



THE LAVENDER FESTIVAL – A PREREQUISITE FOR SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF TOURISM (ON THE EXAMPLE CHIRPANMUNICIPALITY)

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ABSTRACT

One of the key elements of modern tourism is the alternative forms it offers. Festivals and festival tourism arouse great interest among many tourists, and as a result of their implementation, an increase in tourist traffic levels is reported. As part of the main tourism assets for a region, festivals are gaining momentum and have a significant impact on the economy of the localities where they are held. The International Lavender Festival is proof of the sustainable development of tourism, based on an agricultural activity characteristic of the region - lavender production. The **PURPOSE** of the present research is to show how a traditional livelihood of the local population supports the revival of activities that have the potential to create added value, social inclusion, entrepreneurship and limit the migration flow. The applied scientific **METHODS** are statistical, historical, comparative-descriptive, comprehensive assessment and regional analysis. Of greatest value is the conducted field research, which has been discussed in more detail in the discussion. The **RESULTS** confirm the research hypothesis that the natural and anthropogenic resources available in Bulgaria are a prerequisite for the development of alternative forms of tourism. The main **CONCLUSIONS** suggest that the attitudes of tourists towards this type of tourism are positive and this would help its sustainable regional development.

Key words: alternative tourism, festival tourism, lavender production

INTRODUCTION

Festival tourism is a relatively young but fast-growing area that falls within the scope of alternative tourism and is already creating growing interest in our country. As a leading figure in modern tourism, festivals are the subject of study by specialists in various fields. Some of them argue that these events rank among the main tourism assets for a region, while others consider them as a tourism product (1-5).

Lyubomir Kutin devotes considerable attention to a number of festival events of different nature, exploring and identifying the most important elements of festival tourism

associated with them. He defines a festival as "an event that is created on a particularly festive occasion, anniversaries, days of remembrance or tribute, or through a particular choice of performers" (6). In other words, festival tourism is an event of exceptional significance that has a festive character and atmosphere, appropriate recreational facilities and an authentic programme.

Stoykova notes that "festival tourism is characterised by its dynamism and mass appeal, its rich genre diversity and offers tourists participation in various forms of traditional and contemporary cultural celebrations. These are festivals of different types of art, authentic events, etc." (7).

Contemporary festival tourism is enjoying growing interest among the highly developing industrial countries. Its dynamics makes it a leading part of tourism worldwide, and it is also successfully promoted and realized on the

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Bulgarian tourist market. The development of tourism in a given area causes a number of changes that are a consequence of tourist travel, referred to as 'tourist traffic'. This in turn has an impact on the surrounding environment. The changes concern spatial development, economic development, the socio-cultural sphere, politics, administrative institutions and the environment. In her study, Jancheva notes several main contributions of festival tourism and puts the main emphasis on the fact that there is an "improvement of the tourism product of the region or destination; attraction of new target groups of tourists; promotion and subsequent conservation of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources for the region or destination; and provision of additional employment for the local population, etc." (8).

Festival events are gaining momentum and have a significant impact on the economy of the localities where they are held. In Bulgaria, in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic "the tourism registered positive results that reinforce its capacity to generate more revenue and employment and to extend the activity throughout the year and all over the country" (9). The revival of the industry has also been a trend since the lifting of health restrictions introduced by the WHO (10). "It is recognised, therefore, that tourism has the capacity to be a sustainable activity throughout the year and to add value to local communities and the country as a whole" (9). This can largely be achieved through targeted activities to develop alternative forms of tourism and in particular a focus on festivals such as Hallmark events.

Getz et al. define and create a concept describing the characteristic features of Hallmark events. The model they generated is intended to be applied to the recognition of festivals that are unique in nature. This model is structured "around three main outcome goals (attraction, image and branding, and the community) and three major process goals (sustainability, marketing, and organization and ownership) (11).

Under these conditions, the intervention of local administrations and local populations is of utmost importance. It is noticeable that the participation of municipalities in the organisation of festivals is increasing. They are beginning to include them in their municipal development plans and cultural calendars. "In recent years, local administrations and other

cultural institutions have been cooperating with festivals, motivated by the promotion of the city and the region - treating the festival as a promotional window on the world and as a publicity tool" (12).

A number of festivals held in Bulgaria can be cited as good examples, but those related to traditional local productions such as essential oil crops are distinctive for our country. An example of such is the Rose Festival in the town of The Rose Festival in Kazanlak, the Lavender Festival in the town of. The Lavender Festival in Chirpan and the Lavender Festival in General Toshevo.

In order to achieve the set goal, the scope of the subject of the current work examines the "Lavender Festival" held in the municipality of Chirpan in 2017 and 2023.

The Lavender Festival has a relatively young history, but now has an International status and can be counted among the group of recognizable special local events in our country. The festival is dedicated to the beauty and fragrance of lavender, and is organised annually in mid-June. It provides a rich and varied programme for its visitors, who have the opportunity to take part in unique activities such as practicing yoga and taking part in a hiking tour among the lavender fields, tasting typical dishes of the region with a hint of lavender and other thematic experiences (13).

The current state of lavender production in Bulgaria should also be noted. The country currently ranks among the leaders in this agricultural sector (14-17). According to a report by the Bulgarian Industrial Association, the country has 180 km² of lavender and an annual production of more than 260 tonnes of lavender oil (18). The regions of Chirpan and Stara Zagora are among the most favourable for growing this oil-producing crop in southern Bulgaria.

METHODS

In the next stage of the research, a questionnaire survey was also conducted in order to determine the attitudes of visitors to this event and its accompanying events. This in turn provided the basis for drawing conclusions as to whether this festival is a successful prerequisite for the development of an alternative form of tourism in the municipality of Chirpan.

The object of the present study is the Lavender Festival - Chirpan. Sredno gradishte in 2018 and the International Lavender Festival, Chirpan Municipality - 2023. For the purposes of the study, an author's questionnaire was developed, aimed at tourists visiting the festival.

The questionnaire contains 28 questions, and this report reports the results of the processing of several of the key closed questions related to the development of festival tourism. The responses of 61 2018 and 75 2023 respondents who attended the two festivals were analysed. The survey method was a direct standardized interview on the day of the events.

RESULTS

The analysis of respondents by nationality shows that 95.08% are Bulgarian citizens and 4.92% are foreign tourists for 2018, for 2023 92% Bulgarians and 8.00% foreigners respectively. This shows that the festival is still popular outside the country and generates interest abroad.

Based on the results presented in Figure 1, a definitive estimate of the age of those who

attended the festival cannot be made, as the results are quite close. It is noticeable that in the current year the proportion of visitors in the youngest age group has significantly decreased. The social status analysis for 2018 shows that 72.13% identified themselves as working, 16.39% indicated that they were retired and 11.48% were students. For the year 2023, again the highest percentage are those who are working at 76.00%, followed by pensioners at 20.00% and 4% indicated that they were students at the time of the field survey.

When analyzing the results obtained, it should be noted the fact that the percentage of the surveyed residents of the city and that of the surveyed visitors and tourists is almost equal, respectively 34.43% and 44.26% for 2018, for 2023 their share amounts to 44.00% and 41.33%. The locals were included in the study because of their tendency to have fun and spend financial resources on purchasing different types of goods made from lavender, something they would not do on weekdays. Regarding the business representatives, they were 11.22% in 2018 and 12.00% of the total number of respondents in 2023 (**Figure 1**).

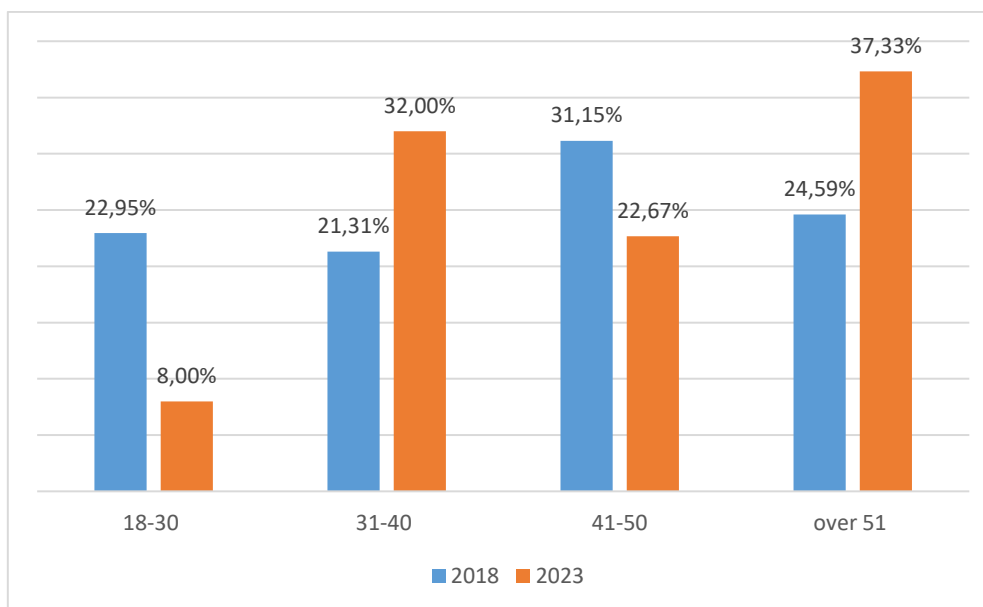


Figure 1. Age structure

From Figure 2 it is clear that among the respondents a positive opinion dominates regarding the available conditions for the development of festival tourism in the

municipality of Chirpan. Not very high is the share of those who could not give an assessment of the condition (**Figure 2**).

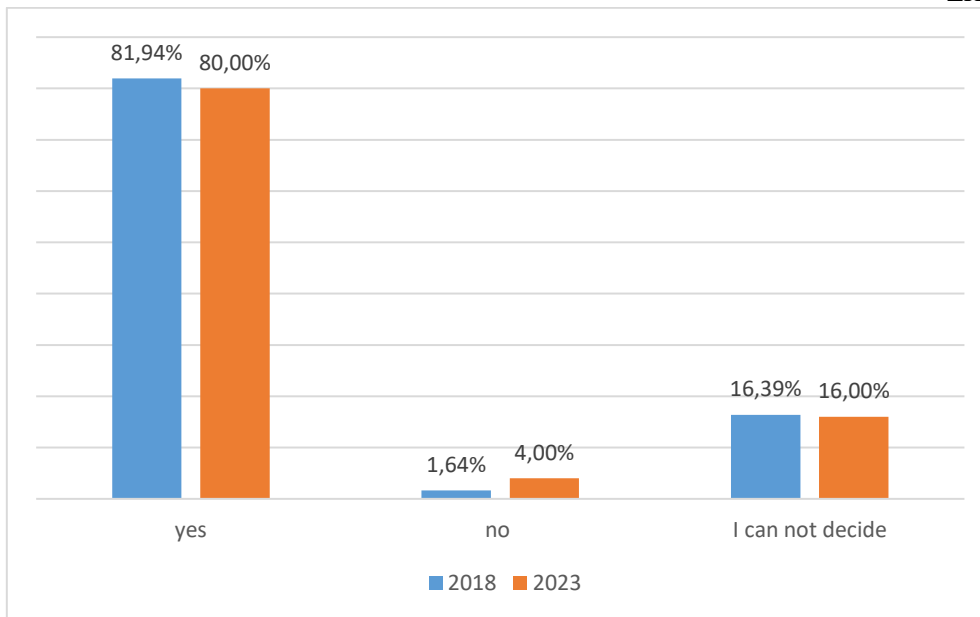


Figure 2. Conditions for the development of festival tourism in Chirpan Municipality

The assessment of the actual development of tourism given by the respondents is rather "good" and "very good" for the two surveyed years. There is an increase in the "very good" rating for 2023 compared to 2018, which gives grounds to claim that tourism development in

the municipality has improved. Although minimal, the percentage of those who gave a "poor" rating is moving upwards, which should draw the attention of the local tourism industry representatives and administration that more efforts need to be focused on this sector (**Figure 3**).

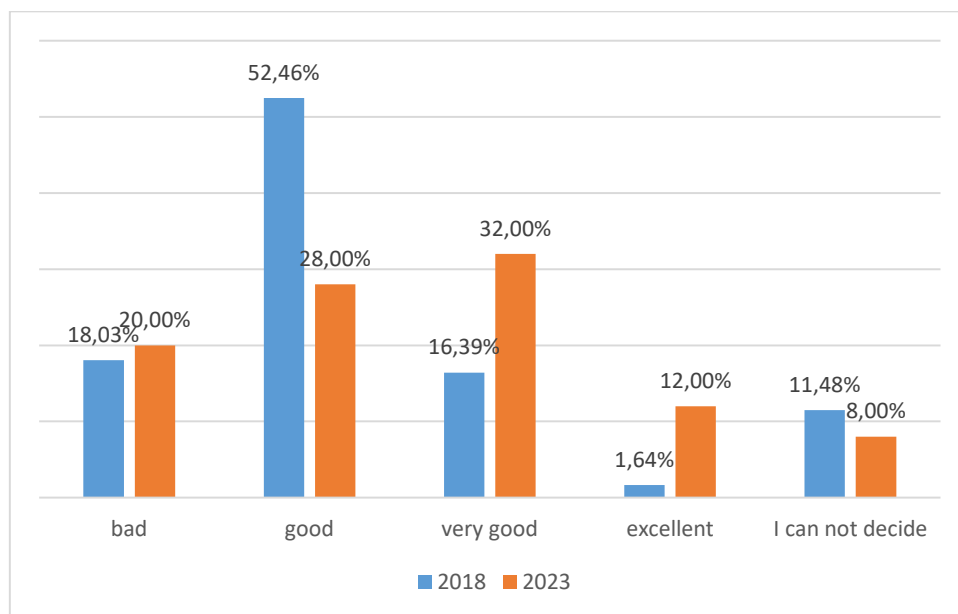


Figure 3. Assessment of tourism development in Chirpan municipality

The results in **Figure 4** show that in terms of tourists' motives for visiting this festival in 2018, the leading motive was the desire for closer contact with nature, which in turn led to a sense of increased energy, followed by a reduction in stress levels. 47.54% of respondents indicated that the leading motive

was social networking. The results in 2023 are different and it can be clearly seen that social bonding and networking is the leading motive for 66.67% of the respondents. For the same year, the percentage of those wanting closer contact with nature has decreased significantly compared to 2018.

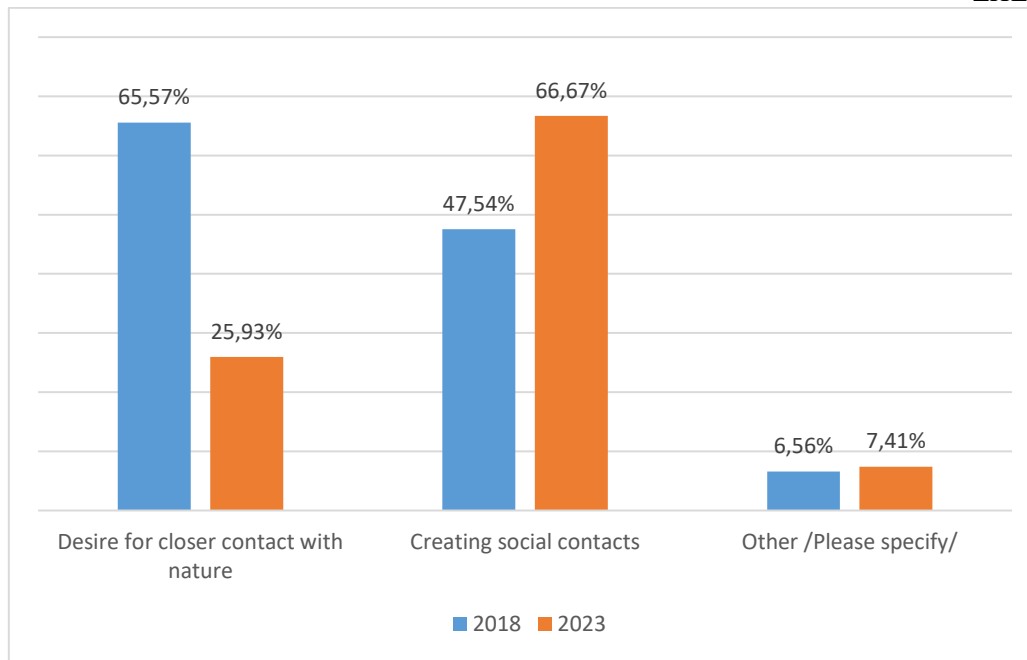


Figure 4. Motives

In 2018, 44.26% of respondents gave the overall atmosphere a "good" rating and felt that their initial expectations were largely met. 29.51% gave it an "excellent" rating and 19.67% gave it a "fair" rating. In 2023, more than half of the

respondents rated the atmosphere of the festival with the maximum possible rating. The results presented in Figure 5 show a positive trend in the development of festival tourism in the municipality.

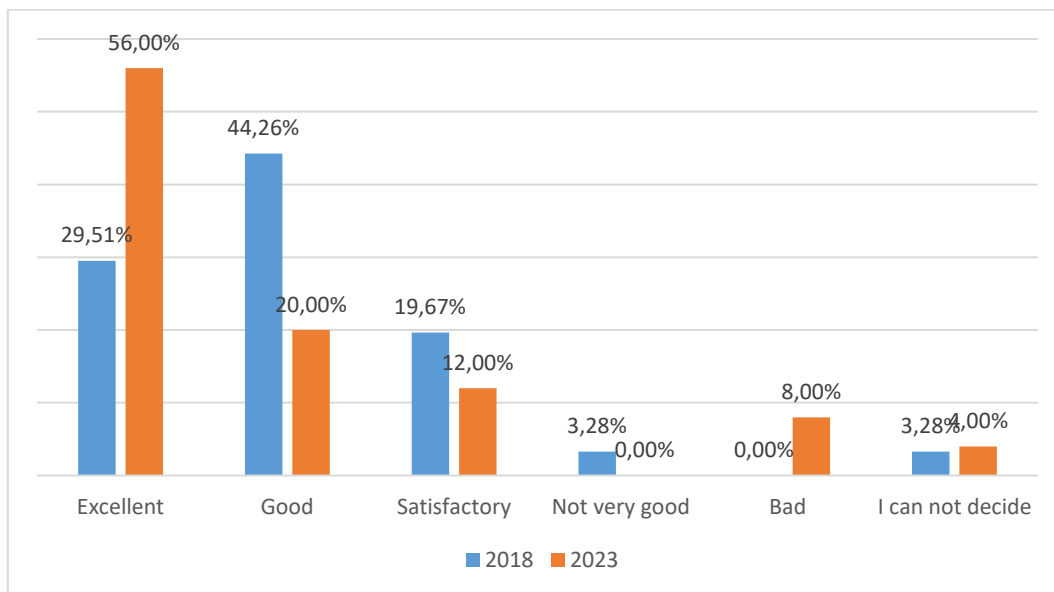


Figure 5. Overall assessment of the festival atmosphere

In Figure 6, when analyzing the empirical data obtained from the responses of the respondents, it can be concluded that more than half of the visitors (52.46% - 2018; 60.00% - 2023) shared their positive attitudes regarding the

professionalism of the organizers of this festival. A lower proportion (37.70% - 2018; 24.00% - 2023) of those who felt that there was still room for improvement.

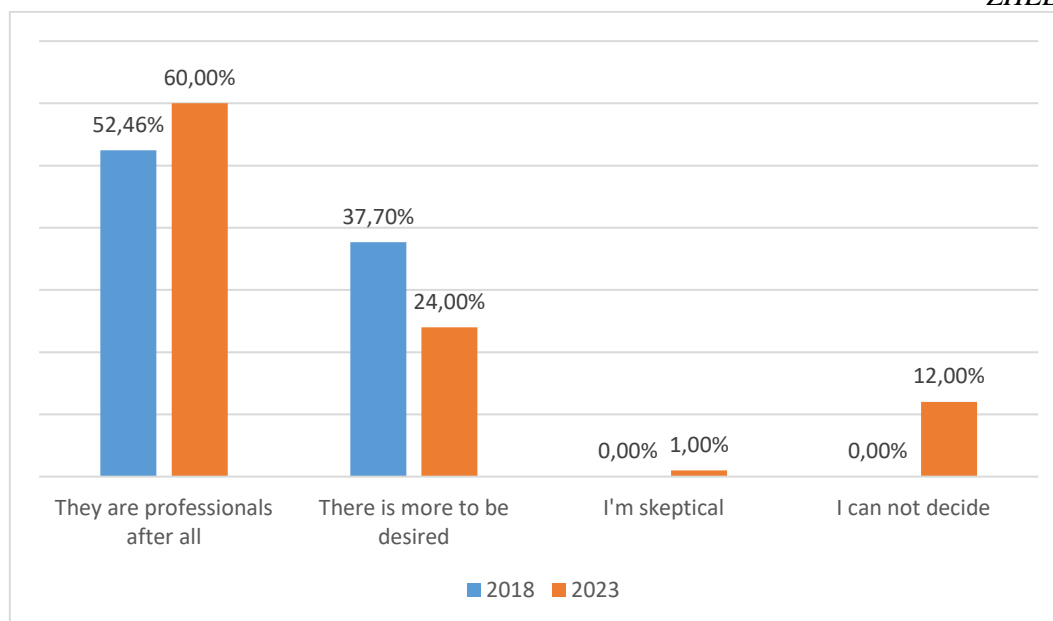


Figure 6. Evaluation of the professionalism of the organisers

CONCLUSIONS

Bulgaria has a rich historical past and traditions in agriculture. In recent years, the country has been the largest producer of essential oil crops in the world, including being a leader in the extraction of lavender and rose oil. The production process, encompassing the stages of cultivation, harvesting, storage and subsequent manufacture of products from the plants, is proving to be very popular among tourists and has the potential to become and establish itself as an innovative approach to the development of specific forms of tourism that will positively impact the economy of the region.

The analysis of the situation and opportunities for the development of festival tourism in the municipality of Chirpan is based on a number of methods, one of which is the complex assessment, which allowed to draw the following main conclusions:

- Tourism linked to traditional industries has some of the best opportunities for adequate market positioning. Lavender production and its products of guaranteed quality attract interest not only at national but also at international level. Although young in history, this festival has the potential to become as recognisable an event as the Rose Festival in Kazanlak.
- Event tourism, with special local events at its core, motivates additional visits to the region and the development of other alternative forms of tourism and related businesses.

The importance of festivals is extremely high because of the economic benefits for the local population, social inclusion and added value. The Lavender Festival as a special event is attracting increasing interest from researchers and is thus finding its way into the scientific literature. Contemporary authors point out in their works that there are destinations in Bulgaria that hold events that have become their symbol and 'trademark'. The municipality of Chirpan, with its aromatic festival, appears to be one of these places..

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