Spatial analysis of public attitudes towards domestic leisure tourism in Bulgaria

Marina Raykova[1], Alexander Naydenov[2]

1   National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Acad. G. Bonchev str., bl. 3, Sofia, Bulgaria
2   University of National and World Economy, 19 December 8th str., Sofia, Bulgaria
Corresponding author: Marina Raykova (marinanikova@yahoo.com)

Abstract

Tourism is a very important sector for the Bulgarian economy with its GDP share varying between 10 and 13% before the COVID-19 health crisis. In 2021 domestic tourism accounted for 89% of the personal travel expenditures of Bulgarians. The purpose of the present paper is to analyse public attitudes towards the domestic leisure tourism in Bulgaria and its spatial distribution at the NUTS-2 regions and the residence place type level. The data used in the research are from a national representative survey based on a two-staged random sample stratified by the Bulgarian districts and the residence place type (capital, district administrative centre, town and village). The methodology includes: literature review, descriptive analysis, spatial analysis, average values, building one- and two- dimensional frequency distributions, statistical hypothesis testing, etc. The indicators used in the paper are: practices for domestic leisure tourism, stay duration in domestic resorts, frequency of domestic leisure tourism, people not practicing domestic leisure tourism, domestic leisure tourism average satisfaction level. The obtained results show the differences between those indicators in NUTS-2 and residence place type level, as well as between summer and winter leisure tourism. The presented results are of particular importance, since some of these differences are significantly large.

Key words: Bulgarian domestic tourism, domestic travel, holiday tourism, motivation, NUTS-2 regions, questionnaire survey, spatial criteria, statistical analysis, vacation tourism

Introduction

In Bulgaria, tourism is one of the most important economic sectors. During the decade preceding the COVID-19 health crises its GDP share was between 10 and 12%, reaching almost 13% in 2019 (UNWTO 2020). Traditionally, domestic tourism surpasses outbound tourism in terms of personal travel expenditure of the Bulgarian population. According to the National Statistical Institute (of Bulgaria) in 2022 it was almost 60% of personal travel expenditures compared to 54% in 2019. During the COVID-19 crises it even reached 86% in 2020 and 89% in 2021.

Attracting domestic tourists is very important for the tourism sector and its related sectors development. The aim of this paper is to present the attitudes of Bulgarians towards domestic leisure tourism by spatial criteria, according to

results obtained by a national representative survey. Leisure tourism includes all forms of travel for recreation purposes during holiday periods. The main forms of practising leisure tourism in Bulgaria are summer and winter tourism. Summer tourism includes travel to the seaside or the mountains, while winter tourism takes place mainly in the mountains. Both types of tourism are important for the Bulgarian economy, that is why they are separately represented in the survey and, respectively, in the current paper.

The spatial analysis in this article is made at NUTS-2 level (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics, level 2) and also on the basis of residence place type of the respondents: capital city, district administrative centre, town or village.

Literature review

According to the definition given by the European Commission, the NUTS is "a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU and the UK for the purpose of: collection, development and harmonisation of European regional statistics, socio-economic analyses of the regions, framing of EU regional policies. The NUTS-2 regions are basic regions for the application of regional policies." There are six NUTS-2 regions in Bulgaria: Southwest (SW - including the districts of Sofia−capital, Sofia, Kyustendil, Blagoevgrad and Pernik), South Central (SC - Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Smolyan, Haskovo and Kardzhali), Southeast (SE - Stara Zagora, Sliven, Yambol and Burgas), Northeast (NE - Varna, Dobrich, Targovishte and Shumen), North Central (NC - Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Ruse, Razgrad and Silistra) and Northwest (NW - Vidin, Vratsa, Montana, Pleven and Lovech). The number of districts, included in the six NUTS-2 regions, is 28. Every district has its administrative centre.

UNWTO defines domestic tourism as "the activities of a resident visitor within the country of reference, either as part of a domestic tourism trip or part of an outbound tourism trip" (UNWTO 2008). According to World Travel & Tourism Council domestic tourism is a tool to fight poverty, achieve economic growth, generate employment, upgrade infrastructure, alleviate pressure from overcrowding, address seasonality within regions and develop the less visited by inbound tourist areas, for example rural regions (WTTC 2018).

Nowadays, low-cost airlines and cheap all-inclusive packages in the developing countries make outbound tourism much easier and affordable even for holidaymakers with not very high incomes. Despite the possibilities for distant exotic trips (Salazar 2012) and the variety of attractive competing destinations, domestic tourism is not necessarily outdated, dull or too close to everyday life (Jeuring 2017). For many people, the familiar surroundings and proximity to home (Jeuring and Haartsen 2016), the lower prices (Yap and Allen 2011) and the absence of border formalities and language barriers (Singh and Krakover 2015), as well as the beautiful landscapes (Chansuk et al. 2022, Falk et al. 2022, Lee et al. 2022) and suitable natural resources (Davison and Ryley 2016) are a serious motivation for choosing a destination within the borders of their own countries. In other cases, financial constraints or family circumstances (Jeuring and Haartsen 2016, Luvsandavaajav and Narantuya 2021) explain the so-called staycation (Bourdeau 2012). In times of crises customers tend to prefer domestic tourism due to health and safety risks (Kim and Liu 2022), tour and flight cancelations (Kourgiantakis et al. 2020), lockdowns and

other restrictions (Bratić et al. 2021) and financial concerns about future incomes and financial stability (Pappas 2021). Even showing preferences to domestic tourism during crises, people tend to decrease the lengths of their holidays and their travel expenditures (Wu et al. 2022).

Tourism is a sector highly vulnerable to crises. The last to affect the sector was the health crisis caused by COVID-19. Several researches were made about its effects on domestic tourism and the opportunities to recover through it. According to Arbulú et al. (2021) the reliance on domestic tourism and the reorientation of outbound tourism are a fruitful strategy when there is no inbound tourism. In 2020 Abdullah et al. pointed out a direct link between natural resources, cultural heritage and special events and the destination competitiveness with regard to domestic tourism. They also suggest inserting a moderator in this type of studies, together with using quantitative methods, rather that qualitative ones. Altuntas and Gok (2021) suggest using the DEMATEL method in determining the quarantined regions in order to timely redirect domestic tourist flows and investments to other non-quarantined regions within the countries.

Amongst the stimulations for domestic tourism in times of a global crisis Chan (2021) and Duong et al. (2022) mention the attractive pricing, enhancing of tourist confidence regarding safety and health, less crowded tourism sites, lifting inter-district travel restrictions and improvement of travel connectivity between regions within the countries. Other ways to attract domestic tourists during crises are promoting authentic and more specific local holidays oriented to outdoor activities and ecotourism (Lebrun et al. 2021). Wang et al. (2021) study the mass media effect on the tourists, the emotional factors and their sensitivity to the pandemic with the passage of time. In research from 2022 Falk et al. suggest that every NUTS-2 region and its domestic tourists must be studied by using regional typology indicators instead of classical economic factors. According to a study by Nyikana and Bama (2023) the main factor for the recovery of the sector through domestic tourism is building a strong collaboration between the public and private sector together with continuous relations between all stakeholders in tourism industry.

In Bulgaria, representative studies have been made regarding the importance of domestic tourism during COVID-19 (Varadzhakova et al. 2022) and other crises (Raykova and Varadzhakova 2023) and the travel preferences of Bulgarian citizens (Naumov et al. 2021). According to a study by Varadzahkova et al. (2021), conducted in the first months after the beginning of the crisis, 61.4% of Bulgarian respondents are willing to travel domestically. In a subsequent study by Dogramadjieva and Terziyska (2022) the results show prioritization of domestic tourism with 77% in 2020 and with 82% in 2021. Dogramadjieva (2022) points out that this change is caused mainly by external restrictions rather than patriotic feelings or health risk concerns.

Methods

Revealing the full potential of the analysis of the public attitudes towards the domestic leisure tourism in Bulgaria would not be possible without the solid basis of a high-quality data. The following analysis uses national representative survey data based on a two-staged random sample stratified by the Bulgarian districts (28) and the residence place type (district administrative centre,

town and village). At the first stage the clusters are the election areas and the second stage clusters are Bulgarian private households. The clusters at the first stage were stratified proportionally to the population in each stratum and randomly selected. The second-stage clusters (households) were randomly selected within the selected first-stage clusters. All adults from the sampled households were surveyed by the usage of the face-to-face tablet assisted personal interview (TAPI) approach. For the purposes of the TAPI data collection process an online questionnaire, programmed in the LimeSurvey environment, was used. After the completion of the field work (April-May 2023) and the following data processing activities (incl. data cleaning), a SPSS-format database with 1003 full records was available for further consideration and analysis.

In order to analyse the attitudes of the Bulgarian adult population towards the domestic leisure tourism a number of statistical analyses have been run using the SPSS software (version 26), over a subset of questions (the survey questionnaire includes a vast number of topics), mainly concerning public attitudes. The analyses include: building one- and two- dimensional frequency distributions, and statistical hypothesis testing, etc. While using the descriptive analysis for the frequency distributions, each hypothesis testing implicitly includes the following stages: restating the initial research hypothesis as null and alternate hypothesis, setting-up a suitable significance level (in our case: 0.01, 0.05 and 0.10), determination of the suitable test statistic according to the data and procedure specifics, performing computations using the sample data and the chosen test statistic, decision-making process based on the p-value and the significance level comparison.

Results

In order to enlighten the specifics of public attitudes towards domestic leisure tourism in Bulgaria a thorough statistical analysis of the following indicators has been executed: practices for domestic leisure tourism, stay duration in domestic resorts, frequency of domestic leisure tourism, people not practising domestic leisure tourism, domestic leisure tourism average satisfaction level.

The practices for domestic leisure tourism are presented by the number of respondents who have travelled for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism (winter or summer) in the last five years, based on spatial analysis by NUTS-2 regions and residence place types (Tables 1, 2).

The winter resorts are visited mostly by the citizens of the Southeast region where 51.1% have practiced winter leisure tourism in the last five years. The difference of 2.4 times between the Southeast and North Central regions is noticeable (Figure 1).

The Black Sea resorts are usually visited by a great share of tourists from all over the country (over 75% per each region), except for the Northeast region where 59.4% have practised summer leisure tourism in the last five years (Figure 2).

The differences between the two types of leisure tourism (summer and winter) vary from 1.5 times more summer travellers for the Southeast region to 3.6 times in the North Central region in favour of the seaside resorts.

Citizens from the capital and the district administrative centres travel more for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism (winter and summer), compared to people from towns and villages (Table 2).

Table 1. Domestic leisure tourism practices by NUTS-2 regions.

Leisure tourism practised in Bulgaria in the last 5 years		NUTS-2 region						
		All	NW	NC	NE	SE	SW	SC
Number of respondents		1003	110	108	108	141	315	201
Winter (mountain) resorts	Yes	34.1%	39.1%	21.3%	33.6%	51.1%	33.7%	27.4%
	No	65.9%	60.9%	78.7%	66.4%	48.9%	66.3%	72.6%
Summer (seaside)Resorts	Yes	75.8%	80.0%	76.9%	59.4%	75.9%	80.0%	76.6%
	No	24.2%	20.0%	23.1%	40.6%	24.1%	20.0%	23.4%

Table 2. Domestic leisure tourism practices by residence place type.

Leisure tourism practiced in Bulgaria in the last 5 years		Residence place type				
		All	Capital	District administrative centre	Town	Village
Number of respondents		1003	208	348	194	253
Winter (mountain) resorts	Yes	34.1%	37.5 %	40.8%	28.4%	26.5%
	No	65.9%	62.5%	59.2%	71.6%	73.5%
Summer (seaside) resorts	Yes	75.8%	85.1%	79.3%	71.6%	66.4%
	No	24.2%	14.9%	20.7%	28.4%	33.6%

Figure 1. Domestic winter leisure tourism practices by NUTS-2 regions.

The differences in the Bulgarian tourists' practices in the domestic leisure tourism are also noticeable regarding the stay duration. The stay duration indicator is presented by the number of nights spent in Bulgarian resorts (Tables 3, 4).

The overall average duration for the winter resorts is 4.37 nights which summarizes a wide range starting from 3.56 nights for the Northwest region up to 5.16 nights on average for the winter tourists coming from the Northeast
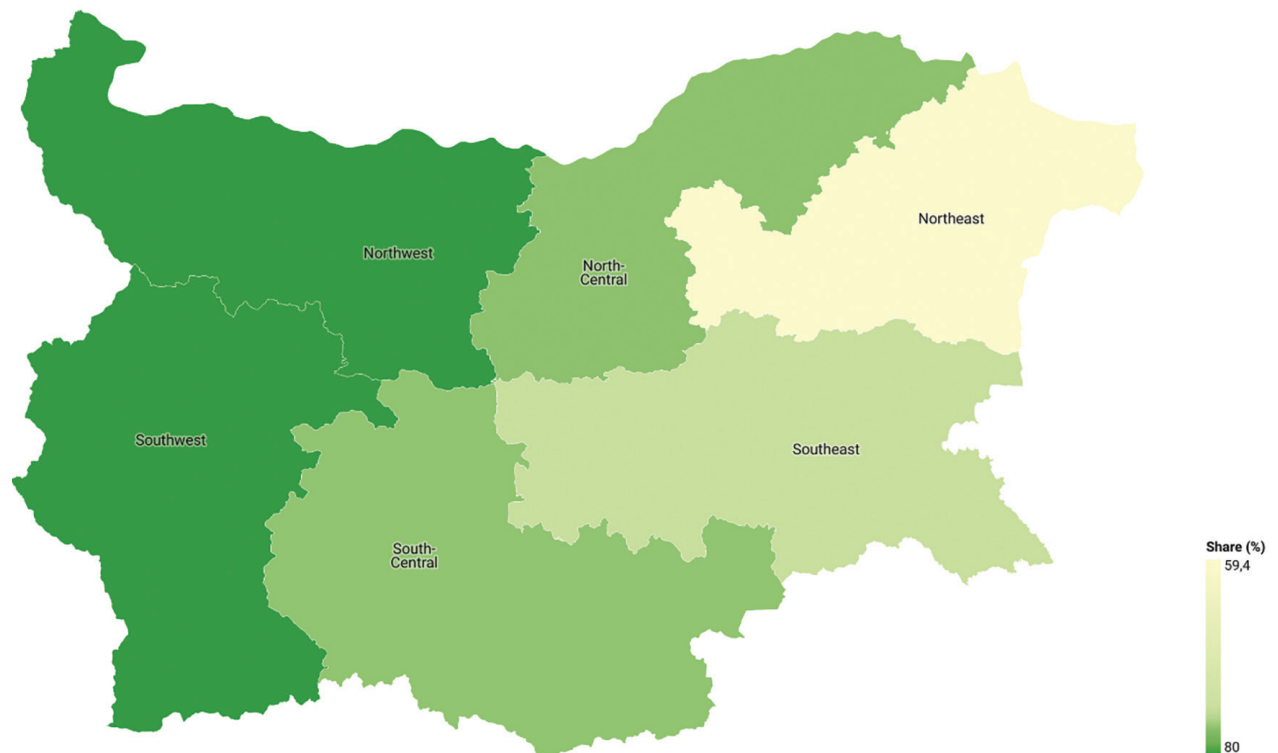
Figure 2. Domestic summer leisure tourism practices by NUTS-2 regions.

Table 3. Average stay duration in Bulgarian winter resorts by NUTS-2 regions.

Average duration of the stay (number of nights spent)	NUTS-2 region							Independent samples
	All	NW	NC	NE	SE	SW	SC	K-S Test (sig.)
Winter (mountain) resorts	4.37	3.56	5.09	5.16	4.31	4.53	3.89	0.000
Summer (seaside) resorts	6.86	6.10	5.96	8.93	6.39	7.65	5.77	0.000

Table 4. Average stay duration at the Bulgarian winter resorts by residence place type.

Average duration of the stay (number of nights spent)	NUTS-2 region							Independent samples
	All	NW	NC	NE	SE	SW	SC	K-S Test (sig.)
Winter (mountain) resorts	4.37	3.56	5.09	5.16	4.31	4.53	3.89	0.000
Summer (seaside) resorts	6.86	6.10	5.96	8.93	6.39	7.65	5.77	0.000

part of the Bulgarian territory (Figure 3). The differences between the average duration of the stay at the Bulgarian winter resorts by NUTS-2 regions are statistically significant at 1% level (Sig. = 0.000).

The summer (seaside) resorts in Bulgaria are not only visited by more local tourists in comparison to the winter ones but also for longer periods of time (Figure 4). The average stay duration at a summer resort is almost a week (6.86 nights). The shortest summer vacation is typical for the tourists from the South-Central region (5.77 nights) while those coming from the Northeast tend to make their summer vacations much longer (8.93 nights).

The differences between the average duration of the stay at the Bulgarian summer resorts by NUTS-2 regions are statistically significant even at 1% level (Sig. = 0.000).
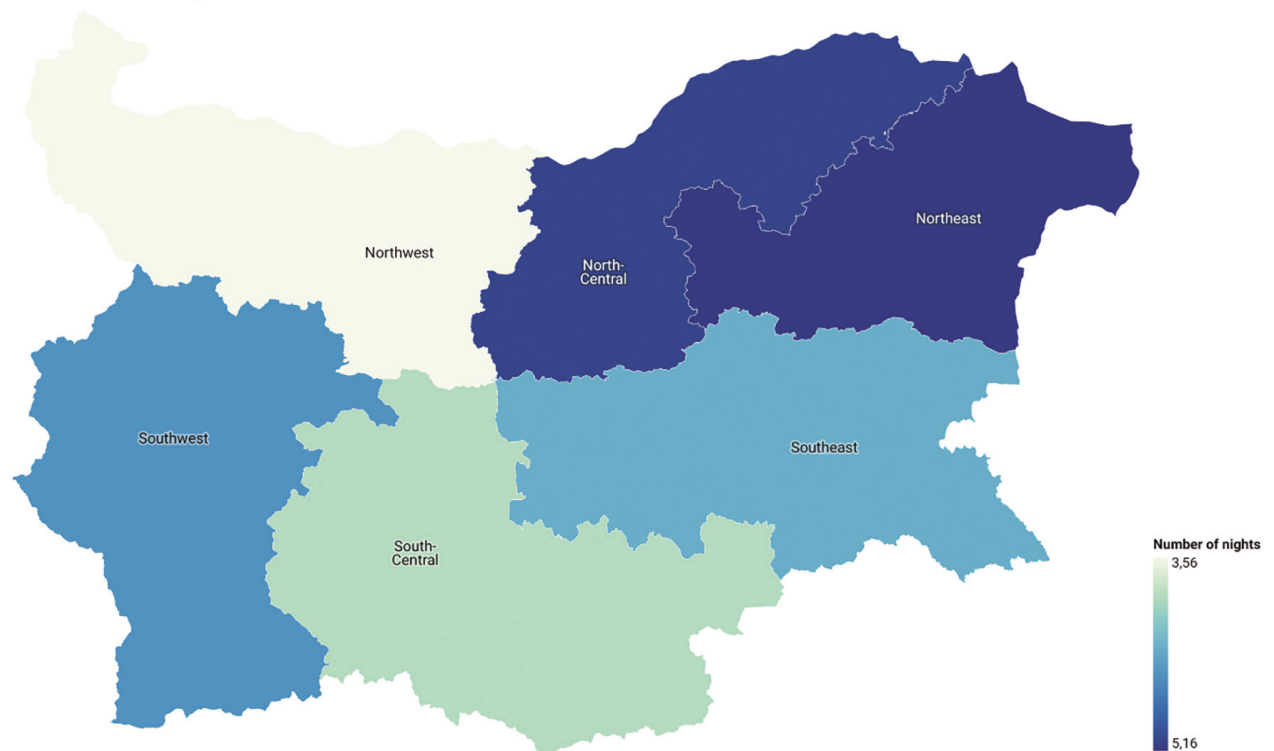
Figure 3. Average stay duration at Bulgarian winter resorts by NUTS-2 regions.
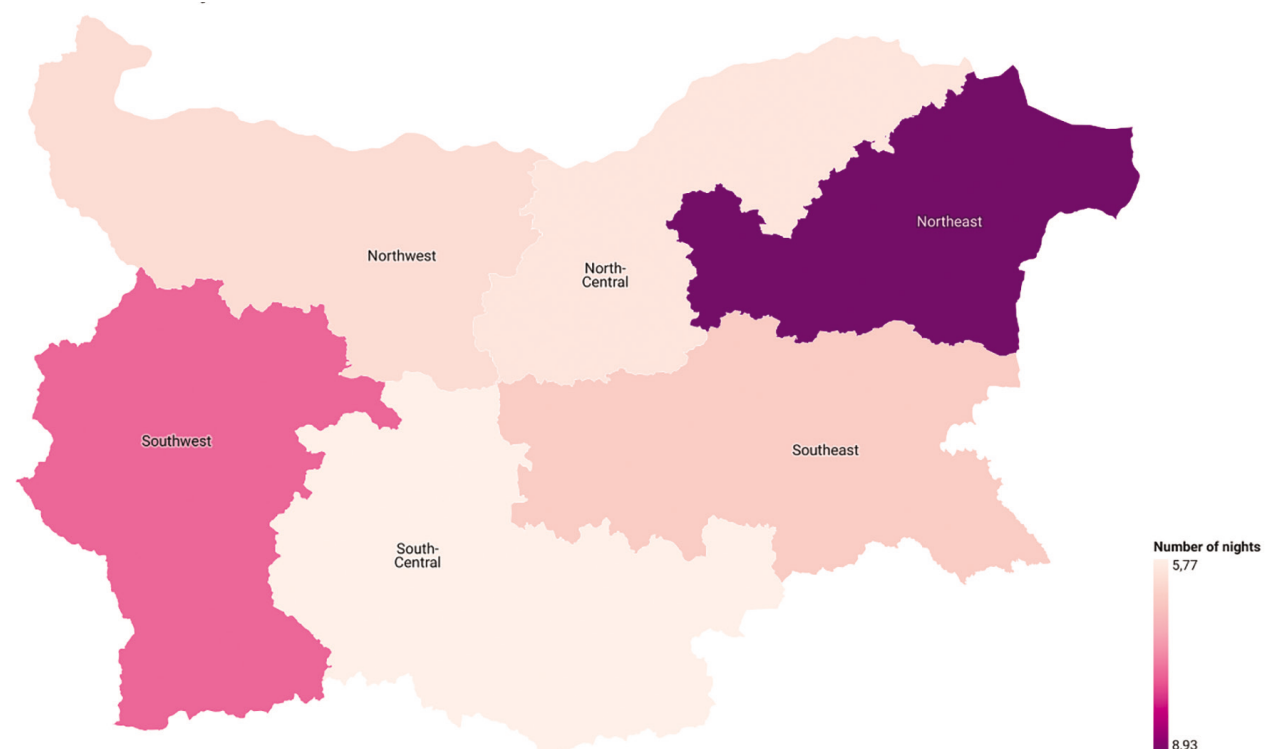

Figure 4. Average stay duration at Bulgarian summer resorts by NUTS-2 regions.

The average stay duration for the winter resorts by the residence place type varies slightly from 4.07 nights for the respondents living in the rural areas up to 4.56 nights on average for the winter tourists coming from the capital of Bul-

garia, Sofia. The differences between the average stay duration at the Bulgarian winter resorts by the residence place type are not statistically significant even at 10% level (Sig. = 0.402).

The average stay duration at the summer resorts fluctuates from the shortest summer vacation – 5.90 nights - typical for tourists from Bulgarian villages - up to those coming from the capital which enjoy their summer vacations moderately longer – 7.47 nights. The differences between the average stay duration at the Bulgarian summer resorts by the residence place type are statistically significant at 1% level (Sig. = 0.000).

The frequency of travel for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism (winter or summer) is shown on Figure 5 by the number of trips per year. The values vary between 1.9 trips per year for Northeast region and 3 trips per year for Southeast region, while the other regions share more moderate values: North Central (2.2), South Central (2.4), Northwest (2.6) and Southwest (2.9). The differences between the frequency of travel for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism by regions are statistically significant at 5% level (Sig. = 0.033).

The travel frequency for domestic leisure tourism purposes varies between 1.8 trips per year by tourists from villages up to 3.5 trips per year for those from the Capital, while the travel frequency of those from other residence place types - towns (2.2) and district administrative centres (2.8) - gravitates around the country mean (2.6). The differences between the frequency of travel for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism by residence place type are statistically significant at 5% level (Sig. = 0.048).

When asked about their frequency of travel, 9.4% of respondents point out that they are not travelling in Bulgaria for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism. Their distribution by NUTS-2 regions is as follows: South Central –
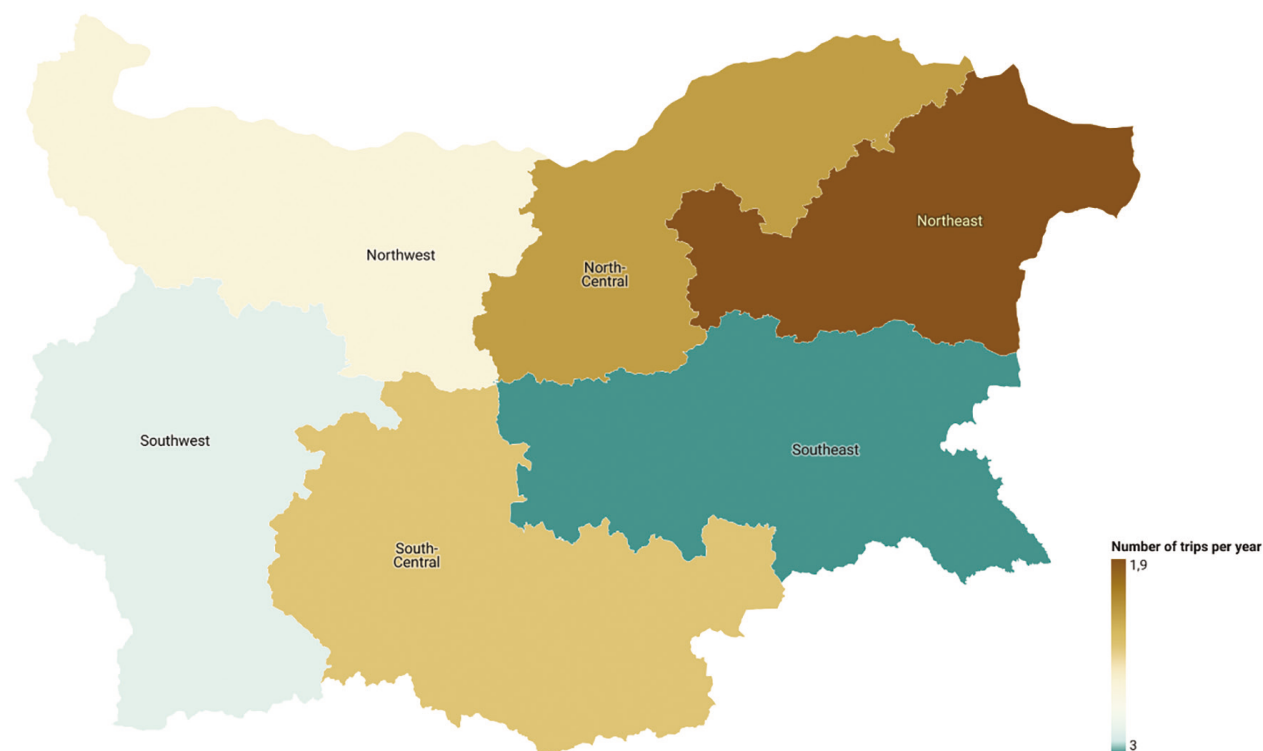

Figure 5. Frequency of travel for the purpose of domestic leisure tourism by NUTS-2 regions.

5.0%, Northwest − 5.5%, Southeast − 6.4%, Southwest − 10.2%, Northeast − 15.6%, North Central − 15.7% (Figure 6). The differences between the shares of the non-travellers by NUTS-2 region are statistically significant at 5% level (Sig. = 0.043).

Bulgarians who do not trust domestic leisure tourism are the fewest in the district administrative centres (7.2%) and the capital (7.7%). The percentage is higher amongst the people from villages (10.4%) and towns (13.7%). The differences between the shares of the non-travellers by residence place type are statistically significant at 10% level (Sig. = 0.087)

The domestic leisure tourism satisfaction level is measured by a seven-point scale where 1 means "absolutely not satisfied" and 7 means "absolutely satisfied". The winter holiday satisfaction level is shown on Figure 7. Except in Northwest region (4.72), in all the other regions the average satisfaction value is over 5 (Southwest − 5.26, Southeast − 5.29, North Central − 5.43, South Central − 5.49, Northeast − 5.65). The differences between the winter holiday satisfaction levels by regions are statistically significant at 1% level (Sig. = 0.003).

The winter holiday average satisfaction level for all residence place types is over 5 (capital − 5.10, district administrative centre − 5.42, town − 5.35, village − 5.22). The differences between the winter holiday satisfaction levels by residence place type are not statistically significant.

The summer holiday satisfaction level is measured using the same scale and is shown on Figure 8. It is higher in the North Central region (5.23) and lower in the Northwest region (4.5). In South Central region it is 5.02, in Southeast − 4.91, in Northeast − 4.87, and in Southwest − 4.83. The differences between the summer holiday satisfaction levels by NUTS-2 regions are statistically significant at 1% level (Sig. = 0.001).
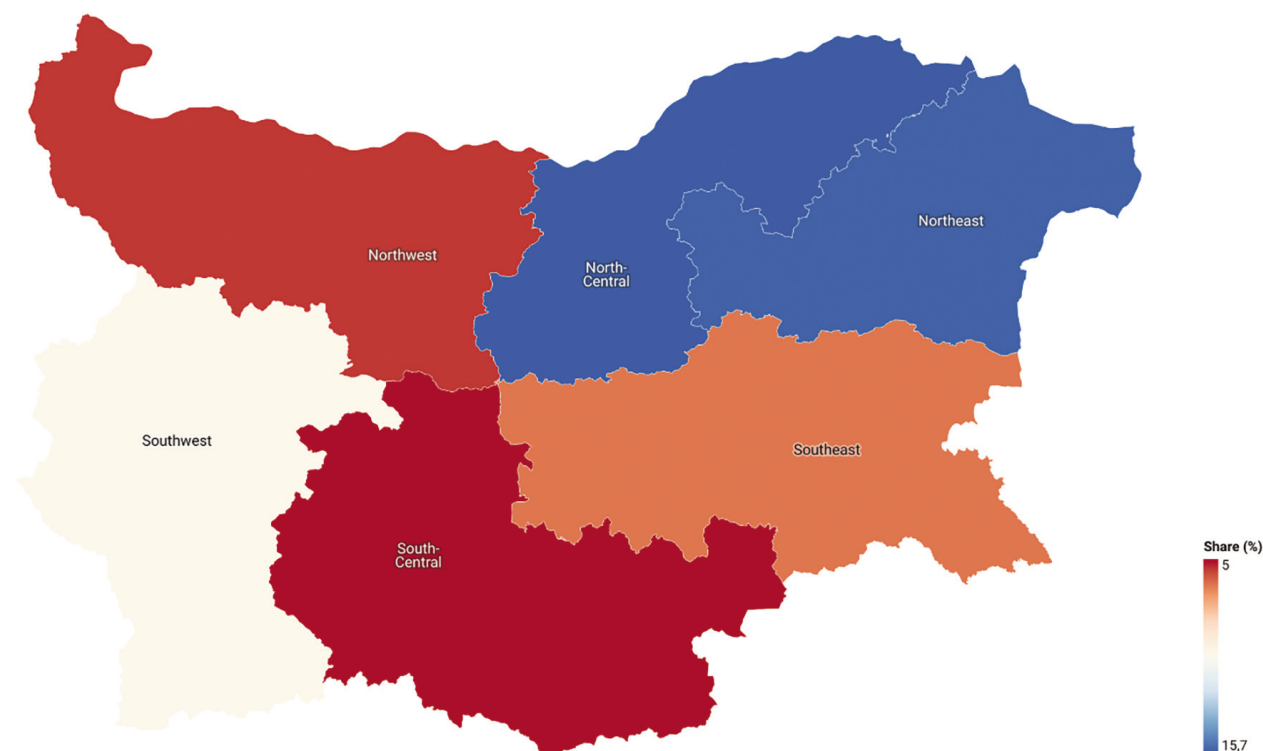

Figure 6. Bulgarians not travelling for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism.
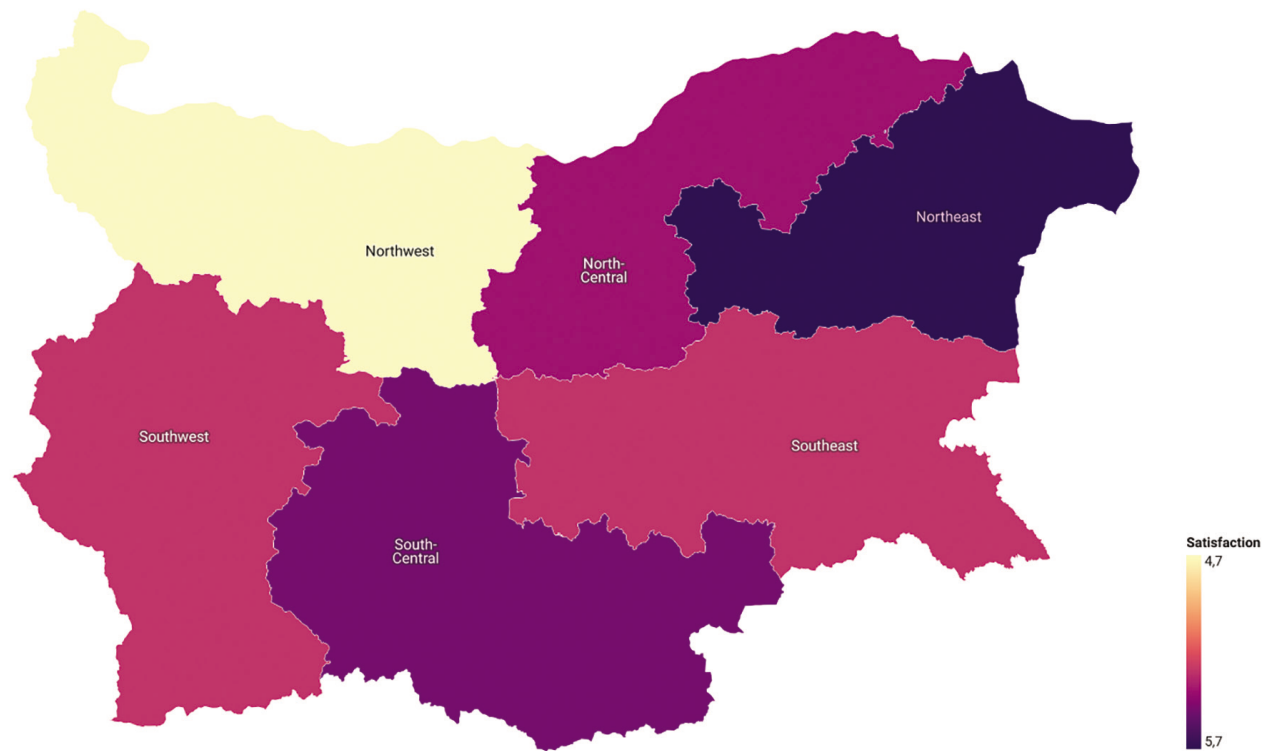
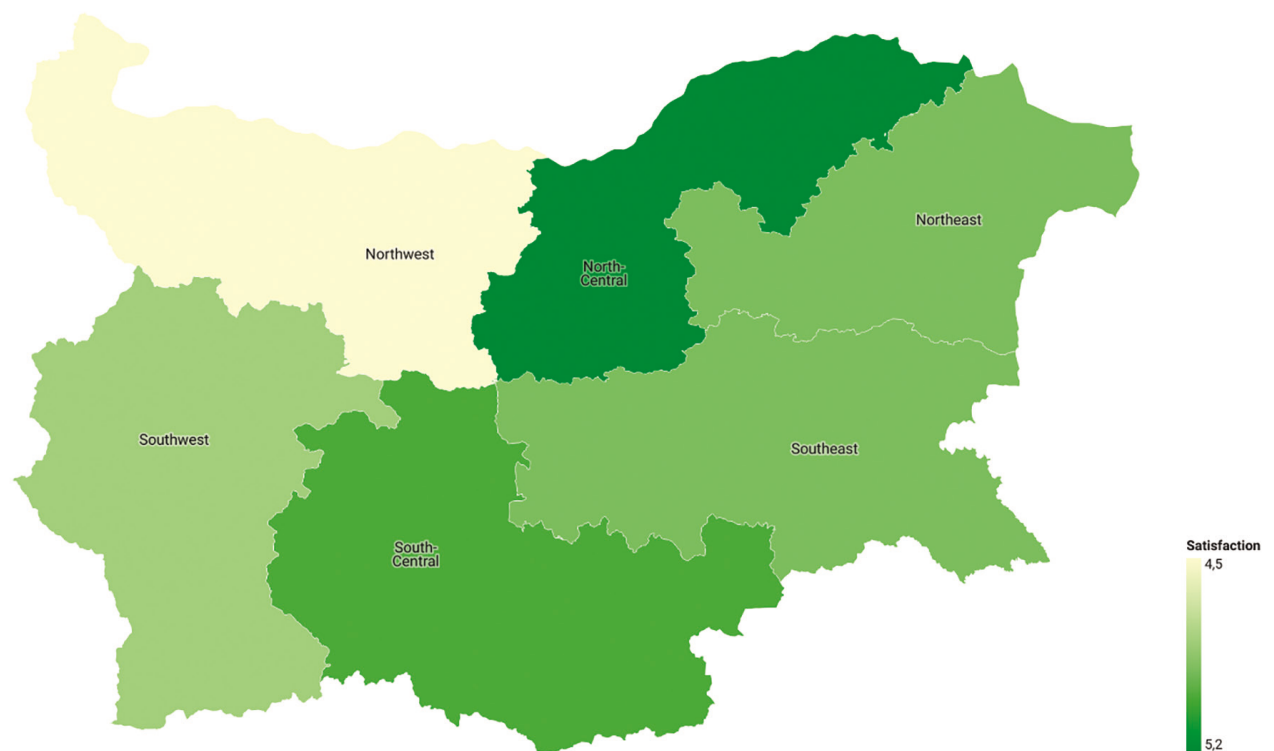**Figure 7.** Winter holiday average satisfaction level.

Figure 8. Winter holiday average satisfaction level.

The summer holiday average satisfaction level is the same in the capital and the district administrative centres (4.9). The residents from the towns give the higher score (5.04) and the ones from the villages – the lower one (4.72). The differences between the summer holiday satisfaction levels by residence place type are not statistically significant.

Discussion

The obtained results show that Bulgarian citizens have travelled more for the purposes of domestic summer leisure tourism than winter leisure tourism in the past five years. On average, Bulgarian tourists tend to visit the summer (sea) resorts (75.8%) much more (approx. 2.2 times) than the winter (mountain) ones (34.1%). This can be explained by the tradition of taking bigger summer holidays than winter ones.

Bulgarian winter tourists from the Southeast region (51.1%) greatly outnumber (2.4 times) those from the North Central region (21.3%). Their percentage is much higher compared to the other regions as well (between 27.4% and 39.1%). Even they travel less for the purposes of domestic winter leisure tourism, the North Central region residents take the second place in stay duration (5.09 nights).

The difference between the Northeast (59.4%) and the other regions (over 75%) in terms of practising summer leisure tourism is noticeable. This could be explained by the fact that the Northeast region has a large border with the Black Sea and the biggest city in the region (Varna) is situated on the Black Sea coast. Many of the region's citizens prefer to travel to the coast and return the same day to their places of residence, instead of staying in a resort. On the other hand, the Northeast region residents have the longest stay in summer resorts (8.93 nights).

The stay duration varies significantly between the regions in terms of summer leisure tourism, while the differences between the residence place types in terms of winter leisure tourism are very small. Bulgarian tourists from all regions travel mostly once or several times a year for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism. There is a big difference in the travel frequency between the capital and the village residents. The percentages of people not travelling for the purposes of domestic leisure tourism vary a lot between the regions and the residence place types.

Bulgarians are more satisfied by their winter holidays that summer ones. The less satisfied tourists (winter and summer tourism) come from the Northwest region. It is also worth mentioning that, regarding the winter leisure tourism, none of the respondents answered 1 (absolutely not satisfied) or 2 (not satisfied).

The current paper presents only a part of the results obtained by the national representative survey. In this regard, further analyses can be made of the public attitudes toward Bulgarian domestic leisure tourism on NUTS-2 level and residence place type or based on other demographic characteristics, using the other survey questions that are not part of the current analysis.

Conclusion

Domestic tourism is very important for the national economy. The survey results show that Bulgarian tourists from all regions and all resident place types prefer summer over winter tourism not just in terms of undertaking them but also when it comes to length of stay. On the other hand, people from all regions and all resident place types are more satisfied by their winter holidays in Bulgaria than the summer ones. Bearing in mind the research findings, it

can be concluded that it is needed to promote the domestic winter leisure tourism amongst the Bulgarian tourists and to find the reasons for the lower satisfaction by the domestic summer leisure tourism. In this regard, further analyses can be performed using the national representative survey data. The present paper could be useful for scientists, authorities, tourism professionals, students, etc., both from Bulgaria and other countries, in order to determine Bulgarian citizens' attitudes towards domestic summer and winter leisure tourism.

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Additional information

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was declared.

Ethical statement

No ethical statement was reported.

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Author contributions

The authors jointly shared the workload of collecting specimens, completing DNA barcoding in the lab, doing the molecular analysis, putting together figures and writing the manuscript.

Author ORCIDs

Marina Raykova https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9114-8849
Aleksander Naydenov https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9302-994X

Data availability

All of the data that support the findings of this study are available in the main text or Supplementary Information.

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