

Butterfly Effect Shaping the Tourism Ecosystem: A Case Study of Border Security and Tourism from Strandzha Nature Park

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Abstract: This article examines a case from the largest protected area in Bulgaria – Strandzha Nature Park, located at both a national border and an external border of the European Union. Here, the acute, pressing needs of national security intersect with long-term nature- and culture-based tourism efforts. The tourism ecosystem, as a business ecosystem, is characterized by complexity. In such complex adaptive systems, the butterfly effect can be observed, where small contributions or changes in the initial conditions lead to dramatic consequences and often unpredictable results, affecting the overall health of the system. The research presents the impacts of a new business traveler segment – policemen and soldiers stationed in the region – on tourism in the municipality of Malko Tarnovo, which lies entirely within the park's boundaries. To assess these impacts, statistics, secondary analysis of expert interviews, and online communications were reviewed. The results reveal both positive and negative direct alterations in the accommodation supply which, in turn, could further influence many aspects of both consumer behavior and tourism service providers' decisions. The study suggests that the state, as the factual customer of business tourism services, should recognize its role within the ecosystem and contributes to the strategic development of tourism in the region, rather than unintentionally disrupting it. By examining a specific case in tourism practice, the study offers empirical validation of the ecosystemic governance framework in tourism. Furthermore, it contributes to tourism governing in other similar regions across Europe.

Keywords: Tourism ecosystem, Butterfly effect, National security, Strandzha Nature Park, Strategic development

1. Introduction

Tourism is a strategic sector for Bulgaria. It is considered as a business ecosystem, characterized by complexity. In such complex adaptive systems, the butterfly effect can be observed, where small contributions or changes in the initial conditions lead to dramatic consequences and often unpredictable results, affecting the overall health of the system. This article addresses a highly topical issue of intersection between tourism development and EU external border security. It examines a case from Strandzha Nature Park, the largest protected area in Bulgaria, located at both a national border and an external border of the European Union. The research question is asked: *How does the national security activity of stationing police and military staff on the border affect the tourism development of Municipality of Malko Tarnovo?* The research question is approached by literature on tourism destinations as ecosystems where butterfly effect can be observed, as well as historical and geographical overview of Strandzha Nature Park as a definitive factor of tourism for the region. Next, statistics, expert interviews, and media reports are investigated. The study suggests that the state, as a key customer of business tourism, should acknowledge its role in the ecosystem and support strategic tourism development in the region, rather than disrupt it. Findings contribute to sustainable tourism governing in other similar regions across Europe.

2. Literature Review

This study views the tourism destination as an ecosystem where the butterfly effect could be observed. The examined destination is the inland territory of Strandzha Nature Park situated in the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo – Bulgaria, on the border with Türkiye. Thus, the literature review covers the concept of butterfly effect as a characteristic of an ecosystem, as well as some aspects from the history and geography of Strandzha Nature Park, both from tourism and national security point of view.

2.1 The butterfly Effect in the Tourism Ecosystem

Tourism destination can be viewed as an ecosystem (Selen & Ogulin, 2015) where interconnected agents act in a network based not only on contractual but also non-contractual relationships (Hillebrand, 2022). These agents come from a wider pool than just the tourism industry and are not always destination-bound (Selen & Ogulin, 2015). They represent both the production and consumption side of tourism (Selen & Ogulin, 2015; March & Wilkinson, 2009).

The tourism destination as a business ecosystem is a complex adaptive system (Smith & Stacey, 1997). Its complexity is expressed in a set of characteristics, one of which is the so-called butterfly effect. An ecosystem and all its elements are interconnected and share a common faith, whereby the health of the entire system

improves when all its members are thriving, and conversely, the system becomes unsustainable if critical resources are damaged or out of alignment (Iansiti & Levien, 2004). The butterfly effect is a metaphor for how small, seemingly insignificant changes in the conditions can lead to vastly different outcomes in such complex systems, emphasizing how the interactions among components can produce unpredictable behaviour (Lewin, 1993). This concept highlights the importance of understanding the interconnectedness and non-linear relationships within complex systems, which can complicate predictions and decision-making processes. The butterfly effect can enhance the understanding of the broader implications of an agent's actions, regardless of their position within the ecosystem. In tourism, the awareness of these implications should be developed especially in terms of customers who are increasingly co-developing the experiences (Buonincontri et al, 2017; March & Wilkinson, 2009).

2.2 Strandzha Nature Park – Between Tourism and National Security Goals

Established in 1995, Strandzha Nature Park is the largest protected area in Bulgaria, and the only inhabited one (Georgiev, 2010). It incorporates the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo in its entirety and parts of the Municipality of Tsarevo, being situated in South-East Bulgaria, on the border with Türkiye. It is acknowledged as important and given priority at the national, regional, and European levels, based on different indicators related to biodiversity and landscapes (Chorbadzhiyska, 2012). Against the background of unique nature, monuments from the ancient Thracian civilization and the UNESCO-recognized indigenous custom of nestinarstvo have also been preserved (Assenova, 2012). Categorized as a nature park, category V by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) criteria, Strandzha offers excellent tourism opportunities alongside biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource use (Georgiev & Stoilova, 2006). From a socio-economic perspective, the primary functions of the area are agriculture and recreation. Traditional livelihoods for the local population include forestry and sea fishing. A trend of depopulation is evident due to the area's border location and rural characteristics. (Georgiev, 2010.)

Despite the lack of sanctioned management plan (Ivanova, 2024), the park is operating, and efforts are made to develop tourism, especially as a means of socio-economic revival of the region (Municipality of Malko Tarnovo, 2019). Marine and recreational mass tourism are prevalent in the park's coastal regions belonging to Tsarevo, whereas alternative nature-based and rural tourism are being developed in the interior areas, mainly within the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo. (Georgiev, 2010.) Recently, the idea for health tourism development and the revival of climate treatments utilizing the clean air in the park have emerged (Bulgarian News Agency, 2021).

The southern border of the nature park coincides with big part of the Bulgarian national border with Türkiye (see Figure 1), which is also an external border of the European Union (EU) (Penin, 2007, 19). From a total of 259 km common border between the two countries (Penin, 2007, 19), 141 km or 54 % fall under the jurisdiction of the Border Police Department of Malko Tarnovo. Also, one of three border crossing points with Türkiye is in the municipality of Malko Tarnovo. (Ministry of the Interior – Main Directorate Border Police, 2021.) These facts define the important role of Strandzha region in ensuring the national security by resisting the migration pressure from the Middle East and Northern Africa, which has intensified ever since the outbreak of the Arab spring in 2010-2012 (Tashev, 2018). Bulgaria is facing the responsibilities and burdens of protecting not only its national but also EU's external border (Tashev, 2018, 13), being part of the The Eastern Mediterranean migration route (Tashev, 2018, 85), although the country is subject to much smaller migration pressure than Greece, Italy, and the countries of the Western Balkans (Dimitrov, 2018a). In addition, Bulgaria fulfills its commitments as a candidate for full Schengen membership (Ministry of the Interior, n.d., 21). Due to the security situation, in the last 10 years a border fence facility has been built and police and military staff has been continuously deployed to the border region from different parts of the country (Dimitrov, 2018b) on duty trips with limited duration, up to 30 days (Labor Code, 2024, art. 121; BNR, 2024), but the practice of deployment could continue indefinitely depending on the border situation (Hristov, 2015). According to current assessments, as a result of globalization, demographic processes, climate changes, the aggravation of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, there is a tendency towards the continuation of the migration process in the long term (Ministry of the Interior, n.d., 40).

The logistics provision of Bulgaria concerning migration has been researched only from the perspective of the refuge and accommodation services provided to migrants (e.g., Danev, 2022) but not from the point of view of the services needed by the stationed border patrol personnel. Currently, the Bulgarian state does not own accommodation facilities in the proximity to the Turkish border. All the facilities, including military units, border posts, barracks, storages, residential apartments, recreational facilities, kitchens, infirmaries, even

theaters, once serving the former Border Troops, have first been abandoned for more than 10 years (Slavcheva, 2010; Burgas24.bg, 2009; Katsarska, 2015), and later sold by the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior as non-necessary (Meduzata, 2016; BNR, 2022) to the municipalities and to private entities (Meduzata, 2016; BNR, 2022). Part of them is repurposed, e.g., a livestock farm was built in the smaller military unit of Zvesdets (Slavcheva, 2010). Despite their potential for tourism (Slavcheva, 2010, Burgas24.bg, 2009), they are mainly left to decay (Kolev, 2017; Katsarska, 2015). Meanwhile, the stationed personnel are “accommodated in hotels, and where such are not available - in tourist facilities registered and categorized by the relevant municipality under the Tourism Act (private accommodation, guest houses, etc.)” (Ureport, 2015).

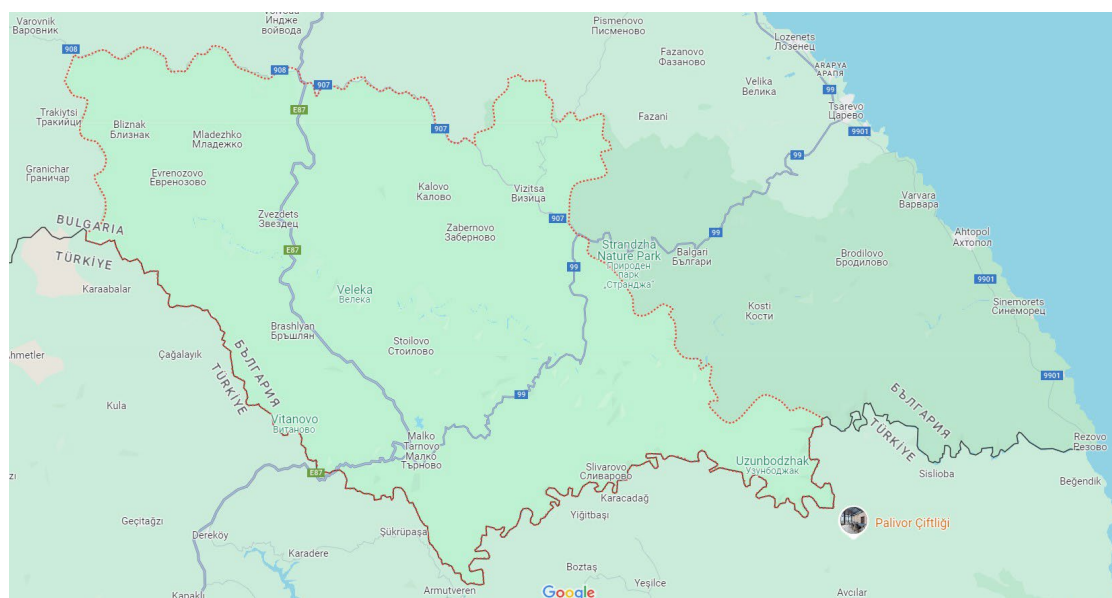


Figure 1: The border of Strandzha Nature Park with Türkiye, coinciding with the Bulgarian national border. The limits of the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo are visible but all the 141 km of border concerning the park fall under the jurisdiction of the Border Police Department of Malko Tarnovo. Map source: Google Maps

3. Methodology

The need for the current research emerged during a round of expert interviews for a larger study concerning the development of health and recreation tourism in Strandzha Nature Park, conducted in June 2024. Thus, empirical data has not been designed and collected for this study in particular, but rather the relevant expert interviews, five in total, have been utilized secondarily, while enriching the data with statistics, media pieces, and state documents. The interviewees, representing both the public and private side of tourism in the destination, are anonymized. All interviews are conducted in Bulgarian, and the used citations are authors’ translations into English.

The statistics on the development of accommodation capacity and tourist visits were obtained partially from the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo, and wherever the need extended the availability, also as a paid, tailored service provided by the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, as well as from the National Tourism Registry (n.d.). The electronically stored statistical data covers the period 2019-2024 since the establishment of the digital National Tourism Registry and the Unified Tourist Information System in Bulgaria, whereby every accommodation provider got the obligation to categorize their facility and report on its activity (Council of Ministers Decree No. 252, 2019, art. 2; Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). Earlier data was obtained from municipality reports (Municipality of Malko Tarnovo, 2014, 2019), but at that time, only small part of the accommodation sites has been registered.

Furthermore, documentation was sought to describe the processes of migration pressure and national security measures on the Türkiye border. Relevant documents of the state administration, such as orders, instructions, regulations, strategies, and plans were hard to obtain digitally or completely unavailable publicly, and their accessibility was complicated also by the fact that they concern several different institutions: the Ministry of Defense (MD), the Ministry of the Interior (MI), the multiplicity of regional directorates of the Ministry of the Interior (RDMI), the Main Directorate of Border Police (MDBP). To cover for this deficiency, the study also

utilized media reports from the period 2015-2024, starting from the first significant wave of migration pressure towards the Bulgarian border with Türkiye. The abundance of media pieces enabled the successful data triangulation, so the obtained data is relatively reliable. However, they are not systematic, and they are informing on the phenomenon unevenly. Still, some conclusions could be made based on the overall picture they paint. Altogether 25 reports of news were utilized.

4. Results

The study follows the development of migration pressure on the Türkiye border, causing the stationing of military and police personnel on the border and the development of accommodation supply in the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo.

4.1 Migration Pressure and Personnel Stationing 2010-2024

In Figure 2, a timeline is built regarding the migration pressure on the Turkish border and the response of the state by positioning military and police personnel from the interior of the country on the border. The numbers are not specific to the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo or Strandzha Nature Park, as such specific information is not publicly available, but by assumptions based on the portion of the border under the respective jurisdiction, at least 50% of the presented amounts of stationed personnel should concern the investigated area. Little information has been presented in the media on the number of policemen, focusing on the role of soldiers, which makes it difficult to calculate the total of stationed personnel. Different subdivisions under both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior have been engaged, but some presence on the border is provided at all times. In any case, these facts indicate hundreds to thousands of people visiting the region, who are practically business travelers. The security situation on the border does not seem to improve over time, so more similar measures of withstanding the migration pressure are expected in future.

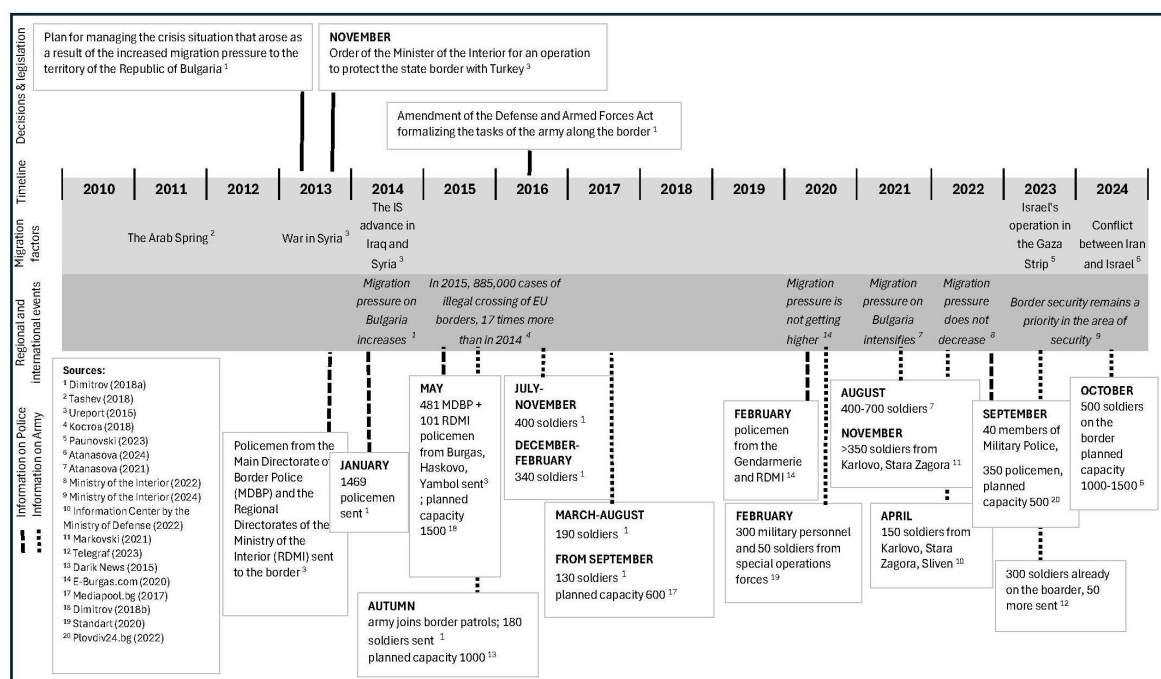


Figure 2: Timeline of the military and police deployments to the Türkiye border according to the investigated media pieces. Figure: Authors' own

When examining the places mentioned in media pieces where the soldiers and policemen are sent from (Figure 3), the closest is Burgas, situated on 74 km distance from the municipal center Malko Tarnovo, and the farthest is Karlovo, on 318 km. The average distance of the sending places to Malko Tarnovo is 203 km. As the number of sent personnel from each place is not known, is not possible to investigate the distances more accurately, e.g. using central tendencies. Moreover, there might be more sending places which have not been announced. None of the known distances, however, imply the possibility of daily commuting between the sending place and the border stationing, especially as it is also known that the working regime of the Border Police Department in Malko Tarnovo is 12-hour shifts (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2015). Consequently, accommodation is needed closer to the stationing – in Strandzha.

The existing research and examined media pieces also address the expenses related to the border personnel stationing. The posting of personnel on the border is among the biggest expenses together with the building of the border fence (Dimitrov, 2018a, 264). In the beginning, their duty trip expenses are covered by the state budget, but since 2017, they are mostly covered by EU's migrant crisis aid (Dimitrov, 2018a, 269; Tsvetanova, 2022; Ministry of the Interior, n.d., 49). The accommodation expenses per person are 40 BGN (approx. 20 €) per night (Radio999bg, n.d.; Fakti.bg, 2019), which makes 1200 BGN (approx. 600 €) per 30 days. The overnight stays are paid directly to the accommodators (Ureport, 2015).

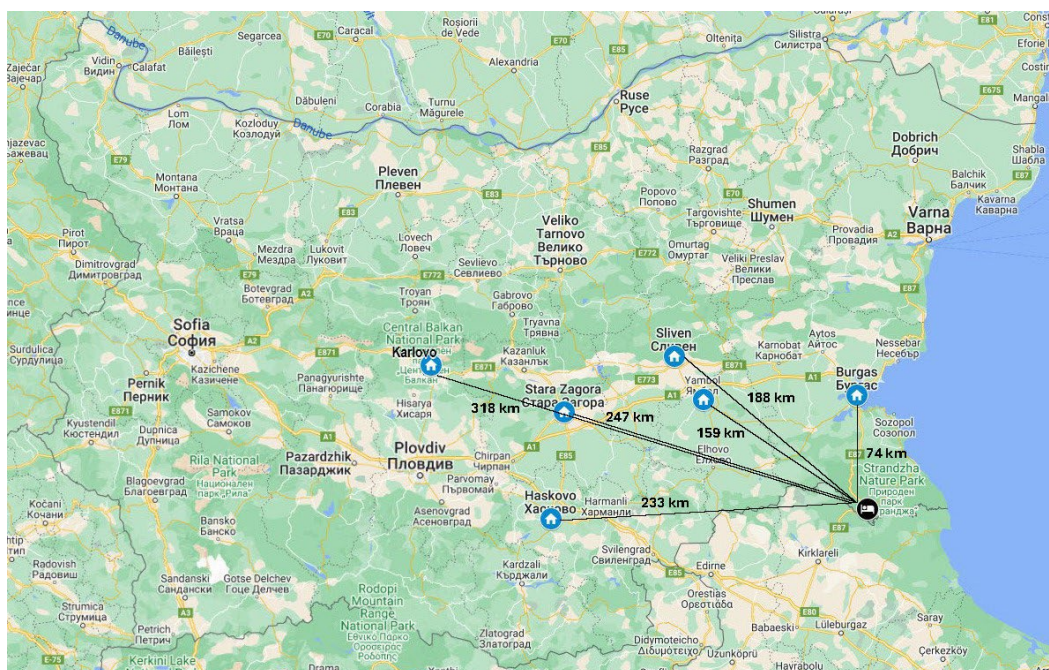


Figure 3: Map of Bulgaria with distances between the sending workplaces and the stationing (Malko Tarnovo) of military and police staff. Map by Google Maps; data by Ureport (2015), Information Center by the Ministry of Defence (2022), Markovski (2021); figure: Authors' own

4.2 Accommodation in the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo 2014-2024

4.2.1 According to statistics

In the last ten years, the accommodation capacity in the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo has grown dramatically (Figure 4). For the first five years of the period, the growth in number of accommodation sites is almost 47% with nearly 54% increase in the number of beds. Encouraged by the demand for accommodation of military and police staff, new property owners and existing accommodators from the grey area have entered the categorization. The second half of the period saw nearly doubled growth compared to the first one. A significant factor in this phenomenon after 2019 is the newly established digital National Tourism Registry.



Figure 4: Development of accommodation capacity in the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo 2014-2024. Data: Municipality of Malko Tarnovo (2014,2019), National Tourism Registry (n.d.); figure: Authors' own

The most substantial pressure of accommodating border's business travelers is evidently put on the town on Malko Tarnovo. In none of the surrounding villages the difference is so pronounced between Bulgarian male visitors of working age compared to female visitors (Table 1). Males mainly aged 20-44, but also younger and older within the working age, fit to the profile of border guards.

The average revenue from an overnight stay within the municipality, calculated using the number of realized overnight stays and the total annual revenue of overnight stays, is nearing the price paid for accommodation by the state, namely 40 BGN which is also evidence of how the new customer segment is dominating the market (Table 2).

Table 1: Persons stayed overnight in the town of Malko Tarnovo until 9.8.2024 by gender, age, and origin.
Data: statistics of the Municipality of Malko Tarnovo; table: Authors' own

2024 (1.1.-9.8.)		Number of persons stayed overnight			
		Bulgarian citizens		Foreigners	
Malko Tarnovo		Men	Women	Men	Women
Total:		2509	304	27	11
Age group	15-29	307	32	2	1
	30-44	1346	109	15	3
	45-59	803	132	6	4
	60+	48	28	4	3

Table 2: Average revenue from an overnight stay in Municipality of Malko Tarnovo. Only accommodation sites with 10 beds or more. Data: National Statistical Institute; table: Authors' own

Average revenue from an overnight stay (BGN)			
Year	Total	Bulgarians	Foreigners
2019	39,35	39,62	35,07
2020	42,65	n/a	n/a
2021	36,50	36,39	41,33
2022	43,95	43,81	53,31
2023	65,21	n/a	n/a

4.2.2 According to tourism actors in Malko Tarnovo

Those engaged in tourism activity in Malko Tarnovo recognize the border deployments as a factor in local tourism. It directly affects the accommodation supply: "It is a fact that most of the guest apartments and rooms exist because of the border guards" (Expert 2). On the one hand, this additional tourist flow brings additional income to locals and evens out the seasonal drops of demand: "Accommodators cannot count only on weekends to survive" (Expert 2). On the other hand, with this arrangement there is no capacity left to accommodate the traditional leisure and recreational tourists, especially the groups (Experts 1,2). "All the bases are occupied by the military, commanded from the interior of the country, year-round" (Expert 1).

Those, who have worked longer for developing the local tourism, see the shift in tourist segments being served as unfulfilled potential regarding the strategic goals: "We cannot benefit from Strandzha's natural resources" (Expert 1); "The focus of Strandzha is in the silence, the calm, the green, the forest, the return to one's own nature. [...] What little tourism we have going on, we have built up over many years, based on nature and culture, and now it is being hindered" (Expert 3). But for others, it makes sense economically, because each stationed soldier or policeman is a long-stay, more sustainable customer: "Many owners refuse to accommodate for just one night. To clean the whole house every day is not cost-effective. There is no laundry service in the area" (Expert 2). Still, there are some entrepreneurs who do not want to handle the bureaucracy with the state and prefer the conventional leisure tourist as a customer (Expert 4).

The role of the state as an end customer in this case is central. It has driven the officializing of accommodation activity in a culture where grey economy is a widely accepted practice: "It is illegal to accommodate if the place is not registered and categorized. Accommodation places register and pay taxes because border guards need invoices. [...] The current statistics are, however, not completely accurate. Those, who do not accommodate border guards, do not issue invoices, nor pay taxes" (Expert 2). However, this is not the only

factor determining whether the site will be registered: “Overnight stays are registered online. Granny Siyka cannot manage, so most of the elderly women in the village quit tourism” (Expert 5).

Others see the phenomenon of border deployments within the bigger picture of poorly synchronized actions between the various institutions of the Bulgarian state: “The state needs to set its priorities” (Expert 3), “I do not need the state to help me anyhow in my business, I only require it not to get in my way” (Expert 4).

The military and police are not only customers of tourism. They are also visible while on duty. In a region known for the illegal migration pressure, their presence “instills security in tourists” (Expert 4).

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1 Conclusions

The results reveal both positive and negative direct alterations in the accommodation supply. Among the positive impacts are the increased revenue of accommodation services for locals, the less seasonal nature of visits, the diversification of visitor segments, and the incentives for accommodation businesses to leave the gray economy. Also, the professional presence of border guards, regardless of their tourist role, adds up to the perceived feeling of safety for other tourists.

A significant negative impact is the non-strategic nature of this new business travel activity: it is not part of the local tourism development efforts, but the decision and the operation model are dictated by state structures outside of the destination without consideration for tourism. Another negative impact is that many accommodation providers get used to and dependent on the new arrangement and start choosing their clients, preferring long-stay police and military customers over the nature and culture explorers. On the one hand, the municipality, the nature park directorate, and many service providers participating in the destination ecosystem market the destination through a tourism offer which is highly inaccessible because of the lack of accommodation for leisure visitors, which could confuse the potential consumers. In long term, nature and culture visitors could be discouraged from visiting the region at all, leaving service providers even more depending on border guard activities, which could seize with a single order by a state bureaucrat. A serious consideration should be given to the fact that tourism is much more than accommodation services, and border’s business travelers do not need guided excursions, transportation, events, etc. The new value created by them destroys the value built for tourism actors around leisure and recreation tourism. Hopes for health and climatic healing tourism might never get realized, as they require longer stays but accommodation is blocked. These described impacts are mostly direct or logically trackable. However, the real nature of the butterfly effect is in the long-term unpredictability if impacts (Smith & Stacey, 1997, 82), meaning that if left without strategic planning and governance, Malko Tarnovo’s and Strandzha Nature Park’s tourism could take any direction, and the destination ecosystem may cease to exist. Therefore, the study suggests that the state, as the factual customer of business tourism services, should recognize its role within the ecosystem and contribute to the strategic development of tourism in the region, rather than unintentionally disrupting it.

5.2 Limitations

The limitations of this study are in the fragmented and secondary nature of data utilized, as the border guards are not directly distinguishable in statistical data, and not all documents regarding their stationing are publicly accessible.

5.3 Implications and Further Research

By examining a specific case in tourism practice, this study provides empirical validation of the ecosystemic governance framework in tourism, contributing to the limited literature on the subject. Additionally, it holds relevance for managing tourism in similar regions across Europe, where EU external border security intersects with tourism—a highly topical issue.

Further research, particularly by governmental bodies, is recommended to systematically study and monitor this phenomenon. A follow-up study could also be conducted at a later stage to assess the long-term impacts from a fresh time perspective.

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