

Project co-funded by the European Union and national funds of the participating countries



Deliverable: 5.2.2

**Market analysis and opportunities in Greek CB area:
Agrotouristic sector**

**PROJECT: Social agri-entrepreneurship for people with disabilities in the
crossborder area**

AGRI-ABILITY

(Subsidy Contract No: SC: B2.9c.09-AGRI-ABILITY)

Orestiada, 2019

Project title	People Social agri-entrepreneurship for people with disabilities in the crossborder area
Call identifier	INTERREG V-A Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020 1st Call of Proposals
Project acronym	AGRI-ABILITY
Starting date	06/10/2017
End date	05/10/2019 (extended to 31/03/2020)
Funding scheme	European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and National Funds
Contract no.	SC: B2.9c.09-AGRI-ABILITY
Project Summary	
Deliverable no.	5.2.2
Partner	PB2: Democritus University of Thrace
Deliverable name	Market analysis and opportunities in Greek CB area: Agrotouristic sector
Doc. Version	Final
Work Package	5. Business models for agrotourism and outdoor sporting activities in rural areas
Date	31/12/2019

Preface

The report entitled “Market analysis and opportunities in the Greek Cross Border Area: Agrotouristic sector” is the Deliverable 5.2.2 of the Democritus University of Thrace within the framework of the project “Social agri-entrepreneurship for people with disabilities in the crossborder area” (SC: B2.9c.09-AGRI-ABILITY) implemented under the framework of INTERREG V-A Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020 Cooperation Programme. The report was designed to promote understanding of the current situation of agrotouristic entrepreneurship and identify relevant opportunities in the Region of Central Macedonia and the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace that is the eligible areas of the Programme INTERREG Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020. The report does not contain data and assessments relevant to the livestock sector which is out of the scope of the AGRI-ABILITY project.

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1. Introduction

According to the United Nations Convention, people with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. One in six people in the EU has a disability that ranges from mild to severe, which signifies that around 80 million are often prevented from fully participating in society and the economy because of environmental and attitudinal barriers. The last decade the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that over a billion people, about 15% of the total population, live with disabilities.

According to the EU 2020 Strategy, development should be equitable, inclusive and accessible for all in order to benefit all of society. Including persons with disabilities by boosting their involvement in the agricultural sector and rural activities can improve employment opportunity and income generation.

Rural landscapes provide several entrepreneurial opportunities for people with disabilities in the Balkan area. The tourism, leisure and cultural sectors in rural areas are constantly growing the last decades; urban dwellers are attracted by the wide-open spaces, wildlife, and the tranquility of certain places in rural areas, which provide opportunities for reflection, recreation, spirituality, and reconnection with nature. Others seek out the music, literature, art, and architecture that form part of the nation's rural cultural heritage. Yet others are hungry for active, or even extreme, experiences associated with hiking, climbing, canoeing, spelunking, hunting, and skiing. Adventure parks, children's parks, equestrian facilities and venues for special events are other examples of business opportunities. All of these provide the basis for an expanded rural tourism and hospitality sectors, as well as driving the growth of second home and retirement communities, particularly in high-amenity areas.

Within the above mentioned framework the rural tourism in the Region of Central Macedonia and the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace provides several

opportunities for entrepreneurship that can be exploited by people with disabilities offering both economic and social benefits at multiple levels.

This report was designed to promote understanding of the current situation of rural tourism and identify relevant opportunities in the Region of Central Macedonia and the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace that is the Greek part of the eligible area of the Cooperation Programme INTERREG Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020.

2. General description of the Greek Cross Border Area

The Cooperation Programme “Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020” was approved by the European Commission on 13/12/2016 by Decision C(2016)8708. The Greek part of the eligible area of the Programme consists of the **Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace** (Regional Units of Evros, Kavala, Xanthi, Rodopi and Drama) and part of the **Region of Central Macedonia** (Regional Units of Thessaloniki and Serres) (Map 1).



Map 1. The eligible area of the Cooperation Programme “Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020”

The **Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace** consists of the northeastern part of Greece, and is divided into 6 Regional Units:

- 📍 **Regional Unit of Drama**
- 📍 **Regional Unit of Kavala**
- 📍 **Regional Unit of Thassos**
- 📍 **Regional Unit of Xanthi**



Regional Unit of Rodopi



Regional Unit of Evros

The Region covers 14.157 sq. km corresponding to 10,7% of the total area of Greece. It borders Bulgaria and Turkey to the north, the prefecture of Serres to the west and the Thracian Sea to the south.

The **Region of Central Macedonia** is the largest and second most populous region of Greece and is divided into 7 Regional Units:



Regional Unit of Thessaloniki



Regional Unit of Imathia



Regional Unit of Kilkis



Regional Unit of Pella



Regional Unit of Pieria



Regional Unit of Serres



Regional Unit of Chalkidiki

It is highlighted that only the Regional Unit of Thessaloniki and the Regional Unit of Serres are included in the eligible area of the Programme.

The Region has a total area of about 18,810 square kilometers of which 3,683 km² occupied by the Regional Unit of Thessaloniki, 3,968 km² by the Regional Unit of Serres.

The Region of Central Macedonia along with the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace, are supervised by the Decentralized Administration of Macedonia and Thrace which is based in Thessaloniki.

2.1 Natural Resources and Environment

The Greek CB area is characterized by many and important natural resources, including a large number of protected areas, many of which are of pristine character. The CB landscape consists of densely forested mountains with predominant the Rodopi mountains, valleys, plains, lakes and wetlands such as Koronia, Volvi, Kerkini, and Ismaritida, seasides and the cross-border rivers of Strymon (Struma), Nestos (Mesta), Ardas (Arda) and Evros (Maritsa).

The Greek CB area is known, from the ancient years, for its rich mineral wealth. In the prefecture of Drama the marble quarries are among the largest and most developed in Greece. Moreover, there are important mineral resources of manganese at the foot of Mt Phalakro, uranium deposits and industrial minerals in Paranesti and a lignite field has been recently located in Mavrolefki. There are also industrial minerals, lignite deposits and turf, mainly in the flat land of the south. The prefecture of Kavala is rich in iron ore (in Thassos) and in marble (near the village Limnias).

Furthermore the area is characterized by important energy resources such as hydroelectric power plants and geothermal fields with several potential applications in the agricultural and agrotouristic sector.

2.2 Socioeconomic characteristics

The economy in the Greek CB-area is based on agriculture, on construction and industrial activity, trade, commerce, transport, education, and public administration. The manufacturing sector has a high concentration of firms in clothing, textiles, food packaging, wood, paper and metal processing. In the tertiary sector, there are considerable opportunities for the development of tourism due to important natural and cultural resources. The Greek CB area has been gradually converting from an agricultural/industrial economy to an industrial/service economy, however this

conversion has been rather slow. The Greek CB-area is considerably less agricultural and industrial than the BG CB-area part, and more service-oriented. The total labour productivity in the CB area is significantly lower than the EU28 avg. (approx. 1/5), however is higher in the Greek part (32.800€/employee) comparing to the Bulgarian (5.800€/employee). Furthermore the productivity is also below the respective national average since for the Greek part is ranging from 60% to 84% of the GR national average. It is underlined that even within the study area there is an uneven development between the rural and urban areas, with the last attracting most of the population and economic activities of the area.

The Greek CB area has significant research facilities and academic facilities with predominant the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Democritus University of Thrace. In terms of transport, the Egnatia Motorway crosses the Regions of Central Macedonia and Eastern Macedonia and Thrace starting from the Igoumenitsa Port, which provides links by boat to Italy, and ending to Kipi in Evros (Greek-Turkish borders).

On a national level, the Egnatia Motorway will increase investments in sectors like transport (e.g. new freight centers), industry and tourism, thus playing an important role as a major development axis in Northern Greece. The major ports and airports in the study area are established in Thessaloniki, Alexandroupoli and Kavala. Furthermore there is a railway network connecting the major cities of the study area.



3. Economy and entrepreneurship in tourism

Although “tourism” is a single sector, it actually consists of different elements (tangible and intangible) and affects/is affected by many other sectors and activities. In this sense tourism development affects and can be beneficial to other economic sectors.

3.1 Economy

Gross domestic product (GDP) is a monetary measure of the market value of all the final goods and services produced in a period of time (annually). The GDP of the study area was increasing until 2008 (Figure 1) when the economic crises affected the country. After a 5 year depression period (2008-2013) the GDP seems to be stabilized at levels that are higher than those before 2002, with an increasing tendency. According Eurostat (2019) the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace in 2017 was among the poorest regions of Greece with just 11.500 Euros GDP per capita and 13.900 Purchasing power parity (PPP) while in Central Macedonia the GDP per capita and PPP was 13.300 Euros and 16.000 respectively.

Gross value added (GVA) is defined as output (at basic prices) minus intermediate consumption (at purchaser prices); it is the balancing item of the national accounts' production account. GVA can be broken down by industry and institutional sector. The sum of GVA over all industries or sectors plus taxes on products minus subsidies on products gives gross domestic product. The Gross Value Added in the study area reflects the contribution of labour and capital to production. Value added by activity breaks down the total value added by sector, namely agriculture, industry, utilities, and other service activities including tourism (Figure 2).

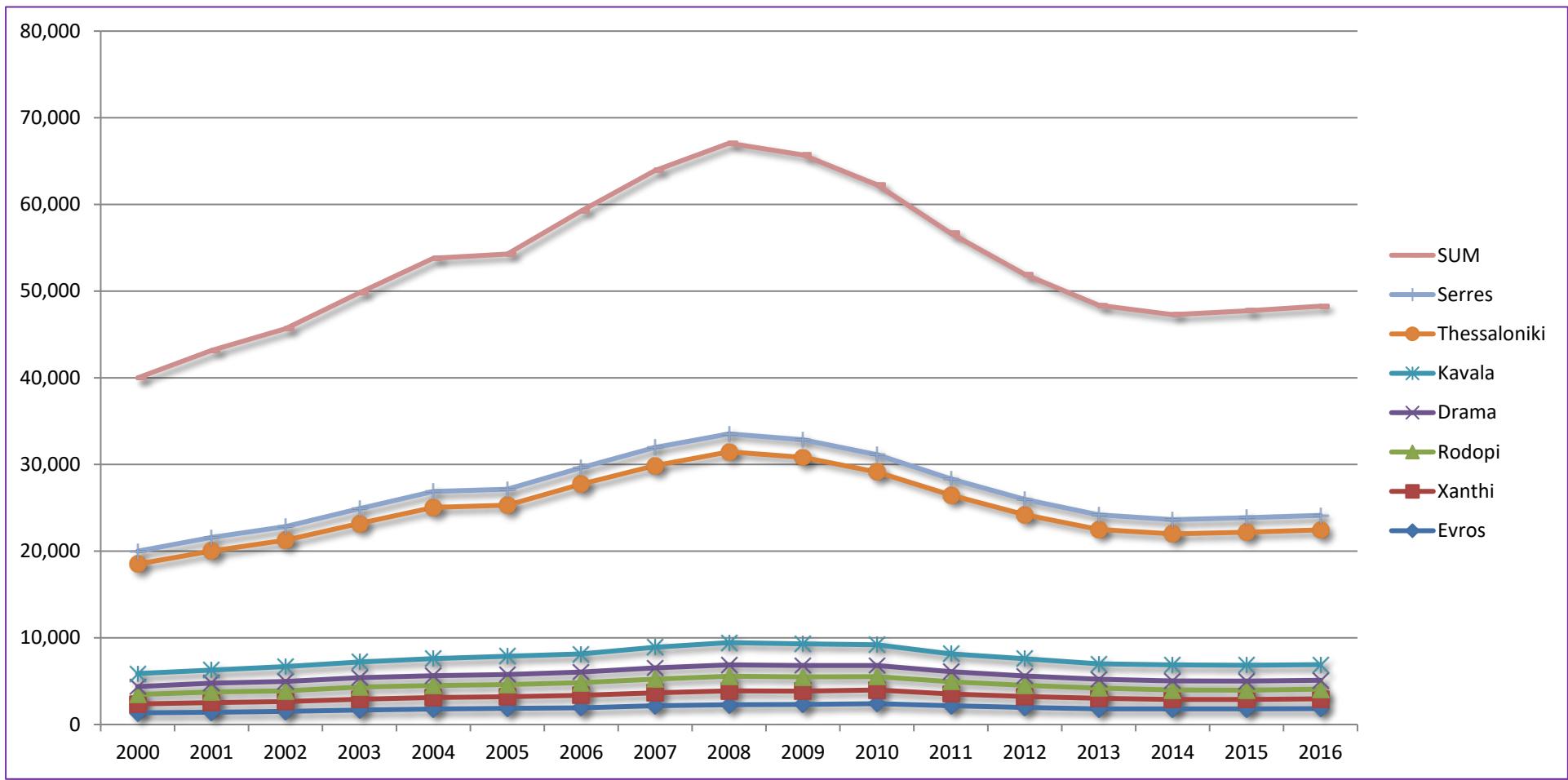


Figure 1. Gross domestic product by Regional Unit (*In million euro. At current prices*).

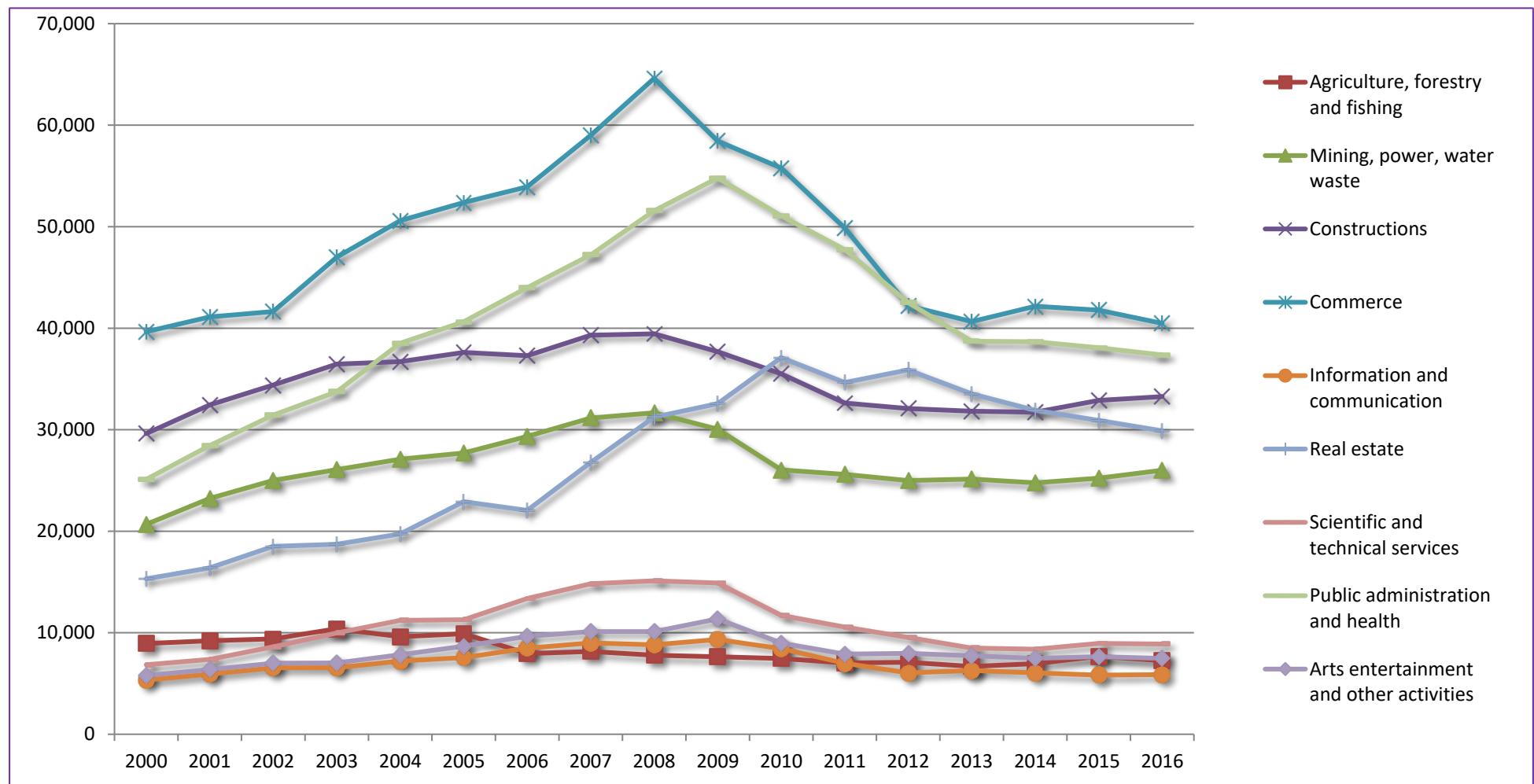


Figure 2. Gross value added by industry (*In million euro. At current prices*).

The shares of each sector are calculated by dividing the value added in each sector by total value added. The breakdown of value added by activity has changed in the study area over the last 20 years but not dramatically. The share of agriculture is now relatively smaller compared to 2000, while industry and services including tourism have been increased.

With regards to the economic activity, the primary sector, despite its decline, remains quite significant for the local economy, with high productivity above the national average. It is important to note the high proportion of arable and irrigated areas, the above national average production of cereals, industrial and aromatic plants, the improved structure of agricultural holdings compared to the national average and the relatively high degree of mechanisation and organisation of animal farming. Nevertheless the primary sector remains vulnerable because of its dependence on agricultural subsidies and the replacement of products by imports. The secondary (manufacturing) sector remains highly specialized in certain medium to low technology and labour intensive sectors. It accounts for a significant part of regional employment and thus is a factor of social cohesion and a key component of economic activity due to the intense and interactive relationship with other productive activities in all three sectors of the economy. However recent negative trends in investment have been noted, accompanied by relatively lower labour productivity and growth. Until 2016, the rates of setting up new and modern manufacturing enterprises remain low and far from internationally competitive manufacturing standards. The difficulties in attracting Foreign Direct Investments are indicative of the fact.

In 2017, the tourism's direct (18.3 billion) and indirect contribution (30.2 billion) to the economy accounted for 27.3% of Greece's GDP, compared with 25.5% in 2016 (16.7 billion direct and 27.6 billion indirect contribution) (Figure 3). In 2017 direct tourism contribution to the economy increased by 1,6 billion while nominal GDP increased by 3.5 billion. Tourism has an important multiplier effect since for every 1.0 of tourism revenue, the country's GDP grows by 2.65. Only 12.9% of receipts from incoming tourism are re-exported.

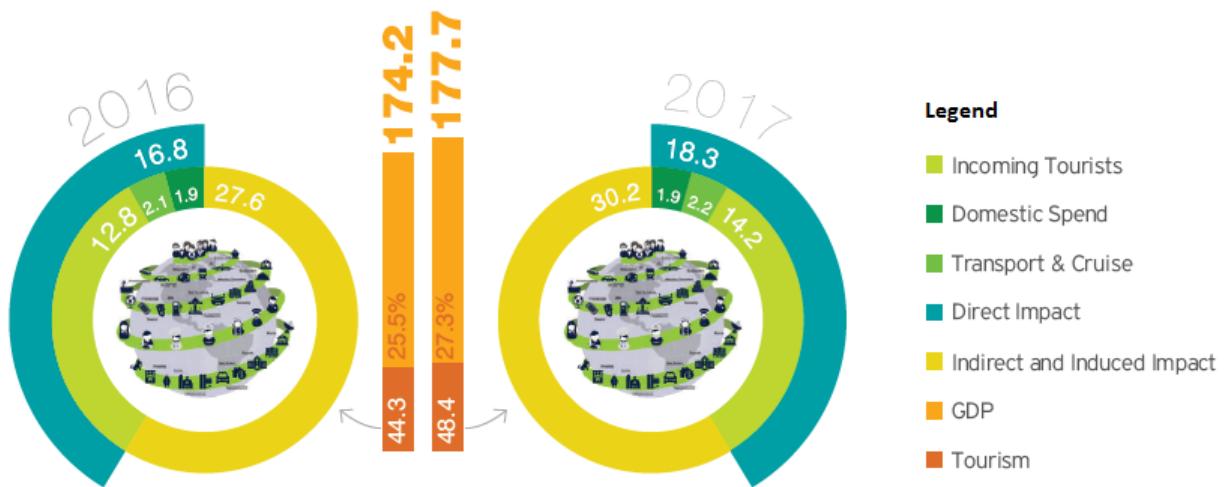


Figure 3. The contribution of tourism to national economy of Greece between 2016 and 2017 (INSETE 2017)

In the study area the Regional tourism distribution of revenues in 2017 (Figure 4) was significant for the Region of Central Macedonia (13%) while in East Macedonia and Thrace was only 2%.

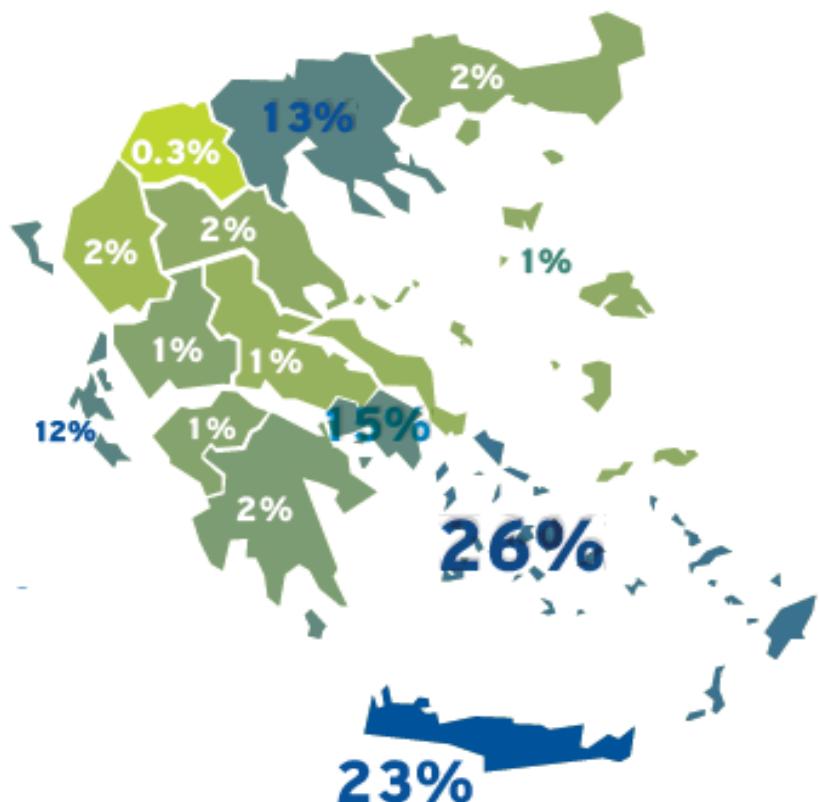


Figure 4. Regional tourism distribution of revenues in 2017 (INSETE 2017)

The direct contribution of tourism to Regional GDP for 2017 (Figure 5) was 10% in case of Central Macedonia and only 5% in case of East Macedonia and Thrace.

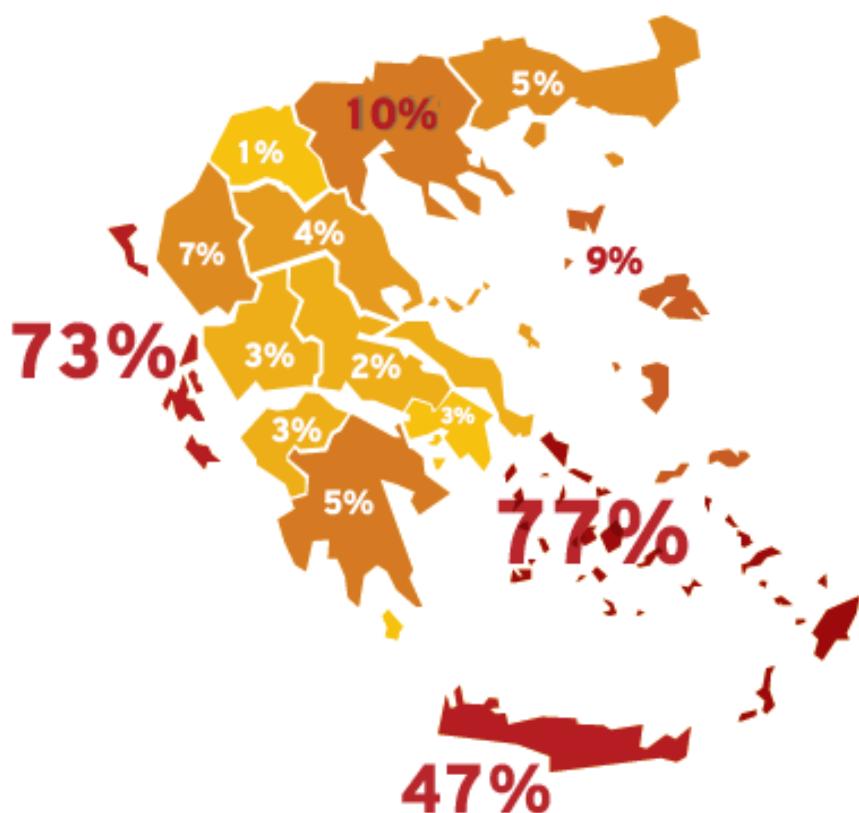


Figure 5. Direct contribution of tourism to Regional GDP for 2017 (*INSETE 2017*)

3.2 Employment

The latest employment and social trends after the EU economic crisis seems to be promising for all European regions since economic growth continues to favor employment growth and improvements. The unemployment rates started to rapidly increase in Greece soon after the wake of the economic crisis in 2008 reaching record high levels in 2013: Xanthi 37,5%, Drama 36,8%, Thessaloniki 32,1%, Serres 22,9%, Kavala 22,8%, Evros 22%, and Rodopi 16,8%. Furthermore, the CB area shows significantly higher values of long-term unemployed persons compared to the EU28. Youth unemployment rates display similar trends and are attributed to the lackluster economic growth, the rigid labour market, and the mismatch between potential employee skills and employers' needs. An additional important issue for the area is the considerably higher than EU28 percentages of population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (3-4 times higher). The main reason for the large divergence is the comparatively higher long term unemployment rates, and the higher share of people living in areas with low work intensity and low income levels. The large number of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the CB area is also attributable to the presence of various vulnerable groups such as minorities, internal migrants, asylum seekers and foreign persons under subsidiary protection. The higher risk of poverty and social exclusion among these groups is primarily connected to long-term unemployment and economic inactivity. The last 5 years brought significant improvements in the labor markets of the majority of Member States and in case of Greece according to EUROSTAT (2019) the unemployment decreased from 27% in 2013 to 18% in 2019 (Figure 6). However the rates of unemployment in the study area are higher than the EU and Greek average, while in case of the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace the percentage is still one of the highest in European Union.



Figure 6. Percentage of unemployment in EU (blue line) and Greece (red line) for the period 2000 to 2019.

In terms of employment per economic activity in the GR eligible area of Interreg GR-BL 2014-2020 several changes have been recorder by ELSTAT between the years 2000 and 2016 (Figure 7). More specifically, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of employment in: (1) Agriculture, forestry and fishing, (2) Mining and quarrying, manufacturing, electricity, gas, steam, air conditioning and water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities, and (3) Constructions. On the other hand, the employment in other sectors such and trade/commerce and services was significantly increased.

In 2017 more than 90% of the touristic sector revenues are derived from abroad, within an extremely competitive global environment. According to the Labour Force Survey findings, at peak periods, tourism employs more than 10% of the country's labour force and has become the 3rd largest employment sector (after commerce and the entire primary sector), ahead of manufacturing and the public sector.

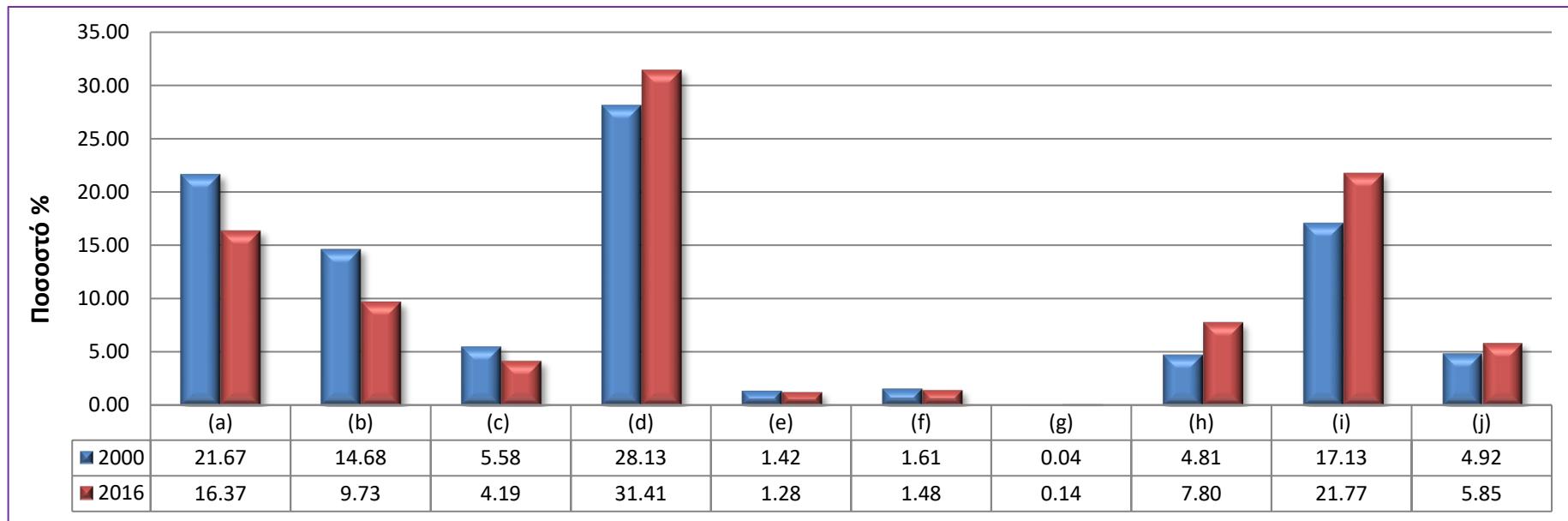


Figure 7. Percentage of employment in the GR eligible area of Interreg GR-BL 2014-2020 per economic activity for the years 2000 and 2016.

Where: (a) Agriculture, forestry and fishing, (b) Mining and quarrying, manufacturing, electricity, gas, steam, air conditioning and water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities, (c) Construction, (d) Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, transportation and storage, accommodation and food service activities, (e) Information and communication, (f) Financial and insurance activities, (g) Real estate activities, (h) Professional, scientific and technical activities, administrative and support service activities, (i) Public administration and defense, compulsory social security, education, human health and social work activities, (j) Arts, entertainment, recreation, other service activities, activities of households as employers, undifferentiated goods and services producing activities of households for own use, activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies.

4. Forms and Characteristics of tourism in rural areas

4.1 Definitions and typology

Rural tourism has been studied in various ways and contexts. The term “rural tourism” has been defined in a number of ways, it varies from country to country, and it is rather difficult to find a universal definition, due to its complex multi-faceted nature. It can be argued, however, that studies have yet to provide a clear and basic understanding of the characteristics that underpin and define agritourism (Phillip et al. 2010). Literature review reveals several definitions of Rural tourism and relevant labels (Table 4.1) .

Table 4.1. Definitions of Rural tourism and relevant labels

Term	Definition	Reference
<i>Rural tourism</i>	<p>“tourism in areas with a low density of population”</p> <p>the kind of tourist services in rural areas, services involving investors, tour operators, local and central governments. These services include accommodation, meals (with a focus on traditional local cuisine) and all leisure activities according to the desires of tourists</p>	European Commission, (2000) Barbu (2013)
<i>Agritourism</i>	<p>“any practice developed on a working farm with the purpose of attracting visitors”</p> <p>“a specific type of rural tourism in which the hosting house must be integrated into an agricultural estate, inhabited by the proprietor, allowing visitors to take part in agricultural or complementary activities on the property”</p> <p>“tourism products which are directly connected with the agrarian environment, agrarian products or agrarian stays”</p>	Barbieri and Mshenga (2008) Marques (2006) Sharpley and Sharpley (1997)

<i>Agrotourism</i>	“tourism activities which are undertaken in non-urban regions by individuals whose main employment is in the primary or secondary sector of the economy” “tourist activities of small-scale, family or co-operative in origin, being developed in rural areas by people employed in agriculture”	Iakovidou (1997) Kizos and Iosifides (2007)
<i>Farm Tourism</i>	“rural tourism conducted on working farms where the working environment forms part of the product from the perspective of the consumer”	Clarke (1999)
	“tourist activity is closely intertwined with farm activities and often with the viability of the household economy”	Gladstone and Morris (2000)
	“activities and services offered to commercial clients in a working farm environment for participation, observation or education”	Ollenburg (2006)
<i>Farm-based tourism</i>	“phenomenon of attracting people onto agricultural holdings”	Evans and Ilbery (1989)
<i>Vacation Farms</i>	“incorporate both a working farm environment and a commercial tourism component”	Weaver and Fennell (1997)

Rural tourism, agro-tourism and village tourism are more often than not used as synonyms and, even though there is no widely applicable and universally accepted definition for this form of tourism. Furthermore, agro-tourism is often considered as part of ecotourism, “for both are related and subject to natural attractions”. Yet, in the case of ecotourism, “the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature and local traditions related to the nature” (Dorobantu and Nistoreanu, 2012), while raising awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, minimizing negative impacts upon the environment, providing employment and generating economic benefits for local communities (World Tourism Organization, 2002).

Rural tourism is a form of tourism that takes place in rural areas and involve exploitation of natural and anthropogenic tourist resources of the rural area, and the conduct of social and economic activities that generate benefits for local communities. The main differences between classic/standard tourism and rural tourism are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Main differences between classic/standard tourism and rural tourism

Attribute	Classic tourism	Rural tourism
Level	Activities developed at national or international level	Activities developed locally
Location of space built	High density commercial space built in, faced with an acute shortage of space	Low density in commercial space, has built itself into an open space
Resident population	Urban settlements involved in tourism activity have over 10,000 inhabitants	Rural settlements in practice rural tourism have under 10,000 inhabitants
Tourist movement	Intense movement by attracting tourism by various segments of tourists	Low tourist movement by attracting certain segments of tourists
Relationship between host and tourists	Formal, impersonal relationships with tourists	Individualized, personal relationships with tourists
Architecture	Modern to conventional architecture	Traditional/local architecture
Approach	Behavior-oriented leisure activities /entertainment,	Loyalty in the process of training and education for appropriate conduct with local culture and nature

4.2 Ecotourism and agro-tourism within the framework of rural tourism

The last fifty years can be characterized by a strong growth of tourism, contributing to economic development and upgrade of the due societies. The effect is even greater when looking at rural areas which so far had remained ignored; advancements in infrastructure and in the style of life are the two major ones to mention. Communication developments, reconsideration of rural areas and appreciation of rural legacy, come to supplement the aforementioned (Lopez and Garcia, 2006).

Rural tourism as well as ecotourism and agro-tourism, are forms of tourism that emerged in the last century, becoming increasingly important sectors of the tourism industry worldwide. The new kinds of life-style, the evolving tourist behaviour and continuously changing customers' preferences coupled with the widespread concern about environment, industrial heritage and sustainable development are all factors that led to the expansion of these niche market types of tourism. Rural tourism, agro-tourism and ecotourism have common points in what regards the type of tourists that choose this kind of holidays, the quality of time they aspire to, but also in terms of trends, conditions and principles the bodies and communities involved tend to be guided by. The main characteristics of each of the three types of tourism presented above are summarized in Table 4.3 (Ana Maria-Irina 2017).

Table 4.3. Main characteristics of rural tourism, agro-tourism and ecotourism

Rural Tourism	Agro-tourism	Ecotourism
All forms of tourism that take place in rural areas or rural communities	Tourism activities directly related to agriculture	Nature-based form of tourism, the main motivation of the tourists being the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas

Often referred to as “agrotourism”, “nature-based tourism”, “farm-based tourism” and “village tourism”	Often referred to as “farmbased tourism”, “rural tourism” and “village tourism”	Often referred to as “sustainable tourism”, “responsible tourism” and “green tourism”
Independent activity integrated in the tertiary sector of the economy, alternative/complementary form of mass-tourism	Entirely integrate within rural tourism	described as “niche tourism”, differs from rural tourism by the closeness to nature and the more rational exploitation of tourism resources.
Potential customers are nature-lovers	Potential customers are interested in farming, crafting, folklore, natural agricultural products and gastronomy	Potential customers are interested in meaningful community participation, slow travel, high-quality experiences, picturesque, nature-made elements, gastronomy, traditions and routes that allow them to feel as if they were locals

Sustainable development is inextricably linked to rural development, thus, growth in less favored areas cannot be achieved without any environmental consciousness and initiative. Furthermore, the trend of our days, meaning a shift to more environmental / ecological goods, comes to support the above notion. The same trend can be noticed even in tourism, where people now, are striving for alternative options as a result of qualitative transitions in the way of life, activities and structure of modern societies. In addition to that, tourists are more sophisticated than ever, better informed and in a sense, tired of the concept that mass tourism promotes (Chronopoulou 2013).

In general, rural tourism plays an important role in developing the economic level of society towards better and sustainable life. The development of tourism brings benefits in rural areas such as reducing the migration of the local

population, vocational training, the eradication of gender discrimination and other social categories, improve social and cultural existence, opportunities for social interaction, participation of residents in decision making (Aref et al, 2010) and to promote the arts and crafts practiced by the community (Sharif and Lonik 2017).

5. Market analysis

5.1 Availability of touristic resources and sites

The rural landscape of the Greek CB Area is characterized by villages, old traditional settlements, magnificent mythical mountains, golden sand beaches with crystal clear waters, beautiful forests, gorges, lakes and rivers which compose an amazing scenery.

In **Central Macedonia** the main distinctive features of the Regional Unit of Serres are the mountain ranges that make for beautiful sheltering surroundings and river Strymonas flowing across it. The vast and fertile plain nestling among Mount Belles, Menoikio, Orvilos and Pangaio produces, among others, hard wheat, rice, cotton, sugar beet, tobacco and corn. Lake Kerkini (Figure 8) host a significant biodiversity including a vast number of birds and even water buffaloes. The lush vegetation, the geographical location, the aquatic potential and the diversity of the biotopes make up the natural beauty of Serres. The wetland of Lake Kerkini, which is protected by the Ramsar Treaty and is part of the European Network “Natura 2000”, is like having been taken out of a fairyland. Extensive lowlands with many plants and trees, rich flora and fauna, buffaloes in a small distance away from people, cormorants flying around their nests, boats offered for amazing rides among reeds and trees on the lake, bicycles for rides over the dam, guesthouses, cafés and taverns where you can taste excellent local dishes with fish or buffalo products. The Lailias mountain ski resort is ideal for winter sports (Figure 9), while there are a lot of sites of religious interest including the Holy Monastery of Eikosifoinissa, Monastery of Timios Prodromos and Monastery of Panagia Vyssianis. The famous thermal springs of Thermes are 5 kilometers away from Nigrita with thermal water that gushes from the spring at a temperature of 36 to 56°C and is highly recommended for chronic rheumatic diseases and gastrointestinal disorders. At a distance of 7 kilometers outside Sidirokastro, in a verdant location with panoramic views, you can have a bath in the thermal hydrotherapeutic spring. The warm thermal waters of the spring will soothe your body, while at the same time they will alleviate musculoskeletal

pains. The cave of Alistrati is one of most beautiful and largest caves in Greece, with stalactites and stalagmites that began to develop 2,000,000 years ago (Figure 10).



Figure 8. Kerkini lake (photo: <https://www.discovergreece.com/>)



Figure 9. Lailias mountain ski resort (photo: <https://www.voria.gr>)



Figure 10. Alistrati cave (photo: <https://www.cnn.gr/>)

Next to the cave entrance is the 15-km-long Angitis Canyon that one should definitely include in the touring schedule. The Archaeological and Folklore museums, as well as the museum of Natural History help the visitor get closer to the mythology and popular beliefs of the place and get connected to his roots. On the way to Promachon you will meet the Fort Roupel, a fortress of monumental interest, the largest of the fortress complexes built during World War II, with impressive labyrinthine underground vaults of 4,251 meters. In Amfipoli the visitors may admire the ancient monuments of one of the most important archaeological sites of Greece, the impressive marble Lion, 5.37 meter high, which was the symbol of the city, as well as all the great archaeological finds that revealed important Macedonian tombs. In terms of gastronomy famous local products include the traditional "Akanes" delight (Figure 11), cheese and dairy products, water-buffalo products as well as pies and handmade delicacies.

Famous are the Tzoumagia's sausages and the Kerkini kavourmas made from beef or buffalos. The local cuisine, besides meat, has also specialties with lake fish such as

grilled carp and trout on the grill or on the frying pan. The fertile land of Serres produces the famous beans, rice, tomatoes, Vrontou potatoes and the famous Nigrita spirulina known for its healing properties. Finally tsipouro and ouzo stands out for its unique aroma and rich flavor, as it is produced from seeds of aromatic plants such as anise, nutmeg and others.



Figure 11. Traditional “Akanes” delight, made of goat butter and roasted almonds
(photo: <https://www.zorbabook.com>)

The Regional Unit of Thessaloniki beyond the city of Thessaloniki is characterized by a diverse landscape of cultural, historical and environmental attractions.

The National Park of Axios - Loudias - Aliakmonas (Figure 12) stretches over a vast area of 338 square kilometers where Kalohori Lagoon, Gallikos River, Delta of Axios River, Loudias and Aliakmonas and the wetlands of Nea Agathoupoli and Alykes Kitrous meet. Throughout this protected area, 295 bird species, 40 mammalian species, many reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates and rich flora live, grow and reproduce. The spectacle is amazing. Epanomi and Aggelochori lagoons, listed in the network "Natura 2000", host 178 rare and protected birds and more than 2,500 plant species. Lake Koronia and lake Volvi are located North and east of Thessaloniki and along with the Redina gorge consist a rare complex of ecosystems with unique ecological importance.

The thermal baths of Lagadas, built by Justinian, a military doctor of Byzantium, in the 9th century AD, are located 19 kilometers from Thessaloniki, within a splendid area of 100 acres with endless greenery, basketball courts, a playground offered for relaxation, picnic and endless play. The spa baths of Nea Apollonia, located near the national road of Thessaloniki-Kavala, 50 km from the center of Thessaloniki and next to Lake Volvi, represent the only one existing lakeside spa. The temperature of water ranges from 47 to 57°C and the spa is recommended for migraines, dermatological, gynecological, urological diseases and allergic asthma.

Vrasna is a traditional village in the mountain side of Strymonikos Bay. It's one of the most beautiful villages in the area. It is built with amazing view, at the foot of the forest of Kerdyllia with traditional architecture, Folk Museum, and panoramic views of the castle and its fortress. The area of Asprovalta offers alternative type of tourism as it features sites of intense archaeological, cultural, environmental and religious significance. There are many interesting excursions and short trips to the nearby areas. The city of Thessaloniki, the beautiful beaches of Halkidiki, the archaeological site of Amfipolis, the picturesque town of Kavala, and a tour by boat to Mount Athos are just some of the examples of activities available.

Ancient Stagira (Figure 13), Aristotle's birthplace who was a Greek philosopher and polymath, a student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. A unique park of Aristotle is located at an altitude of about 500 meters, in the historical village of Stagira. In just 10 minutes drive from Stavros, lies the mid-Byzantine Castle of Rentina (Figure 14) . The castle is located at the top of a natural hill that overlooks the point where the mountains of the basin of Migdoniki converge and create a narrow passage that allows the passage of Richios river and ancient Macedonia communication road with the Thracian region.

The mixing of peoples and cultures is reflected in Thessaloniki cuisine and recipes. Visitors can enjoy fresh seafood and fish, tsipouro with delicious appetizers or tasty kebabs and also the famous "bougatsa" [pastry with layers of phyllo and filling] with cream, cheese, minced meat or spinach.



Figure 12. National Park of Axios - Loudias - Aliakmonas (photo: Agorastos-Papatsanis <https://axiosdelta.gr/>)



Figure 13. Ancient Stagira (photo: <https://volviguide.gr/>)



Figure 14. The Redina castle (photo: <https://volviguide.gr/>)

At the epicenter of three worlds – Asia, Balkans and Mediterranean – **Eastern Macedonia and Thrace** created and witnessed a flow of human events and nature interactions that few regions ever experienced. Eastern Macedonia and Thrace have a millenniums-old, multi cultural history. Their legacy is a region that's still home to the mix of ethnicities and religions that have settled on these lush, mountainous lands. The entire region was a natural conduit for the legendary Silk Road and Spice Route that stretched from the Mediterranean to India and China. In the 2nd century BC Rome built the Via Egnatia – a 700-mile long road – connecting their Balkan, Macedonia and Asian provinces creating a tangible link between its western and eastern empires.

Archaeological locations of interest among other include: The Citadel of Ancient Thassos, the walls of Traianoupoli, the Roman portico in Agios Charalambos of Maroneia, the "Akontisma" station and fort of the Egnatia Highway, the fortifications of Aggitis, the sanctuary of Dionysus near Drama, the ancient acropolis in the village of Platanias, the Hellenistic Tomb of Street Troy, the Ancient Theatre of Maronia constructed in the Hellenistic period and remodelled in Roman times, the Medieval bridge in Polyanthos, the towers and the medieval fortifications of Samothrace, the Byzantine Castle Kale of Didymoticho, and the Megalithic Gate of ancient Ismara. Prominent among these is Philippi (Figure 15). Founded in the 4th century BC Philippi served three empires, and the ruins of this once influential city are a pleasant 10-mile drive from Kavala. The gold and silver of the Pangaion Hills did indeed enrich the Macedonian Kingdom, and Alexander the Great would use Philippi as the doorway to Asia Minor, tapping Kavala as its sea link. Within a short period of time, Philippi was a wealthy strategic city.

Health tourism sites are widespread in the Region including the Sanative Springs in Thermia of Paranesti, the Springs of Traianoupoli, the Springs in Thermes, the spring of Psarotherma in Samothrace, the Clay infirmary of Krinides, the Baths of Sanative Springs of Eleftheres and the Sanative Spring in Potamia (New Kessani). Further more magnificent geological formations and caves in the area incude the Cave Sources of Aggitis River-Cave of Maaras (Figure 16), Maroneia cave, cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus and the Cave of Saints Theodoroi.



Figure 15. The archeological site of Philippi (photo: <http://www.jti-rhodope.eu/>)



Figure 16. The Cave of Maaras (photo: Marco Anzidei)

For nature lovers must see sites include the Waterfalls of Paranesti's area (Figure 17), the Valley and Waterfall of Fonias River and the famous Vathres (lagoons) of Samothrace Samothrace, the Aesthetic Forest of Strait of Nestos River, the riparian forest Kotza Orman or Large Forest (Figure 18), and the Frakto forest which was declared as a Protected Natural Monument, because of its high ecological value, the lakes of Vistonida, Ismarida as well as the Evros River Delta and Nestos river lagoons.

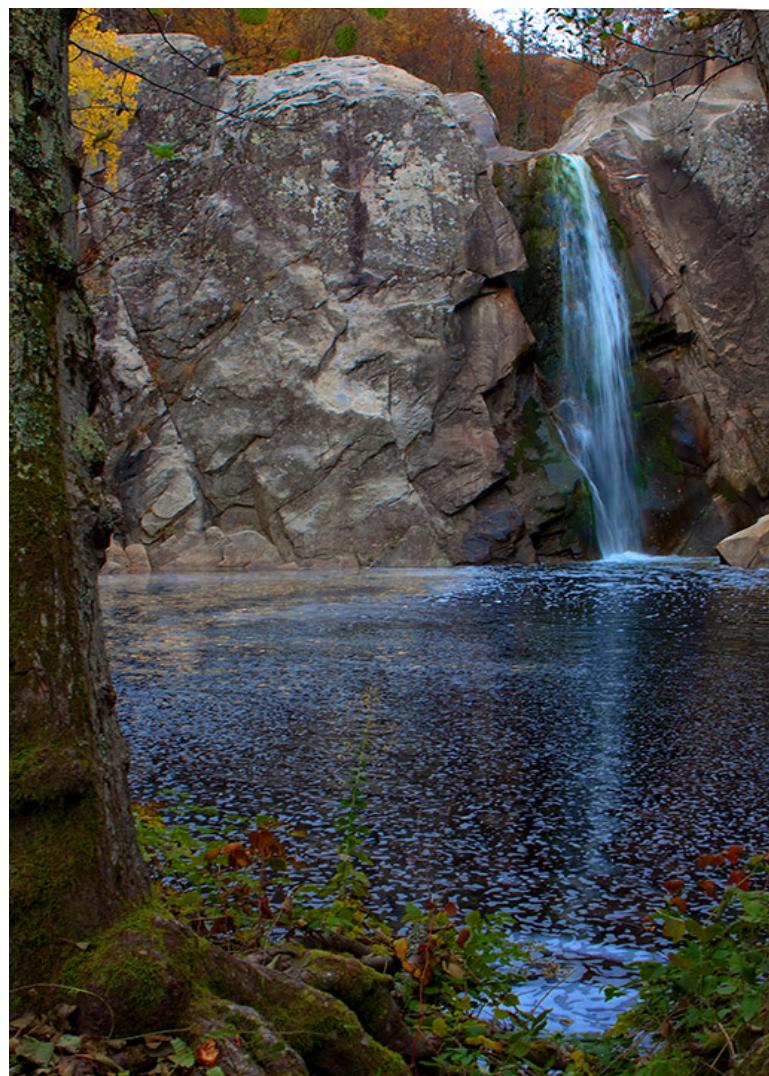


Figure 17. The Waterfalls of Paranesti (photo: <https://www.trekearth.com/>)

Furthermore the area has a long rural history and tradition which is highlighted in the Tabacco Museum of Kavala, the Silk museum of Soufli and several other museums of folklore tradition, Roma Basketery, Minerals exploitation etc.



Figure 18. The riparian forest Kotza Orman (photo: <https://exfacto.gr/>)

In addition to the above visitors may enjoy local products and gastronomy including the sweet nut of Thasos, famous wines, olives and olive oil, and traditional sweets of the orient. Notable items include cold cuts and pickled foods, as well as spicy kebabs that help inhabitants withstand the cold winds that sweep down from the Rodopi mountains. The towns of Xanthi and Komotini are famous for their syropiasta (syrupy pastries), while in Alexandroupoli, dishes made with seafood supplied by local fishermen are favored.

Both Kavala and Drama (Figure 19), have had success with international grapes such as Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Semillon, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. However, there's a growing trend of focusing on indigenous varieties, with some stunning examples of Assyrtiko, Malagousia and Agiorgitiko wines from famous local producers. Moving eastwards, Thrace has no shortage of wine history, with references in Homer to the land of the Kikones, a people of Thrace, and the wine made there by Maron, one of the priests of Apollo in Ismarus. Today, Thrace is a vibrant winemaking region. Beyond the largest producers, the emergence of a number of artisanal wineries has promoted a new sense of excitement among wine

enthusiasts regarding this part of the country. Most of the wineries are open to the public providing guided tours and unique experiences to visitors.



Figure 19. Vineyards of Drama (photo: <https://pgiagora.gr/vineyards/>)

5.2 Transportation and accommodation capacity

The eligible area is served by three airports, three international ports (Table 5.1), the “Egnatia Road” that connects the port of Igumenitsa in Epirus with Alexandroupoli in Thrace and the railway network that passes through the entire region.

The main transportation network is well developed, however the secondary and local transportation network can be considered for further improvement in order to provide the necessary access to locations of interest and facilitate commercial networks.

Table 5.1. Airports and international ports in the study area

Airports	Ports
Thessaloniki “Macedonia” Airport	Thessaloniki
Alexandroupolis “Dimokritos” Airport	Alexandroupolis
Kavala “Megas Alexandros” Airport	Kavala

Accommodation is a base of tourism industry as it is a vital and fundamental part of tourism supply. Tourists in their travel require location where they can rest and revive during their travel. As a result, commercial accommodations are in existence. There is great diversity in size and type of accommodation in relation to location and services provided. The area can accommodate an adequate number of visitors as it is presented in Tables 5.2 and 5.3. However it is highlighted that the vast majority of accommodation facilities are situated in the urban areas such as Thessaloniki, Serres, Kavala, Drama, Xanthi, Komotini and Alexandroupoli, while agrotouristic accommodations are less favored.

Table 5.2. Hotel capacity in the eligible area (2019)

		Hotel capacity 2019						
Regional Area			5*	4*	3*	2*	1*	Total
Thessaloniki	Units		15	31	42	25	32	145
	Rooms		2.034	2.159	2.308	836	751	8.088
	Guest beds		3.839	3.944	4.461	1.588	1.507	15.339
Serres	Units		0	6	19	6	2	33
	Rooms		0	299	457	179	95	1.030
	Guest beds		0	690	956	392	193	2.231
Drama	Units		1	3	12	2	3	21
	Rooms		73	173	235	68	49	598
	Guest beds		147	365	479	121	92	1.204
Evros	Units		3	2	21	29	10	65
	Rooms		386	142	658	701	144	2.031
	Guest beds		784	293	1.275	1.302	291	3.945
Thassos	Units		4	15	43	101	46	209
	Rooms		420	1.167	1.238	1.982	708	5.515
	Guest beds		929	2.516	2.519	3.945	1.348	11.257
Kavala	Units		2	5	12	22	10	51
	Rooms		179	327	479	523	154	1.662
	Guest beds		359	572	897	978	325	3.131
Xanthi	Units		2	2	10	2	2	18
	Rooms		127	62	369	87	34	679
	Guest beds		244	125	748	175	66	1.358
Rodopi	Units		0	4	17	0	1	22
	Rooms		0	167	598	0	11	776
	Guest beds		0	320	1.127	0	22	1.469
Total	Units		27	68	176	187	106	564
	Rooms		3.219	4.496	6.342	4.376	1.946	20.379
	Guest beds		6.302	8.825	12.462	8.501	3.844	39.934

Source: Hellenic Chamber of Hotels - Processing INSETE Intelligence

Table 5.3. Rooms for rent in the eligible area (2019)

ROOMS FOR RENT 2019						
Regional Area		4K	3K	2K	1K	Total
	Units	12	105	282	121	520
Thessaloniki	Rooms	127	1.055	2.137	790	4.109
	Guest beds	324	2.254	5.158	2.015	9.751
	Units	2	9	1	0	12
Serres	Rooms	17	62	4	0	83
	Guest beds	32	138	8	0	178
	Units	16	154	576	176	922
Thassos	Rooms	181	1.143	3.623	948	5.895
	Guest beds	404	2.884	8.330	2.020	13.638
	Units	4	31	54	18	107
Kavala	Rooms	27	225	310	83	645
	Guest beds	68	631	852	227	1.778
	Units	2	18	27	44	91
Evros	Rooms	11	120	193	263	587
	Guest beds	27	281	402	545	1.255
	Units	2	3	7	0	12
Drama	Rooms	15	20	47	0	82
	Guest beds	38	43	110	0	191
	Units	0	4	8	1	13
Rodopi	Rooms	0	38	32	5	75
	Guest beds	0	82	128	11	221
	Units	1	0	4	2	7
Xanthi	Rooms	6	0	16	16	38
	Guest beds	12	0	36	29	77
	Units	39	324	959	362	1,684
Total	Rooms	384	2663	6362	2.105	11.514
	Guest beds	905	6.313	15.024	4.847	27.089

Source: Tourism Enterprise Register - Processing INSETE Intelligence

5.3 Demand of touristic product

In a post-modern society rural areas and the countryside have grown in both importance and appeal. For this reason, academics and politicians have become interested in understanding the rural tourism phenomenon since it was recognized as a development tool of often economically and socially depressed rural areas. Rural tourism is further identified as a potential opportunity to diversify the product portfolio of declining mass tourism destinations or to enhance the positioning of these destinations.

Simultaneously, in the last two decades there has been an increasing tendency for the urban population to choose rural zones for holiday purposes, coinciding with and possibly stimulated by a trend towards splitting holiday periods along the year and an increase in short distance travel. This market pressure towards the development of new and diversified rural tourism products and experiences leads to business opportunities. Together with the chance to integrate these products within a wider economic, social and cultural local and regional basis, they constitute the foundations of the aforementioned development potential . Like urban or seaside tourism, the appeal of rural tourism also lies in the range and quality of attractions and facilities. Rural tourism should correspondingly adapt to current market mechanisms, which are becoming extremely competitive and are dominated by powerful communication techniques, in a context of strategically developed marketing action .

As illustrated in Figure 20 there is an evident year-by-year evolution of the number of nights spent in rural tourism accommodation establishments in EU countries from 2012 to 2015. All of the countries except for Finland saw their numbers increasing in terms of nights spent at rural tourism accommodation establishments, indicating an ascendant trend and growing interest and demand for this form of tourism.

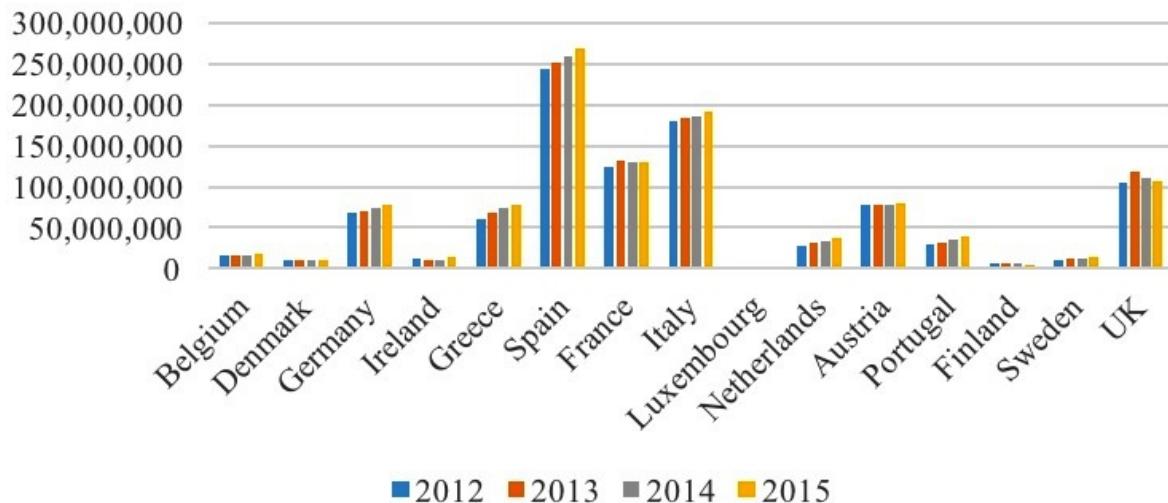


Figure 20. Number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the rural areas in the old member states of the EU (OMS-15) 2012-2015 (Ana Maria-Irina, 2017)

In the eligible area there is an evident increase in the number of visits from 7.757.600 in 2016 to 9.759.900 in 2018 (Figure 21). However there is still a big difference in the number of visitors between the Region of Central Macedonia and the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace.

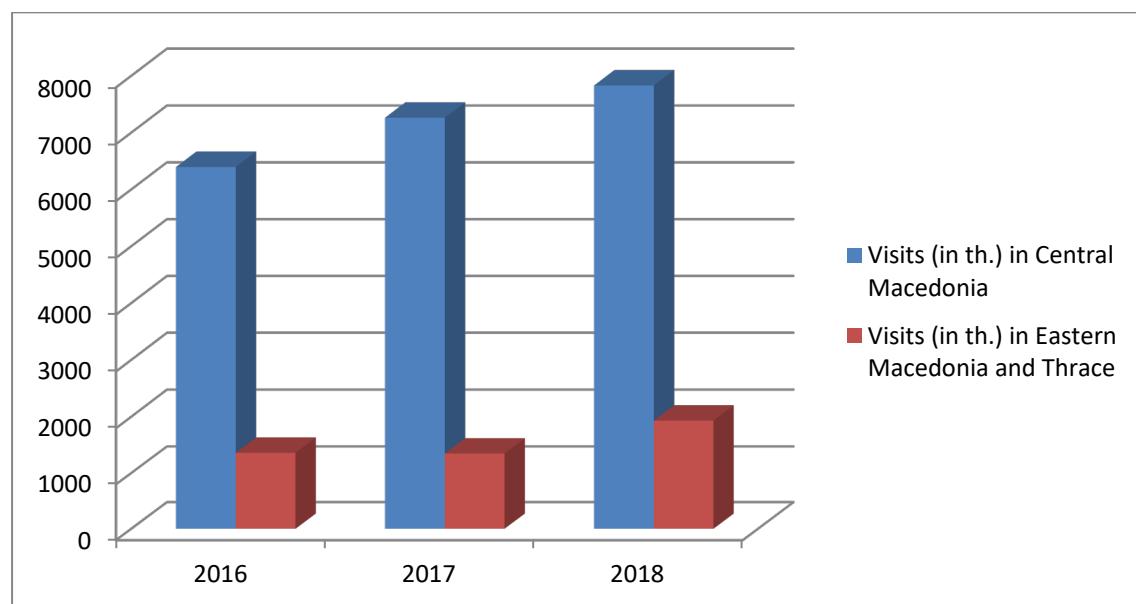


Figure 21. Number of visits Central Macedonia and in Eastern Macedonia & Thrace 2016-2018

Inbound tourism flows into the study area, particularly during periods when there is an absence of investments that substantially change the form of the Greek tourism product and attract new markets, depend on:

- a) geopolitical developments and events of nature that render certain competing destinations more or less attractive in terms of security,
- b) economic developments in international markets, to the degree that these developments impact the desire and capability of the residents of a given market to travel abroad, and
- c) our access to these markets, which, for Greece, is to a great extent via air routes.

The incoming visitors are mainly from the neighboring countries while Germany, United Kingdom and Russia hold a significant percentage as well (Table 5.4). This is quite interesting since countries like Germany and United Kingdom tend to show a preference in rural tourism and have a long tradition in this sector of tourism.

In accordance with Chasapopoulos et al. (2014) distance and trade ties between Greece and the sending countries are important factors influencing foreign demand for tourist services while the demand for tourism in Greece does not appear to be a luxury service for the relatively rich (European) countries.

The major trends mainly in demand (tourists and tourism businesses) but also in supply (locals and local planners) constituted a rapidly growing and extremely diversified market -regarding especially motives and infrastructure. Furthermore, the development of SIT is an inseparable part of the regeneration programs in mature mass tourism destinations in order either to renew their traditional products or to differentiate and target new markets or market segments. The major trends of this enormous change in the overall development of Tourism the last 30 years are the following (Tsartas et al. 2015) :

- ✓ Tourists prefer more independent modes of travel.

- ✓ An increased number of trips is combined with high travel expenditure.
 - ✓ The notion of “locality” and the bottom-up planning positively affected the development of special interest tourism.
 - ✓ Tourists are now choosing a more active and rich travel experience.

Thus in many areas besides the traditional vacation tourism infrastructure an additional number of services is provided for this new products which may have different characteristics in their organization and management. A huge turn both in offer and demand was thus the result :beside the traditional massive vacation tourism product we had a vast number of tourism products related to a demand for totally different motives: Environment, Education, Rurality, Heritage, Culture, Sports, Health, History, Congresses, City breaks, Hobbies , Casinos, Profession, Experiential travels, Adventure Travels, Thematic Museums/ Parks etc. This evolution posed a large number of issues for the tourism regions and first of all to create the necessary and specialized infrastructure for this new type of demand (Tsartas et al. 2015).

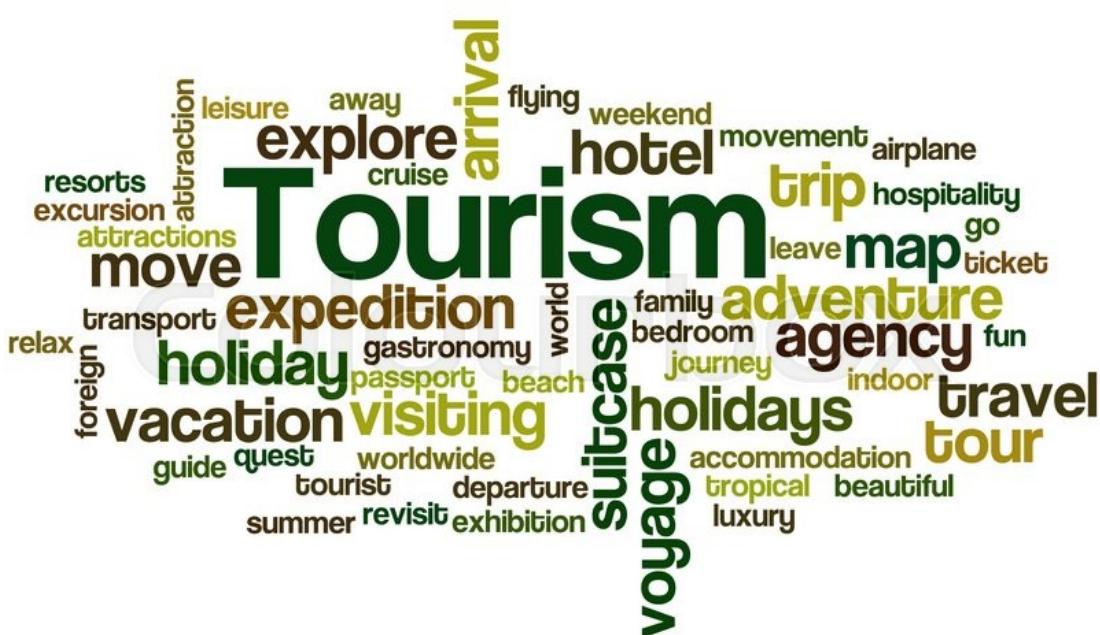


Table 5.4 . Regional Key figures of incoming tourism in Central Macedonia and in Eastern Macedonia & Thrace 2018

Region	Countries of origin	Visits (in th.)	Receipts (in mil. €)	Overnights (in th.)	Expenditure per visit (in €)	Daily spend (in €)	Length of Stay
Central Macedonia	Bulgaria	1.914,0	161,4	4.555,3	84,3	35,4	2,4
	FYROM	1.149,0	148,3	3.069,5	129,1	48,3	2,7
	Serbia	766,6	248,6	5.997,2	324,3	41,5	7,8
	Germany	904,7	522,8	10.014,9	577,8	52,2	11,1
	Romania	766,6	210,9	4.514,0	275,1	46,7	5,9
	UK	304,6	182,7	2.703,7	599,7	67,6	8,9
	Cyprus	202,0	105,4	1.867,7	521,9	56,5	9,2
	Russia	91,2	58,1	1.117,3	637,4	52,0	12,3
	Others	1.731,5	637,2	10.850,8	368,0	58,7	6,3
	Total	7.830,2	2.275,4	44.690,4	290,6	50,9	5,7
Region	Countries of origin	Visits (in th.)	Receipts (in mil. €)	Overnights (in th.)	Expenditure per visit (in €)	Daily spend (in €)	Length of Stay
Eastern Macedonia & Thrace	Turkey	429,5	87,1	1.025,4	202,9	85,0	2,4
	Bulgaria	875,1	58,1	1.903,0	66,4	30,6	2,2
	Germany	118,5	43,3	785,1	365,6	55,2	6,6
	Romania	127,3	29,2	575,5	229,1	50,7	4,5
	Others	379,6	103,9	2.177,4	273,6	47,7	5,7
	Total	1.929,9	321,6	6.466,6	166,7	49,7	3,4

Source: Bank of Greece Frontier Survey, Processing INSETE Intelligence

In contrast with the above there is a decrease in the number of tourists from cruise ships that visit the area (Table 5.5 and Table 5.6), since the yearly number of cruise ships visiting the study area was reduced from 32 ships in 2013 to only 13 ships in 2019. However this reduction does not affect rural tourism in terms of accommodation nights since cruise ships carry daily visitors to the urban areas of Kavala and Thessaloniki. On the other hand this may have an impact on the sales of traditional local products consumption in these areas.

Table 5.5. Cruise ship traffic on Kavala port between 2013 and 2019

	Cruise ship traffic on Kavala port						
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Cruise ships	14	26	22	19	6	5	7
Passengers	6.995	13.087	12.783	6.042	3.226	1.954	2.699

Source: Greek Port Association - Processing INSETE Intelligence

Table 5.6. Cruise ship traffic on Thessaloniki port between 2013 and 2019

	Cruise ship traffic on Thessaloniki port						
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Cruise ships	18	31	35	23	4	5	6
Passengers	14.585	19.720	26.356	18.876	2.424	1.502	4.865

Source: Greek Port Association - Processing INSETE Intelligence

5.4 SWOT analysis

The tourism related entrepreneurship is closely linked to rural development of the study area. Entrepreneurship can expedite the process of rural sustainable development provide additional income to farmers as well as employment and professional opportunities to new entrants into market. The key strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats of rural tourism sector in the Greek eligible area are presented through the SWOT analysis.

The main components of the SWOT analysis include:



Strengths describe in what the under study area excels at and what separates it from the competition



Weaknesses stop an entrepreneur from performing at its optimum level. They are areas where the business needs to improve to remain competitive: a weak brand, higher-than-average turnover, high levels of debt, an inadequate supply chain, or lack of capital.



Opportunities refer to favorable external factors that could give a competitive advantage. For example, for example if a country cuts tariffs, a car manufacturer can export its cars into a new market, increasing sales and market share.



Threats refer to factors that have the potential to harm an agricultural entrepreneur. For example, a drought is a threat to a wheat-producing company, as it may destroy or reduce the crop yield. Other common threats include things like rising costs for materials, increasing competition, tight labor supply and so on.

Strengths and weaknesses refer to the internal environment of the area under study—things that one can have some control over and can change.

Opportunities and threats are external—factors that are going on in the broader environment. One can take advantage of opportunities and protect against threats, but he can't change them.

The SWOT analysis was performed to facilitate a realistic, fact-based, data-driven look at the strengths and weaknesses of the sector in the Greek eligible area. Using internal and external data, the technique can guide businesses toward strategies more likely to be successful, and away from those in which they have been, or are likely to be, less successful.

SWOT ANALYSIS

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT		EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT	
Rich natural heritage, protected areas and biodiversity (wetlands, caves, waterfalls etc)	Lack of cooperation culture between researchers and practitioners professionals in the touristic sector	Several traditional and local products	Non favorable economic environment for new investments and limited cash-flow due to the financial crisis
Historic sites of interest	Low competitiveness and profitability of family businesses	Travelers looking for local and authentic experiences	Aging and decreasing rural population
Rural tradition and heritage	Segmented approach between the professionals	Financial support programmes (Regional, National and EU)	Prices are affected by both national and international factors
Hot springs and geothermal fields	Maintenance of museums and hist. sites	Application of ICT technology the touristic sector	Competition with other forms of tourism and destinations
Well developed transportation network (roads, ports, airports etc)	Lack of coordination and guidance for new entrants into rural tourism business	Promotion of smart specialization and innovation strategies in tourism	Social reluctance and negative perceptions for hiring disadvantaged people and people from vulnerable groups
Local products and food experience	Accessibility issues	Increased support of social and woman entrepreneurship	Climate change
Hospitality of locals at most steps of	Lack of on-the job training	Bio-economy and circular economy	Production and yield may affected

the stay	infrastructures and initiatives, limited access to knowledge Limited or even lack of signposting	policies Social innovation and linking of tourism with existing agricultural activities such as multifunctional farms Large availability of certification schemes and labels that can provide added value Visitor information centers and digital assistance	by weather and natural disasters Fragmented policies and weak coordination with other sectors
Safety feeling	Limited short supply chain mechanisms		
Geopolitical position in Southeastern Europe that enables cross border transactions	Lack of destination management schemes		

6. Challenges and opportunities

Rural tourism in Greece developed as a result of the socio – economic and cultural changes which occurred gradually in the Mediterranean the last decades (Gousiou et al., 2001). The urbanization, the shift from the agricultural sector to the service one and the emphasis on mass tourism altered the image of Greece and influenced significantly the rural areas. According to INSETE (2017) Greece's macroeconomic (fiscal) adjustment and achievements in terms of structural reforms and international competitiveness up until the end of 2014 have essentially not been disturbed. Consequently, and contrary to the precrisis period, the recovery of last decade is due to the reorientation of the Greek economy towards exports of goods and tourism, rather than due to an increase in consumption through borrowing from abroad. This development can, in turn, be attributed to the restoration of the competitiveness of the Greek economy.

European funds and subsidies enabled the deployment of agrotourism in non – urban areas in an effort to revitalize and regenerate mainly the less favored regions. Thus, in the beginning of the 1980's, the first signs of the sector's evolution circuit can be officially recorded (Kizos and Iosifides, 2007).

As rural tourism "attracts more specialist, niche market tourists with an interest in culture and the environment, destinations offering rural tourism holidays are unlikely to suffer from the disadvantages associated with mass market tourism destinations (World Tourism Organization, 2002). People involved in rural tourism in Greece are not necessarily farmers by profession, but rather permanent residents of rural areas. Furthermore, rural tourism has been proposed as the main opportunity for women to become engaged in business. Local stakeholders as well as public authorities view rural tourism as a tool capable of making women visible in the local economy, but also as the key solution to revitalising and restructuring mountainous and disadvantaged rural areas through supplementary incomes in the process of farm diversification (Koutsou et al. 2009).

According to both the Strategic and Operational Plan for Touristic Development of the Region of East Macedonia and Thrace (2015) and the Strategic and Operational Plan for the promotion of Thematic tourism in the Region of Central Macedonia (2014), the rural tourism shows a high potential for development and is considered among the main regional priorities to be supported in the years to come.

In terms of opportunities, a wide range of rural tourism services and products may be offered in the eligible area that can be classified into six main groups. Each group offers its own set of services, products and activities. However, some of them may overlap while others may be complementary. These groups include:

Rural accommodation. These services comprise various kinds of accommodation in rural areas. Farmhouse accommodation, and rural B&B hotels are the most common. As the differences between them are very slight, B&B is usually an “umbrella term” for a variety of agri accommodation that includes a bed for the night and a breakfast in the morning.

Rural gastronomy and agri-catering businesses. Food products may come from local producers, the agri-tourism farm's own production or partly or entirely purchased from the broader area. Agritourism enterprises that serve their own food products can increase income and provide information to the visitor about the whole chain of production, preparation and offer of the products.

Demonstrating food gathering and preparation is an appealing activity to be offered in multifunctional farms. It may also lead to cost containment if visitors are invited and are willing to share in these. The meals can be limited to breakfast or to more meals, served outdoor, in a restaurant or in a special room of the agri-accommodation and be based on local, regional or national kitchen.

The variety and quality of the meals can diversify an agri-tourism enterprise from another and through the unlimited possibility of meals differentiation to promote the own cuisine and local production.

Genuine agritourism. Related groups of products and services for creating a “real agritourism” product/experience include: Observation of agricultural production process such as plant and animal production, some processing (e.g. help in cow milking, hay making, sheep shearing etc.), and participating in guided or individual farm tours and related activities as demonstrating agricultural activities such as harvesting or just walking on-farm signed trails. Contact of tourists, particularly children, with domestic animals, including poultry, rabbits, goats, sheep, calves, etc.

Visitors may also learn about local flora and recognize various plant species. Blooming of orchards and harvesting seem to be the most interesting moments. A farm prepared for tourists should have signposting as appropriate or a room with posters e.g. introducing a history of the landscape and land use systems, while some farms can create museums of agricultural machinery and rural culture (a product of ethnography).

Increasingly, tourists show a keen interest in visiting small enterprises processing facilities. Creameries, dairies, wineries, olive-oil producing facilities, cookery and pastry. Furthermore most visitors highly appreciate their active involvement in the preparation of local dishes, old-school recipes of jams, stewed fruits, spoon sweets, homemade bread, fresh pasta, pies, liqueurs and other delights of the local production can be the best examples of such services. In this perspective tourists watching or participating in the production process are more willing to buy products that they observed or participated themselves in their production.

Historical cultural and recreational. Historical farms using old techniques and old machines can be organized and become very attractive to visitors. Managing a traditional farm requires quite a lot of expenditure on labour and capital and delivering tourist services means additional investment. More simple and effective could be to offer a guided tour in sites of interest or to organize in collaboration with other rural firms of the area a heritage park or local museum that exhibits material and posters showing old techniques of rural production. In some regions examples of traditional cultivation, agricultural production and traditional artifacts are exposed in Museums of Folk Art and Agriculture, frequently in special traditional

buildings in historic villages. Visits to Museums related to rural life and agro-activity and to historical and archeological sites are also an appropriate activity in this regard. Furhter more these services may include visits in historical, archeological and religious points of interest that are multiple in the Greek CB area including monasteries, castles, archeological monuments etc.

In addition, things to see and participate may include festivals, parties and special events carried out privately or publicly, for example an annual local festival or a thematic event organized by a farm business network or the local authorities. Means for highlighting cultural or heritage segments to tourists and improving tourism experience about “intangible” culture or heritage and of subsistent rural life could be:

- Organizing cultural tours and cultural interpretation sessions
- Offering lessons of local cuisine and traditional gastronomy.
- Producing and demonstrating traditional handicrafts
- Conducting traditional dance or music as a means to experience “intangible” culture.
- Marketing and selling artifacts to tourists; this can improve interaction with other farmers and enhance arts and crafts.

Ecotourism and adventure tourism. Rafting, kayaking, small boat tours, surfing and sailing are activities can be promoted in places by lakes, rivers and the sea of the rural environment. Rural tourism enterprises usually have suitable conditions for different sport activities, especially when the sport discipline is connected with animals, natural and landscape resources and free space to practice the sport. Walk tours, horse-back riding, and boating are typical agri-tourism products that can be offered. It may vary from one rural area to another and it may comprise various activities connected with them. Mountaineering, snow ski, mountain ski and Hiking are also activities to combine with rural tourism.

Most important points in this process are:

- (a) To organize and offer adventure and nature oriented activities of different difficulty levels in order to satisfy the needs of multiple target groups (aged people, kids, etc)
- (b) To use site posting as appropriate and/or provide the necessary guidance and information/knowledge to visitors

The involvement of an agritourism firm in providing sport services protects it from the high competition that may be experienced between accommodation and providers of catering services. Some agritourism and rural tourism enterprises located close to urban areas may include in their offer tennis fields or golf fields if available in the neighboring urban area.

Health and therapy tourism. Rural tourism can be connected with health services or health-related products. Tourists coming to the countryside may expect possibility of a specific therapy, e.g. thermal baths/SPA, horse riding therapy (one of the methods for rehabilitation of disabled persons) or a special diet therapy, including consumption of “healthy” / “organic” products. The “Green care” is a growing movement to provide health, social or educational benefits through farming for a wide range of people as well as the base for promoting mental and physical health through farming and environmental activities. It could provide services on a regular basis for participants who attend the farm or the natural environment activities as part of a structured care, rehabilitation, therapeutic or educational program. Nature based therapies using earth or animal products may also applied, as well as therapies involving the use of plants e.g., horticultural therapy, forest therapy, flower therapy, herb therapy, etc. Other forms of rural and agri-therapy may involve api-therapy (use of various bee products) and spas and health resorts in rural areas, combining both an indoor and an outdoor experience for the guests.

Accessible tourism. Persons with disabilities are participating more and more frequently in tourism activities as a result of their growing level of economic and social integration. However, there remain many impediments and barriers of all

kinds that hinder normalized access to tourism goods and services. Facilitating travel for people with disabilities is an exceptional business opportunity. Yet, a change in mind-set and in the model of tourism services provision is needed in order to meet this major market demand. Accessible environments and services contribute to improve the quality of the tourism product and can create more job opportunities for people with disabilities.

Since 2015 the Hellenic Ministry of Tourism has been implementing a New Tourism Policy to promote Greece as a globally attractive destination offering unique and authentic travel experiences, 365 days a year. All initiatives are geared towards increasing international travel share, further enriching the tourism offer, and enhancing competitiveness (OECD 2018). The strategic pillars of this programme are:

- Extending the tourism season by innovative product development in close co-operation with the Regional Authorities
- Promoting new thematic tourism products and special interest tourism with an emphasis on cultural tourism, pilgrimage tourism, cruises, yachting, diving parks, wellness and spas, medical tourism, MICE, luxury tourism, city-breaks, and Greek gastronomy.
- Targeting new dynamic source-markets (Middle East, China, South Korea, and as of 2017 India) while enhancing Greece's presence in traditional markets in Europe, Russia and the United States.
- Increasing air connectivity/direct flights from central and regional foreign airports to existing and new destinations in Greece.
- Attracting investments of high quality and added value to upgrade the overall tourism product and accommodate the expected increase in demand in the coming years.
- Creating and promoting synergies with other economic sectors (e.g. agri-food, manufacturing).

In response to this strategy, a number of specific actions have been implemented to increase tourism flows and lengthen the season. Further-more according to Lantitsou (2017), the utilization of the existing tourism resources of the region with ecological perception, combined with the excellent management of the national parks, will contribute to eco-agritourism in the eco-development of the area.

In terms of challenges even though everything started like a simple, cheap and not so popular form of tourism, rural tourism is now considered sophisticated, modern and addresses to highly educated, well-travelled and from higher socio-economic groups people (Centre for the Promotion of Imports, 2016). Over time, the rural regions have witnessed the development of the so-called “routes”, for example the silk route, the wine route, - some of these are still popular among specific types of tourists, which unfortunately have been either abandoned or have been degraded in terms of the services that they provide. However, it is underlined that consumers are influenced in their decision regarding the selection of their tourist destination by escape and self actualisation, novelty seeking, culture exploration, adventure seeking and enjoying night life, natural features, quality of the accommodation, general level of prices, quality of activities or services (Tsourgiannis et al. 2015).

All things considered, it can be stated that EU policies, programmes and initiatives follow two directions. On one hand, tourism is seen as an economic sector that requires regulations, so to be sustainable, profitable, qualitative and accessible by all social categories, and, on the other hand, tourism is perceived as a support-activity, as a mean to achieve other complementary objectives. Up to the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force on the 1st of December 2009, the European Communities did not have specific attributions in the tourism field, and there was rather a set of actions and initiatives developed at European level, but with voluntary implementation. The European bodies were rather helping the tourism stakeholders undertake responsibilities for sustainable tourism development by creating useful instruments, the main aim being the exchange of best practices, information dissemination, co-operation and networking between stakeholders across the Union (Cismaru et al., 2015).

One of the central pieces developed by the European bodies in the sustainable tourism field, often called the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy, is the “Rural development 2014-2020” Policy, worth 100 billion EUR and funded through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development - EAFRD (European Commission, 2017).

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development is complemented by the European Regional Development Fund – ERDF – and the European Social Fund –ESF-, their focus being agricultural sector competitiveness, sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, but also a balanced territorial development of the European rural areas. All these objectives are also shared by the EU cohesion policy, but tourism is of direct interest for ERDF. As per European Commission (2014), the fund “supports the competitiveness, sustainability and quality of tourism at regional and local levels”, this sector’s allocation being about 8 billion EUR. On the other hand, through EAFRD, the Commission can support, among other things, the establishment of businesses active within rural tourism, the development and promotion of agri-tourism and capitalisation on the cultural and natural heritage of rural regions, including mountain areas” (European Commission, 2010). For the promotion of tourism, Article 52 and Article 55 from the 3rd axis of the EAFRD might also be of interest, as “encouragement of tourism activities” was listed as one of the measures that can diversify the rural economy, through: “a. small-scale infrastructure such as information centres and the signposting of tourist sites; b. recreational infrastructure such as offering access to natural areas, and small-capacity accommodation; c. the development and/or marketing of tourism services relating to rural tourism” (Ana Maria-Irina, 2017).

According to the EU Parliament (2018) for the new Programming Period 2021-2027, the Commission proposes tourism as one of the eligible areas for financing and investment operations (including under the sustainable infrastructure window) of the InvestEU Programme. Moreover, it proposes to continue supporting investments in tourism under the ERDF. Under the proposed Regulation for the European

Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund (COM (2018) 372 final) investments in tourism sector are possible under the following specific objectives:

- i) fostering the integrated social, economic and environmental development, cultural heritage and security and urban areas; and
- ii) (fostering the integrated social, economic and environmental local development, cultural heritage and security, including for rural and coastal areas also through community led-local development. Investment in tourism needs to be embedded in the territorial or local development strategy.

Finally, possibilities to support rural tourism in the framework of the common agricultural policy (CAP) are available under the current proposal for 2021-2027. Thus the Member States would therefore have the possibility to include tourism related investments in their CAP Strategic Plans. Such support could, for instance, include interventions linked to territorial economic development and rural infrastructure, the renewal of villages and/or actions aimed at the conservation of small scale built heritage (chapels, bridges, public amenities), construction and modernization of tourism information centers, visitor information, and various other leisure, recreational and/or sporting activities.

7. Conclusions

Tourism is a social activity which involves an individual or group aiming travel to stay outside their usual environment for a certain period of time, in order to satisfy physical, mental, business or other needs. Tourism brings in large amounts of income in payment for goods and services and creates opportunities for employment in the service industries associated with tourism.

The Greek eligible area of INTERREG V-A Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020 has a rich rural tradition and several sites interest in terms of culture, nature, history, religion and a impressive variety of traditional products in relation to local gastronomy. The growing interest of visitors for alternative types of tourism beyond the beaten track and associated with personalized experiences creates multiple opportunities entrepreneurship related to rural tourism. This touristic sector, which is still in the development phase, is strongly supported by EU, National and Regional policies in terms of both establishing mechanisms of support and providing funds for the relevant enterprises, existing ones and start-ups.

Rural development is one of the aspects of national planning which seeks to improve the quality of life of the local community in order to achieve sustainable development. Rural tourism also is less costly and easier to establish than other rural economic development strategies such as manufacturing. Rural tourism can be developed locally with participation from local government and small businesses, and its development is not necessarily dependent on outside firms or companies. In this effort the role to local communities is of major importance. Community-based rural tourism is attracting increasing interest in several countries, since tourism is considered an effective way to promote rural development in all parts of the globe. Further, because information and communication technologies are developing rapidly, new types of communities are now formed more easily than ever.

Entrepreneurs play an important role in promoting and sustaining touristic activities in rural areas and formulating of sustainable strategies, as initiators of the

tourism business and the engine of the local development. Therefore, the development of sustainable entrepreneurial activities is crucial for the recovery of rural areas and regional traditions, maintaining local employment growth and increase living standards with respect to local cultural and natural heritage.

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The deliverable was elaborated for the project “Social agri-entrepreneurship for people with disabilities in the crossborder area” (SC: B2.9c.09-AGRI-ABILITY) which is implemented within the framework of the Cooperation Programme INTERREG V-A Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020. The project is co-financed by the European Union (ERDF) and National funds of Greece and Bulgaria. The content of this report is sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union, the Participating Countries the Managing Authority and the Joint Secretariat of the Programme.