

# Possibilities and Opportunities of Wine Tourism Development in the Cross-Border Region of Greece-Bulgaria Through the Protection of Traditional Vine Varieties

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Wine tourism as an alternative form of tourism is developed in rural areas with significant wine production. But rural areas are usually not characterized by dynamic local economies. Therefore the contribution of wine tourism to regional development is important. In the region we will focus on the present paper, i.e., the countries of Greece and Bulgaria, where the tradition in viticulture and production of quality wines is long. Especially in the cross-border area of Greece-Bulgaria, wine production is very remarkable. The project “VineSOS-SOS for endangered traditional vine varieties” implemented and funded by the Program “Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020” identified local grape varieties in danger of extinction. In addition, a comprehensive intervention mechanism was formed for greater protection and sustainability of these varieties. The next step after the protection and promotion of these varieties is their utilization for the region with the development of a common wine tourism product for the cross-border area of Greece-Bulgaria. The present research seeks to utilize the results of the VineSOS project to develop a proposal for wine tourism development in the cross-border region of Greece-Bulgaria as a single tourist product. The main hypothesis of our research concerns the investigation and formulation of a strategy for the development of wine tourism in the cross-border region of Greece-Bulgaria based on the rare vine varieties found in the region. The development of this strategy emerges through the study of the international literature on wine tourism and the study of good practices at the international level, as well as through the special features of the cross-border area of Greece-Bulgaria.

*Keywords:* wine tourism, extinct vine varieties, Greece-Bulgaria cross-border area

## Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the possibilities and opportunities for the development of wine tourism in the cross-border area of Greece-Bulgaria through the protection of traditional vine varieties. The aim is to utilize the results of the project “VineSOS-SOS for endangered traditional vine varieties” to develop a proposal for the development of wine tourism as a single tourist product.

The main hypothesis of the paper is to find the appropriate strategy to enhance the attractiveness and development of wine tourism in the cross-border area of Greece-Bulgaria. Traditional vine varieties thrive in the study area, but are threatened with decline or even extinction, as a result of the introduction of new varieties

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and modern wine production techniques. The VineSOS project seeks to address the region's main problems and challenges related to local biodiversity and vine varieties.

The methodology followed is the review of the wine tourism literature, but also the study of successful cases of wine tourism development, specifically in cross-border areas. Through the study of these cases, but also the evaluation of the special conditions that prevail in the study area, the development of an appropriate strategy for the wine tourism development is sought. The strategy emerged using SWOT analysis, a useful strategic planning tool used to analyze the internal and external environment.

## **Literature Review**

### **Special and Alternative Forms of Tourism**

The negative effects of mass tourism and environmental awareness in the late 1980s led to the realization of the need to set limits to uncontrolled growth. The concept of "alternative tourism" has been a promising solution, as it has fewer negative effects on the environment and culture in the destination areas, without, however, reducing the positive economic impact on these areas (Smith & Eadington, 1992). Thus, sustainable tourism development and alternative tourism emerged as opposite concepts to conventional mass tourism, as mass tourism had begun to receive constant criticism due to its social and environmental impacts (Weaver, 1991). Unlike mass tourism, alternative tourism is based on small groups of visitors, families, and even individual visitors, while alternative tourism activities can take place all year round (Dodds, 2005).

In general, we can say that alternative tourism: "is considered as an alternative to tourism massification and therefore has different implications and development practices" (Andriotis, 2008, p. 141). Some basic principles for a better approach of alternative tourism are: (a) It should be based on a dialogue with the local population, which should be informed about its results, (b) it should be environmentally friendly and respect the local culture and religious tradition, (c) it should adjust the scale of tourism in the bearing capacity of the local area, measured from an aesthetic and ecological point of view (Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017).

Along with the emergence of alternative tourism, there was a shift in the tourists' preferences, who began to seek more "active" and "of specific interests" activities during their stay in tourist destinations. To meet these needs, alternative forms of tourism, often referred to as "special interest tourism" or "special forms of tourism", began to be developed (Tsartas et al., 2010). The term refers to "specialized tourism that includes groups or individuals who wish to develop specific interests, by visiting sites and places related to a specific topic" (Rittichainuwat, 2018, p. 8).

### **Conceptual Approach to Wine Tourism**

Tourism as a dynamic phenomenon is constantly changing due to various social, cultural, economic, political factors, as well as natural and technological. These changes have led to an increased interest in new forms of tourism, in which wine tourism has a special place (Bibicioiu & Cretu, 2013). The tourism markets have become extremely competitive and segmented into specific niche markets. In such competitive tourism markets, wine tourism in some areas has become a strategic choice for the development of tourist destinations (Bojnec, Jurinčič, & Tomljenovic, 2007).

Wine tourism is both a form of consumer behavior and a strategy by which destinations develop and promote wine-related attractions and images, as well as a marketing opportunity for wineries to sell their products directly to consumers (Alebaki & Iakovidou, 2011). Wine tourism is widely recognized as a unique

tourism product for visitors looking for an authentic multidimensional experience, but at the same time represents an innovative business opportunity for small wine producers who want to expand their wine production and meet international demand (Škrbić, Jegdić, Milošević, & Tomka, 2015).

The term “wine tourism” has emerged in recent years as a form of special interest tourism, and is often associated with the theory of sustainability (Montella, 2017). Wine tourism can be defined as: “a visitation to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals, and wine shows for which grape-wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grape-wine region are the prime motivating factors for visitor” (Hall & Mitchell, 2000, p. 447). The above definition suggests that in addition to wine and viticulture, wine tourism is characterized by the entire wine region and its characteristics (Alebaki & Iakovidou, 2011).

Wine tourism represents a whole system of products and services based on or related to winemaking, in order to meet the needs of tourism. This is why it incorporates many products: wine, winemaking with sampling capability, events, wine routes, souvenirs, training courses and workshops, gastronomy, etc. The competitiveness of modern wine tourism requires the quality of wine, but also the quality of the integral tourist product—authenticity, interaction, and wholeness of the tourist experience (Škrbić et al., 2015).

The literature shows that sustainable wine tourism is closely linked to the culture and distinctive features of the local community and the place (Montella, 2017). Wine tourism has the potential to play an important role in national and regional sustainable tourism development plans by contributing to the preservation of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of the regions (Hall & Mitchell, 2000, p. 447). The wine tourism industry should combine ethical and resource conservation issues with the needs and culture of the local community in order to pursue a diversification of the rural economy (Montella, 2017).

Petroman et al. (2020) summarize the advantages and disadvantages of wine tourism for the main stakeholders such as farmers, producers, tourists, and the local population, as presented below.

- Farmers: Advantages: (a) possibility of direct sales, (b) selling to large groups, (c) consumer loyalty. Disadvantages: (a) investment in product presentation units, (b) additional costs with testing, (c) limited quantities of products sold.

- Producers: Advantages: (a) possibilities of presenting new varieties, (b) customers trust and loyalty relationships, (c) diversification of consumers, (d) diversification of production according to market trends. Disadvantages: (a) production risks due to high tourist flow, (b) opportunity costs, (c) investments in tasting rooms.

- Wine tourists: Advantages: (a) direct communication with growers, processors, (b) training in the art of wine, (c) attractive prices for wine producers, (d) special experiences. Disadvantages: (a) high prices for presentations, tastings, (b) transport requirements, (c) high prices for accommodation services.

- Local population: Advantages: (a) superior use of the rural landscape, (b) multiplier effect of wine tourism on the sustainable development of the destination, (c) integration of the tourist product in a historical, natural, cultural cycle, (d) economic development of rural areas, (e) promotion of the area as a tourist destination. Disadvantages: (a) benefits for travel agents and tour operators, (b) environmental problems through large flows of wine producers, (c) risk of developing mass tourism.

### **The Evolution of Wine Tourism**

The idea of wine tourism is not recent. The first reference to wine tourism is a “wine road” (“Weinstraße”) which took place in Germany in 1935 when, as a result of poor cultivation, Josef Bürekel had the idea to

connect the vineyard villages in the area of Rhineland-Palatinate, in order to encourage wine sales. All local roads along this route were renamed by adding “Weinstraße” to their names and local municipalities used the term “an der Weinstraße” in their site names (Bibicioiu & Cretu, 2013). This initiative helped to inform the public about German wines, but also to promote sales, while until the late 1970s the 11 Rhineland-Palatinate wine regions had their own wine roads (Hall & Mitchell, 2000). The evolution of wine tourism, of course, differs from region to region. For example, in the Napa Valley region of the USA, this form of tourism started in 1975, after some coordinated marketing efforts. During the 1970s, the effort to promote Italy’s wine tourism product under the name “Strade dei vini e deisapor” (“Wine and Taste Roads”) also began (Bibicioiu & Cretu, 2013).

More recently, Eastern European countries, such as Hungary, have begun to create wine routes in an effort to attract Western European tourists (Hall & Mitchell, 2000). In other regions, such as Catalonia in Spain, wine tourism marketing began in the mid-2000s, with an emphasis on how such a form of tourism could be an alternative to mass beach-to-sun tourism. In France, the first studies to obtain quality information on wine tourism routes, local products, and stakeholders, as well as marketing and advertising budgets, began only in 2000 (Bibicioiu & Cretu, 2013).

### **Literature Review of Wine Tourism Development**

Many wine-producing regions and tourist destinations find that the benefits of wine tourism extend far beyond wine-producers in almost all regions of the regional economy (Carlsen, 2004). It is considered as a tool for promoting the sustainable development of an area, utilizing natural and social attractions, contributing to the economic development of the areas, and integrating the tourism product in a specific destination (Petroman et al., 2020). However, academic interest in this field is recent, as the first relevant research began to be published at the beginning of the millennium (Carlsen, 2004).

For example, Hall and Mitchell (2000) study the development of wine tourism in the Mediterranean region, identifying some critical points: (a) the often secondary or tertiary nature of tourism as an activity in the wine industry, (b) a predominant focus on winemakers and traders, (c) a general lack of experience and understanding in the wine tourism industry and a consequent lack of business skills marketing and product development, service quality and understanding of consumer behaviour, and (d) the lack of effective intersectoral links and supplier networks, leading to a lack of inter- and intra-organizational coherence within the wine industry, and between the wine industry and the tourism industry.

Bojnec et al. (2007) examine the case of the Slovenian wine product. The research showed that the development and marketing of wine tourism is caused by the level of development of the tourist destination and the overall economic development in the areas that are important for the local tourist requirements. The development of tourist destinations and the development of tourist infrastructure are important elements that integrate wine tourism in the wider tourist destination.

Getz and Brown (2006) studied wine tourists’ views on the attractive characteristics of destinations. The survey found that they prefer destinations that offer a wide range of cultural and outdoor attractions. It was also found that there are significant differences between the perceptions of consumers and industry professionals about the critical success factors for tourist destinations. Those in charge of developing destinations may be prone to overemphasis on the attractiveness of wine or wineries, rather than the cultural and recreational experiences that consumers desire. The researchers conclude that the “experience” that the visitor will

experience in the area is certainly more important than specific attractions and products.

Specifically in the cross-border areas, which are the object of interest of the present work, the research of Renko et al. (2014) explores the possibilities of cross-border programs for the development and promotion of wine growing and consequently tourism. Researchers place particular emphasis on processes and actions that support the development of cultural characteristics, traditional values, and local identity. Research shows that cultural heritage and national identities rely heavily on local products and traditions. Therefore, wine route events can act as mediators of cultural identity, especially when wine businesses are closely linked to the region and its traditions. Wine routes can be an integral part of the country's image, attracting new market segments. Partnership and cooperation emerge as a critical success factor in local/regional development and in the strengthening of cultural identity.

### **Best Practices in Wine Tourism Development**

In Europe and around the world, many areas and regions benefit from the popularity of wine for their local and regional development (Stoykova, 2009). Wine tourism is highly developed in the famous wine-growing regions of the world, such as Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and California (Blazheska & Nickova, 2016).

For example, Italy offers 98 wine routes and is ranked No. 1 on the list of Europe's most famous wine producers. The Italian experience is based on a well-functioning system that includes a wide range of facilities in various sectors, applying certain management principles that have been introduced to ensure the quality and maintenance of wine routes. Most facilities are based on private initiatives, such as the "Movimento Turismo del Vino", which have long defined the economic potential of wine, and help the rapid development of tourism in the region. In fact, hospitality, unconventional methods, and unique souvenirs are what make Italy competitive in the huge European market (Stoykova, 2009).

At European Union level there are many projects designed to help wine-growing regions and wine tourism. For example, many Portuguese entrepreneurs involved in wine tourism are supported by the European Fund in an effort to improve tourism infrastructure and competition in Portugal, which is an important sector of its economy. An example of a co-operation and wine tourism project supported by the European Regional Development Fund of the EU (ERDF) is WINTRANET applicable in certain regions of Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Germany. The project aims to preserve the tradition of wine production as an important part of European culture. According to the ERDF, wine production is an important economic activity that gives a unique identity to the regions involved in wine cultivation throughout Europe. Wine cultivation can be used to strengthen regional and European identity, to develop cultural tourism, but also for educational purposes (Blazheska & Nickova, 2016).

A typical example of good practice in the development of wine tourism in the context of cross-border cooperation is that of cooperation between Slovakia and Hungary on wine and tourism. According to UNESCO, the wine production of the Hungarian village of Hercegkút and the neighboring Slovak village of Malý Horeš has great potential for attracting tourists and boosting the local economy in the cross-border area. However, due to the lack of basic infrastructure (such as paths, accessible toilets, event venues, tourist services, etc.), it was difficult for the area to attract tourists' interest. Through the EU cross-border cooperation program between the villages of Hercegkút and Malý Horeš, the potential of the region was exploited, the lack of infrastructure was improved, and joint tourism packages were developed for both regions. Since these investments were made,

there has been great local development in the region. The increased tourism created by the project has had a major impact on local people and has improved their ability to live in the area. Today there are two major wine tasting festivals with open cellars in both Hercegkút and Malý Horeš. The festivals attract many visitors and allow small local winemakers to market and sell their wines. In total, about 3,000-5,000 people visit these areas each year. In Malý Horeš, there are currently 300 active winemakers making wine based on traditional methods. An NGO of about 20 members has also been set up to help support small-scale wineries in both areas (Interact, 2018).

### **The Cross-Border Area of Greece-Bulgaria and the VineSOS Project**

Cross-border and transnational cooperation represent sources of knowledge and inputs for local development. Integrated approach and cooperation between different parties, countries or regions/territories are the main factors for increasing the added value and competitiveness of the agricultural sector, thus contributing to the creation of social capital (Contò, Fiore, & La Sala, 2012). In particular, Greece's cooperation with neighboring Bulgaria is of interest, mainly due to the dynamics that are developing on the northern borders of Greece, given the enlargement of the EU and the economic and political transformation of Bulgaria (Georpalidou, 2010).

In the framework of the European Territorial Cooperation Program Interreg V-A "Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020", the project "VineSOS-SOS for endangered traditional vine varieties" attempts to address the main problems and challenges of the Greek-Bulgarian cross-border area related to local biodiversity and vine varieties, especially those located within areas of the Natura 2000 network.

Climate change and human activity—especially those related to agriculture, tourism, and urban development—threaten the high level of local biodiversity. In particular, local vine varieties are threatened with decline or even extinction, as a result of the introduction of new varieties and modern wine production techniques. The main objective of the project is to promote a comprehensive intervention mechanism for long-term preservation of vines. It also aims to create a cross-border policy for the conservation of local vine varieties, which will be based on molecular data and data from field research.

The areas participating in the project are for Greece: Evros, Xanthi, Rodopi, Drama, Thessaloniki, and Serres and for Bulgaria: Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Kardzhali, and Haskovo.

The main target groups and final beneficiaries of the project will be: national, regional, and local authorities working in the field of environmental protection, biodiversity protection, agriculture, viticulture, protected area management bodies, research institutes, environmental NGOs, branches of organizations, local population—farmers, viticulturists in the eligible areas of both Bulgaria and Greece.

The project includes the following activities:

- Activity 1. Project management & coordination,
- Activity 2. Communication & dissemination,
- Activity 3. Diagnosis and project strategy planning,
- Activity 4. Sustainability and value added measures,
- Activity 5. Development of training center,
- Activity 6. Activities outside the eligible area.

### Local Vine Varieties of the Cross-Border Region of Greece-Bulgaria and Their Opportunities for Utilization in Wine Tourism

The vines belong to the genus *Vitis vinifera* of the Vitaceae family and according to the World Wine Organization there are over 10,000 grape varieties, of which 33 represent half of the world production. They thrive in temperate climates and are found all over the world from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere.

Cross-border Greek-Bulgarian region studied in this paper has unique characteristics related to natural capital and the climatic conditions. The area offers unique conditions for the development of a sustainable grape cultivation and wine production. There are also certain traditional varieties that are threatened with extinction. Table 1 presents the endangered varieties in the two cross-border areas of Greece and Bulgaria.

Table 1

#### *Vine Varieties Threatened With Extinction in the Cross-Border Areas of Greece and Bulgaria*

White varieties		Red varieties	
Variety	Area	Variety	Area
Bulgaria			
Tamyanka	Haskovo	Bouquet	Haskovo
Riesling Bulgarian	Haskovo	Shevka	Haskovo
Keratsuda	Blagoevgrad	Misket cherven	Haskovo
Gergana	Haskovo	Mavrud	Haskovo and Blagoevgrad
Dimyat	Kardzhali	Ruen	Blagoevgrad
Misket Sandanski	Blagoevgrad	Shiroka melnishka loza	Haskovo
		Pamid	Kardzhali
		Rubin	Haskovo and Blagoevgrad
		Melnishki rubin	Blagoevgrad
Greece			
Zoumiatiko ή Damiatis	Serres and Xanthi	Pamidi	Thraki
Aleponoura	Soufli (Evros)	Limnio	Thessaloniki, Xanthi, and Rodopi
Asrpouda Serron	Serres	Serres	Serres
Keratsouda	Thraki	Serres	Serres
		Trinka	Serres
		Mavroudi	Thraki
		Karapapas	Thraki
		Bogialamas	Thraki
		Karnachalas	Thraki

Source: VineSOS: <https://www.vinesos.com/>.

The above varieties can be utilized in the context of the development of wine tourism in the region, as they are a unique local feature. The promotion of the area can be done by emphasizing the local varieties, satisfying the demand of the visitors for unique experiences.

#### **Wine Tourism Development Strategy in the Cross-Border Area of Greece-Bulgaria**

Creating successful strategies should include a long-term planning for the effective management of internal and external environmental factors. A successful strategy is the key to meeting competition and building visitor loyalty to a particular tourism product or service. Table 2 presents the SWOT analysis, which

lists both the strengths and weaknesses of the area, as well as the threats and opportunities of the external environment.

Table 2

*SWOT Analysis for the Development of Wine Tourism in the Cross-Border Area of Greece-Bulgaria*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local traditional varieties and methods</li> <li>• Local identity</li> <li>• Natural environment</li> <li>• Cross-border cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of infrastructure</li> <li>• Lack of experience and training</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VineSOS program</li> <li>• Increasing popularity of alternative/special forms of tourism</li> <li>• Increasing popularity of wine tourism</li> <li>• Changes in the needs of tourists: search for unique local characteristics and “experience”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great competition</li> <li>• Economic crisis</li> <li>• Health crisis (COVID-19 pandemic)</li> </ul>

The study area has the special feature, compared to other wine tourism development areas, that it extends to two different countries. A feature that was, until the 1990s, a deterrent to the development of the region, turned into a comparative advantage for it with the borders opening. Of course, the cross-border nature of the region presupposes that the efforts for the region’s promotion should be made on the basis of good cooperation between the two countries. It is up to the local authorities to work together, following a common line of action.

The development of wine tourism in the study area should be based mainly on the promotion of unique traditional varieties and traditional methods of cultivation and wine production. Also, these are areas with a special natural environment that has not been altered by tourism, while they have a strong local identity.

However, the weaknesses of the area should include the lack of appropriate infrastructure, but also the lack of appropriate experience and training by all stakeholders (farmers, local population, winemakers, local authorities, etc.).

Within the framework of the VineSOS project, a series of activities are being implemented, which can be utilized in parallel with the efforts for the promotion of wine tourism in the region. The increasing popularity of alternative/special forms of tourism, and in particular wine tourism, combined with the changes in the needs of visitors—who are looking for unique experiences, are important opportunities for the region.

Threats in the external environment should include the difficulties arising from economic crisis that have seriously affected both countries, and the current health crisis of COVID-19 disease which has affected the tourism market dramatically worldwide.

The tourism development strategy in the region should include concrete steps, which will exploit and highlight the strengths of the region, reduce the weaknesses, take advantage of the opportunities of the environment, and provide mechanisms for resilience against threats.

Initially, the traditional wineries of the area should be recorded and a database should be created, which will be updated and monitored. Incentives should also be provided for capital investments for the renovation and upgrading of traditional winery facilities, as they are important tourist resources of the region.

The two countries should work together to promote joint tourism packages to visitors with a special interest in wine tourism. Therefore, investments need to be made in the field of promotion by both public authorities and private companies.

Finally, special emphasis should be placed on the special tourist products that interest the specific tourist target-groups: creation of cross-border wine routes, tasting events, festivals, souvenirs, etc., emphasizing the uniqueness and cross-border nature of the area.

### Conclusions

The cross-border area of Greece-Bulgaria has great potential for the development of wine tourism, mainly due to the tradition that exists in the viticulture/winemaking sector and the traditional vine varieties that thrive in the area. The VineSOS project is an important opportunity for the preservation of traditional vine varieties and traditional wine production methods; however, it can also be an important opportunity for the development of wine tourism in the region.

A successful wine tourism development strategy in the Greece-Bulgaria cross-border region should be based on a number of key directions:

- Good cooperation and joint actions from both countries,
- Utilization of local endangered vine varieties,
- Utilization of the results of the VineSOS project,
- Recording of the traditional wineries of the area—database creation,
- Selection and renovation—upgrade of the facilities of traditional wineries,
- Creation of cross-border wine routes, tasting events, festivals, souvenirs, etc.,
- Investments in marketing.

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