



Assessment of National Statistical System and Tourism Evidence in Serbia

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Abstract: *The development and accuracy of national tourism statistics are crucial for effective policy-making and sustainable growth in the tourism sector. The paper assesses Serbia's current national statistical tourism system, focusing on its alignment with international standards and the need for further enhancements. Despite progress in data collection for accommodation statistics and tourism participation, challenges persist in integrating comprehensive demand-side data and fully establishing Tourism Satellite Account. The study underscores the importance of improving data accuracy, reliability, and international data dissemination to strengthen Serbia's tourism statistics, ultimately supporting more effective policy-making, strategic planning, and long-term competitiveness in the global tourism market.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Accurate and comprehensive statistical data systems are crucial for making informed decisions, developing strategic plans, and promoting sustainable growth in the tourism industry. Such systems offer a detailed understanding of various aspects of tourism, aiding government activities and enabling well-informed policy-making. Reliable and standardized tourism statistics are paramount in the rapidly evolving global tourism sector. These statistics form the foundation for evaluating tourism's economic, social, and environmental impacts, guiding infrastructure development, policies, and marketing strategies that align with national priorities and international standards.

The focus of this paper is to assess the current state of Serbia's national statistical system in tourism. The aim is to evaluate Serbia's alignment with international best practices in tourism statistics and identify areas for improvement that would enhance data accuracy, reliability, and utility. The assessment aims to provide actionable insights to support the further development of Serbia's tourism statistics, contributing to more effective policy-making and sustainable tourism growth.

2. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

An advanced national statistical system is not only pivotal for the efficient monitoring and assessment of tourism development activities but also for ensuring that decisions are evidence-based and align with the diverse needs and aspirations of communities at both national and local levels (Endhartiko, 2016; Hasyim et al., 2020; Abesadze et al., 2023). By enabling a comprehensive collection and analysis of data, such systems facilitate the evaluation of tourism's multifaceted impacts - economic, social, and environmental - thus guiding infrastructure development, policy formulation, and promoting

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diverse forms of tourism (Nikolskaya, 2019). Moreover, establishing a robust and integrated national statistical system enhances tourism-related employment statistics' accuracy, trustworthiness, and dependability. Precise employment data is essential as it forms the foundation for a comprehensive assessment of the economic impact of the tourist sector, including its contributions to GDP and job creation. For instance, the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) is a comprehensive statistical tool providing in-depth insights into employment and human resource issues within the tourism sector, underscoring the importance of precise data in understanding tourism's macroeconomic significance (Eurostat, 2017). The TSA's role is particularly highlighted in the work of Milenkovski et al. (2019), who emphasize that quality tourism statistics are the foundation for sound tourism research and effective policy-making, particularly in emerging and competitive markets. Enhancing the national statistical system also fosters the development of specialized expertise in analyzing tourism statistics, improving the practical application of statistical methods within the industry and the theoretical understanding of tourism dynamics. Sabou et al. (2012) argue that integrating diverse data sources can enrich statistical analysis and provide a more nuanced understanding of tourism trends and impacts. Pratt and Tolkach (2017) argue that tourism statistics are complex and politically influenced, stressing the importance of critically analyzing and rigorously applying methods to ensure that the data is accurate, unbiased, and truly reflective of the state of the tourism sector.

Effective statistical data collection methods, including observation, interviews, literature studies, and recording, remain essential for gathering detailed information that supports the provision of facilities, infrastructure, financial aid, and promotion of tourism destinations. These methods are critical for identifying priority locations, analyzing changing traveler demographics, recognizing preferred activities, and understanding expenditure trends. Comprehensive and high-quality data is thus indispensable for formulating effective tourism policies and strategies that enhance the overall tourism experience while maximizing economic benefits (Mariani et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 2004). Integrating advanced technologies and sophisticated data analysis techniques ensures that the tourism sector remains competitive and capable of adapting to emerging trends and challenges. Recent technological developments further amplify the importance of integrating traditional statistical methods with big data and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Incorporating AI into tourism statistics has revolutionized data collection and analysis processes, offering enhanced precision, efficiency, and the ability to process real-time data. The integration makes better decision-making and policy development possible, making conducting more thorough and dynamic assessments of tourist trends easier. Several authors (Viglia et al., 2016; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; García-Madurga & Grilló-Méndez, 2023) highlight how AI technologies like machine learning and predictive analytics are being leveraged to gain deeper insights into tourism dynamics, ultimately contributing to a more responsive and adaptive tourism management system.

The study by Frechtling and Hara (2016), which was one of the starting points for our research, provides a critical assessment of the global state of national tourism statistics, revealing significant disparities in the comprehensiveness of Systems of Tourism Statistics (STS) across countries. Their analysis shows that only 11% of countries possess the most complete and robust STS, capable of supporting comprehensive tourism policies and economic planning. The study also highlights the urgent need for capacity building in lower-tier countries, where tourism statistics are rudimentary and insufficient for meaningful analysis. The authors advocate for international collaboration and targeted support to enhance the statistical capabilities of these nations, emphasizing that improved STS are essential for informed decision-making, effective policy formulation, and the overall development of the tourism sector. The significance of a globally harmonized approach to tourist data is highlighted by this research, as it is essential for precise cross-national comparisons and the strategic management of tourism at both the national and international levels.

3. METHODOLOGY FOR TOURISM STATISTICS AT A GLOBAL LEVEL

Various initiatives from international organizations have significantly influenced establishing and enhancing national statistical systems in tourism. These organizations have provided comprehensive frameworks and standardized methodologies to ensure the collection and analysis of reliable and comparable tourism data on a global level. The initiatives aim to address the diverse aspects of tourism statistics, including data definitions, classifications, and sources, thereby enhancing the consistency and comparability of data across different countries. By developing robust statistical frameworks, these organizations support countries in measuring the economic impact of tourism, understanding market trends, and formulating evidence-based policies. The collaborative efforts of international bodies such as the UNWTO, Eurostat, and the OECD have been pivotal in promoting best practices and fostering global cooperation in tourism statistics. Initiatives like these aid in accurately assessing tourism activities and facilitate better planning and strategic development, ultimately contributing to the sustainable growth of the tourism sector.

The following section provides an overview of key documents and initiatives that have shaped the global approach to tourism statistical systems.

1. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Standards
 - a. International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics (IRTS) (2008) (United Nations, 2010) - The document offers a comprehensive framework for collecting and compiling tourism statistics, providing guidelines that ensure data consistency and comparability across different countries. The IRTS 2008 addresses various aspects of tourism statistics, including definitions, classifications, and data sources.
 - b. Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework (2008) (UN et al., 2010) - The TSA framework is designed to measure the economic contribution of tourism to the national economy. It provides a structured approach to compiling tourism-related data, covering aspects such as tourism expenditures, production, employment, and gross value added.
2. Eurostat Initiatives
 - a. Methodological Manual on Tourism Statistics - The manual provides detailed guidelines for collecting, processing, and disseminating tourism statistics within the EU. It aims to harmonize the statistical practices of member states, facilitating accurate and comprehensive data collection.
 - b. Tourism Satellite Accounts in Europe (2016 Edition) (Eurostat, 2017) - Eurostat has undertaken initiatives to standardize the compilation of tourism statistics across European Union member states. The 2016 edition of this document outlines the methodologies for creating TSAs, ensuring that the data is reliable and comparable.
3. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018) Guidelines
 - a. OECD Tourism Trends and Policies - The OECD regularly publishes reports that provide insights into tourism policies and their effectiveness based on comprehensive data collection and analysis. These publications help countries benchmark their tourism performance and policy outcomes.
4. World Bank Initiative for Sustainable Tourism
 - a. Databank – The World Bank has developed a comprehensive Global Tourism Dashboard, a databank dedicated to tourism statistics. This platform compiles and standardizes tourism data from various countries, offering a global overview that facilitates cross-country comparisons. The Global Tourism Dashboard includes a wide range of indicators, such as tourist arrivals, tourism expenditures, and economic impact metrics.
 - b. Tourism for Development: Tourism Diagnostic Toolkit (Perrottet & Twining-Ward, 2019) – The Toolkit was developed under the Tourism for Development knowledge series and

is a vital resource for evaluating and enhancing the tourism sector. The Toolkit offers a structured approach to diagnosing a country's current state of tourism, focusing on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The practical guidelines provided in the toolkit help identify critical areas for improvement and strategic development. Access to this Toolkit ensures that countries can systematically assess their tourism potential and implement targeted actions to maximize economic benefits and enhance the overall tourism experience.

Initiatives and documents from various international and regional organizations have significantly advanced tourism statistical systems on a national level. Improved data collection methodologies, standardized guidelines, and enhanced statistical frameworks have collectively contributed to a better understanding of tourism trends and impacts. By adopting these advanced practices, countries can monitor and evaluate tourism activities more effectively, identify priority areas for development, and allocate resources efficiently. The detailed insights from robust tourism statistics also help craft targeted marketing strategies, improve infrastructure planning, and foster sustainable tourism practices. As a result, these advancements are vital in enhancing national tourism sectors' overall effectiveness and strategic planning.

4. TOURISM IN SERBIA – POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Serbia, situated in the Balkan Peninsula of Central Europe, boasts a diverse array of natural, geographical, historical, and climatic assets that create ideal conditions for developing various types of tourism. According to forecasts by the [UNWTO \(2021\)](#), these forms of tourism are expected to become leading trends in international travel in the coming years. Recognizing this potential, the Government of the Republic of Serbia has designated tourism as a priority sector for socio-economic growth and development, which is best exemplified by the adoption of the third Strategy for Tourism Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2016-2025 ([RS Official Gazette no. 98/2016](#)). However, despite the strategic focus and the country's rich resource base, Serbia's tourism sector underperforms relative to its capabilities and market opportunities. The key indicators show that tourism development lags well behind what could be achieved given the country's abundant resources and favorable conditions. Enhancing infrastructure, improving service quality, and promoting Serbia as a prime tourist destination are essential steps needed to capitalize on its full potential. Additionally, there is a need for comprehensive marketing strategies and more substantial international partnerships to boost Serbia's visibility on the global tourism stage. With targeted efforts and strategic investments, Serbia can bridge this gap and realize its vision of becoming a leading destination in the region.

Among the main problems in Serbian tourism is an outdated tourism strategy that has not adequately considered the digitalization of tourism marketing and management, leaving the sector lagging behind its regional competitors. Furthermore, the Strategy did not define specific market segments based on thorough market research, leading to a disconnect between tourism products and their target audiences. Also, the previous Strategy did not sufficiently recognize emerging tourist markets such as Asia and the Middle East, nor did it adapt to the changing dynamics brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the importance of regional tourists and visa-free travel arrangements. Despite these shortcomings, some aspects of the Strategy remain relevant. Key foreign markets for incoming tourism, such as regional and nearby EU countries, remain important. The strategic geographic clusters of Serbian tourism offerings are still in place, although coordination and support from regional tourism organizations are inconsistent, while efforts to digitalize the tourism industry, including implementing the *eTurista* platform, represent

a critical step forward. However, challenges in the platform's implementation, discrepancies in data collection, and a lack of consistent usage by accommodation providers indicate that more work is needed to integrate this tool fully into the national statistical system.

The legal framework supporting tourism development has also been improved, including introducing new laws and strategic marketing plans. However, the absence of a comprehensive reporting system and regular evaluations of the Strategy's progress has hindered the effective monitoring and adjustment of tourism policies. While Serbia has made strides in certain areas of tourism development, significant challenges remain. Addressing these issues through updated strategies, improved digitalization, targeted marketing, and better coordination among stakeholders is essential for realizing the full potential of Serbia's tourism sector.

Given the information provided above, it is feasible to offer suitable suggestions. Serbia should enhance digitalization in tourism marketing and management through advanced digital tools and platforms. Conducting thorough market research to define and reach specific tourist segments and increasing efforts to attract tourists from emerging markets such as Asia and the Middle East are essential. Investing in infrastructure improvements to support and enhance the tourist experience and building stronger international partnerships with international tourism organizations and neighboring countries are crucial. Establishing regular evaluations and a comprehensive reporting system to monitor and adjust tourism policies effectively is necessary. Additionally, developing targeted promotional strategies to boost Serbia's visibility as a prime tourist destination on the global stage and enhancing tourism data quality and availability are vital steps to realize Serbia's tourism potential fully.

For Serbia to achieve its goals in national tourism and address all identified shortcomings, it must have comprehensive and high-quality tourism data. In the following section, an overview of the current state of this field in 2024 will be presented.

5. ASSESSMENT OF THE TOURISM DATA QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY IN SERBIA

5.1. Methodology & data

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) guidelines for establishing and assessing national tourist data are followed in the present research. The methodology is based on the adherence to two primary UN statistical standards: the International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008 and the Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework 2008. These standards ensure that the tourism statistics collected are accurate, reliable, and internationally comparable, which is essential for effective policy-making and economic analysis.

The need for a robust statistical framework, guided by established principles, became particularly evident during the 1980s when Central European countries transitioned from centrally planned economies to market-oriented democracies. The Conference of European Statisticians developed the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in 1991 to ensure that these emerging economies could produce reliable and appropriate data. These principles, adopted at the ministerial level by the European Economic Commission in 1992, have since been recognized for their broader global relevance, underscoring the importance of reliable statistics in supporting democratic governance, economic stability, and public trust.

The data collection process involved developing and disseminating a detailed questionnaire designed based on Eurostat's Methodological Manual for Tourism Statistics (Eurostat, 2014, Version 3.1.),

the UN's International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics 2008, and the Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework 2008. The questionnaire aimed to assess compliance with these international standards among the Western Balkan economies (WB6). It covered the following key segments: (a) Basic tourism statistical concepts; (b) Supply-side data: Accommodation statistics; (c) Demand-side data: Participation in tourism, tourism trips, and visitors, including same-day visits; (d) Tourism expenditure data, (e) Employment in the tourism industries, (f) Tourism Satellite Account; (g) International data dissemination practices and (h) International sustainable tourism indicators. The survey was conducted between mid-December 2021 and the end of January 2022, targeting statistical agencies across all WB6 economies. The collected responses were synthesized and analyzed based on the segments outlined above, providing a comprehensive evaluation of the region's current state and development level of tourism statistics. Bearing that this research focuses on the Republic of Serbia, only the answers from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia are presented with an update in August 2024.

5.2. Results

Basic Tourism Statistical Concepts – The Ministry for Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia and the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia serve as the central authority responsible for collecting, processing, and disseminating official tourism statistics in the country. While ongoing efforts have improved the scope and quality of data coverage, significant challenges remain in fully aligning Serbia's statistical systems with the European Union acquis, particularly regarding internal tourism statistics. Serbia has made strides in collecting and transmitting critical internal tourism data, such as tourist accommodation establishments' capacity and occupancy rates. However, the existing statistical framework has yet to fully incorporate critical elements like same-day visits and outbound tourism data. These gaps highlight areas that require further development and enhancement to fully comply with international standards, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive and accurate representation of tourism activities.

Supply Side: Accommodation Statistics - Serbia has established a relatively robust system for collecting data on the capacity and occupancy of tourist accommodation establishments, encompassing essential variables such as the number of establishments, bed places, and bedrooms. The statistical coverage for these variables is reasonably comprehensive, aligning with the basic requirements outlined in the European Union's Methodological Manual for Tourism Statistics. Despite this progress, significant room remains for improvement, particularly in capturing data related to non-rented accommodation, which continues to be underreported. Moreover, while compliance with EU standards regarding the classification of accommodation establishments is generally high, the data collection process could be further refined. Expanding the classification categories to include more detailed distinctions, such as facilities that cater to persons with reduced mobility, would enhance the granularity and usefulness of the collected data.

Demand Side: Participation in Tourism, Tourism Trips, and Visitors, Including Same-Day Visits - Serbia's national statistics on tourism demand provide coverage of essential variables, including the number of residents participating in tourism, the primary purposes of trips, and the means of transport and accommodation utilized. However, the current framework lacks detailed breakdowns for same-day visits, expenditure categories, and socio-demographic variables, which are crucial for a more nuanced understanding of tourism demand. Integrating these additional variables into Serbia's data collection processes would significantly enhance the comprehensiveness and depth of tourism demand statistics, providing more valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders.

Employment in the Tourism Industries - Employment statistics within Serbia's tourism sector are currently limited in scope, with the primary focus on permanent and temporary employment figures expressed in terms of the number of jobs and hours worked. Other critical variables, such as employment distribution by age group, educational attainment, and the type of establishment, are not yet fully incorporated into the statistical system. Serbia needs to broaden its data collection framework to include these additional variables to improve the reliability, depth, and utility of employment statistics within the tourism sector. Aligning with international best practices and guidelines will ensure that the employment data collected is comprehensive and reflects the sector's dynamics.

Tourism Satellite Account - Initial efforts to develop a TSA in Serbia were undertaken with a survey on domestic visitor consumption conducted in 2009. However, despite these efforts, the TSA has not yet been fully integrated into the country's official statistical system. Establishing a fully operational TSA is crucial for Serbia to more accurately measure the economic impact of tourism, offering a detailed framework for assessing tourism's contributions to GDP, employment, and other key macroeconomic indicators. The planned survey on tourism demand-side data in 2023 marks a positive advancement towards this goal. However, sustained efforts will be necessary to embed TSA as a regular and integral component of Serbia's national statistics, thereby enabling a more holistic understanding of the tourism sector's economic significance.

International Data Dissemination - Serbia has been actively submitting tourism data to several key international organizations, including Eurostat, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC). However, to further enhance the visibility and comparability of Serbia's tourism statistics on a global scale, there is a need to expand the dissemination of data to additional international bodies and platforms. Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on improving compliance with Eurostat's metadata quality assessment and reporting methodologies. Ensuring that Serbia's tourism data meets these stringent international standards will enhance the country's published data's consistency, reliability, and global credibility.

6. CONCLUSION

The assessment of Serbia's national tourism statistical system highlights notable achievements and areas requiring further enhancement. Significant progress has been made in aligning tourism statistics with international standards, especially regarding data collection for accommodation statistics and participation in tourism. However, challenges persist in fully integrating comprehensive demand-side data, such as same-day visits and outbound tourism, into the statistical framework. The absence of this data limits the ability to capture a complete understanding of tourism activities and their economic impacts.

Developing a TSA remains crucial for enhancing Serbia's tourism statistics. Initial efforts, such as the 2009 survey on domestic visitor consumption, laid the groundwork, but TSA is not yet fully embedded within the national statistical system. Establishing a TSA would enable a more accurate measurement of tourism's contributions to the national economy, including impacts on GDP, employment, and other macroeconomic indicators. Such a framework is essential for informed decision-making and strategic planning, both critical for sustainable tourism development.

Serbia has also shown commendable efforts in international data dissemination, regularly submitting data to organizations like Eurostat and UNWTO. To improve global visibility and comparability

of tourism statistics further expansion of dissemination efforts and enhanced compliance with Eurostat's metadata quality assessments and reporting methodologies are recommended. Ensuring accuracy, reliability, and consistency with international standards will significantly benefit the country's tourism data.

It is also essential to highlight the issue encountered by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia regarding data input by caterers on the *eTurista* platform. The quality control revealed that caterers frequently input data mechanically, lacking awareness of its significance, by selecting the first choice presented in the guest registration questionnaire. To address this issue, investing effort in training and enhancing caterers' awareness regarding the need for precise input is essential.

In conclusion, Serbia's national tourism statistical system has demonstrated substantial progress, particularly in aligning accommodation statistics and participation data with international standards. However, to fully achieve best practices, further actions are required. Key priorities should include fully integrating a TSA for precise measurement of tourism's economic impact, expanding demand-side data collection to encompass same-day visits and outbound tourism, and enhancing the quality and consistency of international data dissemination. Addressing challenges such as the mechanical data input on the *eTurista* platform through targeted training and awareness initiatives will also be crucial for improving data reliability. Advancing these areas will elevate the overall quality and utility of Serbia's tourism statistics, enabling more effective policy-making, better resource allocation, and the sustainable growth of the tourism sector. These efforts will help position Serbia as a competitive and informed player in the global tourism market. Continuous refinement of the statistical framework is essential to harness the full potential of the country's diverse tourism resources.

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