



# A Multidimensional Framework for Assessing Balneary Tourism Competitiveness: The Case of Sovata Resort

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## ABSTRACT

Balneary tourism has long surpassed the limiting perception of a niche segment, currently consolidating itself as an important element of health tourism and representing a fundamental engine in the growth of the local economy. Although Romania possesses natural resources and a distinguished balneary tradition, the competitiveness of destinations cannot be based only on natural factors, thus, modern management is necessary for the efficient management of resources, emphasizing strengths and, at the same time, remedying weaknesses through management strategies capable of transforming vulnerabilities into opportunities for sustainable development. In this context, this study evaluates the degree of competitiveness of the Sovata balneary-climatic resort. The research applies a multidimensional evaluation model of the degree of competitiveness structured on four pillars: tourism resources, infrastructure, management, and destination sustainability. The study highlights the importance of infrastructure, for the Sovata resort to remain competitive.

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## 1. Introduction

Balneary tourism, a component of wellness tourism, is an important form of tourism in continuous development, driven by longer stays and offering visitors the opportunity to benefit from both natural healing methods and the treatment or restoration of physical and mental health. The popularity of this form of tourism has increased significantly in recent decades, due to the desire of the modern population to improve the quality of their life experiences, and consequently balneary tourism has a direct impact on the income obtained by local communities and other territorial units.

Romania has a competitive advantage supported by the diversity of natural therapeutic resources and a consolidated tradition in balneary tourism, but the competitiveness of tourist destinations in the current context can no longer be ensured by natural resources alone. Performance is therefore conditioned by the existence of strategic management oriented towards the effective use of resources, strengthening existing strengths and correcting structural dysfunctions. In the specialized literature, the evaluation of the competitiveness of a tourist destination is described as a complex and multidimensional process, in which competitive advantages need to be identified and communicated in order to allow differentiation and consolidation of market positioning. The optimization process of a tourist destination involves the integration of natural and anthropogenic resources with accommodation facilities, service quality, operational skills and, last but not least, sustainability and environmental protection. In this context, the present research analyzes the competitiveness and performance of the Sovata resort as a balneary destination, considered one of the most representative balneary resorts in Romania. Thus, the study examines the key indicators that determine the competitiveness of a balneary resort, such as tourist attractions, accommodation facilities, destination management and attitudes towards the environment. The evaluation of these indicators aims to determine the overall performance and competitiveness of the Sovata resort, as well as to identify the strengths and vulnerabilities faced by the resort, providing useful information for improving performance and supporting the long-term sustainable and competitive development of balneary tourism.

## 2. Literature review

Balneary tourism is a form of tourism characterized by extended stays, practiced by people traveling to balneary resorts for the prevention, maintenance, and healing of diseases. Balneary tourism is a component

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of health tourism, which is distinguished by the reduced influence of seasonality compared to other forms of tourism (Marin et al., 2019).

The concept of wellness is an orientation toward maintaining well-being, both physically and mentally (Popescu et al., 2014). According to the Global Wellness Institute (2025), the wellness field is a major force that was valued at 6.8 trillion dollars in 2024. Thus, within the concept of wellness, balneary tourism involves the use of therapeutic methods and natural resources for treatment. These include speleotherapy, peloidotherapy, natural waters, and, last but not least, balneotherapy (Romanian Balneology Association, 2019, p. 5), which is used in chronic rheumatic conditions, especially among people with osteoarthritis (Galvez et al., 2018).

According to the National Institute of Statistics (2024), there were approximately 1.25 million arrivals to balneary resorts in Romania, almost all of whom (96.4%, i.e., over 1.2 million) were Romanian tourists, and only 3.6% (around 45,000) were foreigners in 2024. There were also over 4.25 million overnight stays, of which the vast majority (4.13 million) were Romanians and only around 123,000 were foreigners. Most tourists chose hotels, followed by tourist villas and other types of tourist accommodation.

In the literature, the competitiveness of tourist destinations is perceived as a complex and multidimensional construct. The conceptual model of the specialized authors Ritchie & Crouch (2003) starts from the idea that the competitiveness of a tourist destination is closely linked to its ability to generate superior results in a competitive environment through the efficient use of resources, infrastructure, services, and management mechanisms.

According to Ritchie & Crouch (1999), the competitiveness of tourist destinations is influenced by economic considerations, however, the authors state that the evolution of tourism is also affected by broader goals, such as promoting the image of a nation, strengthening identity, and preserving the natural and cultural environment. In the vision of Crouch and Ritchie, the competitiveness of a destination is based on the interaction of the microenvironment, made up of the components of the tourist sector, the parties involved, and the competition with similar destinations, and the macroenvironment, influenced by economic, demographic, technological, cultural, and environmental factors. Thus, the competitiveness model proposed by Ritchie and Crouch is based on an approach in which the performance of the destination results from the interaction between the core resources and attractors (physiography, culture and history, market links, events, tourism superstructure), the supporting factors and resources (infrastructure, accessibility, facilitating resources, human capital, entrepreneurship), the destination management (marketing, product development, experience quality management, information use, Destination Management Organization, and resource stewardship), the supporting factors and resources (infrastructure, accessibility, facilitating resources, human capital, entrepreneurship), the destination management (marketing, product development, experience quality management, information use, Destination Management Organization, and resource stewardship), and the qualifying determinants (location, external dependencies, safety, costs). The conceptual model developed by Ritchie & Crouch (1999) is presented in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1. Conceptual representation of the model proposed by Crouch & Ritchie (1999)**

*Source: adapted from Ritchie & Crouch (1999)*

The competitiveness of a tourist destination is not based only on natural or cultural attractiveness, but also on the functioning of the entire economic system that supports tourism, resulting from the correlation of tourism-specific factors with generic factors of economic competition (Enright & Newton, 2004).

The model for analyzing competitiveness has a relative and multidimensional character, being made up of a set of dimensions and subdimensions and not a single indicator (Cristache, N., et al, 2025). To achieve superior competitiveness in the tourism industry, the destination must present a superior overall attractiveness and a better tourist experience compared to existing destinations on the tourist market (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Dwyer et al., 2004).

The model for evaluating the competitiveness of tourist destinations, according to Dumitru & Cosma (2023), is based on the need to transform and simplify the concept of competitiveness into a clear analytical framework. The model focuses on integrating the main elements of competitiveness, thus, the structure of the model is built from four large categories and 10 key determinants. The approach emphasizes the link between existing resources, with the determinants: attractions and tourist assistance; infrastructure, with the determinants: general infrastructure and accessibility; destination management, with the determinants: marketing, public policies, and monitoring; and sustainability, with the determinants: cultural aspects, environment, and performance of tourist destinations.

The natural and cultural resources of a tourist destination represent the foundation of comparative advantage. However, their contribution to competitiveness depends on the ability of the destination to manage them effectively and to transform them into tourist performance, such as income and arrivals in tourist reception structures (González-Rodríguez et al., 2023). The infrastructure determinant is an important indicator of competitiveness, supporting accessibility, the functioning of the tourism offer, and the overall performance of the tourist destination (Rheeders, 2022). According to Chan et al. (2023), the competitiveness of a tourist destination is influenced by hard infrastructure, representing the basic functionality of tourist activities, such as transport, telecommunications, and accommodation, as well as soft infrastructure, such as social, political, and cultural institutions (Pricopoaia, O., et al, 2025).

According to Hassan (2000), a superior competitiveness of a destination cannot exist without a balance between economic growth and permanent protection of resources. The competitiveness model in Hassan's vision is made up of four major determinants, where the commitment to environmental sustainability is a determinant of competitiveness, because environmental quality and sustainability is a necessary condition for long-term competitiveness, influencing the attractiveness of the destination and the decision of tourists to visit the destination.

### 3. Research methodology

The competitiveness of tourist destinations has always been an important topic in the specialized literature, especially in the case of balneary-climatic resorts where competition is more pronounced due to the wide spectrum of the tourist offer. According to the model proposed by Dumitru & Cosma (2023), the competitiveness of tourist destinations is determined by the available resources, infrastructure, management and sustainability of the destination. These four major categories are, in turn, divided into 10 key determinants, the model is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. The structure of the evaluation model for the competitiveness of tourist destinations**

<b>Competitiveness categories</b>	<b>Key determinants</b>
<b>Resources</b>	Attractions
	Tourist assistance
<b>Infrastructure</b>	General infrastructure
	Accessibility
<b>Destination management</b>	Marketing
	Public policies
	Monitoring
<b>Sustainability</b>	Cultural aspects
	Environment
	Performance

*Source: adapted from (Dumitru, I.M & Cosma, S.A., 2023)*

We applied the model for evaluating the competitiveness of tourist destinations to the Sovata resort, a popular balneary destination both nationally and internationally. Within the framework of the Destination of the Year competitiveness (n.d), the Sovata Resort was designated in first place among the balneary resorts.

According to the latest data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2024), the Sovata Resort recorded 159,662 arrivals and 408,747 overnight stays of tourists in tourist reception structures. In 2025, the tourist infrastructure of accommodation units registered 191 tourist reception structures with accommodation functions, including 15 hotels, a hostel, 47 apartments and rooms for rent, 2 motels, 21 tourist villas, 4 tourist chalets, 51 bungalows, a campsite, 4 tourist cottages, 2 student and preschool camps and 43 tourist guesthouses. The tourist accommodation capacity is 4,784 places, including 1,994 places in hotels, 98 places in hostels, 668 places in apartments and rooms for rent, 59 places in motels, 509 places in tourist villas, 86 places

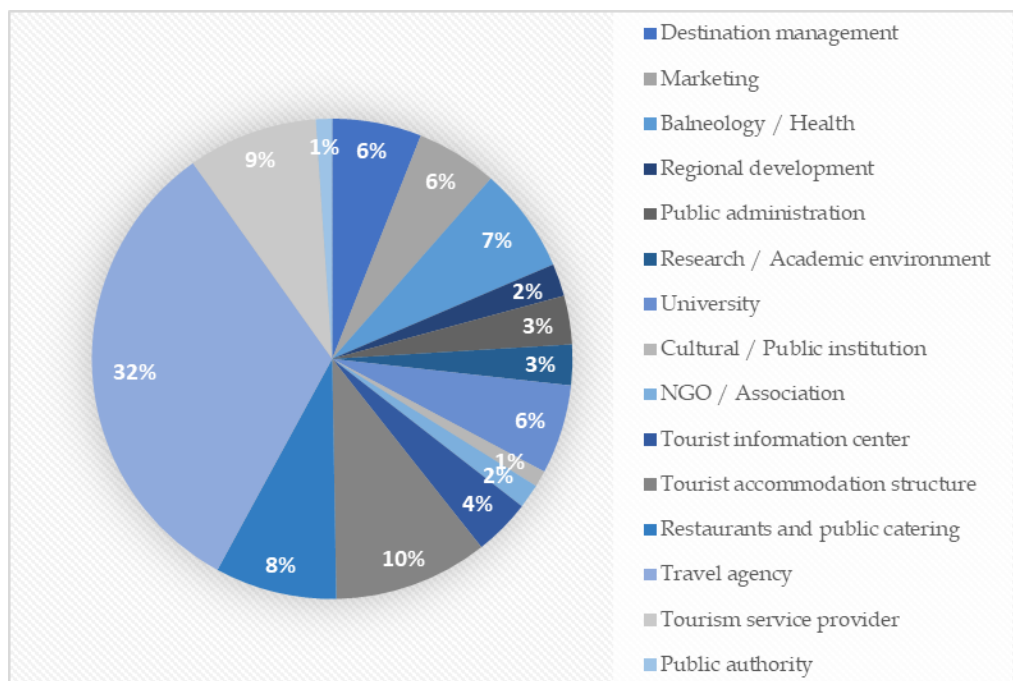
in tourist chalets, 182 places in bungalows, 140 places in campsites, 68 places in tourist cottages, 201 places in student and preschool camps and 779 places in tourist guesthouses (National Institute of Statistics [INS], 2025).

The objectives of the study are to evaluate in the foreground the degree of competitiveness of the Sovata balneary resort, the objectives also aim to identify the key factors that influence the competitive positioning of the resort, the integrated analysis of tourism resources, infrastructure, destination management and sustainability, by applying and adapting the model for evaluating the competitiveness of tourist destinations proposed by Dumitru & Cosma (2023).

Starting from this context, we structured the model into four main categories, which are subdivided into 10 key determinants and 52 sub-indicators. The evaluation of the indicators was carried out using the 5-point Likert scale, 1 representing the “very poor” level, and 5 the “very good” level. The data were collected through a questionnaire, distributed through the Microsoft Forms platform.

Data collection took place between November 29, 2025 and January 24, 2026, with a total of 183 responses. The sample structure shows a predominance of female respondents (58%), with men accounting for 42%. In terms of professional experience, most respondents have experience in the field between 6 and over 10 years (60%). Regarding the level of knowledge of the resort, most respondents stated that they have very good (51%) and good (46%) knowledge.

The questionnaire was addressed to specialists in tourism, public administration, destination marketing, regional development, balneology, hospitality, public authority and academia. Analysis of the sample structure according to the field of professional activity highlighted the predominant position held by travel agencies, with a share of 32% (59 people) of the total sample. The second position is held by tourist reception structures with a share of 10% (19 people), followed by tourist service providers 9% (16 people) and the restaurant and public catering sector 8% (15 people). A share of 7% is represented by the balneology/health sector, followed by marketing, destination management and the university environment each with 6%. Tourist information centers are represented in a proportion of 4%, and research/academic environment in a proportion of 3%. Lower shares are found in the fields of regional development and NGOs/associations, each with 2%, and public authorities and cultural institutions represent only 1% of the total. Data presented in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2. Respondents' professional field of activity**

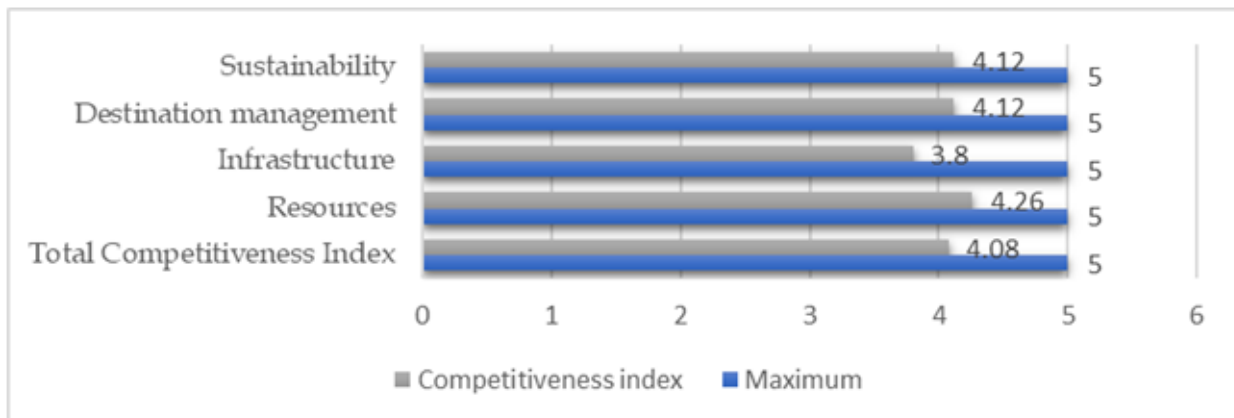
*Source: own data, processed by the authors*

#### 4. Research results

The competitiveness assessment of the Sovata balneary resort was carried out with the support of experts working in tourism and related fields, directly involved in the development, promotion and management of tourist destinations. Thus, this approach was based on the practical experience of the respondents and their direct contact with the reality of the Sovata resort.

Following the interpretation of the results, the Sovata resort obtained a total competitiveness index of 4.08, and it can also be seen in Fig. 3 that all four categories recorded relatively similar scores, without radical fluctuations. Tourist resources obtained the highest score of 4.26, followed by the management and

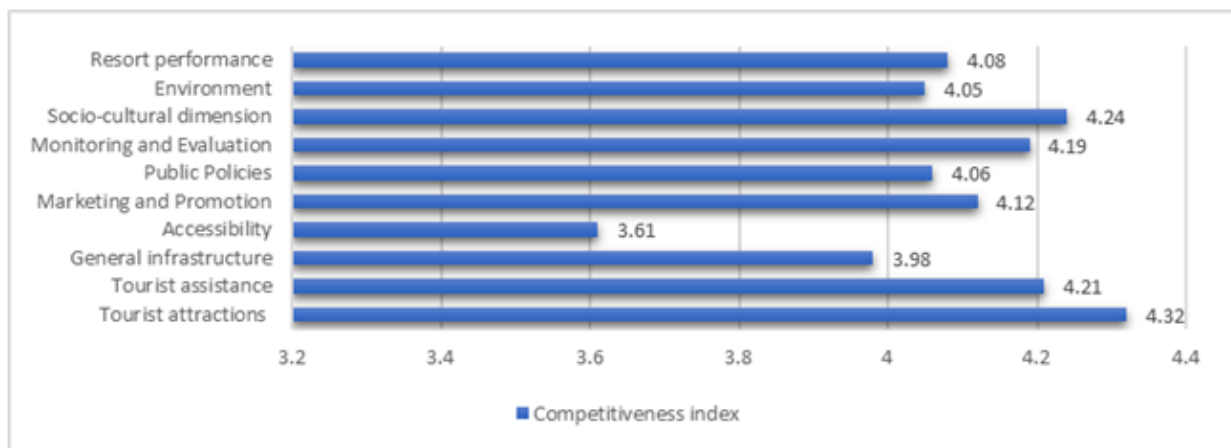
sustainability of the destination, both having a score of 4.12, while infrastructure ranks last with a score of 3.8. However, taking into account that the maximum score is 5, the Sovata resort has a solid position in terms of competitiveness, with all four categories recording scores above average.



**Fig. 3. The competitiveness index of the Sovata balneary resort**

*Source: own data, processed by the authors*

The results obtained from the analysis of the competitiveness index of the key determinants are shown in Fig. 4 and indicate that the competitiveness of the destination is located very close to the upper limit of the scale. The highest values were recorded by the determinants of tourist attractions, with a score of 4.32, and the socio-cultural dimension, with 4.24. Also, a very high competitiveness index was recorded by the determinants of tourist assistance, with a score of 4.21, monitoring and evaluation of destination management, with a score of 4.19, as well as marketing and promotion, with a score of 4.12. With a slight lag in the competitiveness index, but still at a fairly good score to maintain the resort at a high level of competitiveness, the determinants of resort performance, with a score of 4.08, public policies, with a score of 4.06, and the environment, with a score of 4.05, stand out. Lower values were obtained by the determinants of general infrastructure, with a score of 3.98, and accessibility, with a competitiveness index of 3.61.



**Fig. 4. Competitiveness index of key determinants**

*Source: own data, processed by the authors*

Based on the 52 sub-indicators analyzed, it can be seen that the resort presents a good level of performance and competitiveness, with most of the scores being above the threshold of 4 points. The highest scores were obtained by natural resources with a balneary role, with a competitiveness index of 4.51 points, and local and traditional products, with a score of 4.45 points. High values are also found in the balneary accommodation capacities, with a score of 4.36 points, the local gastronomic specificity, with a score of 4.31 points, recreation and relaxation, with 4.28 points, as well as local hospitality, with a score of 4.27, and the level of services offered, with 4.26 points. The socio-cultural component, local identity and traditions, community involvement, and local events and manifestations obtained scores between 4.21 and 4.24 points. Also, the sub-indicators destination image and identity and tourism impact assessment obtained a competitiveness index of 4.20 points each. Lower scores appear in the case of public safety, with 3.75 points, and financial services and digital connectivity, which obtained a score of 3.85 points each. The lowest values were obtained by the sub-indicators air access (2.77 points) and rail access (3.38 points). The data can be found below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Structure of the competitiveness index**

<b>COMPETITIVENESS INDICATORS</b>	<b>COMPETITIVENESS INDEX</b>
<b>A. RESOURCES</b>	<b>4.26</b>
1. Tourist attractions	4.32
1.1 Natural resources with balneary role	4.51
1.2 Elements of cultural and historical heritage	4.13
1.3 Local manifestations and events	4.21
1.4 Recreation and relaxation	4.28
1.5 Local and traditional products	4.45
1.6 Local gastronomic specificity	4.31
2. Tourist assistance	4.21
2.1 Orientation and signage for tourists	4.10
2.2 Balneary tourist accommodation capacities	4.36
2.3 Level of services provided	4.26
2.4 Staff and professional competences	4.17
2.5 Tourist information and local communication	4.15
<b>B. INFRASTRUCTURE</b>	<b>3.80</b>
3. General infrastructure	3.98
3.1 Public safety	3.75
3.2 Medical services and assistance	3.86
3.3 Financial and banking services	3.85
3.4 Digital connectivity	3.85
3.5 Accommodation capacity	4.27
3.6 Public catering services	4.26
3.7 Hygiene and Sanitation Conditions	4.01
4. Accessibility	3.61
4.1 Road access to the destination	3.74
4.2 Railway access to the destination	3.38
4.3 Air access to the destination	2.77
4.4 Local public transport	3.73
4.5 Private transport and transfer services	3.97
4.6 Access to natural areas and treatment facilities	4.09
<b>C. Destination Management</b>	<b>4.12</b>
5. Marketing and Promotion	4.12
5.1 Promotion of the destination	4.05
5.2 Tourism marketing strategies	4.03
5.3 Destination image and identity	4.20
5.4 Collaboration with tourism agencies and other partners	4.17
5.5 Presence on booking platforms and tourist information	4.16
6. Public Policies	4.06
6.1 Organization and functioning of tourism management structures at the local level	4.05
6.2 Planning processes and strategic guidelines for tourism development	4.05
6.3 Level of involvement and cooperation of local stakeholders	4.05
6.4 Development initiatives, investments and funding mechanism	4.08
6.5 Partnership networks and forms of strategic collaboration	4.07
7. Monitoring and Evaluation	4.19
7.1 Management of tourist flows	4.13
7.2 Inventory and capitalization of resources	4.17
7.3 Evaluation of tourism impact	4.20
7.4 Tourist satisfaction level	4.25
7.5 Length of stay	4.18
<b>D. SUSTAINABILITY</b>	<b>4.12</b>

COMPETITIVENESS INDICATORS	COMPETITIVENESS INDEX
8. Socio-cultural dimension	4.24
8.1 Local hospitality	4.27
8.2 Local identity and traditions	4.23
8.3 Community involvement	4.21
8.4 Local products and services	4.25
9. Environment	4.05
9.1 Environmental protection measures	4.05
9.2 Waste management	3.99
9.3 Utilities and environmental infrastructure	4.10
9.4 Conservation of natural resources	4.04
10. Resort performance	4.08
10.1 Revenues obtained from tourism activities	4.09
10.2 Occupancy rate of accommodation facilities	4.17
10.3 Quality-price ratio	4.02
10.4 Capacity of the local environment to support entrepreneurial initiatives	4.10
10.5 Jobs in tourism	4.02
TOTAL COMPETITIVENESS INDEX	4.08

*Source: own data, processed by the authors*

## 5. Conclusions

The competitiveness of tourist destinations is a multidimensional concept in continuous development, which shows, in the case of the present study, the ability of the Sovata balneary destination to use the available resources, infrastructure, management and sustainability to achieve tourism performance and to maintain itself on the market in the long term. The research aims to evaluate the competitiveness of the Sovata balneary resort by applying an analysis model of the competitiveness of tourist destinations, structured on four main categories, such as tourism resources, infrastructure, management and sustainability of the destination, being operationalized through 10 key determinants and 52 sub-indicators. The methodological approach was carried out with the help of experts in the field of tourism and related fields.

The competitiveness of the Sovata resort presents a high level of overall destination performance, the total competitiveness index is 4.08 points out of a maximum of 5 points. Of the four categories analyzed, tourism resources identified the highest score of 4.26 points. In this category, due to the wide spectrum of the balneary tourism offer that the Sovata resort has, natural resources with a balneary role obtained the highest competitiveness index, of 4.51 points, followed by local and traditional products, with 4.45 points, and local gastronomic specificity, with 4.31 points. The determinant tourist assistance obtained a score of 4.21 points, where the sub-indicators balneary accommodation capacities, with a score of 4.36 points, and the quality of services offered, with a competitiveness index of 4.26 points, stand out.

The destination management category recorded a score of 4.12 points, comprising three key determinants that in turn achieved a high level of competitiveness, and the highest competitiveness index goes to the determinant monitoring and evaluation, with a score of 4.19 points, followed by marketing and promotion, with a score of 4.12 points, while the determinant public policies obtained the lowest score of 4.06, but still high enough to maintain the solid position of the resort on the market. The analysis of the sub-indicators supports the performance of the destination management category and confirms the coherence of the implemented management mechanisms. Thus, the sub-indicators tourist satisfaction level stand out, with a score of 4.25 points, followed by the sub-indicator tourism impact assessment, with 4.20 points, and tourist flow management, with a competitiveness index of 4.13 points.

Sustainability is a dimension of the competitiveness of tourist destinations, reflecting their capacity to manage natural, socio-cultural and economic resources in order to ensure the continuity of tourism development in the long term. The sustainability category obtained a score of 4.12 points, where the sub-indicators local hospitality, with 4.27 points, socio-cultural dimension, with 4.24 points, community involvement, with a score of 4.21 points, and the indicators related to the environmental determinant, which obtained values close to the general average, with scores between 3.99 and 4.10 points, stand out.

Infrastructure has the lowest competitiveness index compared to the other categories in the applied competitiveness model, and thus, lower values were obtained by the determinants general infrastructure, with a score of 3.98 points, and accessibility, with a competitiveness index of 3.61 points. The reasons for these low scores are caused by limited rail and air access, with a score of 3.38 and 2.77 points respectively, the nearest airport being approximately 70 km away.

The Sovata balneary resort presents a high competitiveness on the balneary tourism market, due to its main operational dimensions reaching toward the maximum threshold of 5 points. The applied method allowed

the identification of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the indicators that influence the degree of competitiveness and performance of the Sovata resort.

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