

# What can mountain regions in Southeast Europe learn from the Alps? Tourism vs. National Park in Bansko/Pirin, Bulgaria

Karsten Grunewald & Jörg Scheithauer

## Abstract

The Alps, as an economically prosperous macroregion, act as a role model for other mountain regions. Therefore the question arises whether they can be compared with other mountain regions. Is there an ecologically compatible way of developing and exploiting mountains? Within a short period of time the small town of Bansko in the Pirin Mountains has emerged as Southeastern Europe's number one ski resort, using know-how from the Alps. The resort continues to grow. This goes together with interferences on nature affecting a fragile high mountain region with national park status.

**Keywords:** know-how transfer, management plan, nature protection, sustainable development, tourism boom

## 1 Introduction

The Alps are the prime example for research, exploitation and development of mountain regions. A large part of basic knowledge about geology and functionality of mountains has been compiled in this region. The living standard and the tourism infrastructure in the Alpine region reached a level, which is rated as a model for other mountain regions. In reverse, Central- and Western Europeans increasingly spotlight on peripheral mountain regions as tourism destinations or places for low-priced investments. These regions are regarded as inexpensive, purchasable, untouched and venturesome. Bulgaria's pristine nature and affordable real estate prices are attracting a growing number of foreign investors – many from Britain, Ireland, Russia and other countries. But one of the most basic conflicts faced by environmental policy occurs when a currently underdeveloped but ecologically significant piece of land becomes candidate for development. If developed, the land may provide employment, wealth for owners, and goods for consumers. But it may also degrade the ecosystem, possibly in an irreversible way. These conflicts intensify if unemployment rates in the area are high and the local ecology is rather unique (Rashev 2003).

In times of open frontiers and globalisation, the Alps are in focus more than ever. Upcoming mountain regions, particularly in Eastern Europe intend to learn from the Alps. Guidelines and funds of the European Union as well as labour and know-how are increasingly obtainable for these countries. Does that entail "Alps everywhere"? In this regard, younger development trends in the Pirin Mountains need to be analysed and evaluated (figure 1). A booming ski resort such as Bansko provides new jobs for a whole region. Which synergies and findings can be derived

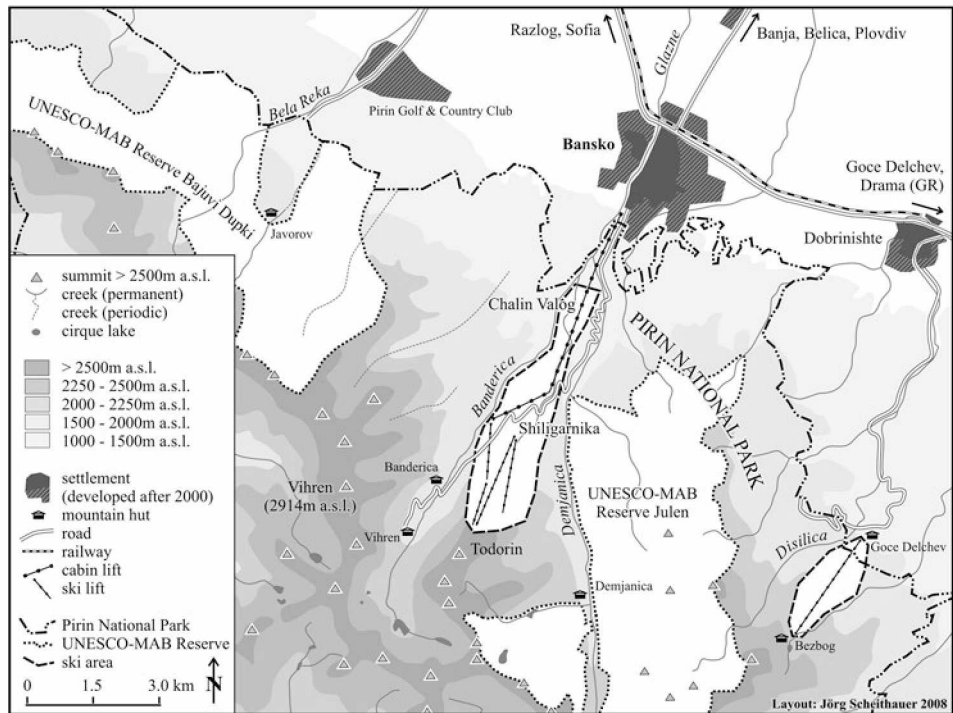


Figure 1: Skiing areas in the Pirin National Park and neighbouring UNESCO-MAB reserves.

from national park strategies for development and planning? On this background, the regions of Pirin Mountains and Bansko will be surveyed and the development in comparison to experiences and examples of the Alps evaluated.

### 1.1 Pirin Mountains and nature protection

The Pirin Massif, composed of marble, schist, gneiss and granite, attains an altitude of nearly 3,000 m. It is part of the Rila-Rhodope-Massif and comprises a relatively small area of approximately 35 km x 70 km in Southwest Bulgaria. The Pirin Mountains spatially mark the transition between the Mediterranean and temperate climate zones. The massif and its flanking basins and valleys show characteristic natural and social stages of development for miniature-chambered Southeastern European mountainous regions. It should rapidly respond to environmental changes. Therefore, this area can be seen as an indicator, immediately displaying changes in landscape-ecological processes (Grunewald et al. 1999, 2007).

The region's population density with 70 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> is considerably lower than in the rest of the country. It is an underdeveloped, rural region of Bulgaria. The average income per capita is only € 1,800 per annum and the unemployment rate partially reaches values of 50% (Grunewald et al. 2007).

The natural potential of the Pirin region does not differ from those of other mountain regions and determines dispersion and intensity of land use. Forests dom-

inate, whereas settlements and areas under cultivation can be found in basins and valleys. Alpine pastures play a small role only today. Cultivation of the mountain forests is important but difficult because it has to be realised in accordance with the national park authorities.

The area of the Pirin National Park covers the high altitudes, including two nature reserves (declared as UNESCO MAB Biosphere Reserves in 1977), 11 natural wonder sites and 113 caves, covers 40,356 ha, which is 22% of the Pirin Mountains (figure 1). Before 1998, when the Bulgarian protection regulations were enacted, this region was classified as a “Naroden Park” (a peoples park). The national park was accepted by the UN and was put on the list of the World Cultural Heritage in 1983. This sensitive and valuable high mountain landscape includes for instance: marble peaks, hundreds of years-old pine forests, Pleistocene geomorphological formations, almost 170 glacial lakes and nearly 2,000 higher plant species, among them are 110 red-list-species of Bulgaria. According to the Bulgarian environmental legislation, the Pirin National Park has the highest conservation status.

An adjustment to international categories and standards took place. With the support of Switzerland, a park zoning with a graded protection status was laid down in the development and management plan. The Pirin National Park management plan is for nature protection and landscape protection, a balanced use of recreation capacities and natural resources of the territory and turning the protected areas into a socio-economic factor for regional development (Anonymous 2003).

In the last few years the idea of establishing a “good management practice” and “integrated-dynamic approaches” as a necessary condition for achieving sustainable development of the protected areas acquired global recognition (Weixlbaumer 2006). After 1996–1997 this became a major issue in Bulgaria too. The sense of a good management practice is the involvement of the people defining goals and priorities and participating in their fulfilment (Anonymous 2003).

## 2 Tourism boomtown Bansko?

The town of Bansko is the most important entrance door of Pirin. The local industry is presented in two works, small workshops in the timber and the tailoring industry. On the territory of the municipality more than 1,500 companies in the fields of the trade and service, the processing industry, the hotel industry and catering, and agriculture are registered (Anonymous 2008).

The tourist industry has the highest strategic significance for the social-economic development of the municipality of Bansko (figure 2), as it is the most dynamic and the fastest growing branch of the economy. For the period 2001–2006 the investments in tourism sum up to over 100 million Euros. This led to the opening of over 500 new employment positions in the field of tourist service and several times greater in the building sector (Anonymous 2008). Only in the last two years, more than one hundred hotels were built, from small family hotels to luxurious four-star complexes. Hotel “Kempinski Grand Arena” is the first five-star hotel in the resort. The bed facilities increased from 2,000 (2002) to 10,000 (2007) with a trend to reach 20,000



*Figure 2: Bansko's attractions are the Pirin High Mountains (Pirin National Park) as well as the combination of traditional and modern spirit. Unlike the other winter resorts, here the hotel facilities are situated exclusively in the town.*

(Anonymous 2003, 2008). The structure of guests: wealthy Bulgarians, Greeks, Russians, Germans and increasingly British. The latter are the target group for selling flatlets under the slogan "Why not Bulgaria" (Bulgarian Property Agents 2008).

The lesson learnt from the Alps was that winter sports and spa-tourists bring much more money than hikers and eco-tourists. Consequently a change from summer tourism (until 1998 approx. 80% of accommodations, Grunewald et al. 1999) to winter tourism (2002 already close to approx. 50%, Anonymous 2003) took place.

The technical development of winter sports and accompanying systems was almost exclusively imported from Austria. Alongside the asphalt road leading to the Vihren Hut, a cable way opened in 2003 enables everybody to reach the northern main valleys easily. The capacity of the lift facilities is about 20,000 people per hour. In the national park and to the forest's detriment, ski slopes were generously built. The total length of the ski runs and ski paths comes up to 65 km. In addition, water pipes and reservoirs were constructed for making and distributing artificial snow (12 snow-tamping machines). 161 guns for artificial snow guarantee a long ski season from December to May. Other elements of infrastructure were also provided – in and outside of the Pirin National Park (figure 1).

Bansko already is comparable to capacious ski resorts in the Alps (e.g. Obertauern: 95 km slopes, 10,000 beds; Sölden: 147 km slopes, 9,000 beds, Ski.de 2008) and investments continue. Building a second cabin line in the ski centre is aimed at and 30 million Euros will be invested in a golf playground (Anonymous 2008). The dynamic of the current development including the structure of investments becomes apparent from the example of the projected ski resort in Dobrinishte: The Orbel Development company and the municipality of Bansko have set up the Dobrinishte BG joint venture to build a ski zone in the resort of the same name. Orbel Develop-

ment is a partnership between Galchev Engineering and Austria's Norema Tourist Holding Company. Orbel won a tender invited by the Bansko municipality to select an investor for the development of the site. In the new joint venture company, Orbel controls 80% of the capital while the city of Bansko has the remaining 20%. In exchange for its stake in the project, the municipality undertakes to draft a zoning plan for the new resort by the spring of 2008. According to the official, the resort will be primed for construction density of 15 to 20% with a maximum permitted height of no more than 10 m. The 2,000 ha Dobrinishte Skiing Zone will have 10,000 beds. The combined length of the ski runs and the other skiing facilities, such as ski toes and lifts, will be 22.5 km (Zaharieva 2007).

### 3 Coexistence of tourism and National Park?

The competing types of land use, nature conservancy and tourism carry great synergetic potentials. National parks in Europe have also a social and economic development target alongside the aims of conservation. Understanding and enjoying the countryside plays an important role for regional development (Mose & Weixlbaumer 2002). An attractive landscape serves as a magnet for tourists in the region and beyond. Hence the importance of the national park for the tourism is of interest to those who are responsible for the management of these sanctuaries as well as for the tourism industry in the region (WWF 1999, Claßen 2006).

The Pirin National Park is an important supporting as well as limiting factor, especially for tourism, in the region of Southwest Bulgaria. Vice versa tourism is important for the national park, as its function of education requires guests (Job et al. 2005). But not only harmonic coexistence and synergy are common. Extensive tourism can counteract with the aims of the national park and restrictions of nature conservancy can deflate the development of tourism and constrain investors or economic activities. Bachleitner (2001), for instance, discusses the various dimensions, development and risks within the interplay of nature conservancy and tourism in the Alpine region. Effects and conflicts are omnipresent in the affected regions, whereas winter tourism in particular is subject to criticism (e.g. BUND 2008).

National, regional and local administration departments and the population aim to prevent negative effects by control (e.g. regulation, law, setting of priorities). The manifestations for Bansko/Pirin can be well comprehended in context with NATURA 2000 – the European Union's network of protected territories and tourism development (development without the necessary care). In this context NGOs play also in Bulgaria a new and important role for the balance of ecology and economy. They claim for instance that two thirds of the constructed ski facilities in Pirin National Park have not been approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment and Waters. Further, they claim that the investor did not comply with the Environmental Impact Assessment regulations (Za Zemiata 2007). Protest activities, even bomb threatening against investors/developers, took place. A coalition of 17 Bulgarian nature conservation organisations warns that the Bulgarian government is breaching EU legislation to aid investors (Bluelink 2007).

The question at the interface between national park vs. tourism is which comparable alpine role models can be used? On the one hand this could be the Swiss National Park, the only national park in Switzerland, with a clear segregation and prohibited winter sport. For Austria on the other hand the National Parks Hohe Tauern and Kalkalpen are to be mentioned, where skiing centres are kept out of the national park, since there are enough spatial alternatives. After all the National Park Berchtesgaden in the German Alps probably provides the most comparable approaches: zoning, regulation, integration, winter sports at the Jenner (Alps national parks 2008).

## 4 Conclusion and future concepts

Since several years there has been a substantial progress of tourism in Bulgaria: the shift of ownership from the state to the private sector, the rapid growth of a large number of small and medium sized companies, and structural changes in the sector. However, there is still a high concentration of bed capacity in “tourist-resorts” and a low occupancy rate (OECD 2008).

The microregion Bansko/Pirin develops dynamically, learns from the Alps and receives vigorous support (figure 3). There is a real estate market and a reasonably priced, modern ski tourism establishes in the Pirin Mountains. The East as well as the West observe this situation. Positive news from the Balkans region are extremely important for Bansko’s image. Modernity, individuality, acceptable costs, snow reliability and excellent service are said to be the pillars of success. Neighbouring towns such as Razlog, Dobrinishte or Goce Delchev followed the example of Bansko and wish to share the success in the tourism industry and real estate branch.

On the other hand, an unique and fragile high mountain environment is utilised and exploited. Damaging natural resources as well as inconsiderate ambition for profit and violation of regulations occur, even in a national park area. However, the usage of a protected area for tourism is not unusual in Europe. National parks are subdivided to define the core zones of strict nature conservation (reserves) and the areas of “experiencing nature” (associated with stronger interferences). This took place in terms of the Pirin management plan: only 3.3% of the national park may be used for tourism and an expansion is strictly prohibited (Anonymous 2003). In this regard, there is a possibility of an exemplary co-operation and conflict solution.

But the strong tendency to extend the capacities and upgrade technology is chance and awareness. More artificial snow and more cable ways, in combination with spa/wellness, golf-sport and new trend sports entail further interferences with nature and a growing resource strain. Yo-yo effects can be expected: an insufficient lift capacity, an overloaded infrastructure and a shortage of energy and water calling for new constructions. A rapid growth causes inequity and strong social incline.

Providing sustainable development and avoiding failures is easier said than done. A moderate development can be achieved with the help of ecological counterweights. The regions should use “The Alpine Convention” (1991) and the “European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas” (2008) as guidelines. As well the mod-

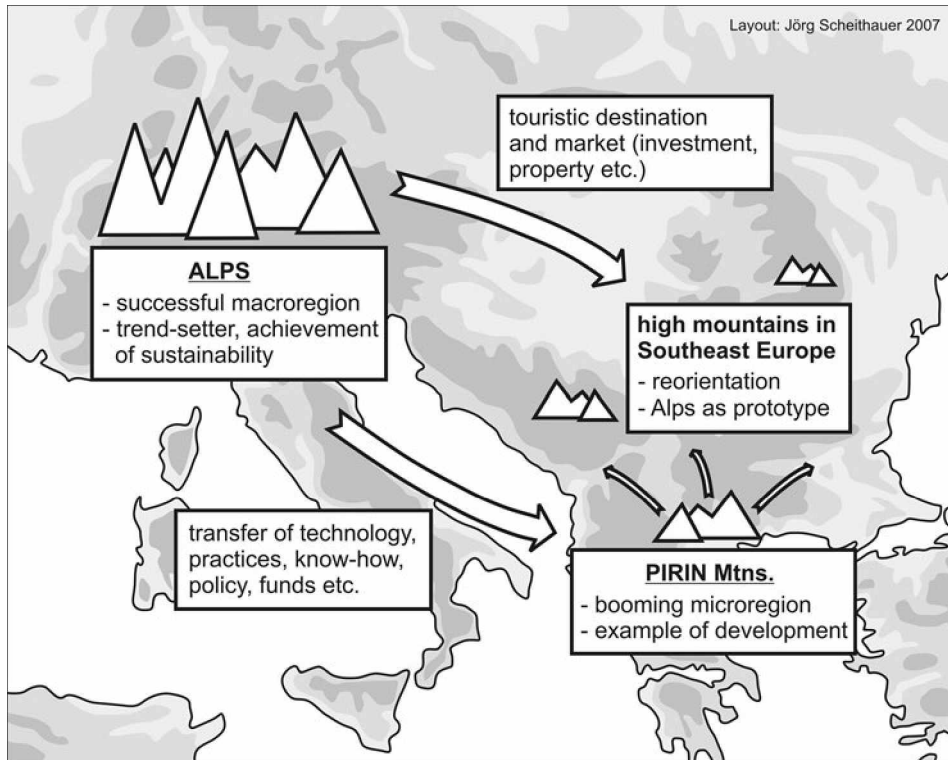


Figure 3: Scheme: Bansko/Pirin as a regional example and know-how transfer from the Alps.

ern European nature conservancy approaches like NATURA 2000 and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) help to prevent undesirable developments.

The international community watches closely whether the region succeeds in combining matters of nature conservancy with tourism. Investors as well as the local population and tourists should be aware of the vulnerability of sensitive high mountain ecosystems and of the inscription on the World Heritage List the approval of the UNESCO-MAB reservations of being not untouchable. Inasmuch the Pirin region can be regarded as a role model for upcoming ski resorts in Southeast Europe national park areas (e.g. Rila Mountains) and beyond (e.g. Sochi/Caucasus).

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Artikel/Article: [What can mountain regions in Southeast Europe learn from the Alps? Tourism vs. National Park in Bansko/ Pirin, Bulgaria 295-302](#)