Proceeding Paper

The Importance of Digital Skills in Implementing Tourism Public Policies in the Republic of Serbia †

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Abstract: Serbia has recognized the potential of the tourism sector, which is visible through the adopted public policies in this area. However, the question arises as to whether the conditions necessary for their fulfillment have been established. This pilot study aims to assess whether the level of digital literacy of Serbian citizens is a barrier or an opportunity for the implementation of actions and initiatives recommended by the public sector as part of tourism-related public policies. The results indicate that the general level of digital skills of the population of Serbia is not a supporting factor for the implementation of measures foreseen by public policies in this area.

Keywords: public policies; tourism; digital skills; Serbia

1. Objectives

Tourism is one of the economic sectors most severely impacted by the pandemic issue; therefore, the necessity for new solutions is highlighted. The majority of tourist advances are associated with the digitization process [1]. Tourism processes and activities have been significantly modified by digital technology, which is most evident in the usage of digital media and online platforms for reservations and reviews, but also for tourism products and communication systems [2,3].

Serbia also has recognized the potential of the tourism sector, which is visible through the trend of significantly growing business, and adopted public policies in this area. The Government has approved numerous master plans and development programs during the last fifteen years, such as the umbrella document—the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia [4]. As a result of these processes, the demand for more advanced digital skills among all tourism sector stakeholders has expanded substantially [5–7].

This pilot study aims to assess whether the level of digital literacy of Serbian citizens is a barrier or an opportunity for the implementation of actions and initiatives recommended by the public sector as part of tourism-related public policies.

2. Methodology and Data

There are numerous methodologies for measuring digital skills. We applied Eurostat's methodology [8] on microdata collected by the Statistical Office of RS's "Use of information and communication technologies in the Republic of Serbia—ICT Usage in households and by individuals." It should be kept in mind that the method of data collection does not guarantee completely reliable values, as it relies on the self-assessment of the respondents' knowledge and habits, which in some cases can lead to bias in the responses due to overestimation or underestimation of the actual situation.

Based on microdata we calculated values for the following indicators: information skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, software skills in content manipulation, and overall digital skills for 2019, a year before the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Results

We found that the level of digital skills in the section of the sample labeled "Wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation, and catering services" was modest. More than 70% of the respondents had a basic and above-basic level of information and communication skills, but nearly 45% of them did not have problem-solving skills or software skills (more than 55%). The obtained values suggest that the overall level of digital skills in Serbia was lower compared to that in most EU countries.

4. Implications

Current public policies in the field of tourism envisage numerous measures (projects) based on digital technology [4]. For these measures to be implemented, stakeholders need to have an adequate level of digital skills (public servants, tourism management, employees in the business sector, and guests). The obtained results suggest that stakeholders' lack of digital skills in tourism in the Republic of Serbia could be a significant constraint on the successful implementation of measures prescribed by public policies.

5. Originality Value

A systematic analysis of the digital skill level of stakeholders involved in implementing public policies, regardless of the area, has not been performed so far in Serbia. Based on secondary data, this research allows the preliminary conclusions that the level of digital skills in tourism is a limiting factor in successfully implementing public policies. To obtain more accurate results, it is necessary to perform an in-depth analysis based on data collected by primary research (self-assessment and/or testing of respondents) using statistical analysis methods.

6. Contribution

We believe that our pilot research has indicated a significant problem in the planning and implementation of public tourism policies in the Republic of Serbia which spills over into the business sector. This topic has become highly relevant in the post-COVID-19 period, given the increased usage of digital technologies in tourism.

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