

## NATURAL AND CULTURAL-HISTORICAL RESOURCES FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN GERLOVO REGION

### RECURSOS NATURAIS E HISTÓRICOS-CULTURAIS PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO DO TURISMO NA REGIÃO DE GERLOVO

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#### Summary

Tourism is a traditional activity in the Bulgarian lands. Its results are directly dependent on the natural and cultural-historical resources of the Gerlovo geographical area. It is located on the territory of four municipalities: Varbitsa, Kotel, Omurtag and Targovishte. The starting point for developing the potential and competitiveness of tourism in the Gerlovo region is its natural and cultural-historical resources. One of the specific tasks is related to carrying out an analysis of tourism in the Gerlovo region in terms of natural resources and cultural and historical heritage, and the second is aimed at the opportunities for the development of regional tourism. This regional analysis can be useful not only for tourism from the Gerlovo region, but also for other regions in Bulgaria and the EU.

**Keywords:** Gerlovo region, resources, tourism, state, development.

#### Resumo

O turismo é uma atividade tradicional em terras búlgaras. Seus resultados dependem diretamente dos recursos naturais e histórico-culturais da região, inclusive e na área geográfica de Gerlovo. Está localizado no território de quatro municípios: Varbitsa, Kotel, Omurtag e Targovishte. O ponto de partida para desenvolver o potencial e a competitividade do turismo na região de Gerlovo são os seus recursos naturais e histórico-culturais. Uma das tarefas específicas está relacionada com a realização de uma análise do turismo na região de Gerlovo em termos de recursos naturais e património cultural e histórico, e a segunda visa as oportunidades para o desenvolvimento do turismo regional. Esta análise regional pode ser útil não só para o turismo da região de Gerlovo, mas também para outras regiões da Bulgária e da UE.

**Palavras-chave:** região de Gerlovo, recursos, turismo, estado, desenvolvimento.

#### 1- Introduction

In tourism, the main factors of competitiveness are formed at the regional level, and through the market realization of tourist products, they are also manifested at the supra-regional level. The starting point for developing the potential and competitiveness of tourism in the Gerlovo region is its natural and cultural-historical resources. One of the specific tasks of the reported study is related to carrying out an analysis of tourism in the Gerlovo region in terms of natural resources and cultural and historical heritage, and the second is aimed at the opportunities for the development of regional tourism. This regional analysis can be useful not only for tourism from the Gerlovo region, but also for other regions in Bulgaria.

Tourism is a traditional activity in the Bulgarian lands. Its results are directly dependent on the natural and cultural-historical resources of the region, incl. and in the Gerlovo geographical area. There are no studies for the Gerlovo region, incl. and for other areas and regions in the country, as well as attempts to reveal the interdependencies between the triad “natural conditions - natural and cultural-historical resources

– tourism”. These relationships and issues define the purpose of the present study. The development of tourism is expected to diversify and provide more stable and high incomes to the regional economy in Gerlovo district and its related regions.

The segment of hotels, restaurants and cafes (HoReCa) provides an opportunity for regional agricultural and other producers to sell directly and without intermediaries, as well as to build their own retail market through a catering establishment. It forms short supply chains that cut out middlemen and creates agricultural products, farm food, rural and other high-value-added tourism that increase the income of local communities - agricultural raw materials make up about ¼ and food and beverages about one-third of the turnover in HoReCa

Tourism allows the formation of more complex products with a higher added value, a lower dependence of farms on seasonality and the achievement of higher and sustainable prices. It forms local markets and short supply chains for various products and services. Different types of tourism diversify regional farms, providing them with more stable and high incomes, respectively, and competitiveness (Lyubenov, 2017).

Gerlovo region has a great biodiversity, including honey and pollen plants, which is why beekeeping is very well developed, and there are very good conditions for the development of tourism based on it, i.e. api-tourism and related balneos, spas and other types of tourism. Development of tourism based on regional beekeeping will create jobs and increase the demand not only for goods and services from beekeeping, but also for many foods, drinks and other goods and services from other types of local tourism (Lyubenov, 2018). Api-tourism will maintain and improve the biodiversity of the Gerlovo region, as a result of the improved pollination of the local flora, which will also increase the economic value of the region.

Research methods include the complex combination of grouping, comparison, analysis and synthesis. The sources of information are the national and regional institutions, the legislative base and research on the analyzed problem. The spatial boundaries of the study are determined by the studied region Gerlovo district and the time span of the study is from the last decade. In accordance with the goal, the research is focused on an analysis of the tasks with the help of which it will be reached. Therefore, a two-part structure was created. The first is aimed at the geographical location, natural resources and cultural-historical heritage of the Gerlovo region, and the second concerns determination of the state and policies for the dynamic development of regional tourism.

## **2- Geographical location of the Gerlovo region, natural resources and cultural-historical heritage**

### **2-1. Gerlovo region and its natural tourist resources**

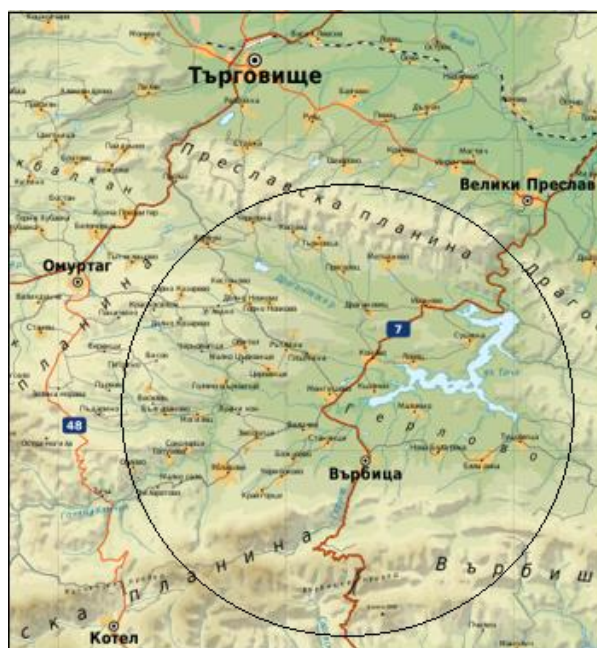
Gerlovo (or Gerilovo) is a hilly valley and historical-geographical region in the Eastern Sub-Balkans, in Targovishtka, Shumenska and Slivenska regions. Towards the end of the 16th century, the district was called Gerilovo. The name is probably of Thracian origin and is due to the trough-shaped shape of the valley. The basin is located between Kotlenska and Varbisha mountains to the south, Lissa mountain to the west, Preslavka mountain to the north and Dragoevska mountain to the northeast. In the east, it is connected to

the Riška Kotlovina through a low watershed. The area of the district is about 650 km<sup>2</sup> with a length of 30-35 km and a width of 10-20 km. Its altitude is from 250-280 m to 400 m.

The Gerlovo region is a trough-like valley deeply dissected by flat monoclinal hills, located in the west-east direction. The main river artery is the river Golyama Kamchiya (Ticha), together with its tributaries - Draganovska reka (left), Gerila and Eleshnitsa (right). Golyama Kamchia flows through the entire valley from southwest to northeast, and before leaving it, it passes through the large "Ticha" dam located in Gerlovo. There are also numerous micro-dams in the district. The climate is temperate-continental, the soils are gray forest, highly eroded, and the natural vegetation is anthropogenically altered.

Administratively, a larger part of the district falls in the regions of Targovishte (the western part) and Shumen (the eastern part) and a small part in the Sliven Region. Gerlovoto covers 52 settlements, incl. and one city (Verbitsa) - Fig. 1.

From the Targovishte region, there are 29 settlements from two municipalities - Targovishte (including 2,640 inhabitants) and Omurtag (including 7,562 inhabitants). From the municipality of Kotel there are 7 settlements from the Sliven region, and from the Shumen region there are 16 settlements from the municipality of Varbitsa, (NSI, 2021). Only three of the settlements have a population of over 1,000 inhabitants: Varbitsa (3,352), Yablanovo (2,913) and Byala Reka (1,309) (NSI, 2021).



**Figura 1:** Geographical location of Gerlovo district.  
Source: NSI.

Five km from the town of Varbitsa there are two mineral springs with proven healing properties for gastrointestinal and eye diseases. There are a total of three water sources with mineral water on the territory of the municipality, which determine the development of health, spa and spa tourism. The first healing spring has been known for decades. It has a mineralization of 1.2 g/l, containing hydrogen sulphide and significant concentrations of calcium ions (109 mg/l). It was widely used for drinking by the population, even the water was bottled by the municipality of Varbitsa and sold. The water is not hot and does not have a very high flow rate. Its latest research shows that it is unique in composition and properties and is suitable not only for gastrointestinal, but also for the treatment of kidney diseases and peripheral nervous system. This spring

was famous in the past and marked on an old World Map of Mineral Waters from 1937, and was widely used for healing. In the resort complex “Verbitsa” there is a sanatorium with mineral springs, from which hundreds of patients were cured in the second half of the last century.

There is another spring with similar properties of mineral water near the “Verbitsa” hut. The water from the borehole water source is also cold, with high mineralization (13.1 g/l), sodium chloride, containing iodide and bromide. It is suitable after heating for balneotherapy. In the center of the Varbitsa resort there is a spring with water for the treatment of eye diseases. The springs are now not exploited in accordance with current legislation. It is necessary to initiate the registration of mineral water deposits in the Ministry of Environment and Water ([www.moew.government.bg](http://www.moew.government.bg), 2022) as soon as possible, as well as their provision for exploitation by the Municipality of Varbitsa. This is imperative as the first step in a series of activities for the construction of aquatic facilities for the waters, with the aim of their healing properties being invested in the development of balneological, health and spa tourism, as part of the guidelines for diversifying the local tourism product (PIDM of Varbitsa, 2021).

In the municipality of Varbitsa there are many protected areas, zones and objects suitable for ecotourism. According to the Law on Biological Diversity, the following territories are included in the NATURA 2000 ecological network: “Kotlenska planina”; “Preslavska Planina” and “Eco Corridor Kamchia – Emine”, and under the Law on Protected Areas: “Momin Grad”, “Horse Chestnut”, “Red Peony”. On the territory of the municipality of Varbitsa there is a protected natural site - reserve “Momin Grad”.

The forest vegetation is represented by three main groups of plantations: tree species, shrub and semi-shrub species and medicinal plants (<http://e-ecodb.bas.bg/rdb/bg/vol2/>). Herbs can be used to diversify the tourism product and enable herb gathering by tourists during the summer season as part of ecotourism. Medicinal plants can be offered to tourists under the brand name of a local organic product and as part of balneological tourism.

The scope of the “municipality of Omurtag partially includes the following protected areas in the sense of the Biodiversity Act – “Kotlenska Planina” for the protection of wild birds and for the protection of natural habitats. Part of the territory of the Municipality of Varbitsa falls into the protected area “Kotlenska planina” for the protection of wild birds from Natura 2000. There are 182 species of birds found on the territory, of which 51 are included in the Red Book of Bulgaria, and of the species found, 81 are from European Natural Importance (2004) (PIDM of Omurtag, 2020). 10 species are included as globally endangered, and 71 species are endangered in Europe. The site provides suitable habitats for 65 species listed in Schedule 2 of the Biodiversity Act for which special protection measures are required. The westernmost part of the Black Sea flyway Via Pontika passes through the territory of the district.

The rich biodiversity is of interest to a certain category of tourists and can be used to diversify the offered tourist products with additional attractions - watching birds, animals and deposits of rare plants. It is necessary to build eco-paths, tourist shelters, place markings, signs and others. As a priority, a tourist trail should be built to the “Momingrad” reserve with two starting points:

The first one from the center of the “Verbitsa” resort complex to the “Momingrad” reserve - about 6 hours of walking. The path will pass by the mineral spring, which has proven healing properties. Summer and winter marking should be done. It is appropriate to build a shelter near the remains of fortress walls from the medieval fortress “Momingrad”. Drinking water sources and two recreation areas with massive fire pits can

be built and marked along the way. The second one from the “Verbishki Prohod” hut to the Reserve - about 5 hours of hiking. By car you can reach Elevation 1008, where it is necessary to build a guarded parking lot, and you can reach the “Momingrad” Fortress and the shelter by a marked road along the ridge. The distance from the starting points suggests the construction of a support point in the Reserve with bungalows set up in a tourist village on the meadow next to the Reserve. The Fortress itself needs restoration and proper presentation to tourists.

It is possible to build and mark with appropriate eco-trails with exit points – “Mineral water” - hut – “Verbishki prohod” and “Resort” karst cave – “Marata”. The first path will introduce tourists to the tree species, the healing properties of the mineral spring and the more interesting animal species in the area. The second eco-trail leads to a unique karst cave, where the formations of stalactites, stalactons and stalagmites are thousands of years old. It is also possible to build an eco-trail to the medieval fortress “Belgrade” mentioned during the march of the Byzantine emperor.

Favoring the development of nature tourism in Kotel municipality are: the protected natural sites: “Khersovgrad”, “Saiganitsa” and the cave “St. 40 martyrs” - near the village of Kipilovo, the cave of “Rakovski” - near Malko selo, Urushkite skali - near the village of Ticha, the reservoir near the village of Cherkovna, Targovishtko, etc.

## **2.2. Cultural and historical heritage of the Gerlovo region**

Cultural heritage as a material and spiritual message represents a powerful resource for sustainable development and a good quality of life, by absorbing the opportunities of cultural tourism and the exchange of knowledge and values. In the predictions of the Council of Europe, cultural heritage has an exceptional role in the “information society” of the 21st century. Its integration as a catalyst for economic growth and a quality living environment, the inclusion of national cultural identity in the European socio-cultural space, are factors for a sustainable spatial development and social equilibrium. Areas with cultural memory will increasingly attract people, activities and investment. The creation of regional and local tourism products, revealing the full richness of the phenomenon, implies the construction of a tourism strategy, international contacts and a long-term policy in the preservation and valorization of cultural heritage.

Resources for the development of cultural tourism include archaeological, architectural, ethnological, religious sites, historical landmarks, as well as cultural institutions - museums, community centers and cultural events of a different nature related to intangible culture, as well as “creative” tourism, in which tourists create culture. They are characterized by their diversity, authenticity and uniqueness.

There are 125 archaeological sites in Gerlovo - prehistoric, Roman and late antique, but most of them have not been studied and would hardly become attractive to tourists. According to the information of the National Institute for Immoveable Cultural Heritage (<http://ninkn.bg/>, 2022), 25 cultural monuments have been registered, 3 of which are of national importance - a settlement mound above the village of Ivanovo and two necropolises in the land of the village of Lovets. The following sites have the potential for relatively quick development for the purpose of tourist accessibility, restoration, conservation and socialization for archaeological tourism:

- Prehistoric settlement near the village of Ivanovo from the middle of the 5th millennium;

- Prehistoric settlement and stone fortress wall in the village of Sushina from the end of the 5th millennium, which is supposed to be one of the oldest in the Balkans;
- Kaleto next to the village of Tusovitsa;
- Varbitsa Thracian tomb - next to the town of Varbitsa;
- Late Roman fortress in the village of Metodievo;
- Necropolis in the village of Mengishevo – about 30 Thracian mounds;
- Thracian tomb on the road from Varbitsa to Kölmen, near the dam;
- There are also interesting archaeological sites in the direction of the village of Velichka and Omurtag;
- Seven mounds, a Roman villa from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, a late medieval settlement and necropolis in the village of Mogilec;
- Chalcolithic settlement mound in the village of Dolno Novkovo;
- Chalcolithic settlement mound and fortification walls from the III-V centuries in the village of Velichka;
- Ancient settlement in the village of Golyamo Tserkovishte;
- Late Roman fortress in the village of Vrani kon;
- Chalcolithic settlement mound in the village of Vardun;
- Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement mound and late antique fortification in the village of Draganovets;
- Roman Kale in the village of Yablanovo;
- The late antique fortress "Canakkale" in the village of Tarnovtsa;
- Late antique and medieval fortress in Ticha village;
- Ancient houses with the typical architecture of the Kotel and Elena area in the villages of Malko Selo, Ticha, Topuzevo, Yablanovo and the village of Ticha (PIDM of Kotel, 2021).

Joint routes are also possible with neighboring municipalities.

At the moment, there is only one ethnographic gathering in the municipality, in the Vasilaki House in the center of Varbitsa. It is also arranged in it, donated by Dr. Anton Sirakov - 520 volumes of fiction, Bulgarian, foreign and specialized literature. An object with potential for lovers of cultural and historical tourism is the Saraya (Konaka) of the Gerais - the last heirs of Chingiz Khan. At this place in the town of Varbitsa, there was an impressive building that burned down in the 1980s. The high stone wall and the foundations of the buildings have been preserved. The idea is to restore the object as an open-air ethnographic museum, which will present objects from the everyday life of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the Varbitsa region (PIDM of Varbitsa, 2021).

The centers of the spiritual life of the local population are also the numerous religious temples in the municipality: churches, mosques, some of which were built in the XVIII-XIX centuries. The most interesting is the mosque in the village of Plastina, which has an important cultural and historical significance. These sites are suitable for religious and pilgrimage tourism.

The episodic and periodic events that take place in the individual municipalities of the region, as well as events from the rich cultural calendar, can be popularized and attract the attention of both Bulgarian and foreign tourists. There are 20 community centers operating on the territory of the district, which are one of the main cultural and educational centers. Community centers organize and maintain a rich cultural calendar and diversify the spiritual life of the local population, incl. and for cultural and event tourism.

The cultural calendars annually include: the National Holiday of the Republic of Bulgaria - March 3rd, the Day of Slavic Writing and Bulgarian Education and Culture - May 24th and the Day of People's Awakeners - November 1st. Babinden, Triphon Zarezan, March 1, Todorovden, St. George's Day, Easter, Christmas, New Year, family meetings and village gatherings are also celebrated.

An event in the area that attracts many visitors is the traditional autumn Varbish fair in September. Traditional local folklore festivals are held, such as "And we sing the song" in the village of Gorno Novkovo and the assembly "Girls sing and dance" in the village of Yablanovo. People dress up in unique, village-specific costumes. (PIDM of Targovishte, 2021).

The best conditions for the development of sports tourism are found in the Municipality of Varbitsa. Organization of training camp-schools and competitions in various sports. Opened in 2015, the new Sports Complex "Guerrilla" in the resort "Varbitsa" is built on an area of 16 acres with a total of 3 halls, changing rooms, 2 football fields and 2 swimming pools. The complex enjoys great tourist interest. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors was around 250 per day.

### **3- State of tourism in Gerlovo region and dynamization of its development**

#### **3.1. State of tourism in the Gerlovo region**

Tourism is not a typical branch of the local economy in the Gerlovo region. It has tourism resources and potential, which unfortunately have not yet been exploited and are not fully utilized for income generation and sustainable local development. There are no officially registered and operating tour operators, travel agents and tourist associations on the territory of the district.

The main tourist flow can easily reach the area via the first-class road I-76 Shumen - Veliki Preslav - Varbitsa - Varbishki Prohod. As an alternative for the transport connectivity of Varbitsa, a road from the III-class road network in the direction - Varbitsa - Rishki Prohod is used. Access for tourists is possible from two more directions - along the route to the city of Kotel and the Kotlen pass through the village of Velichka and in the direction of Omurtag and Targovishte. There is no railway line built through the territory of the district and the nearest railway stations are in the city of Targovishte, which also has an airport, and the city of Smyadovo. The nearest international airports are in Varna (140 km) and Burgas (110 km).

In the past, the area (and especially the town of Varbitsa) was a well-known and preferred destination for short-term relaxation (recreation), balneology, ecological tourism, hunting and fishing. This is the reason why the district has a very well-built material base and tourist infrastructure. Unfortunately, over time this base has been neglected and abandoned, it is not maintained and in recent years the municipality has been visited by very few tourists. The best material base was built in the Varbitsa Resort Complex with a capacity of 1,690 beds, distributed as follows: Hotel complex - 100 beds; Camping - 120 beds; Motel - 100 beds; Camps for children - 350 beds; Departmental rest stations - 1020 beds. Much of this base is not maintained and is constantly crumbling. As of 2020, the following are operating in the resort complex: municipal hotel "Edelweiss", "Varbishki Prohod" hut, "Diviyat Peony" guest house and several departmental rest stations. Another designated recreation area on the territory of the municipality was built near the Ticha dam. The capacity there is about 550 beds, but the general condition is still not very good.

According to official statistics, the categorized accommodation places in the district as of 2019 are 6 with 128 beds and 49 rooms. The overnight stays in them in 2015 reached 8,977, but in 2019 they decreased to 1,928 - Table. 1. Other places of accommodation and shelter operate in the district, which have fewer beds and are not subject to mandatory categorization. The data in Tab. 1 cover only the categorized accommodations and hotels with more than 10 beds. The remaining smaller sites, huts and guest houses are not included in the NSI data.

**Tabela 1:** Activity in accommodation facilities in the Gerlovo region 2013-2019.

Year	Accommodations	Beds	Beds	Number of rooms	Realized nights
2013	5	120	36002	52	3757
2014	6	136	36498	62	4245
a2015	6	134	36638	56	8977
2016	5	126	31159	52	3740
2017	6	141	27143	57	1960
2018	7	158	35846	63	2055
2019	6	128	36710	49	1928

Source: NSI, 2021.

As of 2020, 16 places of accommodation and shelter are officially registered in the Gerlovo region. It should be borne in mind that the object of research by the National Statistical Institute (<https://nsi.bg/bg>, 2022) are all categorized and functional accommodations with 10 or more beds - hotels, campsites and other places for short-term accommodation (tourist and villa villages, lodges, private accommodation and apartments, rest stations, holiday bungalows, guest houses and other places for short-term accommodation). Camping Rest Base Sushina is located on the bank of the "Ticha" dam near the village of Sushina. It has 13 bungalows (4 large and 9 small). Outside the registers of the Municipality, the "Verbishki Prohod" hut, the "Forestry" hut, the "Rusalka" complex, the "Ticha" complex and several departmental rest stations in the resort complex function.

As of 2020, the district generally lacks many public catering establishments. They are mainly located in the municipality of Varbitsa. There is a restaurant in the "Verbitsa" hut, which offers game and traditional local specialties, and there is also a restaurant in the "Edelweiss" municipal hotel. In the center of the resort complex, there is a bistro-restaurant "Baboy", in the town of Varbitsa there is a coffee shop and several cafes in the villages. The district has the potential to successfully develop a fish restaurant, a game restaurant, a restaurant with Turkish cuisine and a restaurant for old Bulgarian food and drinks. The base of the "Shoumen camp" is in relatively good condition, which the Municipality of Varbitsa intends to restore and adapt as a place for holding green schools, outdoor lessons and summer camps for children and students. The municipality of Varbitsa also has a large unfinished building, near the mineral water, which, if a suitable investor is found, can be turned into a modern spa and balneological center. It is necessary to restore the existing material base, to renew the infrastructure and to maintain and manage it in order to attract tourists and to successfully develop this sector in the municipality (PIDM of Varbitsa, 2021).



### **3.2. Development of tourism in the Gerlovo region**

For the growth and retention of tourist interest and confirmation of the destination, the provision of good tourist accessibility, including the “leading” and internal transport infrastructure, is of primary importance.

The subject of tourism management is the local government bodies in partnership with non-governmental organizations (community centers and independent groups, non-governmental organizations, local initiative groups, etc.), businesses and decentralized state institutions related to the development of tourism in the area. Unfortunately, no travel agencies and tour operators work in the area. They must be attracted from other regions. Almost all settlements have the potential to attract tourists and contribute to the development and enrichment of the local tourism product.

The main livelihood of people in small settlements is animal husbandry and agriculture. This valuable resource can be used to feed tourists and offer traditional cuisine from local produce in restaurants. This will help both to optimize costs in tourism and to shape a clearly expressed identity of the area, as well as to revive the municipal economy as a whole and develop accompanying activities and services. An integrated approach and strengthening of links between the tourism industry and local productions - agriculture, incl. and organic, food industry, etc.

To improve the quality of rural tourism, it is necessary to improve the general appearance of villages - squares, parks, streets, sidewalks, children's and sports grounds, entertainment and attractions. The connection between some villages and the walks to tourist sites in the area can be done by bicycle. It is necessary to place new signposts to reach the natural and cultural attractions. The resort complex “Verbitsa” also needs renovation of the infrastructures - alleys, asphalt pavements, stairs, maintenance of vegetation and improvement of the area. People and local communities are the most important resource for the development of any economic activity, including tourism. They are the basis of the organization, management and creation of tourist products and services. The quality of the tourist offer depends on their knowledge, skills and capacity. People are generators of innovative ideas for exploiting the tourist potential and diversifying the stay of tourists with different attractions.

In general, the district still lacks additional attractions and entertainment to diversify the stay of tourists. The quality of the tourist service depends entirely on the staff and is the joint responsibility of the educational system, municipalities and entrepreneurs in the field of tourism. To provide information to tourists in the destination, it is necessary to create a Tourist Information Center and an Internet portal with tourist information and prepared tour guides and guides for local sites and routes, including bicycle tourism, sports orientation, mountain guides, etc.

The sustainable development of tourism requires coordination, partnership and coordination of the actions of all interested parties and responsible institutions, including the Tourism Advisory Council. Providing the tourism industry with well-prepared personnel, professionals in various fields is one of the most important tasks for the development of the destination during the program period 2021-2027. Tourism has long become an economic and social phenomenon in the daily life of hundreds of millions of people. According to the World Tourism Organization, it remains one of the most dynamically developing sectors that will continue to grow.

In the future, entrepreneurs will encounter increasing difficulties in recruiting personnel and will be forced to attract personnel from other municipalities. This makes it necessary to offer adequate remuneration throughout the year, which is difficult given the seasonality of tourism and the lack of opportunities for an even occupancy of the bed base. The foreign language training of personnel is also a problem, which necessitates the organization of additional courses and trainings in order to develop international cooperation and increase foreign tourists. For the development of competitive tourism, it is necessary to provide the sector with quality and well-prepared personnel in a wide range of specialties. This can be solved by attracting trained personnel, organizing courses and trainings from the Labor Bureau, meeting the requirements of the labor market and the needs of the local tourism business.

Investments in the tourism sector and the promotion of the Gerlovo region as a tourist destination can have a positive impact on the economic revitalization of the area, the standard of living and the quality of the living environment. The successful development of tourism can create new jobs, both in the sector and in related activities and services, and make Gerlovo a more attractive place to work and live. The district has the potential to become a popular destination for health and balneological, mountain, ecological, rural tourism, recreation, short-term recreation, cultural-historical, api-tourism, hunting and fishing. The mission of the Municipal Administrations in this direction is to conduct a consistent and purposeful policy in the field of tourism, ensuring coordination and partnership between the public, private and non-governmental sectors and assisting in the promotion of the destination.

The main objective of the Tourism Development Programs, as an element of the Municipal Integral Development Plans, is to identify appropriate measures and activities for establishing the area on the regional tourist market as a popular destination for traditional and alternative forms of tourism, based on local resources and potential. In the period until 2027, the main tourist markets on which the district can be positioned are local and regional - joint tourist products with the first Bulgarian capital - Veliki Preslav and the neighboring municipality Smyadovo and attracting tourists from nearby areas - Shumen and Varna.

Unfortunately, the potential of the area has not been fully utilized to date and tourism remains one of the underdeveloped sectors of the local economy. At the same time, socioeconomic data indicate high unemployment and emigration of the population due to a lack of employment conditions and jobs. Measures are needed to promote tourism development in the area, attract investors to the sector, expand the basic infrastructure - accommodation and dining and entertainment facilities, and promote Gerlovo as a destination for recreation and leisure.

The development of tourism is an extremely important priority with a significant impact on economic growth and employment and a direct relationship to the quality of life. Tourism can play an essential role in building and consolidating a positive image of the area and enable the development of many ancillary activities and services that diversify the local economy and create jobs. The specific projects, activities, budget and deadlines for their implementation in the field of tourism are included in the Integrated Development Programs of the municipalities of Varbitsa, Kotel, Omurtag and Targovishte. In the Tourist Zoning Concept of Bulgaria from 2015, the municipality of Targovishte is included in the "Danube Plain" region, with the administrative center of Ruse. The municipality of Varbitsa, the municipality of Kotel and the municipality of Omurtag are included in the "Stara Planina" Region, with the administrative center in the city of Veliko Tarnovo.

The area specializes in mountain and ecotourism. His extended specialization includes: mountain hiking and recreational tourism; adventure and ecotourism; cultural-historical, festival and creative tourism; rural tourism; religious and pilgrimage tourism and mountain ski tourism. Given the well-developed beekeeping sector in the district, it also has significant potential in the field of api-tourism, which is in symbiosis with a large part of the other types of tourism, with which they will complement and support each other.

The development of sustainable tourism is among the main goals in the First Priority of the Integrated Territorial Strategy for the Development of the North-Eastern and South-Eastern Regions. The strategy states that the tourism industry has significant potential for expanding and diversifying the regional tourism product, through active and sustainable inclusion of the natural and cultural wealth. Diversification of the tourist product with specific types of tourism and with active inclusion of the tourist resources of the hinterland (the interior of the country) will contribute to overcoming the pronounced seasonality of recreational marine tourism.

The development of tourism in the region should be carried out through broad cooperation between all interested parties - the state, the Regional Development Council, regional and local authorities, business and tourist organizations, other public and non-governmental organizations. The favorable natural factors, the cultural heritage, the accumulated experience in the offered tourist services, the built tourist base to a significant extent help to expand the tourist industry and increase the income from tourism. Tourism can integrate and mobilize business circles and develop as a serious economic activity that diversifies the economy of the area while creating attractive jobs for young people.

For the program period 2021-2027, efforts in the field of tourism should be directed to the creation, development and promotion of an integrated local tourist product: "Varbitsa - the greatness of the Balkans and the glory of Krum - mountain health, healing water, rural and api- tourism, adventure and recreation on the banks of the Ticha Reservoir" including routes and packages for: mountain, adventure and ecotourism, balneological and health tourism, cultural and historical sites, areas for recreation and relaxation, hunting and fishing (ITSDNR; ITSDUSR, 2020).

#### **4- Conclusion**

Expected results of the implementation of policies for the dynamic development of tourism in the Gerlovo region are: creation and offering of a unique local tourist product, based on the specific resources and potential; increasing accommodation and shelter; increase in overnight stays, increase in income from tourism, increase in bed occupancy; increasing the average stay of tourists; increasing jobs in tourism and in related activities and services.

The actions of the interested parties - municipal, etc. organizations and investment projects in the field of regional tourism must stop the negative trends in development that are now being observed and help to raise the standard of living of the population and create new jobs. Achieving favorable development for the Gerlovo region can be achieved by using two main approaches - resource and investment.

The resource approach is aimed at maximum use of local tourism resources and potential. In the investment approach, state institutions, local authorities, private entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations play an essential role in offering, developing and lobbying for the implementation of local and

foreign investments and for attracting financial resources for the implementation of investment projects for the successful and dynamic development of tourism in the Gerlovo area.

In addition to these two approaches, work must be done in two more directions: 1) provision of well-prepared personnel for work in tourism to ensure good and quality service to tourists and guests; 2) active marketing and advertising of the destination and local products and services on the Bulgarian and international market. Gerlovo Region has the potential and capacity to develop as a popular and attractive tourist destination, offering local resources as a single, branded unique tourist product, combining diverse forms of tourism and visitor attractions.

Policies are needed for sustainable, integrated tourist development of the Gerlovo region, attracting investors in the sector, improving and expanding the basic infrastructure, increasing the quality of the tourist offer and establishing it as a preferred destination for recreation and tourism. They will be achieved by using the available resources for the sustainable development of all types of tourism, for which there is potential in the territory of the district, emphasizing cultural-historical, ecological, sports, adventure, rural and api-tourism, hunting and fishing.

The offer of regional tourist services will be supplemented and diversified with opportunities for religious, festival and event tourism, training schools, weekend breaks and recreation, green schools, horse riding, etc. For the financial provision of the necessary measures and activities, the opportunities provided to the greatest extent by operational programs for regional development, strategies for the development of local communities and other Bulgarian financing programs, under which municipalities and local businesses are potential beneficiaries, can be used. Other community programs financed by EU funds and other national and international donor programs, the municipal budget, the republican budget, private investments and bank loans can be used as additional sources of funds.

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