportunity to ensure better competitiveness and profitability of the Ruse region, positioning it as a tourist destination for apitourism and related rural, wine, wellness, cultural, culinary, and other types of tourism.

The object of this study is beekeeping in the Ruse Province, as a basis for the development of apitourism. The aim is to study the Ruse Province as a destination for apitourism. To achieve these goals, the methods of description, comparison, grouping and analysis are applied.

## **2. Exhibition**

The development of beekeeping in Bulgarian lands dates back to ancient times - Thracians, Slavs and Bulgarians have mastered to perfection the art of beekeeping. For centuries, Bulgaria is famous for its large production of honey and high quality wax. After the Liberation in 1878, beekeeping began to be modernized. Primitive, twig-woven hives, also called "grass" hives, are gradually being replaced by modern "greenhouse hives", but the traditions in beekeeping and the production of honey and bee products are preserved to this day.

### **2.1. Relevance of the problem**

Despite the traditions and natural resources, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, beekeeping in Bulgaria remains a hobby for most beekeepers. There are few who have turned beekeeping into a profession, despite the Agriculture Fund's programs aimed at increasing bee colonies. The natural resources of the country and especially the diversity of its honey vegetation yields pure high-quality honey, royal jelly, pollen, propolis, beeswax, bee venom, and other bee products. A trend in recent years is an increase in honey production and an increase in the number of bee colonies, despite the reduction in the number of farms registered in the sector. Due to these facts, it should be noted that beekeeping can and should be used as a resource for the development of apitourism (Vladimirov, 2020).

The urgency of the need to establish the Ruse region as a destination for apitourism stems from: 1. provision of eco-system services; 2. formation of local markets and short supply chains; 3. symbiosis with other sectors and creation of green economies; 4. diversification and improvement of competitiveness and profitability. These arguments are solid and concern the preservation of biodiversity, so as to ensure sustainable agricultural practices, access to new market segments, symbiosis and collaboration with other industries and services, as well as achieve trans-regional

competitiveness. Apitourism will diversify the beekeeping of the Ruse region and improve the integration and creation of products with high added value, increasing consequently the competitiveness of the region.

Beekeeping in the Ruse region plays an important role in the region's food security, given the pollination activity of bees. Due to the disappearing bees in the world, annual production worth between 235 and 557 billion dollars is endangered. The economic effect of bee pollination in the EU is estimated at over 14 billion euros per year, in Bulgaria at over 1 billion BGN / year, and in the Ruse regions at over 0.1 billion BGN / year. The cost of bee extinction could amount to 150 billion euros worldwide, which is 10% of the market value of agricultural products intended for human consumption (Lyubenov and Stoilov, 2020). Apitourism will stimulate the development of beekeeping in the Ruse region, especially the public goods from the eco-system pollination service.

The Bulgarian HoReCa sector (hotel, restaurant, catering / cafe), which is associated with all types of tourism, offers opportunities for marketing of agricultural raw materials in the order of billions of leva. Agricultural raw materials make up about 1/4 of its annual turnover and food and beverages about 1/3 (Lyubenov, 2017). The HoReCa sector provides an opportunity for beekeeping farms to sell directly and without intermediaries, as well as to build their own retail market through apitourism. In general, tourism forms local markets and short supply chains that avoid intermediaries. Apitourism allows the placement of bees and other high value-added products that diversify bee farms and increase their competitiveness and profitability.

Apitourism in the Ruse Province forms new green industries, services and employment in the region, as well as new green markets. Consumers of apitourism and products related to it, create local markets and short supply chains for beekeeping products. Apitourism forms new green markets for bee and other products that expand regional markets. These green markets reduce not only costs and delivery time, but also environmental pollution. Apitourism forms green markets, which generate and stimulate the development of regional beekeeping and other green economies (organic farming, food, trade) at the local level. They create an image that will serve to better position the Ruse region as a destination for apitourism.

The trend towards sustainable entry of beekeeping in urban areas worldwide provides alternatives for the development of apitourism, aimed at a new generation of tourists looking for real, meaningful and active experiences, including interaction with the natural way of life of bees and detachment from traditional package breaks. These consumers are committed to socially responsible causes regarding the biological role of bees in providing biodiversity, diverse and local food, a cleaner table and environment. As advocates for the conservation of animal and plant species, the reduction of the carbon footprint and the fight against desertification and the maintenance of biodiversity, they are potential consumers of apitourism.

Apitourism is a new direction in tourism with significant and undeveloped potential, as well as very good opportunities for support and collaboration with other types of tourism. The Ruse region is a famous and established tourist destination - cultural, culinary, wine, and other types of tourism related to its history, traditions and business practices. There is a solid base and significant tourist potential for development and establishment of the area as a destination for apitourism, which will diversify its offer

and provide it with more stable, higher incomes. Apitourism can significantly accelerate the development of certain branches of tourism, beekeeping, fruit growing, trade, etc., providing a basis for the more efficient use of its resources with higher profitability.

## 2.2. Resource potential - administrative-territorial and geographical zoning

The Ruse Province is one of the 28 Provinces of Bulgaria, located in the northeastern part of the country, including the municipalities of Borovo, Byala, Vetovo, Dve Mogili, Ivanovo, Ruse, Slivo Pole, Tsenovo. All municipalities except Byala, Dve Mogili and Vetovo have access to the Danube River.

The availability of good accessibility to the area through various transport corridors is an important element for the development of tourism. Only easy-to-reach destinations are successful destinations.

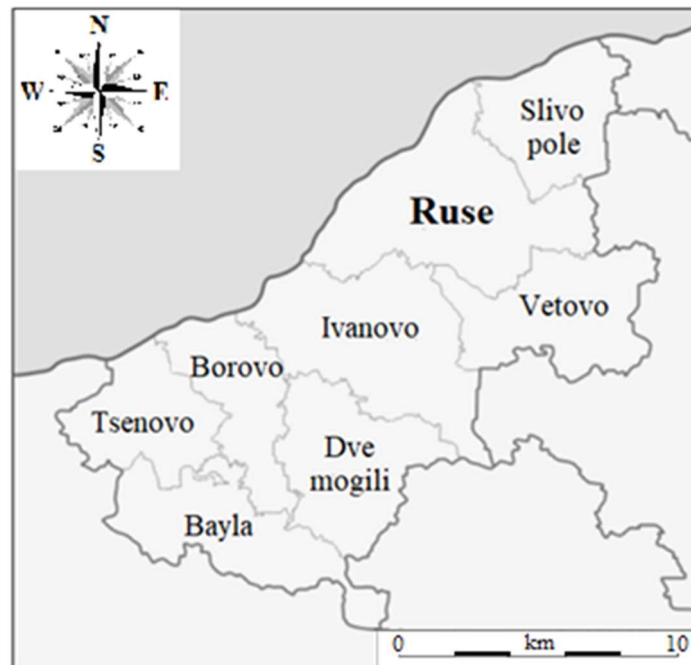


Figure 1 - Administrative division of Ruse Province.

Source: [www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg), 16.11.2020.

The Ruse Province is one of the middle regions in terms of territory and population in Bulgaria - its area is about 3%, and the population and GDP about 2.2% of the national indicators ([www.nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg), 16.11.2020.). But the latter are steadily declining in the last decade. It has a significantly higher than the national average share of agricultural areas (76% vs. 56%), settlements and urban areas - 6.5% vs. 3.7%, as well as a significantly lower share of forest areas - 14 % vs. 34%.

The Ruse Province produces over 1,000 tons of honey, which is over 10% of the national production, and a similar part of the realized economic effect of pollination - over 0.1 billion BGN / year. It is in the top 5 of the provinces (Burgas, Dobrich, Silistra, Pleven) with the largest number of bee families - 43,000 (Lyubenov, 2018). Although beekeeping is mainly in rural areas, it has the highest territorial concentration around the administrative centre - Ruse. Urbanized areas have a greater appeal

in the territorial location of beekeeping farms because they provide better access to resources, information, services and sales, as well as better conditions for training, qualification, financing and more.

The Ruse Province reveals very good prerequisites for the development of apitourism in urban conditions and specifically in its administrative centre. This is an alternative for development that has many positive aspects. Honey produced in urban areas is cleaner than in rural areas due to the lack of plant protection products. Established as tourist destinations, cities bolster the realization of the “made in” effect in different types of tourism, as a basis for branding with a famous name. Other advantages are the reduction of transport and other costs and the offer of more quantity and quality of various tourist services. Apitourism provides new opportunities and stimulates the branding of regional beehives and other products.

The Ruse region is part of the natural area of the Danube Plain, which is divided by the Yantra River into two parts - West and East. Along the southern bank of the Danube, the Ruse Region is located between the delta of the Yantra River and the Brashlyanska lowland, the so-called The coast. The southwestern part of the Ruse region falls in the Western and the rest in the Eastern part of the Danube plain. The Rusenski Lom river basin is located in the Ruse region, which is differentiated as a physiographic sub-region. The coast is the largest Bulgarian Danube lowland. It stretches along the right bank of the Danube, from Ruse to Tutrakan for a length of 60.7 km and its width varies from 10 to 15 km (Lyubenov et al, 2020). The basins of the Danube, Rusenski Lom and others form solid prerequisites for tourism in the Ruse region.

The Danube River has been a famous and established international tourist destination for centuries. It provides transport, historical, cultural and other opportunities for tourism development, including apitourism, in the countries of the so-called Danube area. In 1970, the basin of Rusenski Lom was declared a natural park as a natural complex with ecological, historical and cultural value (Lyubenov et al, 2020). Over the past 50 years, it has established itself as a tourist destination for many foreign tourists. The presence of established international tourist destinations in the Ruse region, as well as the leading positions of beekeeping, natural, historical, cultural and other resources, form solid opportunities for its development and establishment as a destination for apitourism.

The Ruse region is rich in natural tourist resources. There are four sites with the necessary qualities and opportunities for development in the Ruse (Fig. 2). These are:

1) Batin Island - located north of the village of Batin. It is managed and operated by the state hunting farm “Danube”. The Batin hunting lodge can accommodate 13 visitors in one apartment and five double rooms at the same time. The island is reached by boats, which are available to guests of the home;

2) Rusenski Lom Nature Park - located about 20 km. south of Ruse. The park is a monument of exceptional world importance in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Rusenski Lom Nature Park provides a living environment for 197 species of birds, 90% of which are endangered in Europe. The number of plants present in the Red Book of Bulgaria is significant. Specially designed routes allow tourists to get acquainted with the diversity of the park;

3) Orlova Chuka Cave - located on the territory of Dve Mogili municipality. Remains of prehistoric peoples and bears have been found here. The cave is electrified and accessible for visits. Next to the Orlova Chuka cave there is a hut, which provides shelter to 27 people;

4) "Eco-museum with an aquarium" - located in the Natural History Museum in Ruse. On the ground floor of the museum is a small aquarium, which is the only one in Bulgaria representing the diversity of Danube fish - sturgeon, carp, grass carp, silver carp, pike, catfish and others. (Province strategy, 2019).

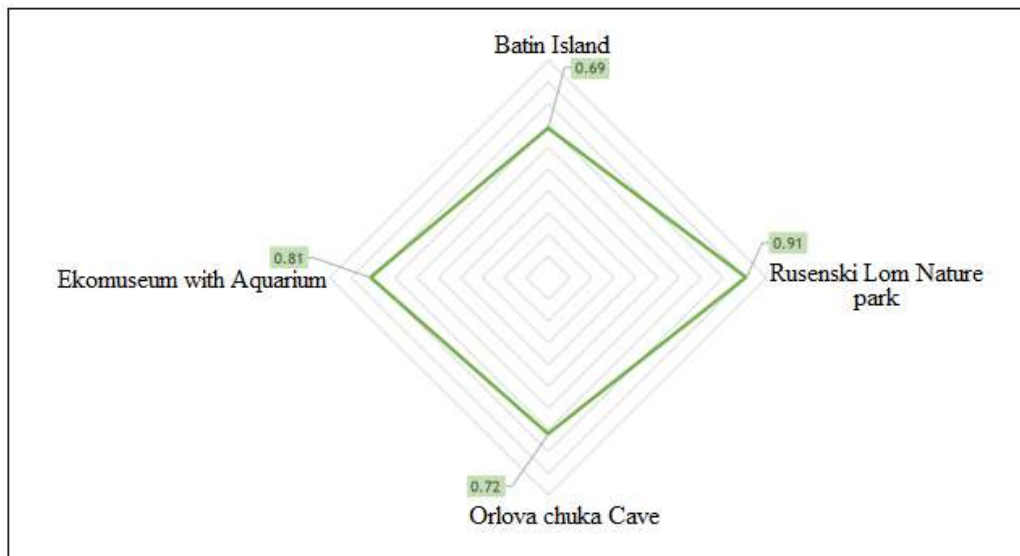


Figure 2 - General assessment of the natural and operational value of natural resources in the Ruse Province.~

Source: Regional Strategy for Tourism Development in Ruse Province, 2019.

The Ruse Province has several hunting and fishing farms, which provide excellent conditions for hunting and fishing tourism. There are centuries-old traditions in fishing, fish farming, fish cuisine and production of fish products. The exoticism of the environment and life in the so-called "Fishing villages", combined with the opportunities for development of water sports, represent a significant resource for enriching the offered tourist product.

Bulgaria is divided into 5 wine-growing regions, such as Ruse and its surroundings included in the Danube Plain Region. there are many wine producers in the Ruse Province who are renowned in Europe and world-wide such as, Winery "Nisovo" (village of Nisovo), Winery "Dve Mogili" (town of Dve Mogili), Wine house "Leventa" (town of Ruse), Winery "Ruse" (Ruse), Winery "Seven Generations" (Stulpishte), Enoteka - Ruse, etc., which adds a touch of wine tourism. The development of viticulture, wine production and fruit growing provides opportunities for tasting local wines, participation in grape harvests and other attractive forums for agricultural work.

The natural resources of Ruse Province, beekeeping and its products, beekeeping practices, crafts and traditions, form a solid resource base for the development of apitourism, and the establishment of the Province as such a destination. This untapped tourist potential is sustainable and guarantees good environmental and cumulative consequences of its development. There are tourist

resources that can bolster the innovative and overall potential of the area for sustainable nature management and development as a destination for apitourism. Therefore, apitourism can be included as an integral and promising element in the development strategies of Ruse Province, to achieve higher profitability and competitiveness of the region.

### 2.3. Cultural and historical heritage of the Ruse region

Cultural heritage encompasses tangible, intangible, movable and immovable heritage as a set of cultural assets that are carriers of historical memory, national identity and have scientific or cultural value. The Thracian, Roman, Byzantine, Revival and modern presences layered culture and assets. The high cultural-historical and cognitive value of unique monuments from ancient and medieval Bulgaria represent architectural-archaeological immovable cultural assets in the Ruse region with the potential for tourism development.

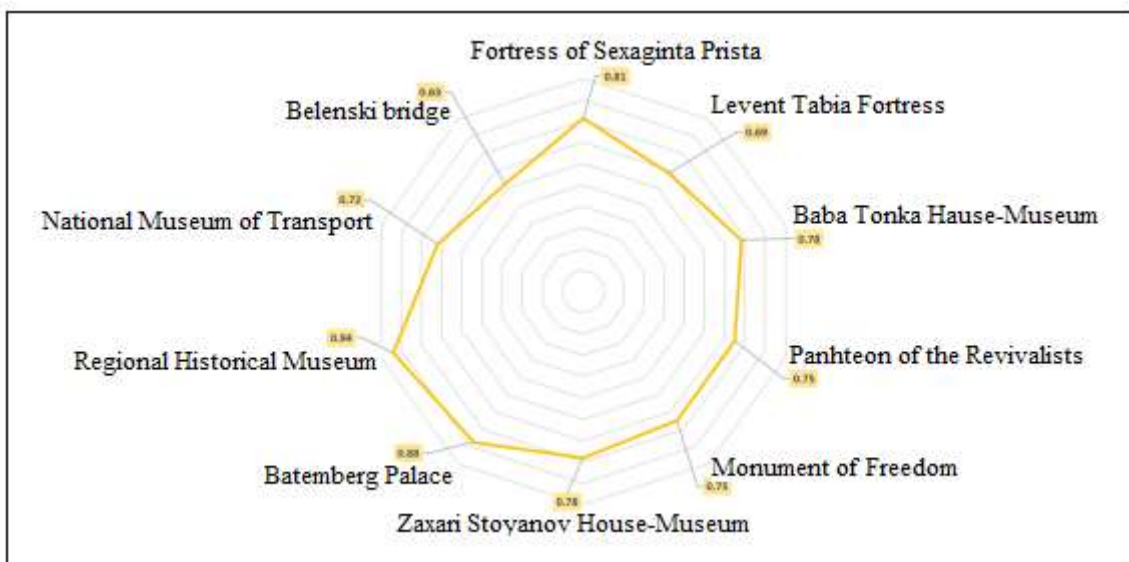


Figure 3 - Total cultural and operational value of the historical resources and heritage in the Ruse region. Source: Regional Strategy for Tourism Development in Ruse Province, 2019.

According to the National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage (NIICH), the declared immovable cultural assets in the Province number 242. However, the most significant immovable cultural assets and artefacts discovered are over 3000. The “Ivanovo Rock Churches” archaeological reserve listed as UNESCO world heritage, the Basarbovo Rock Monastery Archaeological Reserve, the medieval town of Cherven, among others. Among the anthropogenic tourist resources, the following sites stand out (Figure 3): Sexaginta Prista Roman fortress; Levent Tabia Fortress; Baba Tonka House-Museum; The House-Museum of Zahari Stoyanov; The Pantheon of the Revivalists; National Museum of Transport; Regional Historical Museum; Monument of Freedom; Battenberg Palace; National Museum of Transport; Belenski Bridge.



The Ruse Province also has a relatively good accommodation base. In the Province, 106 sites (hotels, guesthouses, bungalows, hostels, etc.) with a total capacity of 2,715 places are officially registered (Table I). 65% of all accommodation is concentrated in Ruse. Over the last nine years, the number of accommodation places with a capacity of more than 10 places in Ruse Province has decreased by 58% - from 116 (2010) to 49 in 2019, but the bed capacity has increased by 6% for the same period. This development is due to two main factors:

- increase in the number and capacity of four-star hotels - by 150% and 198% respectively for the last nine years;
- increase of the bed capacity of the accommodation places of first and second category by 30%.

Table I - Capacity, share and average income per night according to the category of accommodation, 2019.

Category	Number of accommodation places	Bed capacity	Share in realized nights	Growth in overnight stays in the period 2019/2010	Average income per night, BGN*
One and two stars	91	1846	43%	111%	35.87
Three stars	10	298	15%	-57%	57.45
Four stars	5	571	42%	327%	58.61
Total	109	2715	100%	53 %	48.56

Source: National Statistical Institute, 2020. \* One euro is equal to 1.96 leva.

A total of 711 restaurants are registered in the region, with a capacity of over 54 thousand seats. There is a wide variety of restaurants, fast food restaurants, cafes, day and night bars, pastry shops and more. Visitors can enjoy authentic food experiences, classic and modern cuisine, according to their own tastes. The best sites are the tourist sites located in the city of Ruse - nearly 77% of all restaurants and 83% of their capacity.

All this contributes to forming the tourist profile of the province, as a destination for alternative forms of tourism - ecotourism, cultural, religious, rural, and adventure tourism in all seasons. There are suitable paths for walking, cycling and horseback riding. People can practice water sports or see various natural and cultural-historical landmarks. There are suitable places for hunting and fishing. With its diverse cultural and natural attractions, the Ruse region allows its tourists to immerse themselves in the local community and get closer to nature. Even so, the province should focus on additional tourism services, in the form of bad weather infrastructure or so-called soft activities, and special market support programs, among others (Province strategy).

These activities contribute to the vision for development of the Ruse Province “ALWAYS NEW EXPERIENCES AND FEELINGS. DISCOVER THEM!”.

The Ruse is a cross-border region where many international transport corridors and tourist destinations pass through. The Rusenski Lom river valley is an established international tourist destination due to its unique nature, registered UNESCO World Heritage sites and developed tourist

routes. The area has a rich history and centuries-old traditions, crafts, holidays, culture and more. related to beekeeping. This historical, natural, human and other potential contribute to the area's successful positioning as a tourist destination for apitourism. The Ruse Province apitourism can significantly increase the demand not only for goods and services from beekeeping, but also for many foods, beverages and other products of the local economy.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent problems for the development of tourism in 2020-2021, apitourism has a future both in Bulgaria and in the Ruse region. This is also enshrined in the Ruse Province Strategic Documents and the eight municipalities included in it.

### 3. Conclusion

As a result of this study, the following conclusions can be put forward:

- While in Bulgaria apitourism is still mainly a theory and an insignificantly developed practice, there are countries that use it as an attraction with exceptional natural advantages, in accordance with the adopted by the EU green strategy for the development of sustainable tourism. A typical such example is Slovenia;

- The urgency of establishing the Ruse region as a destination for apitourism stems from the provision of eco-system services, formation of local markets and short supply chains, symbiosis with other sectors and the creation of green economies, diversification and supra-regional competitiveness;

- The Ruse Province has an excellent resource base for the development of bee tourism, this untapped tourist potential is sustainable and provides good environmental and cumulative effects, if developed;

- In bee tourism, tourists have the opportunity to taste ready-made honey and buy ready-made products, which are offered in several variants - pure honey, with nuts, with tahini, even with pieces of honeycomb, homemade honey wine (mead), brandy, among other products and services;

- There is a need for adequate and territorially differentiated marketing policy in bee tourism, which can be achieved through the development of new strategic documents concerning this type of tourism. In this context, all future actions in the field of regional tourism should involve representatives of local communities;

- The development of apitourism will contribute to overcoming the seasonality of tourism both in Bulgaria and in the Ruse region. It can be combined with the development of other types of tourism.

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