

# INNOVATION POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN TOURISM DURING THE EPIDEMIC OF COVID-19

Lea-Marija COLARIČ-JAKŠE

Landscape Governance College GRM Novo mesto, Sevno 13, 8000 Novo mesto, Slovenia

*lea.colaric-jakse@vsgrm.unm.si*

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## *Abstract*

The article explores the Slovenian perspective on cooperative networking as a potential for the development of Slovenian tourism. In the competitive times, paradoxically, cooperation between actors in any given field is needed, in order to increase the overall competitiveness of a country in the specific field. However, research indicates that in the case of Slovenian tourism there are two distinct groups. On the one hand, there are actors who are strongly dependent on cooperation and

are well aware of it and, on the other hand, there are self-sufficient actors who see the development of integral tourist products as unnecessary or potentially even harmful for their particular interests. Innovation potential and development of social capital are especially important in the perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on society as well as on tourism industry in the future.

*Keywords:* Slovenia, tourism, social capital, integral tourist products, COVID-19.

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## **Inovacijski potencial družbenega kapitala v turizmu med pandemijo COVID-19**

### *Povzetek*

216 Članek raziskuje slovensko perspektivo glede kooperativnega mreženja kot potenciala za razvoj slovenskega turizma. V tekmovalnih časih je, paradoksalno, kooperacija med akterji na vseh področjih potrebna, da bi se povečala celokupna konkurenčnost države na določenem področju. Vendar raziskave kažejo, da v primeru slovenskega turizma obstajata dve različni skupini. Na eni strani so akterji, ki so v precejšnji meri odvisni od kooperacije in se tega tudi dobro zavedajo, na drugi strani pa so samozadostni akterji, ki razvoj integralnih turističnih produktov vidijo kot nepotreben ali celo ogrožajoč za njihove partikularne interese. Inovacijski potencial in razvoj družbenega kapitala sta zlasti pomembna z vidika pandemije COVID-19 in njenega vpliva tako na družbo kakor na prihodnost turistične industrije.

*Ključne besede:* Slovenija, turizem, družbeni kapital, integralni turistični produkti, COVID-19.

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## **Introduction**

Tourism is one of the most trending economic activities, which became more available to a broader number of people with the development of modern transportation systems and even more popular with the development of information and communication technologies. The latter enable people to exchange their tourist experience for virtual praise, and, on the other hand, are able to promote even the obscure tourist destinations with limited offers and isolated from the economic interest of the majority of tourist agencies and tourists. The economic crisis in the year 2008 significantly damaged tourist economy, but at the same time gave, not only to countries, but also to tourism economy, the opportunity to rethink their interests and strategies in the tourism sector. After a few-year recovery period, the situation worsened in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which again strongly affected tourism industry (e.g., Chang et al. 2020, Gössling et al. 2020). It became rather clear that the only way of restarting and boosting tourism economy lies in cooperation and development of tourist products that are not selling particularities, but the experience of a destination, which includes everything, from history to gastronomy, recreation, and nature. The so-called integral tourist products became a new necessity of tourist industries, especially with regard to tourist destinations that are not at the top of popular destination lists.

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Slovenia is, in this perspective, a rather obscure destination, not only on the level of the country as such, but also on the level of local development. In this perspective, our research attempts to answer the question, what are the possibilities for the development of Slovenian tourist economy in the future. The research tries to understand the cooperative networking potential of tourist actors and their ability to create integral tourist products, which would be attractive to tourists.

### **A brief bibliographical overview**

The success of the modern business environment in tourism industry is not based only upon business models, strategies, and planning, but predominantly upon the cooperation among stakeholders in tourism industry, including consumers. However, the value systems of modern tourists change and thus

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also their desires, expectations, and needs. Modern tourists strive for novelty, the new products, that satisfy their real and imaginary needs. Upon this basis, tourism service providers are directed towards new marketing approaches (Richards and Wilson 2008, 7).

The development of innovation potential, as a starting point for innovative tourism products and services, can be strengthened using different forms of cooperation among service providers (Jamal and Getz 1995). This field was in the past also covered by various researches (e.g., Arnaboldi and Spiller 2011; Ambrož 2006; Ambrož and Veljković 2012). The foundation for social networking in the field of tourism is significantly connected with social capital. Granowetter (1973) and Putnam (1993) are indicating that social capital can be considered as the ability to interlink the ties among subjects on a personal as well as on an institutional level of connectivity. Social capital supports synchronized activities among social actors and various social structures, and consequently contributes to a better functioning of society as a whole (Putnam 1993, 167).

218 Social capital supports the development of new knowledge, which is the foundation for the development of innovation potential. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers cooperative networking as an option in the search for different forms of cooperation networking in tourism. Researchers in this field, among other topics, see potential also in the role of social capital in the development of tourism related networks and cooperation.

Adler and Kwon (2000, 89–115) stress the importance of social networks, social norms, trust, knowledge exchange, and formal institutional frame as important elements of tourism innovation.

Law (1999, 3), as one of the main authors of the Action-Network Theory, based the latter on binary connections (knowledge–power, material–societal, active–passive, etc.). ANT enables a specific approach to scientific and technical innovations on the societal level. Beside Law’s aforementioned work, also other authors—for instance: Akrich and Latour 1992; Callon 1999; Callon and Law 1997; Hassard and Law 1999; Latour 1987; Latour 1996; Latour 2005; Law 1999—paid attention to the ANT.

Cooperative networking is not possible without social capital, based on trust among participating social actors, bound by common rules of cooperation on

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the level of social networks. Social capital is a foundation for the development of knowledge and various competences. The development of competences does not only mean receiving relevant information. Actual learning begins only when individuals understand that their cognitive models do not suffice anymore, in order to resolve existing problems. Thus, they understand that they need to develop new competences and, in order to do so, require new social networks. Social capital, in this aspect, represents the basis for the development of new social networks that will generate new ideas and support the development of new knowledge.

New development models in tourism function according to the same principles as other social models, since they support the relevance of community in the opposition to sole development of tourist economy.

This understanding supports the idea of emphasizing the development of imaginary network regions in tourism (“tourismscapes”). According to Johannesson (2005), the Actor-Network Theory is a very appropriate tool in the explanation of cooperation patterns among stakeholders in tourism. Literature on networking in tourism offers research results that emphasize the importance of networking in the integration of tourist networks (e.g., d’Angella and Go 2009). Dimanche et al. (2010) pay attention to a rearrangement and the classification of existing sources in tourism in the process of developing new tourist products. Della Corte et al. (2012) expose the development of cooperative relations, which is of utmost importance, not only among business partners, but also within competition.

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Lazzareti and Petrillo (2006, 57) state that social actors and business partners can be more successful if they provide tourist products, which are diversified, but offered as integral tourist products. Dredge (2006) establishes that social relations are the basis both for cooperation as well as for the understanding of relations among stakeholders in tourism.

Beside social networking, literature on networking and cooperation in tourism provides also the arguments for the importance of formal forms of cooperation, e.g., consortiums or other forms of associations between business partners as well as other common structures enabling cooperation and common activities in the tourist market (Hastings 2008, 43). The combination of different systems and different forms of the organization of production and consumption

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contributes to a strengthening of the systems of accumulation. This creates a stable and sustainable mixture. In order to achieve this, we need to reduce the importance of Fordist mass production of tourist products, and strengthen the development of post-Fordist production, which emphasizes the role of smaller companies. The latter are in themselves capable of covering different production niches and products that can satisfy diversified needs of tourist consumers. Individualized products are just a step away from the process, which would enable the creation and marketing of integral tourist products (Campos 2014).

The cooperation of different actors in the process of the development of joint products is based on constant innovation and the shaping of new, complex products. In this process, cooperation competences are of utmost importance.

220 Koutoulas (2004) defines the integral tourist product as a product that is a combination of different individual tourist products and can be of material or non-material nature. Koutoulas (2004, 4) argues that the tourist products can be either perfect tourist products or specific tourist products. An integral tourist product can be represented through the negotiation and synthesis of partial individual tourist needs and the expectations of an individual tourist. This creates an individual and unique tourist experience, based on the supply capacities of tourism service providers (Janković et al. 2011). In this perspective, the individual tourist plays a crucial role by evaluating the tourist products and ranking them according to their personal preferences.

Tourist actors and organizations are developing innovative approaches in all fields of their activities, especially in the field of material tourist products.

The innovation potential can be developed only in the conditions that support, recognize, and reward new ideas as well as provide support for the implementation of these ideas in the practice (Mathews 2009, 9; Ambrož 2009, 147; Ridderstråle and Nordström 2004, 178). The innovation dynamics in a certain tourist area can be further supported also by cooperation among groups and individuals at all levels (Ridderstråle in Nordström 2004, 176).

Innovation is successful when actors are involved in all activities and connected with their tasks. In this manner, we can understand also the factors of innovation concerning our research.

In the process of creating innovative tourist products, different organizational structures, such as, civil society, private companies, public companies, small

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enterprises, and craftsmen, etc., significantly influence not only the process itself, but also its outcomes. These structures, among themselves, create the social capital that is a required precondition for a common creation of innovative tourist products.

Ying (2010, 24) argues—as many other authors—that cooperation is the basic need for a successful development of tourist industry. Co-dependency, small size of actors, diversified market, and spatial separation are factors that compel the desire for cooperation, which can achieve of common goals and lead towards the establishment of a cover tourist organization.

### **Methodological remarks**

Based on the social capital theory and Actor-Network Theory, we formulated the survey with a questionnaire, which was disseminated in the Slovenian tourist environment. The survey was part of a broader research attempting to elaborate an understanding of the developmental potential of Slovenian tourism. In the survey, we included different tourist related organizations and subjects, including local communities, local tourist organizations, tourism associations, tourist information centers, hotels, motels, hostels, restaurants and other dining capacities, museums, tourist agencies, travel agencies, tourist farms, recreational facilities, sport facilities, congress centers, small businesses in tourism industry, medium businesses in tourism industry, big tourist companies, private entrepreneurs in tourism, and wine-cellars. In total, the sample included over 1300 different subjects. We received 218 fulfilled questionnaires appropriate for analysis. Despite the circumstance that the questionnaire's thematic field was much broader, we present below only the basic results relevant to the topic.

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### **Research results**

Effective processes of cooperative networking with constant testing create the possibilities for a cooperation of all and for all tourism related structures. Social actors stress the importance of searching for an agreement (unanimity) as well as the need to resolve the conflicts that might occur among them. They state that the process of establishing fruitful interactions is the outcome of

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a series of previous, unsuccessful interactions and learning processes based upon them. Cooperative networking, according to their opinion, is based on ethical relations among different tourist actors and the need to establish “right” relations to other actors in the field of tourism. Tourist actors believe that they are capable and competent enough to connect to other social actors, and that they can develop common innovative tourist products together. To tourist actors who participated in the survey it is important that everyone, who participates in cooperation networking and in the development of integral tourist products, understands the needs and wishes of customers in tourism. They believe that this knowledge is of utmost importance, in order to satisfy the customers, who can, in turn, themselves be included in the development of integral tourist products.

222 Tourist actors are aware of the fact that customer evaluations have a direct influence on the improvement of integral tourist products. Additionally, they understand that knowledge and competences of individuals, companies, non-profit organizations, and other structures in tourism industry are the elements with the crucial potential for the development and innovation in the field of integral tourist products. Customers’ suggestions are vital both for the development of new tourist products as well as for the improvement of the existing ones. According to the survey, special attention is paid to cooperation in the sense that all participating actors are willing to contribute their professional knowledge needed for new integral tourist products. Survey shows also the importance of workload distribution and project approach in cooperation networking, in order to achieve the desired results. Actors who participated in the survey pointed out the importance of rewarding innovative results, in order to increase further motivation for the finalization of projects resulting in innovative tourist products.

Cooperation is most highly praised among tourist associations, tourist agencies, and tourist information centers. This group is followed by middle-sized tourist companies, congress centers, and dining places. The second group has also the highest median in the sample of tourist structures by activity. Based on the character of their work, these subjects are in need of cooperation with various tourist actors, including customers/tourists. This positively influences their openness for cooperative networking and participation

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in the development of integral tourist products. The highest potential of cooperative networking is seen among tourist associations, who are, based on their character, the most appropriate organizational type the coordination of interests among different tourist actors.

The lowest interest for cooperation networking can be seen among museums, individual businesses, tourist farms, local communities, and hotels. Their interest in cooperative networking is connected with their line of work as well as with their status, which they have or, rather, would have in the cooperative networking process. The aforementioned actors are not at the core of the networking process and do not have a connective role in it. More or less, they are only providers of specific tourist products and do not participate in the development of new integral tourist products. Upon the basis of research concerning cooperative networking and the use of innovative potential, one can conclude that cooperative networking is not sufficiently developed, since there are actors who do not participate actively in the activity of connecting tourist actors within a certain frame.

Britton (2001, 162) argues that small tourist structures cannot develop sufficiently to participate in cooperative networking and successfully compete with bigger tourist networks. The results of our research indicate that there exists a similar asymmetric relation among tourist structures in the perspective of cooperative tourist networking. These structures (actors) have troubles allocating resources for cooperation, such as integral tourist products, knowledge, competences, marketing, as well as capital. Consequently, they are unable to create stable business models even for themselves.

Social actors who are merging their social capital, on the other hand, strengthen their possibilities to satisfy particular needs, desires, and expectations of tourists in a certain tourist area. By opening distribution channels, they positively influence the interaction with tourists in the processes of transaction and supply of integral tourist products. This further supports the development of integral information systems of tourist supply and demand. Such behavior sustains the education of tourists and creates new tourist marketing niches. Dependency paths created in this way, effectuated by social actors, enable the development of creative, modern and innovative marketing approaches and buttress positive acceptance among tourists. Consequently, social actors create

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higher-quality promotion of tourist area and tourist products with the usage of webpages, social networks, as well as other information and communication technologies and tools.

Additionally, involved actors encourage the development of effective supply networks, enabling the satisfaction of needs and wishes of tourists. Thus, they develop new market opportunities in their territory. Tourist actors ensure proper coverage of certain tourist territories with integral tourist products, and support effective business processes of all involved tourist actors in the given territory. Joint activity enables the standardization, certification, as well as competitive price and quality assurance of integral tourist products. The opening of new business possibilities is the main motive for tourist actors to participate in the creation of integral tourist products. The possibility to use new business opportunities comes hand in hand with the necessary effective internal organizational processes for all involved actors who participate in cooperative networking. All involved actors should also ensure the consideration of tourists' feedback regarding integral tourist products.

224 The cooperative networking and innovation potential survey results show a generally low positive attitude towards the idea of knowledge exchange among tourist actors and structures. The most open for such an exchange of knowledge are, according to the survey, tourist associations, hotels, tourist information centers, restaurants, medium sized tourist companies, and wine-cellar. Upon the basis of this perspective, one can assume that they have certain experiences with knowledge exchange, at least at the level of cooperation among tourist structures. On the other hand, tourist actors, such as travel agencies, big tourism companies, individual entrepreneurs in tourism, local communities, tourist agencies, museums, and congress centers, do not appreciate knowledge exchange with other tourist actors and structures. One can assume that such actors do not take part in the development of integral tourist products together with other tourist actors and structures due to a lack of interest in synergy and joint tourist products. The aforementioned actors act independently and as self-sufficient institutions, since they have positive experience in doing so, or do not have the possibility to get involved in innovation processes due to the nature of their structure and work. Among possible reasons for such behavior, one can see also the absence of trust among different actors, which would

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support knowledge exchange, or the lack of institutional social capital due to self-sufficiency of certain actors.

With regard to innovative integral tourist products, actors, such as tourist associations, small and medium tourist enterprises, museums, tourist agencies, and wine-cellars, assume a positive attitude. They also possess relevant information concerning the questions what kind of integral tourist products would be appreciated by tourists, and how their needs and wishes could be fulfilled. Upon the basis of survey results, one can assume that the aforementioned actors require information as well as business ideas, upon which products could be integrated together into innovative new tourist products.

On the other hand, individual entrepreneurs, local communities, travel agencies, hotels, congress centers, sport facilities, and tourist farms are less keen on innovation regarding tourist products, in order to satisfy the desires and expectations of tourists. These tourist actors often do not have a clear vision of their mission concerning the development of new tourist products, and do not test their ideas in comparison with other tourist actors.

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As research shows, 71 % of participating actors agree that there should exist a proper organizational structure, which would enable innovation and the development of new integral tourist products, namely, a consortium for the development and innovation concerning integral tourist products. The remaining 29 % of participating actors reject the need for the establishment of such a structure.

Tourist marketing requires financial expenses, development of personal networks, and sharing of knowledge. However, these are the needed predispositions of success, which are often hardly met by individual tourist actors. If individual actors merge into some kind of a cover structure, they have better possibilities for effective marketing. The survey shows that only 29 % of responding actors participate in such cooperative networks. This further indicates the lack of vision and mission, which would include the development of innovative integral tourist products.

Upon the basis of research results, one can assume that cooperative networking is not sufficiently developed on a systemic level and that Slovenian tourist actors act in the market individually and in an asynchronous manner,

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which further reduces the encouragement potential and the ability to successfully promote tourist products.

226 Knowledge, as a factor of social capital, presented as the exchange of knowledge among tourist actors and other tourist structures, and based on mutual trust, is considered to be the way towards cooperative networking in the development of innovative integral tourist products. Based on the regression model, this factor contributes the most to the establishment of cooperative networking. A common vision and mission of tourist actors in certain tourist territories, as well as agreement-based ideas and concepts, contribute to the development of cooperative networking and integral tourist products. The results confirm the findings of Vernon et al. (2005), showing that the lack of agreement among social actors can disturb the realization of long-term goals as well as of cooperative networking as the fundamental precondition for the development of integral tourist products. Our research also suggests that knowledge exchange as a development of information exchange among actors and structures enables successful cooperative networking. This supports the findings of Gray (1989) as well as Ambrož and Ambrož (2014), who argue that broad availability and exchange of information strengthen the agreement among actors as well as enable a common vision in the process of cooperative networking.

An additional element of a successful development of cooperative networking is also the diversity of participating actors. The need for strong partnerships among individuals, businesses organizations, and structures in tourism enables determined and efficient cooperative networking. In this perspective, Jamal and Stronza (2009) argue that the inclusion of a large number of actors is the appropriate way to develop cooperative networking. Actors and structures in the tourist sector developing different forms of social capital create also diversified innovative potential, which is the precondition for the development of integral tourist products. Latour (1987) already established that social actors who are developing the social capital for cooperative networking shall have as much right information as possible, in order to participate in such processes. The right information contributes also to developing realistic expectations of participating actors. A properly organized knowledge exchange in the process of cooperation networking will strengthen this very cooperative networking.

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Arnaboldi and Spiller (2010) argue that tourist actors and structures that are strongly diversified among themselves have difficulty to understand the holistic and non-material exchange of knowledge to the degree, which would enable them to create or participate in successful cooperative networks. This makes the need to procure them with sufficient information and facts concerning cooperative networking processes all the more evident.

Upon the basis of the theoretical model, one can assume that the inclusion of tourist actors and structures is an important element of effective cooperative networking. However, the inclusion of tourist stakeholders can, in the empirical testing of the model, be demonstrated as being the weakest variable with the lowest explanatory power of cooperative networking. This contradicts expectations, especially since empirical results of Arnaboldi in Spiller (2010) indicate that this very element is the basic conceptual factor and a normative activation stimulus for the activation of social capital in the process of the development of tourist products. Tourist actors do express the possibility that a proper organization of the inclusion of individual actors could contribute to their decision to participate in cooperative networks. They also recognize the connection between efficient cooperative networking and increasing the possibility of satisfying particular needs and wishes of tourists in specific tourist spaces. One can assume that they are aware that wishes and needs of customers can be fulfilled only by cooperation on the personal as well as on the structural level.

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Additionally, the actors included in the survey argue that one of the goals of cooperative networking is to open additional distribution channels, which would positively influence the interaction with customers in the process of purchasing integral tourist products. They consider cooperation networking also as the possibility for a merging of ideas into an integral information system supporting tourist demand and supply. The tourist actors see cooperative networking as an opportunity for high-quality promotion of given tourist territories and products with the use of webpages, social networks, as well as other information and communication technologies. Among the goals of cooperative networking, the respondents see also the development of effective supply structures enabling high-quality realization of tourists' demands and wishes and coverage of certain territories by integral tourist products. Tourist

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actors support the idea of combining their social capital in the creation of a new vision and mission, as well as in the use of their innovation potential. They also agree that they need to establish such cooperative networks, which would include actors and ideas that are realistic and real. Additionally, they see an added value in educating tourists and developing new business niches. Potential decisions of involved actors enable them to use creative, prompt, and innovative marketing approaches, which support positive experiences and responses from tourists. Tourist actors support the development of effective supply consortiums that would enable quality services and products to satisfy potential customers.

228 Simultaneously, the actors develop comprehensive coverage of individual tourist territories and provide integral tourist products in the area. They are able to create new business opportunities in given tourist regions or territories. The tourist actors, involved in the survey, understand cooperative networking as an opportunity to effectively use internal organizational processes of all participating stakeholders in a certain territory. Cooperative networking should also contribute to standardization, certification, lower costs, and higher quality, as well as to the excellence of integral tourist products.

The tourist actors covered by the research expose the importance of the inclusion of tourist actors in the innovation processes for integral tourist products, as well as of cooperative networking, which opens new business opportunities in certain territories. The basic precondition for the involvement of tourist actors is a significantly higher level of social capital, founded on the preparedness to cooperate and to use existing connections, in order to achieve common goals, which would be, later on, considered as successful cooperation networking.

### **Tourism, social capital, and innovation with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Social capital and innovation can, in the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, be considered as classical concepts. Both concepts are used in numerous contexts, and often figure as “buzzwords,” rather than actual denominators of certain facts, acts, or reality. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has set a new frame to many human activities, especially the ones, which are contact and mobility intensive (regarding tourism see: Gössling et al. 2020). The general application

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of innovation and social capital, in order to improve tourist experience, has in many cases been connected with new forms of the presentation of tourist products mainly re-defining what is new within the old. However, the pandemic also provides a potential for a different type of tourist innovation (see Higgins-Desbiolles 2020), which could surpass minor changes, incremental improvements, or marketing spins. In many cases, including Slovenia, tourism industry has been given almost a year of a (partially) government supported “time-off,” which could and should be used to rethink the importance of tourism as an economic sector, the importance of guest structures and of different guest interests. It is reasonable to assume that certain types of tourism could, and most likely will, lose their importance, e.g., congress tourism. Further, the use of the Slovenian “voucher” system (see Cvelbar Knežević and Ogorevc 2020) showed that there exists an important share of potential tourists, who are willing, but economically unable to ensure for themselves a tourist experience; it also showed that state should, within regulatory boundaries, do more to promote tourism in the national context and the geographical frames of unexploited locations with tourist potential. The exact data regarding the influence of the 2020 pandemic on tourism will be available only after the year 2022, or even later, the following can, therefore, include only preliminary comments based on direct observations, which shall be put to the test in the future. However, an important issue, which strongly emerged at the forefront, is that Slovenian tourist industry, with all its tourist innovation potential, has not yet systematically been following the needs of domestic tourists, because Slovenian tourists have predominantly been directed to foreign destinations. When the non-economic factor affected all the elements of society, it has become clear that regulatory and allocative functions of the state were called for, while the tourist sector did rather little to attract domestic tourists. It has been counting on indirect subsidy and the maximization of its effectiveness by raising the prices of services. This has led to some dissatisfaction and scandals. In June 2020, the Slovenian Tourist Organization published a market research survey connected with its campaign regarding tourism under the COVID-19 conditions (STO 2020). The main aspect can be emphasized as the fact that relations between Slovenian tourist industry and Slovenian tourists are mutually missing, since 42 % of respondents answered that they will participate

in Slovenian tourism possibilities only due to government vouchers, and 41 % answered that they will use the Slovenian tourist potential due to the positive and safe COVID-19 situation (STO 2020). Also, the structure of priorities between those who indicated that they will spend holidays in Slovenia and those who will travel abroad differs slightly, which could lead towards raising awareness and the development of new tourist products. The research shows a rather biased understanding of how COVID-19 has changed the perception of tourist habits. On the one hand, only 15 % of people argue that they would like to know more about Slovenia based on the “Moja Slovenija” campaign, but at the same time, on the other hand, 45 % expressed their pride that they live in “such a beautiful country” (STO 2020).

230 Upon the basis of the aforementioned research, we can say that Slovenia, as a whole, has a lot of unused potential to attract domestic tourists. However, the main circumstance is that the majority of domestic tourism is rather unprofitable. In many cases, it is connected with unrestricted outdoor activities and also mainly covers the needs of the 34 % of respondents who are low on budget (STO 2020). On the other hand, the tourist sector practices in many cases show a high level of disregard for the domestic tourist, their economic status and their potential. This situation calls for a re-evaluation of the role of the domestic tourist after the end of the pandemic and of the economic potential of dispersed tourism, where a more holistic approach to Slovenia as destination should be used and promoted not only abroad, but also to potential domestic tourists.

Under such circumstances, we can regard the COVID-19 pandemic as a test of the tourist innovation potential and of the ability to develop new, integral products, which will be attractive and safe, especially during the post-COVID-19 transitional period. Important preventive measures will not only be the testing and vaccinating of tourists, but also the increase of hygienic standards in the accommodation and gastronomic facilities (especially, the more frequented ones). Even if social distancing should potentially be forgotten, in the period of two or three years, we can, nonetheless, expect a higher appreciation for tourist opportunities with less crowding potential. This provides the development potential for destinations and services that offer unique experiences or wonders. In this manner, we can say that the

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Postojna cave will remain what it is, but this might be the opportunity for the Iron cave, the Pekel cave, and others, which are often almost forgotten, although they are no less interesting and visit-worthy. The same logic can also be applied onto the international scale, where less visited countries, such as Slovakia or Romania, can become an interesting substitution for the Czech Republic. The question on the national as well as on the international level remains, however, if relevant actors in the tourism sector are willing and able to provide opportunities and products capable of attracting tourists and creating new tourist experiences, which will, on the one hand, support the national economy and, on the other hand, provide a feeling of health-related safety. Upon the basis of current trends, it seems, at the moment, how everyone hopes that people will not have changed their habits significantly and that the vaccine will have done the miracle, before the necessity of systemic changes regarding services and products becomes apparent.

## **Conclusions**

Tourism economy is one of the crucial service economic activities of the modern world. The economic crisis in the year 2008 gave the tourism the opportunity to reconsider its role and direction for the next cycle of economic growth on the global, national, and local scales. Despite showing high levels of instability in the economic crisis, and even more so during the current pandemic, we can argue that, in the long run, tourism will remain an important element of modern economy and continue to contribute a significant share of the GDP in many countries around the globe. In this perspective, research regarding tourism remains an important element not only in the theoretical, but especially in the empirical realm.

Among the main elements of further development of tourism is the shift from micro (individual) products and services to the integral tourist products, which demand cooperation of various tourist actors. The latter are required to ensure a positive tourist experience through the inclusion and development of integral tourist products. In the modern perspective, we can call them “packages.” Such integral tourist products will include various elements and cover different tourist sectors within a single product for an individual tourist (from accommodation

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to dining, sports, sightseeing, etc.). Such an approach demands a high level of quality assurance among all participating actors as well as a high level of mutual trust and ability for cooperation and networking. In other words, integral tourist products can be beneficial for the tourist economy of certain territories only if all cooperating stakeholders have sufficient capacities in the field of social capital and the ability to offer high-level products on their own.

In exploring the possibilities for a change of the tourist paradigm towards integral tourist products in Slovenian environment, the research was conducted among different types of tourism-related structures and actors. Upon the basis of results, one can observe the difference of perspectives with regard to the organizational type of participating actors. Smaller and general actors have a stronger interest in cooperation and the exchange of knowledge, as well as in cooperation networking, which results in new integral tourist products. On the other hand, bigger and specific actors are much more self-sufficient, self-reliant, and less willing to cooperate in cooperative networks that would result in integral tourist products.

232 Among the main concerns regarding cooperation, was the question of trust and competence. This indicates the main issues that are not only connected with the tourism sector in Slovenia, but can be generalized. Firstly, many subjects are unable to commit fully to such a project in the fears that they would lose more than gain, which reduces the desirability of such cooperative networking. Secondly, the subjects often believe that they work better than others and that cooperation would bring about a drop in quality or recognition, which would influence their particular business goals.

In general, there exists an awareness among Slovenian tourist actors that only cooperation can further advance the national tourist economy. However, when it comes to their own involvement in such a cooperation, different actors are rather careful and not fully committed, which reduces the potential of integral tourist products to succeed.

Regarding “the new reality” connected with the COVID-19 pandemic, there has already been a resurgence in research concerning changes in the development of tourism under the new conditions, and one can assume that this will continue over the next years. Although the COVID-19-related research is in all respects an important element, it seems an understanding of

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the basic issues of Slovenian tourism is even more crucial. In this perspective, further research in the field of tourism in Slovenia should be oriented towards raising the awareness regarding domestic tourists and their role as customers, as well as towards overcoming the differences between different tourist sectors and perspectives on the development of tourism.

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