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## Evaluation of brand identity of Bulgaria as a tourist destination

### Abstract

The article reveals in a critical way the current brand identity of tourist destination Bulgaria in terms of its multidimensional aspects. The relevant characteristics of the researched brand identity reflect the compound influence of the destination soft power, destination image and destination brand image. For that reason the paper focuses on the theoretical clarification of the meanings and interrelatedness of the above stated categories in connection with their subsequent empirical evaluations and following issues about the opportunities for enhancement of the brand position of destination Bulgaria on the world tourism market. In order to successfully accomplish this task the authors offer an empirical model through which to express and test their research concept.

**Key words:** brand identity; brand image; destination image; soft power; Bulgaria

### Introduction

The world tourism market has become a stage of fierce competition of tourist destinations for profitable customers. In times of geopolitical instability tourist destinations are exposed to completely new challenges imposing the necessity for invention and application of specific drivers for sustainable destination development. The neuralgic question of brand positioning of the tourist destination requires the re-evaluation of its current communication status for the creation of a desired brand image. In this relation the research goal of this paper is to reassess the brand identity of Bulgaria as a tourist destination along with its inherent complexities on the way of potential reinforcing and altering its brand image.

### Literature review

Concerning the central role of brand identity in the successful positioning of Bulgaria as a tourist destination it is necessary to relate this category to the practical meanings of *destination image* and *brand image*. In order to efficiently manage destination image, brand identity and brand image the destination authorities should possess sufficient understanding about the characteristics of the *soft power* exerted by their country on international level. According to Joseph Nye *soft power is* revealed in terms of activities of a country to "form the preferences of others through appeal and attraction" (Nye, 1990, p. 330). Unlike the classical concept of *hard power predominantly* based on quantitative metrics like population size, availability of military assets, levels of gross domestic product, *soft power is* a result of the country's cultural influence abroad, spread of political values and other legitimate and moral foreign policies (Nye, 2004). In other words the geopolitical pressure of hard power is substituted by geopolitical attraction and appeal of soft power. For that reason it is difficult for destination authorities to intentionally control and manage the soft power of the country due to the exertion of mutual

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efforts by different actors in the process of its creation like governmental institutions, NGOs, profit and non – profit organizations, entities of people having different social status, profession, personal characteristics, etc. In this relation a considerable part of a country's soft power could be regarded as more unintentionally created one. The *soft power* elements that are tightly related to the tourist destination influence abroad include *all types of art, music, dances, folklore; famous books and authors; sportsmen and their achievements; movies and television serials; provided scholarships; state participation in international forums; reputation of exported national goods and products; reputation of typical national products; scientific achievements; religious influence; political values and political model; prestige of institutions; cultural diplomacy; investment climate*. *Soft power* could be regarded as an existent composite wave that could be harnessed and amplified by destination authorities in order to enhance the brand image of the tourist destination. The creation of *soft power* is heavily dependent on the combination of heterogeneous factors that bring together space, increasing its geopolitical subjectivity in tourism, cultural heritage, prestige of the institutions, reputation of export goods, leadership charisma, sports and scientific achievements, popularity of national brands, popularity of media production, cuisine, environmental policy and others. Tourism directly influences the people's perceptions of different countries, as one of the main manifesting activities of the country's *soft power* (Nye, 2004, Laurano, 2011; Parshin, 2014; Kharitonova, 2015; Krastev, 2016). As a geopolitical tool of soft power, tourism forms images about the space along with a vision about the world (Minca, 1996) and its framework of geo-cognitive attraction classifies countries and regions on international level. The accumulation and intensity of flowing of the soft power wave are important characteristics for obtaining destination positioning benefits. It is also suggested that the accumulation of soft power may result as a combination with hard power into a transformed version of so called *smart power* (Nye, 2004; Kostyrev, 2013). According to Nye the *soft power of a tourist destination* needs a considerable amount of time (at least 1-2 decades) in order to exert its influence on international level due to the combination of different factors which accelerate or slow down this process (Nye, 2004). In another related publication, Nye concludes that *soft power should* be regarded more as a compound image than a normatively structured concept (Nye, 2011).

The *soft power* wave of the tourist destination is constantly affecting the formation process and process of changing of destination image, brand identity and brand image. There are lots of discussions about *tourist destination image* and its components. Image is defined as a mental or attitudinal concept developed by an individual on the basis of a few selected impressions (Choong-Ki Lee, 2012). In this relation destination image is regarded as a kind of mental representation of knowledge, beliefs, feelings and overall perception of a particular destination (Crompton, 1979). According to Gallarza (2002) and Hunter (2008) destination image conveys the interpretations concerning representations, projections and perceptions of a place. Other researchers suggest that destination image is a "fluid concept" as far as different target markets hold different destination images as a result of their personal experience and the destination's efforts to promote itself (Livin & Mouri, 2009). Generally destination image is divided into three widely accepted major components that are *cognitive, affective* and *conative*. (Gartner, 1993; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kim & Pardue, 2011).

The cognitive image refers to the beliefs and knowledge about the physical attributes of a destination and the way people evaluate places (Crompton, 1979). The affective image refers to the emotional feelings about the destination attributes and its surrounding environment (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) while in turn the conative image reflects the intent of the individual (or the action component) as a likelihood of visiting a destination within a certain time period (Pike & Ryan 2004).

Considering the stages of formation, reinforcement and alteration the tourist destination image is differentiated into *pre-travel* and *post-travel components*. The positive pre-travel image of the destination into the perceptions of travelers does not directly lead to its visitation (Crompton, 1992). The perception gap (difference) between the pre-travel and post-travel image is defined as a kind of incongruence in the destination image (Choong-Ki Lee, 2012). Positive incongruence is evident when the travelers' post-travel attitudes have positively exceeded their expectations based on the pre-travel perceptions of the destination. The negative incongruence reflects the opposite way of the logical relation. The level of incongruence is also researched about expected and received benefits by tourists. The optimal coherence is evident when both incongruence in destination image and benefits sought are positive.

Considering the way of formation (the type of information sources used) in the travelers' perceptions tourist destination image is outlined as *organic* and *induced* (Martinez & Alvarez, 2010; Elliot, Papadopoulos & Kim, 2011). The organic image is based on the information collected from non-commercial sources depicting historical, political, economic and social aspects of the country (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). According to Gartner (1993), the organic image also results by information which is gained from the actual experience of the traveler with the destination or obtained as word of mouth information from other individuals or credible sources (families, friends, etc.). On the other hand induced image is more created by commercial sources of information such as travel websites, brochures, guide books, travel agents, travel information centers and others (Gunn, 1988; Pan, 2011). In this relation Gartner (2013) outlines four types of induced image based on: traditional forms of commercial advertising; materials prepared by travel agents and intermediaries; information provided by a paid sponsor; information influenced by an independent marketing organization.

Some researchers (Gunn, 1988; Gartner, 1993; Stabler, 1988; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000) focus their attention on the active side and dynamics of the creation of destination image in terms of *perceived* and *projected* image. The first one consists of the visitor's subjective evaluations and opinions of a destination. This type of image is formed through direct marketing strategies and personal experience (Gunn 1988; Gartner, 1993). Projected destination image is a combination of governmental activities and private commercial efforts. The main purpose here is to generate a singular and iconic representation of a place or a showcase of ideal features (Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000).

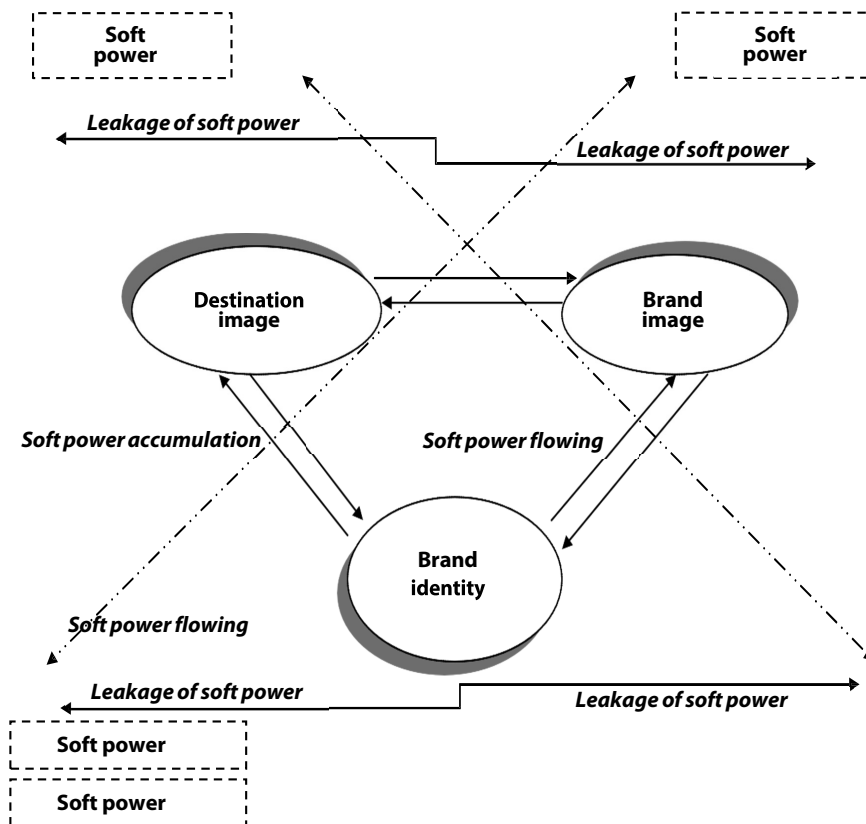
*Brand image* of a tourist destination is the current view (perceptions) of customers about a specific branded place positioned in the market. It can be defined as a unique bundle of associations within the minds of target customers which signify what the brand presently stands for them as a set of beliefs (Brand image...). Brand image derives from the destination brand on the basis of subjective perceptions and associations that consumers hold in their minds. Desired brand image is usually developed on the product's character of the tourist destination in a unique manner different from its competitors' images. The availability of brand attributes (functional, emotional or rational) as a rationale for purchase decision serves as a fundament for the creation of brand image. The core and essence of a brand (Aaker, 1991) in terms of its personality (customer – brand relationships), semiotics (visual image, brand metaphor, brand heritage), product characteristics (attributes, scope, quality/value, uses, users, country of origin) and organizational characteristics (organizational attributes, local or global) reveal the *brand identity* of the tourist destination. Brand identity could be described as a bundle of mental and functional associations about the brand providing familiarity and differentiation that are not replicable by other competitors. In the meantime it is quite often a research of brand identity to involve the elements – brand vision, brand culture, positioning, relationships and presentations (What is brand identity...). Compared to brand identity, brand image is considered to be passive, looks to the current status and/or the past and reflects the total consumer's reflections (Eagle, 2015). On the

other hand brand identity is regarded as more substance and strategic oriented, enduring, sustainable, looking ahead (to the future) and active. Brand identity is posing the question how the tourist destination wants to be perceived by travelers? In the creation of brand identity the starting point should be the existing brand image of the destination or the accumulation of associations up to date (Eagle, 2015). At the same time in accordance with the previous statement brand identity should also match the projected image to the audience in order to obtain a desired sustainable destination image. In this relation the most challenging task associated with the creation of brand identity of a tourist destination is the completion of an effective brand positioning or repositioning strategy.

## Research model

The empirical research is based on a system model of evaluation of brand identity of tourist destination Bulgaria. The interrelated components presented by the system model are regarded in absence of hierarchy and linear order about their meanings and directions of influence (Figure 1).

Figure 1  
System model of evaluation of brand identity of a tourist destination



Source: The Authors.

Each system component is directly connected to and affecting the other elements. Alternatively every component is exposed to the direct influence of the others. It is normally to expect that destination image exerts influence on the already established brand image. Destination image may reinforce or deteriorate brand image. On the other hand brand image reversely influences in positive or negative

ways the image of the tourist destination. Similar relations are logically existent between brand identity of the tourist destination on one hand and its destination and brand images on the other. The above stated components of the model are regarded as system elements of equal importance in horizontal or vertical dimensions. The flowing *soft power wave* constantly affects the formation and alteration of destination image, brand identity and brand image. The *soft power wave* compounds in itself three inherent processes - inflows, accumulations (retentions) and leakages. It could be suggested that those stages predominantly happen as overlapping smaller waves on an irregular basis in resonant or dissonant order.

The focus of the system model is on the time of now concerning the current situation of its constituent components. The model has no forecasting function but it outlines in a descriptive way the potential issues (opportunities) for the enhancement of brand identity and consequently the brand image of tourist destination Bulgaria.

## Methodology of survey

The empirical research is supported by two sets of information by making use of officially published index data (along with other secondary information sources) as well as obtained primary information from a questionnaire survey. The scope of the research (secondary and primary) totally includes 93 indicators. The questionnaire survey data reflects the received results upon 14 research criteria (pillars) as 11 of them are presented in a table format based on the interval rating scale between 1 and 5 and the other three pillars are visualized in form of graphs. Those pillars include the following research topics:

- The influence of soft power of Bulgaria as a tourist destination (pillar 1)
- The general levels of pre-travel and post-travel images of destination Bulgaria (pillars 2 and 4)
- Customer perceptions of price – quality ratios before and after the travel (pillars 3 and 5)
- The level of induced image of destination Bulgaria (pillar 6)
- The importance of communication channels for choosing destination Bulgaria (pillar 7)
- Characteristics of brand identity of destination Bulgaria – brand personality (pillar 8) brand relatedness (pillar 9); brand semantic characteristics (pillar 10); brand as symbol / brand semiotics (pillar 11)
- Desired brand identity of destination Bulgaria – core of the brand (pillar 12); brand slogan and colors (pillars 13 and 14)

The questionnaire survey is based on non-representative statistical sample which includes three types of respondents speaking Bulgarian, English and Russian languages. The questionnaire forms were composed on the online platform Google forms and consequently mailed to the respondents during July and August 2017. Each questionnaire form includes fifteen questions separated into five sections:

- Section One - Influence of the *soft power* in Bulgaria;
- Section Two - Destination image of Bulgaria before and after the trip. Differences between Pre and Post travel images and benefits sought and received;
- Section Three - Characteristics of a brand identity of Bulgaria as a tourist destination; Section Four - Desired brand identity of Bulgaria as a tourist destination;
- Section Five – Information about the respondents.

The research team processed 148 statistically valid questionnaire forms which are filled in by 35.6% young (aged 18–35) and 53.3% socially active people (aged 36 – 60) and 13.3% respondents over the age of 60 having higher education degrees who are experienced in use of modern information technologies. The gender ratio of the sample includes 31.1 % males and 68.9% females.

## Research findings and discussion

### A retrospective review and current level of soft power of Bulgaria influenced by tourism

Bulgaria has achieved an initial accumulation of soft power from tourism during the so called *socialist period when* the country acted as one of the closest and predictable geopolitical satellites of the Soviet Union within the Eastern Bloc. From the position of its status, Bulgaria achieved a leadership in the amount of tourist arrivals from the USSR, becoming a desirable, and in some cases (due to the prevailing constraints for travels on international travel) "the only one opportunity to explore life outside one sixth of the world main land" (Popov, 2011, p. 308). During this period of time the stable international behavior of Bulgaria has influenced the formation of stereotypical perceptions of foreign visitors based on topofilic features due to the multilateral cooperation with the USSR and the traditionally strong intercultural dialogue. The major role of summer sea recreation in Bulgarian tourism has formed the image of the country's personalization as a socialist (or red) Riviera and the verbal identification in the perception of the proximity of its space (in the perceptive views of most soviet people) is reflected in the joking phrase: "Hen is not a bird, Bulgaria is not abroad". These image connotations suggest the strengthening position of Bulgaria as a country of growing sympathy in the perceptions of foreigners.

During the socialist period the tourist influence of the image of Bulgaria was projected on its international activity aimed at pursuing economic benefits (especially within the framework of *The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance / CMEA*) witnessing a significant accumulation of attractiveness and prestige. In 1956 tourism has been declared by the state authorities as a priority sector with a significant place in the cultural diplomacy of Bulgaria. Tourism was closely intertwined with initiatives about large cultural and sports forums along with the country's gained international respect by the UN, UNESCO and UNICEF for the organization of the Children's Peace Assembly, the annual Golden Orpheus Festival and others (Krystev, 2015). From the end of the 1950s the geo-cultural brand Bulgaria began to form, based on the symbolism of the oil rose (also known as Kazanlak rose). The image of Bulgaria as a country of roses has achieved an international recognition (evidenced by the work of foreign artists) and has become the logotype of the national tourist brand. The oil rose was undoubtedly a widely recognized symbol of Bulgarian geo-cultural identity.

In the period of transition (after 1989) the stereotyped characteristics of Bulgaria influenced by international tourism activities have undergone a significant transformation witnessing a considerable loss of attractiveness and prestige of the country. From this time on Bulgaria has suffered a prolonged process of economic and cultural "peripheral existence" which resulted in the shrinkage of its soft power potential. The transformation impact for Bulgaria was due to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc reflecting the termination of all existing country's positions and privileges guaranteed at this time by the USSR (subsequently Russia) as a main strategic partner.

The geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe have pushed Bulgaria so far into the orbit of Western geopolitical influence, but the competitive potential of the country for achieving a sustainable impressive image turned out to be both difficult and weak to realize from its positive semantic standpoints.

From the previous topography of the "Socialist Riviera" the tourist image of Bulgaria (even after its EU membership in 2007) has gradually acquired the characteristics of a "cheap destination" for mass tourism. Having such a tourist status, Bulgaria has increasingly followed the stereotyped vision of a country with a depersonalized identity. This general opinion about the manifested dimensions of the country's tourist image is also shared in the "National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria 2014-2030", which clearly states that "Bulgaria is not a recognizable destination from the standpoint of its brand position "and "its competitiveness is mainly due to the low price levels of products "(Strategy, 2014, pp. 24-25).

## Bulgaria's current soft power according to international ratings, taking into account the influence of tourism on international level

International ratings (indices) serve as a benchmark in measuring soft power of countries (Kharitonova, 2015). No matter the weaknesses in the measurement and evaluation methodology, international ratings provide a meaningful profile of soft power drivers that may "weigh" the reputation and influence of countries in the world. Certain international ratings seem to be relevant in order to illustrate the geopolitical significance of international recognition of Bulgaria by taking into account the role of tourism about its national image and brand position. In order to elicit the tourist attractiveness of Bulgaria out of its accumulated soft power, four prestigious international ratings were selected: the World Economic Forum (Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index); Country Brand Ranking Tourism Edition of the Spanish company Bloom Consulting; Country Brand Index of the British company Future Brand; Global presence index of the Elcano Global Presence Report. Within the methodology of the first two ratings, tourism is the only focus in measuring the soft power of countries on the basis of a set of characteristics and as for the other two indices tourism participates as one of the drivers in the formation of the aggregate index assessments. Concerning the above stated indices the assessment of Bulgaria's soft power potential is also based on the relevant positions of other competing subregional countries on the Balkans.

Table 1

**Bulgaria's soft power position (including tourism) compared to the positions of leading countries and countries with the most significant potential in tourism from the Balkan subregion (2015-2016)**

International rating	Methodology of evaluation	Number of countries in the rating list	Rating leader	Bulgaria	Greece	Croatia	Romania	Turkey
				Position				
The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (2015)	Combination of indicators with a direct relation to tourism	141	Spain	49	31	33	66	44
Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking. Tourism Edition (2014/2015)	Combination of indicators with a direct relation to tourism	180	USA	70	25	28	78	16
Country Brand Index (2014/2015)	Public opinion survey	118	Japan	67	30	44	62	53
Elcano Global Presence Report (2016)	Combination of socio-economic indicators	90	USA	64	37	65	53	25

According to: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report (2015); Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking. Tourism Edition (2014/2015); Country Brand Index (2014/2015); Elcano Global Presence Report (2016).

In the ranking of The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (2015), Bulgaria ranks highest (49<sup>th</sup> out of 141 countries) compared to the positions it takes as per other international indices. Nevertheless, Bulgaria yields to the majority of its regional competitors (except Romania, Montenegro, Macedonia)

and Serbia) in the overall international competitiveness of tourism. According to the same rating on a regional level (in Europe) Bulgaria ranks 28<sup>th</sup> out of 37 countries, taking a position after Poland and Latvia. This position puts Bulgaria in the group of comparatively smaller and worse positioned countries with competitive values closer to the levels of the Baltic countries, Albania, Moldova, Serbia and Macedonia. The ranking of individual countries in that index is determined by a total of 14 tourism-specific indicators<sup>1</sup>. It is important to note that Bulgaria receives relatively high values (over 6.0 of a maximum 7) for tourism infrastructure and hygiene, but considerably low value (below 3.0) for air transport infrastructure, the use of cultural-historical resources and business trips (The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, 2015). According to the "Bloom Consulting" rating of tourist brands of countries, Bulgaria's "soft" influence in the world is even weaker (70<sup>th</sup> position out of 180 countries), while Turkey, Greece and Croatia are taking place between the first 30 countries in the world of highest tourist reputation. On a regional level, Bulgaria retains a front place to Romania (78<sup>th</sup> position) and some Eastern European countries with a smaller weight in international tourism - Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro, but is overtaken by relatively weaker in the system of international tourism countries such as Slovenia and Estonia (Bloom Consulting Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking, 2015). Bulgaria's low rank in this rating system illustrates the relatively modest dimensions of the country's attractiveness (to the scale of a small peripheral European country) exerting a weak effect of tourism on the image of its international reputation and prestige. According to the Country Brand Index (2014/2015), which directly counts the importance of tourism as a separate pillar (combined with value system, quality of life, business potential, cultural heritage and reputation of export goods) in measuring the overall international attractiveness of the countries, Bulgaria occupies the unenviable 67<sup>th</sup> position (out of 118 countries) in the world (Country Brand Index, 2015). In the global positioning, Bulgaria is significantly outpaced by its regional competitors on the Balkans as well as by other Eastern European countries having good traditions in the field of tourism (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Estonia). This fact is an evidence of the weak influence and ineffective use of tourism as a tool for accumulating soft power of Bulgaria even on a regional level.

Elcano Global Presence index consists of 16 dimensions covering different aspects of the economy, including tourism, culture, state defense, communications and education. Bulgaria's relative weight in the global presence in 2015 amounts to a share of 0.2%, which makes it only 64<sup>th</sup> in the world (out of 90 countries included in the survey). This position factually confirms the light weight of Bulgaria in the "export" of international influence even amongst the countries of the Balkan sub-region. On a worldwide level, Bulgaria's share of the global presence index is comparable to that of countries such as Libya and Morocco and of the so called "banana republics" of Ecuador, Costa Rica and Sri Lanka. Within Europe, Bulgaria has acquired 23<sup>rd</sup> position (out of 28 countries) as an aggregate influence, outpacing only small countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus and Malta (Elcano Global Presence Report, 2016).

The processed data (Table 2) from the online survey provide similar results (evidences) that largely confirm the evaluations of the international ratings about Bulgaria's *soft power* levels. However, there are evident some deviations from the commonly accepted image stereotypes which are traditionally perceived about destination Bulgaria.



Table 2

**Summary results of evaluation of brand identity of Bulgaria as a national tourist destination**

	Questions	Mean value (1-5)	St. dev.	Rank of importance
1	<b>International influence of the Republic of Bulgaria</b>			
	Music art (dances, songs, folklore)	3.77	0.99	1
	Books, authors	2.57	1.02	9
	Sports achievements	3.06	1.12	6
	Cinematography	2.31	1.00	10
	Participation of Bulgaria in international forums	3.11	1.01	3
	Scholarships	2.35	1.01	9
	Typical Bulgarian products / reputation of export goods	3.71	1.04	2
	Scientific achievements	3.06	1.01	5
	Religious influence	2.60	1.16	8
	Prestige of the institutions	2.28	1.06	11
	Investment climate	2.77	1.03	7
	Cultural diplomacy (UN, UNESCO, IOC, FIFA, UEFA others)	3.08	1.13	4
2	<b>Factors that influenced your choice of destination Bulgaria before the start of your trip</b>			
	Sea	4.40	0.92	1
	Mountain	3.77	1.19	3
	Culture and history heritage	4.26	1.10	2
	Safety	3.53	1.16	6
	Religious tolerance	3.57	1.10	4
	Political stability	3.42	1.29	7
	Ethnic tolerance	3.53	1.08	5
3	<b>The impact of the following factors after your stay in Bulgaria</b>			
	Sea	4.42	0.82	1
	Mountain	3.80	1.12	3
	Culture and history heritage	4.33	0.86	2
	Safety	3.48	1.20	6
	Religious tolerance	3.62	1.01	4
	Political stability	3.35	1.30	7
	Ethnic tolerance	3.53	1.12	5
4	<b>The impact of the listed below factors during your travel within destination Bulgaria</b>			
	National tourist advertising	2.88	1.11	5
	Company advertising of any kind	3.37	1.01	1
	Advertising of foreign companies and institutions / catalogues, brochures	3.20	1.16	3
	Tourism fairs and exhibitions	3.11	1.09	4
	Cultural calendar	3.22	1.26	2
5	<b>The power of influence of the information channels for choosing Bulgaria as a tourist destination</b>			
	Website	4.00	1.09	1
	Social networks	3.62	1.25	3
	Social media	3.68	1.18	2
	Printed materials (brochures, leaflets, flyers, etc.)	2.68	1.15	4
	Outdoor advertising (signs, billboards, boards, etc.)	2.68	1.33	5
6	<b>Evaluate tourist brand "Bulgaria" according to the following characteristics</b>			
	Natural	3.93	0.90	2
	Informal	3.77	0.96	5
	Authentic	3.77	1.03	6
	Charismatic	3.33	1.13	9
	Genuine	3.28	1.14	11
	Warm and friendly	3.93	0.87	3
	Spontaneous	3.11	1.09	13
	Creative	3.80	1.00	4
	Sincere	3.35	1.07	8
	Sophisticated	2.88	1.11	14
	Exciting	3.33	1.17	10

Table 2 Continued

	Questions	Mean value (1-5)	St. dev.	Rank of importance
6	<b>Emotional</b>	3.68	1.18	7
	Witty	3.26	1.14	12
	Welcoming	4.15	0.91	1
7	<b>Degree of relatedness between the tourist brand of destination Bulgaria and each of the listed items</b>			
	Tourist brand – transport	2.82	1.01	6
	Tourist brand – trade	3.28	0.90	5
	Tourist brand – tourism	4.08	0.83	1
	Tourist brand – hotel industry	3.73	0.92	2
	Tourist brand – restaurant industry	3.53	0.95	4
	Tourist brand – tourist attractions	3.63	0.99	3
8	<b>Evaluate the relevance of the tourist brand of Bulgaria according to the following characteristics</b>			
	Used images	3.75	0.99	1
	Type of tourism	3.57	0.97	3
	Font	3.33	1.11	6
	Colour	3.60	1.10	2
	Form	3.48	1.00	4
	Used figures	3.35	0.99	5
9	<b>Evaluate the tourist brand of Bulgaria according to the following characteristics</b>			
	Abstractedness	3.33	1.01	5
	Simplicity	4.00	0.94	1
	Distinctiveness	3.33	0.91	4
	Attractiveness	3.55	1.06	2
	Conventional meaning	3.37	0.90	3
10	<b>Which of the listed elements should make up the core of the tourist brand of Bulgaria?</b>			
	Sea	4.40	0.92	2
	Mountain	3.95	0.89	4
	Culture and history heritage	4.44	0.85	1
	Type of tourism	3.80	1.20	5
	National standard	3.20	1.30	6
	Coat of arms	2.73	1.28	7
	Country name	4.26	1.12	3
	Other			
11	<b>Evaluate the impact of Bulgaria's slogan "DISCOVER AND SHARE" on the following elements</b>			
	Emotionality	4.00	0.91	2
	Simplicity	4.15	1.01	1
	Font	3.46	0.95	3
	Originality	3.35	1.03	4
	Wittiness	3.33	1.13	5

The received results help the researchers understand the semantics of the modern tourism image and tourism brand of Bulgaria stemming from and reinforcing the *soft power* of the country. Generally, the main evidences that reflect the international influence of Bulgaria abroad (pillar 1) are: the music art (3.77 mean value) and the traditionally produced national products (3.71 mean value). This is probably due to the relatively good performance of Bulgarian artists in the fields of opera, classical music and folklore. Bulgaria's participation in international music contests over the previous years (especially in the Eurovision Song Contest, where the country is ranked successively on 5<sup>th</sup> place in 2007 and on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in 2015 / 2016 Children's Eurovision Song Contest), combined with the unprecedented reputation of national products based on the oil rose and the Bulgarian yoghurt led to the pointed higher response ratings. However, the "soft power" of Bulgarian national cinematography, religious

influence, scientific achievements and prestige of institutions (score of 2.2 mean value) remains too weak. According to the respondent's opinion the current *soft power* of destination Bulgaria remains below the medium level (2.89) which suggests a current potential for development of 57%.

Among the pre-travel factors (pillar 2), influencing the choice of Bulgaria as a country for recreation, traditionally come in front the natural resources (the sea with a rating of 4.4) and the cultural heritage (4.26). Those factors logically form the basis of the country's tourist attractiveness, placing it in the category of mass tourist destinations with clearly expressed seasonality. In regard to the socio-political stability as a factor determining the choice of tourists to travel to Bulgaria, the country is less associated with sufficient security level, political stability and ethnic tolerance. A reasonable explanation should be sought in both national and regional scope (within the Balkan region) where the "balkanization factor" (periodical disturbance of the intra-regional stability) exerts significant influence on the respondent's opinion. On the other hand from the group of post-travel factors, the natural endowments (pillar 4) and in particular the sea (4.42) are mostly influencing the attitude of tourists after their visitation to Bulgaria. The weakest factor influence again corresponds to the security and political stability. There is almost a full congruence (overlap) of the respondents' perceptions about the values of pre-travel (3.78) and post-travel (3.79) factors influencing their trip to Bulgaria.

In the meantime there is evident a negative incongruence of respondents' perceptions about the pre-travel and post-travel perceptions (pillars 3 and 5) of the price quality ratios (Figure 2 and Figure 3). The negative gap is about 16 % difference between the ultimately perceived "low price for high quality" ratio before the travel and the same perceived ratio is evident after the travel. In other words destination Bulgaria is overrated in terms of the quality of the product which has been offered to the new visitors. The "low price – low quality" ratio seems to form a much congruent perception about the current image of tourist destination Bulgaria.

Figure 2  
Perceived quality – price ratio that influenced the choice of destination Bulgaria before the travel

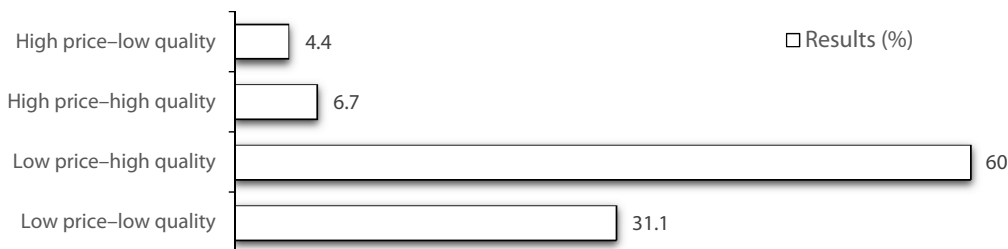
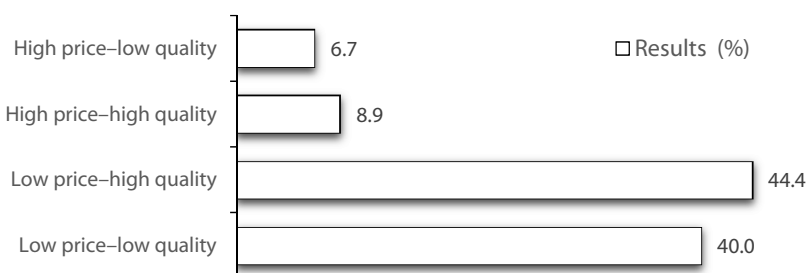


Figure 3  
Perceived quality – price ratio that influenced the stay in destination Bulgaria after the travel



The induced image of destination Bulgaria (pillar 6) is mainly due to the advertising activities of companies (3.37) followed by the periodical cultural calendar (3.22). The leading importance of those two elements can be positively assessed in view of the expanding interest of tourist companies to relate their mass tourism product with certain types of cultural attractions. The induced image is mainly supported by the strong influence of web sites (4) of private companies (pillar 7) on the respondent's decision to choose destination Bulgaria for a tourist travel along with the impact of commercial information through social media (3.68) and social networks (3.62). The total effect of the induced image (3.15) on the respondents' perceptions is relatively lower than the total impact of the organic image (3.79). The influence of communication sources for obtaining a reasonable induced image (3.33) reveals a 66.6% of current potential for development.

According to the respondent's opinion the personality of the current brand of tourist destination Bulgaria (pillar 8) consists of the following characteristics: welcoming / hospitable (4.15), natural (3.93) warm and friendly (3.93), with creative vision (3.8), informal (3.7) and authentic (3.7). At the same time the brand is perceived as unsophisticated (2.88) which supports the opinion of its natural appearance. Having in mind the postmodern aspects of the world we may suggest that this set of brand characteristics is definitely insufficient for obtaining a successful brand personality. For that reason a number of classical countries like Italy, France, Spain along with new destinations (UAE, Singapore, Dominican Republic) show that, to maintain a high tourist competitiveness today it is necessary for a destination brand to possess characteristics such as charismatics, originality and wit, which in terms of the tourist brand of Bulgaria are rated at the lowest possible levels.

The degree of relatedness of brand Bulgaria with various elements of the tourism industry (pillar 9) points out highest possible attachment to tourism (4.08) as a collective socio-cultural sign and a sign for the whole country. In this relation the respondents' opinion show an unambiguous associative idea of Bulgaria as their tourist destination, but while concerning the direct relationship of the brand with the subsystems of the tourism industry (hotel, restaurant, tourist attractions, transport, trade), the degree of interaction is comparatively much weaker.

From semantic point of view (pillar 10) the respondents give prevailing meanings of used images (3.75) and colour (3.6) of the brand logo combined with the relevant types of tourism (3.57). The general colour (pillar 14) that is suggested to predominate in the set of nuances is green (22.9%), followed by blue (10.4%) and red (7.8%). The rest of the respondents disperse their opinions in favour of pink, orange, white or multicoloured vision of the brand logo. Meanwhile the most explicit semiotic (symbolic) characteristics of tourist brand Bulgaria (pillar

11) are associated with the simplicity (4) of the brand logo and its attractiveness (3.57). Relatively close to those evaluations but not sufficiently high as a rating is pointed out the conventional meaning of the brand logo (3.37). It means that according to this criteria the current brand logo of tourist destination Bulgaria is perceived by respondents somewhere between the iconic or symbolic vision. At the same time the lowest ratings (3.3) of abstractedness and distinctiveness of the logo additionally confirm the above stated suggestion. Concerning the total evaluation of the semiotic characteristics (3.52) it seems to be that the current brand logo of destination Bulgaria needs to be much developed in order to obtain the typical vision of a symbol.

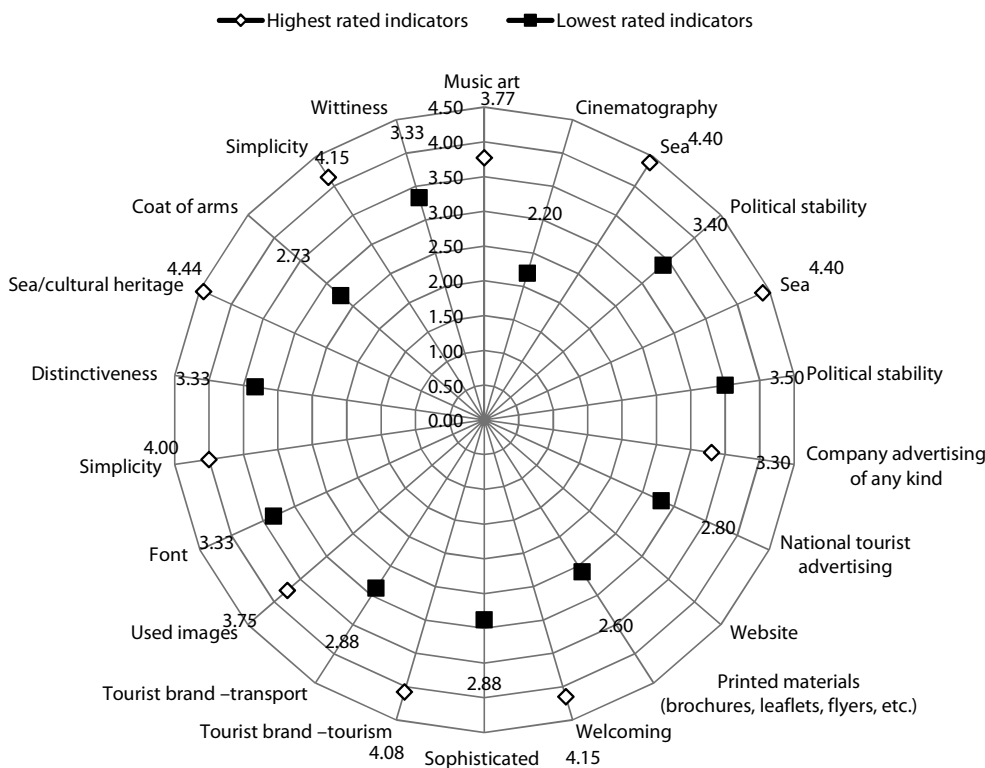
The future core of tourist brand Bulgaria (pillar 12) is generally viewed by respondents through the intersection zone of culture and history heritage (4.44), sea (4.4) and the name of the country (4.26) as main constituting attributes. At the same time it is interesting to note that the respondents devalue the role of the mountain (3.95) from the constructive set of core elements.

On the other hand the respondents do not associate the core of the brand with the Bulgarian national standard (3.2) or coat of arms (2.73). The current Bulgarian slogan "Discover and share" (pillar 13) is perceived as simple (4.15) and emotionally affecting (4). According to the respondents the general drawbacks of such a formulated slogan are evident in the lack of its originality (3.35) and wittiness (3.33).

A compound vision of the above stated analytical results (factorial variations on the research pillars) is presented in Figure 4. The graph is showing the relative difference between the highest and lowest ratings of factor meanings within every set of characteristics (pillars).

Figure 4

Factorial variations on the research pillars



Brand identity of tourist destination Bulgaria has to be related with the conceptual understanding of tourism zoning of the territory of the country. Tourism zoning is highly related to the so called territorial marketing, which emphasizes the role of territorial identity of destinations and destination branding as a result of the regional entities. This allows destinations to acquire personalization of their market positioning in terms of specialization and internal cohesion of the recreation and tourist activities; degree of destination attractiveness for the tourist inflows and the enhancement of the investment climate. Tourism zoning helps to outline the diversity of regional aspects of the territorial identity in relation to the unification of those aspects into an integrated destination image.

Since July 2014 in Bulgaria has been developed a new tourism zoning (The Concept of tourist zoning of Bulgaria, 2014) that divides the country into 9 districts covering the whole national territory: Northern Black Sea, Southern Black Sea, Danube, Stara Planina, Valley of Roses, Thrace, Rhodope, Sofia and Rila-Pirin). According to this zoning (based on the principles of Bulgarian Tourism Law) the regional entities are defined as marketing ones which are supposed to form their own tourist products; to carry out regional marketing and advertising; to coordinate and manage tourism on a regional

level. It seems to be that the outlined tourist-based regional division demonstrates a strong conceptual dependence on the resource approach which in turn predetermines a significant overlap (redundancy) of the regional configurations with the basic physical and geographic units of Bulgaria. The result is a kind of ignorance of the so called inherited tourist specialization of places. In view of the concept of regional zoning whereas regional entities are regarded as marketing areas positioned with their own tourist products, we suggest that their number is unreasonably too large. In order to successfully identify the territorial identity, according to the highly polarized structure of tourism in Bulgaria, which does not imply a mosaic of "autonomous" territorial diversity, it could be offered a reduction in the number of tourist areas to four (or maximum five) in compliance with a broader tourist complexity. On the other hand, the branding of regions needs to be consistent with the developed territorial identity in order to justify their treatment as marketing areas.

## Conclusions

Bulgaria's tourist destination image has negatively changed over the last 27 years during the period of transition from a socialist centralized planned economy to a market based economy. The former fabulous Bulgarian Red Riviera has turned out to a cheap destination for mass tourism. At the same time Bulgaria is witnessing a weakening brand identity which deteriorates the country's recognizability on the outgoing tourist markets. This process is accompanied by the decreasing "export influence" of the country which ranks Bulgaria to a secondary peripheral position even in the Balkan region. Nevertheless a lot of potential exists for the enhancement of the currently diminished soft power of the country.

Bulgarian Black sea littoral and cultural heritage are the most rated factors which confirm the relatively high level of congruence of the country's pre-travel and post-travel images in the tourists' perceptions. On the other hand there is evident a negative congruence in tourists' opinions about the benefit they receive in terms of price – quality ratio compared to its expected level of appearance. In this relation Bulgaria still remains predominantly positioned in the mind of customers as a cheap destination providing low quality products.

There is a considerable potential for development of the induced image of destination Bulgaria which is mainly formed as organic one on the basis of non-commercial information. Communication sources have to be more researched and developed in order to help the further enhancement of the induced destination image. Local and foreign companies still lack commercial efficiency in favour of destination Bulgaria while communicating the country abroad.

The current personality of brand Bulgaria is mainly perceived as welcoming, hospitable, natural, warm and friendly related to tourism as a collective socio-cultural field. On the other hand the still used imagery of an oil rose in the brand logotype could hardly support the association of contemporary Bulgaria as a country of roses. In this relation the currently used orange colour is suggested to be replaced by a single colour of green or with a combination of blue and red.

From symbolic standpoint Bulgarian brand logo still does not match the principles and criteria for the creation of a strong symbol. The current brand logo of destination Bulgaria needs to be further developed or entirely changed in order to obtain the typical vision of a symbol. The visual part of the new brand logo should bring together in quite abstract, distinctive, attractive and clear manner the amalgam of culture, history heritage and the sea. The new Bulgarian brand logo is expected to be bounded with the relevant new destination slogan unifying the regional diversities of the country. In this relation the concept of tourism zoning should match in an optimal coherence the brand identity of tourist destination Bulgaria.

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## Note:

<sup>1</sup> The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index includes the following indicators: 1. Business Environment; 2. Safety and security; 3. Health and hygiene; 4. Human resources and the labor market; 5. Information technologies; 6. Priority of the tourism sector; 7. International openness of the country; 8. Price competitiveness; 9. Resilience of the natural environment; 10. Air Transport Infrastructure; 11. Infrastructure of ground and water transport; 12. Tourist infrastructure; 13. Natural resources; 14. Cultural-historical resources and business trips.

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Submitted: 9/10/2017

Accepted: 27/02/2018