

ARE PARTNERSHIPS ENHANCING TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS?

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Abstract

The competitiveness and networking in tourism destinations is a well discussed topic among tourism scholars. However, the influence of partnerships of destination stakeholders on tourism competitiveness is under-researched. This paper contributes to the recent debate on partnerships and tourism destination competitiveness, including the gargantuan compilations of competitiveness factors by Ritchie and Crouch (2003), or Dwyer and Kim (2003), by examining the link among these two variables. The central question underlying this paper is whether partnerships of private and public sector stakeholders contribute to the destination competitiveness. The analysis is based on the quantification of destinations' competitiveness in Slovakia and the level of partnership by the creation of the partnership index. The paper concludes that the level of partnership positively affects the destination competitiveness.

Keywords: competitiveness, destination management organization, governance, partnership, stakeholders, tourism destination

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there have been a growing number of initiatives among tourism researchers that discuss the need for monitoring destination competitiveness (Kozak and Rimmington, 1999; Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Bahar and Kozak, 2007; Mazanec et al., 2007; Zehrer et al., 2017) and the networking approach in tourism (e.g. Baggio et al., 2010; Beritelli and Bieger, 2014; Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010; Hristov and Zehrer, 2015). The debate on destination competitiveness within tourism research has not yet settled on a widely accepted concept. Agreement is likely to

be reached on a comprehensive interpretation as proposed by Ritchie and Crouch (2003, p. 2): "*What makes a tourism destination truly competitive is its ability to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences, and to do so in a profitable way, while enhancing the well-being of destination residents and preserving the natural capital of the of the destination for future generations*".

The concepts of partnerships and destination competitiveness were examined separately in domestic and foreign literature. What the current literature does not explore in depth is how productive partnerships of public and private sector contribute

to overall destination competitiveness. Therefore this research addresses the research gap identified.

Competitiveness of Tourism Destinations

Destination competitiveness is frequently discussed among numerous authors (e.g. Crouch and Ritchie 1994, 1995, 1999; Ritchie and Crouch 1993, 2000, 2003; Ritchie, Crouch and Hudson, 2001; Dwyer and Kim 2003, Enright and Newton 2004; Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto 2005; Mazanec, Wöber and Zins, 2007).

Crouch and Ritchie (1993, 2003) created the most frequently cited concept of destination competitiveness in tourism. Authors emphasize on destination's ability to provide higher quality travel experiences to the visitors than other competing destinations. The model consists of comprehensive list of indicators combining subjective consumer measures and objective industry measures for each of 32 destination competitiveness components. These components are based on five pillars: core resources and attractions, supporting factors and resources, destination planning, policy and development, destination management and limiting factors. Similar to Ritchie and Crouch; Dwyer and Kim (2003) introduced another holistic approach of determinants and indicators that define destination competitiveness. They built on the Ritchie and Crouch (2003) Conceptual model and add the demand perspective to their Integrated model of destination competitiveness.

As the importance of destination competitiveness was recognized academically and practically, some researchers elaborated on the original conceptual model of destination competitiveness (e.g. Crouch and Ritchie, 2003; Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Mazanec *et al.*, 2007) and other researchers verified the models empirically (e.g. Crouch, 2010; d'Hauterterre, 2000; Enright and Newton, 2004, 2005; Gomezelj and Mihalič, 2008; Kozak and Rimmington, 1999). These authors drawn upon managerial implication especially to destination management organizations (DMOs) but practically to all stakeholders (tourism businesses, government etc.).

Nevertheless, the academic debate on tourism destinations is nowadays shifting to networking approach. Tourism networks can be classified as business networks, policy networks and cooperating networks (Van der Zee and Vaneste, 2015; Marquez and Santos, 2017). In tourism destinations the cooperating networks are dominant, where cooperation or partnership of

destination stakeholders is observed. Nowadays, the partnerships of stakeholders in tourism destination are considered as the basis for their effective tourism development and source of competitive advantage for further tourism development (Czernek, 2013; Zee and Vanneste, 2015; Valente *et al.*, 2015).

Long's (1997, In Caffyn, 2000) definition of partnership highlights the fact that partnership is a commitment of autonomous stakeholders from different sectors of economy, sharing common values and the decision to jointly participate in the tourism development. The OECD (2001) considers the partnership as an effective tool of tourism development that coordinates tourism policy and ensures its adaptation to local conditions and stimulates the participation of private sector in process of tourism development. We agree that partnerships in tourism destination present the one of the possible strategies for their management and the key tool for tourism development (Adcock *et al.*, 2001).

As Czernek (2012) points out, awareness of the key success factors of partnerships in the tourism destinations is more important in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which do not have enough positive examples of partnerships and the history of their establishment is relatively short. The comprehensive approach to the examination of factors determining the functioning of partnerships is presented by Magadan and Rivas (In Gursoy *et al.*, 2015). The authors consider as the key factors legitimacy of partnership in tourism destinations, its stable funding, the necessity to engage key stakeholders from the public, private and non-profit sector participating in tourism development, awareness of the interdependence of various stakeholders, trust, communication, the ability to think in the long-term perspective, expertise and professionalism. From the above-mentioned factors of partnerships, the authors focus mainly on the area of financing (e.g. Beritelli, Bieger, Laesser, 2013, Medvedová, 2015), professionalism of management of partnership (e.g. Vaniček, 2017, van der Zee *et al.*, 2017), social ties between members of partnerships (e.g. Czakon and Czernek, 2016) and their legitimacy (e.g. Marianni, 2016.).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the paper is to examine whether existing partnerships of public and private sector in tourism enhance the competitiveness of tourism destinations. The empirical research examines

the performance of local destination management organizations in tourism destinations in the Slovak republic.

The research is based on secondary and primary data. The competitiveness of Slovak destinations is based on the secondary data. The criteria were chosen based on the Ritchie and Crouch (2003) Conceptual Model and Dwyer and Kim (2003) Integrated model of destination competitiveness. The core resources and attractions are represented by the level destination attractiveness based on the Tourism Regionalisation of the Slovak Republic (2005). The supporting factors and resources are represented by number of beds in the destination, published by the Slovak Statistical Office, as the key factor of tourism infrastructure. Destination policy, planning and development is represented by financial resources aimed at tourism development in the destinations, published by Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak republic, and the level of development of destination management is represented by the level of cooperation in product development in the destination based on the annual reports of DMOs. The demand perspective is expressed by number of overnight stays in the destination, published by the Slovak Statistical Office.

The primary data were collected by a questionnaire survey conducted between September 2017 and December 2017. The aim of the survey was to identify the qualitative characteristics of existing partnerships of private

and public sector. The structured questionnaire was distributed personally and via e-mail to all local DMOs (36) and their members (843). Using the Likert scale, respondents should evaluate (1 very bad, 5 very good) selected aspects – (1) the level of professionalism of management of local DMOs, (2) the degree of cooperation within the DMOs as well as non-members outside the DMOs' membership base, (3) the level of internal communication among members of DMOs, (4) the unity in DMOs' future orientation and (5) the impact of the local DMOs on the tourism development in destinations. From these characteristics the partnership index was created.

In order to quantify the competitiveness of Slovak tourism destinations, a factor analysis/ principal component analysis of selected competitiveness criteria was performed. A minimum standard which should be passed before a factor analysis is KMO and Bartlett's test (Tab. I). A suggested minimum value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is 0.6. The value of KMO 0.825 is meritorious and the significance 0.000 rejects the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix.

Moreover the anti-image correlation matrix also measures the sampling adequacy of selected variables (Tab. II). As the MSA of all variables is $> 0,5$, therefore it can be stated that the variables are appropriate for the analysis. Based on these assumptions it is possible to perform the factor analysis.

I: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.825
Approx. Chi-Square		124.175
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	10
	Sig.	.000

Source: Authors' results, 2018

II: Anti-image Matrices

		Financial resources	Level of cooperation	Attractiveness	No. of beds	No. of overnight stays
Anti-image Correlation	Financial resources	.825 ^a	-.073	-.269	-.333	-.512
	Level of cooperation	-.073	.880 ^a	-.401	-.132	-.086
	Attractiveness	-.269	-.401	.782 ^a	.207	-.044
	No. of beds	-.333	-.132	.207	.829 ^a	-.466
	No. of overnight stays	-.512	-.086	-.044	-.466	.810 ^a

Measures of Sampling Adequacy(MSA)

Source: Authors' results, 2018

Tab. III shows total variance explained by calculated factors. Based on the cumulative %, two factors explain 86.727% of variability, which we find sufficient. Therefore it can be stated that the factor analysis performed on five variables reduced the variables into two factors explaining the significant value of competitiveness of Slovak destinations.

In order to find out which indicator belongs to which factor, the component matrix should be applied. As in the Component matrix (Tab. IV) the indicator of attractiveness is associated with both two factors, the Varimax rotation was used. Based on the Rotated component matrix, it can be assumed that the indicators of financial resources, no. of beds and no. of overnight stays belong to the first factor and the level of cooperation and destination attractiveness belong to the second factor.

Both factors in each destination have its own factor score, which represent the new variables of destination competitiveness. These scores will be

used in the graphical presentation of destinations' competitiveness and in the correlations analysis. The correlation analysis between the factor scores and the partnership index was performed by Pearson correlation coefficient.

RESULTS

Competitiveness of Tourism Destinations in Slovakia

The social and political changes in Slovakia in 1989 instigated every branch of economy, including tourism. After 1989 an attempt to develop an appropriate institutional and funding basis of regional tourism has risen gradually. The stages of networking have developed in several stages in Slovakia.

The stage of formation (1989–2000) is characterized by establishment of local and regional tourism associations which have made efforts to coordinate tourism development in destinations (Micháľková, 2013). After 2000, in

III: Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.564	71.273	71.273	3.564	71.273	71.273	2.663	53.267	53.267
2	.773	15.454	86.727	.773	15.454	86.727	1.673	33.460	86.727
3	.393	7.868	94.596						
4	.154	3.070	97.666						
5	.117	2.334	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Source: Authors' results, 2018

IV: Component matrix vs. Rotated component matrix

	Component Matrix ^a		Rotated Component Matrix ^a	
	Component		Component	
	1	2	1	2
Financial resources	.931	-.168	.861	.391
Level of cooperation	.786	.342	.453	.728
Attractiveness	.675	.655	.184	.923
No. of beds	.880	-.364	.931	.200
No. of overnight stays	.921	-.256	.903	.313

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 2 components extracted.

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Source: Authors' results, 2018

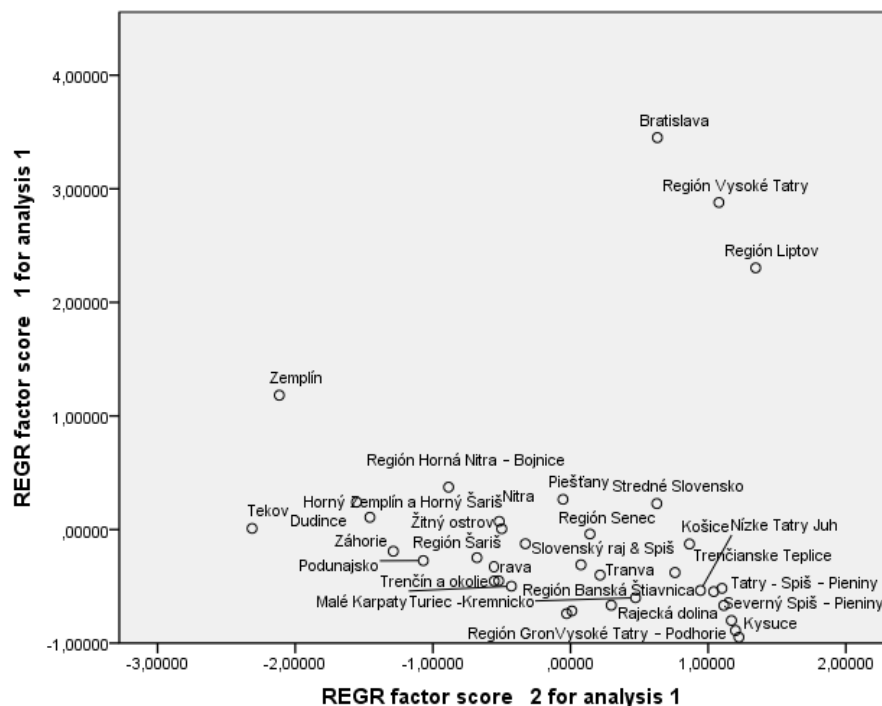
the stage of formation (2001–2007), the tourism associations have continued with their activities. New partnerships were established with the aim to realize specific projects in destinations supported from public resources. However, after the project was finished, these associations stop to perform their activity (Gajdošík and Gúčík, 2015). The stage of growth (2008–2011) is characterized by establishment of tourism clusters. In comparison with tourism associations, the aims of tourism clusters were mostly concentrated on increasing of destinations' competitiveness, product development and cooperation with research institutions and universities as well. The weaknesses of tourism clusters in Slovakia were primarily indifference of key stakeholders in tourism destinations towards membership in clusters and unwillingness to cooperate (Belešová, 2009). In 2012 (stage of concentration) the Tourism Support Act no. 91/2010 Coll. was introduced. The aim of the act is systematic implementation of destination marketing management into a practice of Slovak tourism destinations. This act has enabled establishment of local and regional DMOs on the basis of public-private partnership. DMOs mostly focus on development of tourism products as a chain of complementary services and destination branding.

According to the Tourism Support Act no. 91/2010 Coll., DMO is a legal entity established to promote and create conditions for the tourism development in the region and to protect the interests of its members. It represents a form of public-private partnership in tourism destinations and strive for tourism development and marketing as well on both, regional (self-government) and local level. Currently, there are 36 local DMOs in Slovakia in 2018. The level of competitiveness of Slovak tourism destinations is presented in Fig. 1.

The x axis represents level of product development and attractiveness, while the y axis represents financial resources, no. of beds and no. of overnight stays in a destination.

Bratislava, the High Tatras (Región Vysoké Tatry) and Liptov (Región Liptov) are the most competitive Slovak destinations able to attract large number of foreign visitors. They are the most attractive destinations, with the highest level of cooperation. They have adequate financial resources and infrastructure for tourism development. Moreover, from the demand perspective they have the ability to focus not only on the domestic but also on the international tourism market.

Bratislava, as the Slovak capital, belongs to the most competitive Slovak tourism destinations. This urban destination with rich cultural and historical potential is the centre of MICE tourism



1: Graphical interpretation of competitiveness of Slovak tourism destinations

Source: Authors' results, 2018

in Slovakia. The destination management is quite developed, as the DMO Bratislava Tourist Board has more than 80 members and the level of product development is relatively high. Moreover, the proximity of Vienna attracts many foreign one-day visitors to Bratislava.

The High Tatras and Liptov are well-known winter sport destinations in Slovakia. The attractiveness, major investments in the lift infrastructure and well established DMOs with high level of product development and marketing activities support the competitiveness of these destinations. These destinations attract foreign visitors mainly from the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary as they provide high quality sport conditions for visitors.

From other destinations, there are several which are competitive mainly in the domestic market with lower number of foreign visitors. Their DMOs are active, trying to promote a positive image of the destination and develop comprehensive tourism products. These destinations try to attract visitors because of their historic potential as city destinations (e.g. Košice, Nitra and Trnava), natural conditions (e.g. Stredné Slovensko, Senec, Slovenský raj and Spiš) or spa treatment (e.g. Piešťany, Trenčianske Teplice). Destination Zemplín has good infrastructural conditions, however it lacks professional destination management which should have strengthen its competitiveness. In the remaining destinations, beginnings of creating a comprehensive product of the destination and its marketing communication on the domestic market can be seen. However, low financial resources for tourism development and lower attractiveness have meant that these destinations have insufficient resources for qualified destination management and marketing.

Partnerships in Tourism Destinations in Slovakia

Partnerships in tourism destinations in Slovakia do not have a long tradition. In order to examine the level of partnership in Slovak destinations, the focus was on the professionalism of destination management, degree of cooperation, internal communication, the unity in DMOs' future orientation and the impact of DMOs on the tourism development in the destination

Professionalism of management

The management of local DMOs should consist of experts on tourism who should work on their professional growth. For this reason, the Association of Tourism Organizations was established in 2017. The goal of the association is to exchange experience and mutual help for professional growth and to strengthen the application of marketing management in the tourism destinations. The membership consists of only 13 DMOs. Among other issues, it focuses on explaining the functioning of local and regional DMOs and their contribution to the general public. It is important for all regional and local DMOs to join the association. Growth in professionalization will also positively influence the level of partnership in each destination.

Degree of Cooperation

Taking into account the outcomes of the field research, we can state that cooperation within local DMOs is affected by several factors, primarily the informal relationships among individual members and trust. The performance of the partnership and the fulfilment of its mission rely strongly on the social relationships among different stakeholders involved in the process of tourism development in destination. The stakeholders in tourism destinations do not act in isolation, but interact with each other. By their professional competences, open and trustworthy communication, credibility and performance, they build a reputation in tourism destinations, which plays an important role in level of partnership in the destinations. The management of DMOs should have the arguments supporting the cooperation in marketing management and clearly present the benefits that may be gained by stakeholders entering the DMOs.

Internal Communication

The communication among DMOs' members is affected by similar factors as in the previous case, social ties and trust. The forms of communication applied in the local DMOs can be divided into formal and informal. Formal meetings are based on the statutes of the DMOs and must be organized at least twice a year in order to approve the annual plan of activities and the budget of the DMO. In order to improve mutual relations, the management of DMOs also organizes informal meetings with the aim to deepen the cooperation

among their members and to enhance the process of product development, and to discuss about other opportunities how to improve tourism development in destination. An important form of continuous communication is via e-mail and telephone communication, which enable prompt problem solving. The weakness is communication within working teams whose creation is not yet used in the practice of local DMOs in Slovakia.

The unity in DMOs' future orientation

As the members of DMOs are different stakeholders varying in the size and sectors of economy, in practice it is very difficult to find the consensus about the vision and goals of DMO among their members. The reason is, in particular, the persistence of the individuality of businesses which want to defend their organizations' interests first.

The impact on the tourism development in the destination

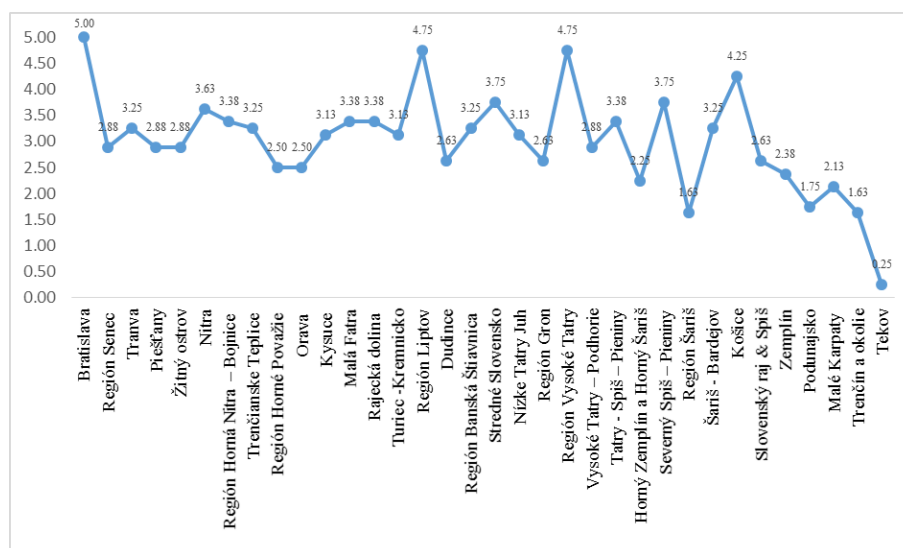
The low level of influence of DMOs on the tourism development is a result of several factors. Insufficient funding does not allow DMOs to fully exploit their potential and become a true development leader in tourism destinations. Furthermore, as the non-profit organizations, the motivation of private sectors to be actively engaged in partnership and to become a member of DMOs is lacking behind. Last but not least, there is also a lack of confidence in

these organizations. The stakeholders in tourism destinations suppose that their membership will only entails administrative burdens and will bring very limited benefits.

The level of partnerships in tourism destinations in Slovakia varies. For identification of the level of partnership the Likert scale was used. The respondents have evaluated (1 very bad, 5 very good) these aspects – (1) the level of professionalism of management of local DMOs, (2) the degree of cooperation within the DMOs as well as non-members outside the DMOs' membership base, (3) the level of internal communication among members of DMOs, (4) the unity in DMOs' future orientation and (5) the impact of the local DMOs on the tourism development in destinations. In some destinations the level of partnership is relatively high, in other destination stakeholders do not cooperate with each other and the level of partnership is low (Fig. 2).

In order to quantify the level of partnership in each tourism destination the partnership index was created, based on stakeholders attitude on presented criteria.

Taking into consideration formulated findings, it is worth to examine the correlation between the level of partnership in each destination, quantified by the partnership index, and the competitiveness of tourism destination in which the local DMOs operate. Using the Pearson correlation coefficient, we have identified a moderate to strong dependence between the variables examined (Tab. V). This result could



2: The level of partnership in tourism destinations in Slovakia

Source: Authors' results, 2018

V: Correlations between the partnership index of local DMOs and competitiveness of tourism destinations in Slovakia

	Partnership	REGR factor score 1 for analysis 1	REGR factor score 2 for analysis 1
Partnership	Pearson Correlation	1	.503**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	36	36
	N	36	36

Source: Authors' results, 2018

be interpreted that with the growth of the level of partnership, the competitiveness of the tourism destination in Slovakia is increasing. We consider this finding to be beneficial because it provides an argument and justifies the need to establish stronger partnerships within DMOs in Slovakia.

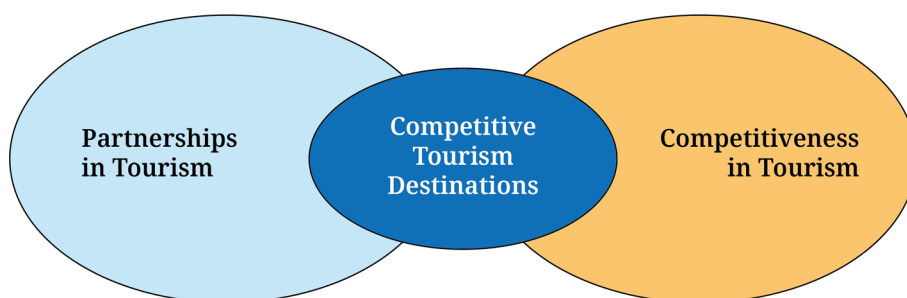
DISCUSSION

As networking in many tourism destinations is evolving toward the establishment of formal partnerships of destination stakeholders, earlier studies (e.g. Palmer and Bejou, 1995) examined the need for collaboration and networking among stakeholders for effective destination marketing with a particular emphasis in assessing the attractiveness of alliance between the public and private sectors. Later the critical success factors for partnerships between the public and private sectors at tourism destinations were identified (Augustyn and Knowles, 2000).

The presented research revealed that the level of partnership of destination stakeholders positively influences the competitiveness of the destination on the tourism market. It empirically proves the statement of UNWTO

(2001), which emphasises that various segments of tourism industry, as well as destination performance, can be improved by focusing on strong private-public partnerships.

The formulation of partnership index by combining the professionalism of management, degree of co-operation, internal communication, the agreement on organisational strategy and the impact on the tourism development in the destination allowed to quantify the level of partnership in tourism destinations and supported the outcomes of Franco and Estavao (2010) who found out that the success of partnerships in tourism destinations depend on the formality of the agreement, clear goal definition, organizational structure, leadership, social networks and the efficiency of the partnership performance. Moreover, as Bornhorst, Ritchie and Sheehan (2010) claim, there is the relationship between the success of tourism destination and community relations. Therefore partnerships should not only be between the public and private sectors but also involve communities. This type of partnership ensures that local communities are able to secure and share the economic benefits from tourism, which will further support sustainable tourism development (Armenski *et al.*, 2018).



3: Interconnection among partnerships, competitiveness and tourism destinations

Source: Authors' results, 2018

CONCLUSION

The aim of the paper was to examine whether the strength of partnership contributes and stimulates the competitiveness of tourism destinations. The empirical research examined the competitiveness of Slovak destinations and the level of partnership based on partnership index. Fig. 3 illustrates how partnerships in tourism and tourism competitiveness aim towards strengthening destination competitiveness.

Nowadays the features of concentration stage apply to tourism partnerships in the Slovak republic. Based on the quantitative analysis of secondary data, the Slovak tourism destinations were classified based on their competitiveness. Classification was conducted using the following parameters: level of cooperation and attractiveness, financial resources, number of beds and number of overnight stays in a destination. Partnership index in each destination was created based on the professionalism of management, degree of co-operation, internal communication, the agreement on organisational strategy, the impact on the tourism development in the destination.

The paper contributes to the existing knowledge by providing the quantitative analysis of destinations' competitiveness and empirically proving that the level of partnership in a destination influences the destination's competitiveness. The limitations of the research lie in the inclusion of destinations in one country with specific conditions of tourism support based on the Tourism Support Act. Moreover the competitiveness and partnerships were analysed in a short period of time, not taking into account the dynamics of destination development. Therefore, the authors suggest examining the contribution of partnerships in tourism destinations to its competitiveness in other countries within a longer period of time and with more focus on local communities.

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