

# The religious tourism in Greece: Case study of Saint John Russian in N. Evia

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**Abstract:** *The prevailing political and economic conditions both in Greece and around the world determine the general development of all forms of tourism. The development of specific forms of tourism, such as that of religious tourism, gains tremendous interest in the present economic circumstances, as it is a factor in strengthening the national economy and at the same time a legacy for the future with enormous social, cultural and environmental significance. The development of a strategic approach to religious tourism can build on the comparative advantage of our country in this field by creating new tourist sites to attract tourists with intellectual pursuits and special interests. The Prefecture of Evia has a rich range of natural and cultural resources, with particular characteristics of beauty, uniqueness, and authenticity, elements that are required for the design and development of specific forms of tourism. In the case study on religious tourism in Saint John Russian in the Prefecture of Evia, an attempt is being made to explore the contribution of religious tourism to local development and the preconditions for the promotion of the pilgrimage of Saint John Russian to a major destination of religious and cultural interest of international scope. Additionally, an effort is made to highlight the importance of religious tourism as a special form of tourism that contributes to the development of areas hosting religious monuments. Identifying the opportunities and opportunities that exist, exploring its growth prospects and identifying emerging markets, dictates the formulation of policy proposals where combined with the existing specific forms of tourism it will show it as an essential factor in the systematic organization, exploitation and promotion of the Area.*

**Keywords:** Tourism, religious tourism, religious motives, special forms of tourism

**JEL Classification:** L83, M1, O1

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism has been particularly flourishing in Greece in recent years as it is one of the most rapidly developing special forms of tourism worldwide. This article presents the importance of religious tourism as a means of religious, cultural or historical expression in the areas of Greece hosting monuments of religious interest. Then, through the study of the pilgrimage to Saint John Russian, the contribution of religious

tourism to local development is explored in order to identify development potential and policies so that the region will become a place of special tourist interest. The study also explores the importance of religious tourism as a special form of tourism that contributes to the development of the areas hosting religious monuments, identifying the opportunities for opportunities for exploiting and promoting the area of St. John Russian as a nodal destination of religious interest in Evia. The exploration of the development

prospects of religious tourism in the country and the identification of countries that are emerging markets of religious tourism and potential sources of attraction of a significant number of pilgrims to the religious monuments of our country and in Evia in particular as well as the policy of systematic organization, improving and developing the religious-pilgrimage trips that can be followed in the region along with the existing special forms of tourism.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The first attempt to give the definition of tourism was made by Hunziker and Kraft in 1942, according to which "tourism could be characterized as the whole of the relations resulting from travel and residence of non-permanent residents as long as they do not lead to permanent residence and don't connect to any speculative activity" (Igoumenakis & Krakavitis, 2004, pp. 13-18). It encompasses new cultural values that are geared to environmental protection and sustainable development despite the continuous geographic expansion and development of the areas involved in tourism at international level. It is indissolubly linked to the most advanced technology in transport, communication, business management, computer and internet software applications, booking systems, marketing and all kinds of tourism-related activities.

The bulk of tourism over the years led to the standardization of services with benefits from private companies as the "price-quality" relationship followed by the "value-quantity" relationship, resulting in reductions in arrivals, investment stagnation, social friction and rebutting expectations for tourism development. Then there was an intensification of environmental problems and a contraction of the tourist season with unfavorable consequences for employment. Under these circumstances, international tourism operators have tried to promote new forms (Velissariou, 1999).

In the opposite direction of mass tourism, were found the alternative forms which were in harmony with nature and the cultural heritage. In addition to this, they contribute to the economic and social development of the regions of the region, to the tourist competitiveness of the areas with developed tourist infrastructure, improve it, neutralize its weaknesses and replace it in the long term (Logothetis, 1997). In this type of travel, the motivation of the movement and the decision about it are determined by a particular interest, due to which the journey is made, e.g. Congress, religious, educational tourism.

Expert and Alternative Tourism is a process that promotes a form of travel that respects both the cultural and natural resources of a region, the local community and its visitors. In addition, it enables the particular features of a region to be exploited and new growth prospects emerged through job creation (Middleton, 2009). It is a type of active tourism, as visitors can participate in a variety of activities and are also associated with small-scale investments (Andriotis, 2008, pp. 74-75). According to (MacLeod, 1997) alternative tourists prefer physical release, sometimes following the pattern of

nudity on the beach, moving with backpacks and living in apartments or rooms bordering on fishermen, making friendships with locals and experiencing local culture. Religious tourism according to (Rinschede, 1992) & (Tomasi, 2002) can be defined as a form of tourism of special interest motivated partly or exclusively by religious motives, and in particular by the desire of the person to move from the place of his permanent residence in order to visit a place that he considers to be "holy" often choosing a specific time, seeking communication with the divine or meeting religious needs such as the fulfillment of a vow, a request for some grace and a sign of gratitude (Smith, 1992), regarding the motivation of the religious tourist formulated the distinction shown in the following diagram:

PILGRIMAGE		RELIGIOUS TOURISM		TOURISM
A	B	C	D	E
Sanctuary		Faithful/Cosmic (Secular)		Cosmic (Secular)

According to the evidence presented (Mira, 2009, pp. 45), he constructed a framework of positions at the ends of which there is the sanctuary and the secular one, and between the two extremes there are unlimited numbers of possible combinations of sacred and secular. Positions A, B, C, D, E on the diagram show various and changing motives of the traveler, whose interest and activities can vary depending on the pilgrim, the tourist and vice versa. In the center there is what is called religious tourism. The area between A and C shows the person who is more pilgrim instead of a tourist, while the area between C and E is the more a tourist than a pilgrim. In the same scheme we can discern the view expressed by Pearce (1992), that the tourist's motivations are varied and varied. By extension his interests and activities can easily be moved from the pilgrim to the tourist and vice versa. Pilgrimage according to (Wright, 2007) is the trip to a holy place for religious purposes. In these places believers seek communication with the Divine (Lagos, 2011).

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2007), the term pilgrimage can be a long trip or exploration for a religious purpose with a high or moral sense beyond a trip to a holy place or temple (Lagos & Christogiannis, 2007, pp.466). The modern version of the pilgrimage broadly includes the concept of pilgrimage not only to religious monuments but also to cultural sites and cultural pilgrimages (Collins-Kreiner, 2006). However, it should not be overlooked that the pilgrimage is shaped in addition to religious beliefs and the influence of other factors that prevail, such as political, economic, social, etc. The distinction between the pilgrim and the religious tourist is an issue that has been in the scientific community for several years. This is because, depending on the area (religious or secular) in which the person moves, his / her needs, desires and behaviors during the journey are shaped (Mira, 2003).

Jackowski & Smith (1992), consider that this move takes two forms, which depend on the goals and the mode of travel. In one the driving force is the religious feeling (pilgrim) and the other (the religious tourist) the quest for knowledge (Squadron, 2008). Dubisch (2000), argues that "the journey includes two important dimensions in time and space. What distinguishes the pilgrimage from other trips is the fact that time and space is unusual and adds, as Aslan (2008) says, that

"pilgrimage is a real journey but at the same time a symbolic or transport journey, in which a spiritual and a social change takes place". Although there is a great literature on tourism and pilgrimage, there is a lack of empirical work that serves as interpretive mechanisms in understanding possible relationships (similarities or differences) between pilgrims and other tourists (Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015). In fact, these are two different social phenomena, the pilgrimage where the spiritual element of faith and religious tourism dominate as a subcategory of cultural tourism, with religiosity as a whole, regardless of whether it is active or inactive.

Religion, however, is an important part of civilization. Religious monuments are considered as cultural elements and religious events, cultural events (Sfakianakis, 2000). Religious tourism is according to the (Rinschede, 1992) subcategory of cultural and organized pilgrimages, religious tourists usually have an extra day to visit selected tourist attractions (Squadron, 2009, pp. 44). Vulkonic (1996) argues that a religious tourist after fulfilling his religious needs behaves as a tourist, meaning that he needs accommodation, food, entertainment, buying souvenirs and other products. The development of religious tourism according to (Kokkosis & Tsartas, 2001, pp.31) also brings socio-cultural benefits such as reducing unemployment, developing infrastructure projects, demanding and improving high-quality medical services, enhancing cultural identity, raising living standards and quality of life for residents of tourist areas, increasing the production of tourism resources.

The creation of museums or theme parks or the organization of cultural events with a main or unique axis of a historical personality of the region or some elements of local culture and tradition serve as a means of preserving the peace of societies, increasing the consciousness of tourists and the local population for the socio-cultural resources of the region, thus avoiding immigration and common interests to bring people of different cultures and societies in contact with each other. Nowadays, religious tourism is recognized internationally as a special form of tourism with great economic and social significance.

According to official figures from the World Religious Tourism Organization, more than 300 million travelers travel each year to visit places of religious interest. The economic benefit to them is about 15 billion euro (WRTA, 2014). Religious tourism and its development potential are a matter of great concern for national tourism policies and responsible bodies worldwide, such as the European Union, UNESCO, etc. (Lytras, 2001). The intense economic activity that accompanies the need for pilgrimage, has led many businesses to specialize in religious-pilgrimage tourism. Greece, according to its website (Newsroom, 2012), thanks to its rich religious and cultural heritage, claims a significant share in the dynamics of a global market of 3 billion people. It is true that religious tourism in Greece is remarkable due to the intense religious feeling of the Greeks as well as their timeless connection with the Orthodox Christian faith. Numerous Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, frescoes, icons of immeasurable value constitute the cultural heritage of this country, attracting the interest of pilgrims and religious tourists. Besides the religious monuments that are included in the UNESCO list, Greece has a huge religious

wealth found in great religious centers of Christianity scattered in the Greek area (Mira, 2009, pp. 164).

In recent years the phenomenon of monasteries and holy pilgrimages has been spilling into crowds of believers, but also other visitors who have previously been indifferent or even negative towards monasticism or the Church, testifying to the inspiration of renewal and the different meaning they impart to their lives. Many Greeks are touring the Greek countryside on weekends looking for the devotion and religious devotee offered by the monasteries. The duration of the trip is determined by the religious nature of the visits and the age of the participants. Official statistics of visits to religious sites, visitors' origins, travel distances, visit time, age, education, and other characteristics that would help analyze the phenomenon, there are only indications that create difficulties in counting and evaluating religious tourist movements.

Almost all counties have religious resources, which creates conditions for the development of religious tourism. A characteristic feature of religious tourism in Greece is that 85% of visitors, according to the Syntagma Office (2015) and the Hellenic Tourists & Travel Agents Association HATTA, (Poulakis & Lagos, 2013, p. 7) While visitors from abroad come mainly from Eastern Orthodox countries such as Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Cyprus (Albani, 2014). Also, the number of potential visitors of the Greek community from Western and Northern European countries, America, Australia, Africa, which travels for religious purposes exclusively or in combination with other forms of tourism in our country, is also significant. In Greece as well as in the rest of the western world, the pilgrim is a target group of the tourist industry, since, according to the HATTA Association, the only visitors to the religious monuments exceed 300,000 each year.

Cultural religious expression is practiced all the seasons of the year, sometimes inside and outside the tourist season. The geographical location of Greece in the Mediterranean, easy access, climatic conditions with a long period of sunshine and its mild climate allow for the development of religious tourism for most of the year. A major lever in the development of religious tourism in Greece can be its religious and cultural wealth as a complementary attractive resource in any tourist activity. The social factor that includes the hospitable mood of local residents combined with the deep religious tradition can give Greece the character of the hospitable religious destination. The political factor also constitutes a safe environment for the pilgrim creating a positive image of religious tourism in our country (Mira, 2009, pp.172).

The challenge and the prospects for religious tourism in Greece are great as, according to the (2013) for the World Tourism Organization, it is the fastest growing tourist product since 2007. Suffice it to note that of the 17 monuments of the Greek cultural heritage in UNESCO, the five are areas of religious interest (Poulaki & Lagos, 2013). In the framework of a policy for the development of religious tourism in Greece, remarkable actions have been taken by the Church of Greece, public bodies involved in tourism, local government and also by private bodies. According to (Poulaki & Lagos, 2013) the cooperation of all governmental, ecclesiastical or non-governmental bodies is becoming more

and more up-to-date with the aim of developing religious tourism.

Religious tourism is part of sustainable development as it includes the experiential acquaintance of tourists with local customs and traditions, the visit of protected natural and cultural areas where there is a balance between the environment, the economy and the social dimensions of tourism. This special form of tourism does not inherently guarantee sustainability and sustainability but should be combined with the adoption of environmentally friendly and local practices. Endogenous development is a key element of development policies that is being pursued with the aim of exploiting the natural, religious and cultural wealth and human potential of each region while aiming at the continuous decentralization of competences from the national to the local level (Kokkosis & Tsartas, 2001).

Basic prerequisites for the local development of religious tourism are the participation of the local community in the benefits of tourism development, decision-making related to the implementation of the development process as well as the design of the offered product. Religious tourism is among the activities that can enhance the reconstruction of a tourist area (isolated and disadvantaged areas) as it brings together characteristics that make it a lever of local and endogenous growth, creating new jobs and preventing young people from migrating to urban centers (Apostolopoulos & Sdrali, 2009). In the context of the aforementioned, and in particular through the case study on religious tourism in Saint John the Russian in the Prefecture of Evia, which is a destination rich in natural beauty, ideal climatic conditions, combines the possibility of using other special forms of tourism, To explore the contribution of religious tourism to local development and the conditions for the promotion of the pilgrimage of St. John of Russia to an important religious and cultural destination Internationally.

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### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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A comprehensive review of Greek and international bibliography, various sources of information related to religion and the evolution of religious tourism in Greece as well as the dynamics of foreign markets such as newspaper articles, tourist or religious magazines were used to investigate the issue Content, internet, statistics from ELSTAT, the IEE, the Bank of Greece, PE Evia, the Church of Greece and its other agencies are related to tourism and are active in the region of Evia and the region of Saint John Russian. In addition, in order to provide comprehensive information on the research theme of the development of religious tourism in Saint John Russian and the emergence of the region as a place of special tourist interest, it was considered necessary to carry out a primary survey using a questionnaire.

The primary exploration of market conditions took place at the visitor level aiming at the evaluation of the tourist product of St. John. Issues related to the experience gained by visitors, suggestions for ways of improving the tourist product, as well as identifying opportunities for the development of new tourist products and market segments,

as well as tourist offices, were examined, aiming to identify ways to increase the sales of travel companies Specializing in mild and special forms of tourism aiming at the tourist development of the Saint John' area and its emergence in a special place Interest. The results were supplemented by the collection of primary data from structured interviews (Christou, 1999).

A structured questionnaire for specific questions was prepared for the inquiry at St. John Russian' visitors, aiming at obtaining clear answers. His design was based on a set of rules to avoid tricky meanings, guidance on specific answers, subjective notions, hypothetical questions, vague concepts and expressions, demanding detailed information from past events or very personal details. It was divided into two parts where the first part consisted of 12 questions related to the profile of the visitors and the second part 18 closed or mixed questions related to the selection of Saint John of the Russian as a destination. The Likert Scale, multiple selection, scale, etc. were used to formulate the above questions (Christos, 1999). Were distributed 150 questionnaires to a random sample of visitor-tourists who had visited Evia at least once and who were not permanent residents, either electronically or by local distribution and immediate completion in the Pilgrimage area. In each case, they were accompanied by a relevant letter stating the subject and the purpose of the survey, asking for participation in the effort to carry out more valid results.

For inquiries at the level of Tourist Offices with reference to them as Distribution Channels, a structured questionnaire was prepared in three sections, the first part of which included 5 questions related to the company profile, the second part, 4 open and 1 closed question related to the profile Customers and third party, 19 closed or mixed questions related to the destination evaluation. Were distributed 20 questionnaires in tourist offices that make excursions to the region of Evia and especially to the pilgrimage of St. John Russian and to tourist offices specializing in religious tourism after telephone communication to inform the objectives of the research. Structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the Pilgrimage, the Temple Hostel, Businesses and Bodies active in the region, as well as Local Government Executives (Kedra, 2008).

The use of this qualitative research technique aimed at a deeper understanding of the factors influencing consumer behavior towards the tourist product and services, using structured questioning. Answers to interview questions were captured in writing and appreciated in conjunction with personal on-site observation. In order to determine the compatibility of the questionnaires and the ability to make the necessary corrections, we have tested a limited number of distributors and distributors, as well as friendly persons by email for on-site completion. The survey was conducted from 10/4/2016 to 5/5/2016.

The difficulty of conducting research was mainly found in the time-consuming approach of visitors to gathering a significant number of responses with only a hindrance to their distrust which was overcome by explaining analytically the purpose of the survey. The owners of hotel units in the prefecture of Evia, located in nearby areas of Prokopi (village of St. John), cited different reasons to avoid completing the questionnaires while the businessmen, the rooms, the hotel

and the Hostel of Prokopi, as well as the dining and local markets responded with willingness to interview. Also, the staff of the Local Government, from which we formed a full picture of the economic and technical dimensions and developments of the Saint. It was extremely difficult to approach the distribution channels, which pretended their workload. Efforts stepped up in online visits, daily telephone communications as well as sending repeated emails.

**4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the analysis of the questionnaire replies, useful conclusions were drawn. 111 completed guest questionnaires, 14 distribution channel questionnaires and 11 completed interviews were collected, which were entered into the SPSS Volume 23 statistical program for editing and exporting results that were captured in charts and diagrams.

**4.1 Visitor questionnaire results**

From the visitors' replies we found that the main reason for making this trip was "Holy Pilgrimage" (Figure 1) and based on their interests, they compare it with equally important religious sites and evaluate it as the most important religious destination in the region (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Reasons for choosing St. John's Russian as destination

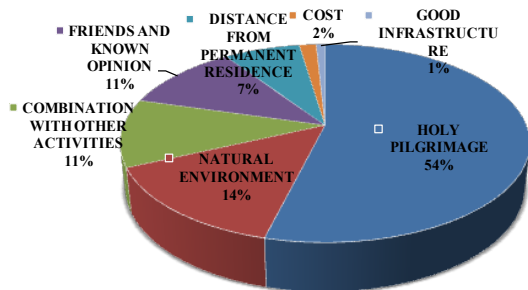
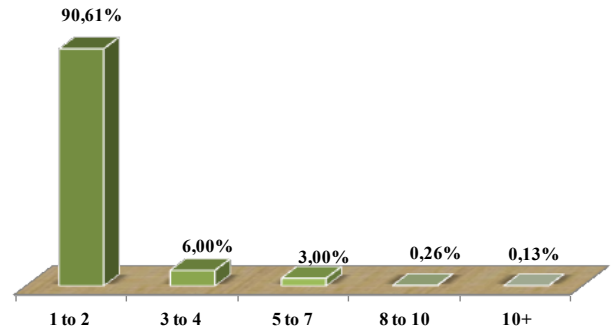


Figure 2: Rating of importance of Saint John of the Russian Compared to other religious monuments and holy places of the region



The audience who visited the Saint in its majority stayed in the area for a few days' holiday up to two days (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of days of stay



For his stay he preferred rooms to let (figure 4) and for eating the traditional taverns (figure 5), while during their stay a part of them carried out activities offered in the area. Of the factors that they consider important in a destination, such as access, means of transport, local resources, infrastructure, accommodation, (Table I).

Figure 4: Place of residence

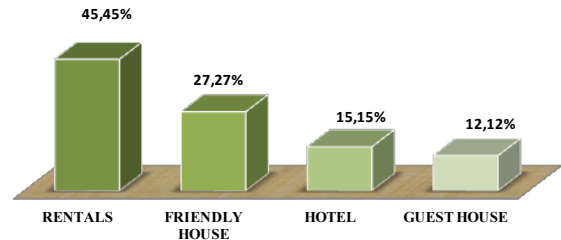


Figure 5: Select place to eat

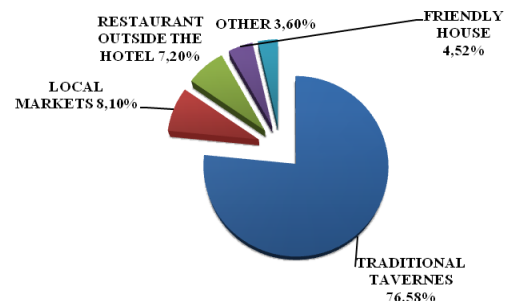


Table 1: Customers' opinion for important destination factors

	At all	Minimum	Moderate	Great	Very big
Access, means of transport, local means	0%	7.1%	57.1%	21.4%	14.3%
Infrastructure (road network, ports, airports)	0%	7.1%	64.3%	21.4%	7.1%
Stay	7.1%	42.9%	50.0%	0%	0%
Diet	0%	0%	50.0%	42.9%	7.1%
Quality of service, security, people	0%	0%	57.1%	28.6%	14.3%
Natural area attractions	0%	0%	0%	57.1%	42.9%
Religious / Cultural Monuments	0%	0%	21.4%	35.7%	42.9%
Entertainment, a combination of other activities	21.4%	35.7%	35.7%	7.1%	0%
Product-price relationship	0%	0%	0%	71.4%	28.6%
Climate	0%	0%	7.1%	78.6%	14.3%

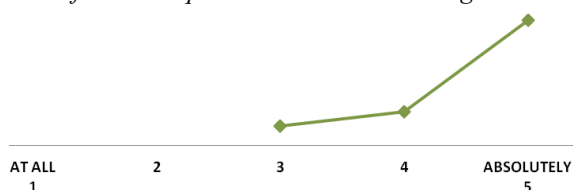
We found that most were not satisfied despite the fact that they rated the region as an economic destination according to data (Table 2).

Table 2: Visitor satisfaction from the destination

	Not at all	Minimum	Moderate	Great	Very high
Access, means of transport, local means	4,5%	9,9%	49,5%	22,5%	13,5%
Infrastructure (road network, ports, airports)	3,6%	10,8%	61,3%	16,2%	8,1%
Stay	14,4%	23,4%	35,1%	22,5%	4,5%
Diet	0%	3,6%	45,9%	44,1%	6,3%
Quality of service, security, people	0%	0,9%	26,1%	62,2%	10,8%
Naturally area attractions	0%	0%	11,7%	59,5%	28,8%
Religious / Cultural Monuments	0,9%	2,7%	22,5%	48,6%	25,2%
Entertainment, a combination of other activities	7,2%	25,2%	33,3%	27,0%	7,2%
Product-price relationship	0%	2,7%	48,6%	43,2%	5,4%
Climate	0%	1,8%	25,2%	63,1%	9,9%

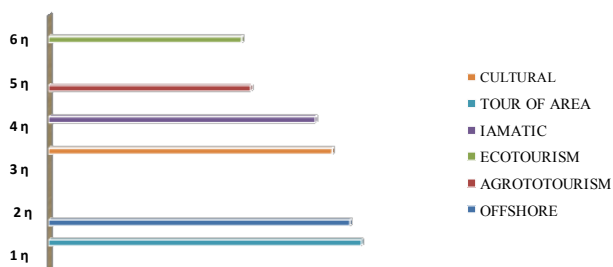
However, the general picture of acquaintance with place, religious cultural monuments, climate, and people seems to satisfy them to a great extent as they have expressed willingness to recommend it to their wider circle with a willingness to return to the future (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Willingness to recommend the destination to friends/acquaintances or to visit it again



Visitors' opinion on service improvements and the development of other forms of tourism in the region has shown that the special forms of theatrical and tourist tourism dominate the preferences of religious tourists (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Hierarchy of choice of special forms of tourism in the studied area



Points of attraction to visitors are natural attractions, religious monuments and climate (figure 8), while accommodation, access, transport, infrastructure and at the same time are impossible an the same time an aggravating factor for the

promotion of Saint John Russian, a place with special tourist interest (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Strengths of Saint John the Russian



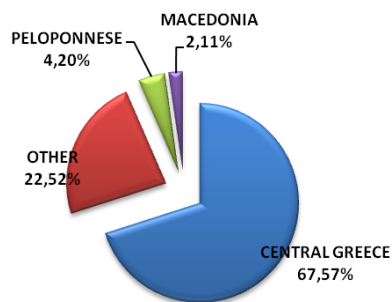
Figure 9: Major weaknesses



#### 4.2 Results of distribution channels survey

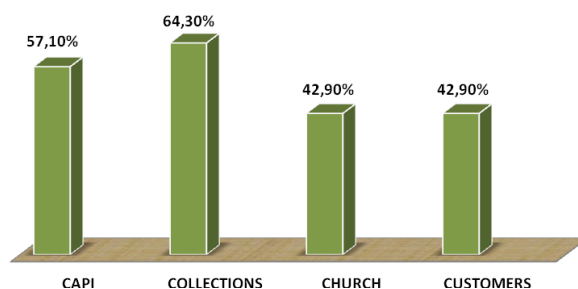
The tourist enterprises that responded to the questionnaire were mainly based in Central Greece while organizing trips of religious interest, especially in Saint John Russian (figure 10).

Figure 10: Location of respondents



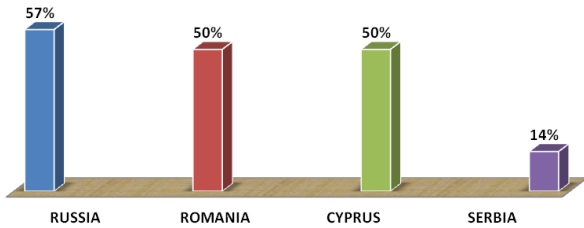
Excursions to this destination are scheduled at the request of Associations, Open Centers for the Protection of the Elderly (CAPI) or Parishes, reaching an average of ten per annum, without fully agreeing that this destination may be a key source of attraction for tourists and income for their businesses (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Groups requesting the organization of excursions to the destination



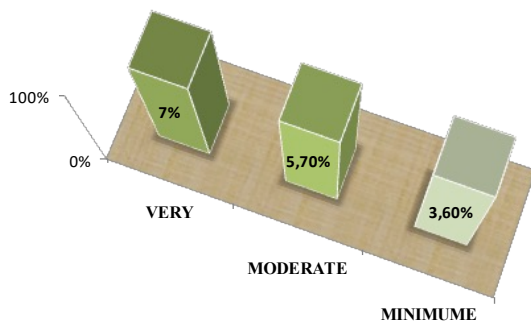
One in two travel agents believe that Cyprus, Romania and Russia are emerging markets for religious tourism, while only one in ten has the same view of Serbia (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Emerging tourism markets for the destination studied



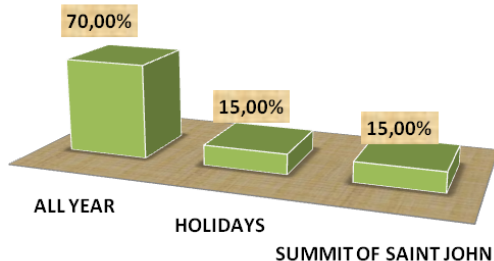
The representatives of the tourist companies seem to accept the importance of the pilgrimage of Saint John Russian to the same extent as the pilgrims as it comes in complete agreement with those who chose the Holy Pilgrimage with difference, first in relation to others in the region (Figure 2). Their opinion on the degree of response of their clients appears to be positive and absolutely positive for the attainment of St John of Russia as a religious destination (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Attitudes of attracting tourists to the destination



The season and the days (Figure 14) proposed by the entrepreneurs appear to be the same as the visitors' preferences as the first ones propose daily excursion, stay, no time of the year, and for any accommodation in the Temple hostel (Figure 3).

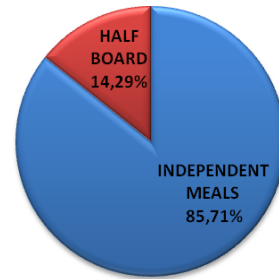
Figure 14: Season of visit



The intent of distribution channels is to create packages that will include an overnight stay in Saint John Russian. However, this is not feasible as the area is deficient in accommodation in a large number of beds. Finally, in the effort to reduce the cost of the groups, they offer almost

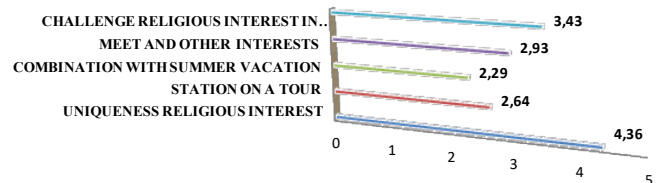
exclusively independent meals for their clients' nutrition (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Proposals for nutrition



The reason for the visit seems to fit well with the activities that entrepreneurs believe that pilgrims do, as they regard dedication to pilgrimage as exclusive activity, which is contrary to what visitors said. The factors affecting the distribution channel customers and their satisfaction (Table II) seem to be the same as what visitors say, as access, transport, accommodation and infrastructure remain the major problem of the destination. But also the strengths of the destination are identical with the visitors' references, which also stated that these include religious monuments, natural attractions and the climate (Figure 8). Finally, according to the representatives of the tourist companies, they want to resume this travel destination in the future, but also to combine it with other special forms of tourism (Figures 16 & 7).

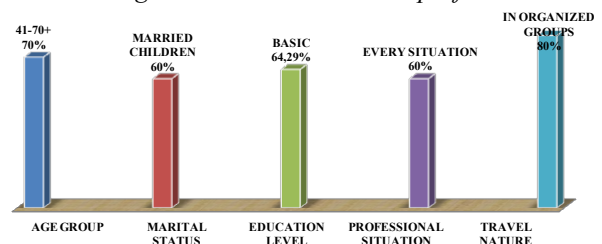
Figure 16: Pilgrimage and religious tourism as tourism development factors



4.3 Interview results

From the interviews, we have found that they all agree on the dispersion of age groups and their marital status. They also agree with the high educational level the ethos and the impeccable behavior of the visitors. By setting their income as a base, they place them in the middle and upper income classes, with younger people moving mainly with a private vehicle, while ages over 55 are mostly female and choose organized tours (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Customer/visitor profile



They are moving from all parts of Greece, but also from Russia, Romania and other militant states, especially on the dates of the celebration of the Saint and are usually employed or retired, while in recent years there has been a drop in student visits. According to local authorities and businesses surveyed, 70% of residents have permanent residence in Athens and the surrounding areas, and 30% in the rest of Greece, while foreigners come mainly from Slavic states with the superiority of the Russians and Romanians.

In recent years, a significant proportion of Indians, Turks and Moldovans have also appeared. The preference of the pilgrims for their access by private means of transport is 70% of the total, while the remaining 30%, which is mainly older people, prefers organized tours to groups. The groups appear to be mainly organized by Open Centers for the Protection of the Elderly (CAPI), parishes and associations (Figure 11), while there are also those organized by foreign agencies dealing exclusively with religious / pilgrimage tourism and come mainly from Russia and Romania (Figure 12).

The main reason for visiting the region, as stated by all the groups of respondents active in the region, is the pilgrimage of St. John Russian, which they do even if they are accidentally found in the area. Religious tourists usually combine their visit with a tour of the natural beauties of the region as well as other pilgrimages such as Saint David of Galataki Monastery, Agios Georgios Ilion etc. However, according to the report of the entrepreneurs in the area there is no tourist packages available for the region's overall utilization. They note that there is a limited number of organized excursions including guided tours of the religious and cultural elements of the area. This also adds to the significant lack of visibility of the cultural and traditional wealth of the region. During the Saint's Day, guests usually stay 2-3 nights in the area, while there are not few Greek visitors staying for up to 7 days.

The Russians and Romanians are used to living in the Temple's guesthouse or in the surrounding areas. It is a fact that accommodation in Prokopi is not enough to cover a large number of visitors, so visitors choose accommodation from the surrounding areas. However, there are no large hotel complexes of many stars and high standards in the region to attract tourist groups of high demands. The hostel caters to the needs of religious tourists in particular, as those who live in it must adhere to specific rules of clothing and behavior. The food is fully covered by the traditional taverns of the area, the Prokopi market, as well as the surrounding areas even during the fasting period. In addition, professionals in the region are striving to maintain visitors' satisfaction at a high level while preserving the balance of product-price relationships. In the case of visitors with groups whose stay time is limited, visitors' choices are limited to a "skewer in hand" as they often report.

The lack of visibility of other activities leads visitors to engage only in pilgrimage despite the fact that the area offers a variety of activities. Businessmen in the region note that the number of organized excursions is mainly daily, which does not allow the visitor to get acquainted with the area and to take advantage of the activities developed there. However, there is a large percentage of pilgrims visiting the nearby beaches, combining thermal baths, participating in cultural events and festivals, walking on paths, excursions to nature

and cultural monuments, archaeological sites or pilgrimages to churches, monasteries and country churches. However, low consumption in souvenir and food markets is indicative of the economic crisis. It is also obvious that there is no particular tourist development in the area. In particular, there are shortages in infrastructures that would enhance the conditions, so that tourism is a major activity for the local people.

Moreover, there is a lack of co-ordination among individuals active in the area. Tourism thus ends up being a secondary / ancillary activity for the inhabitants. Despite the constant increase in the number of visitors, the impact on the environment is extremely positive, as it has caused the local interest to maintain and exploit it by constantly re-building the site, lastly paving the central square, the road leading to the temple and pedestrian along the local market. In addition, it was recently funded by EU programs.

The reconstruction of the old guesthouse into a museum of Asia Minor culture aiming at attracting visitors with interesting interests. Weakness is the stagnation of approval for the preservation of monuments in neighboring areas, such as the preservation of hagiographies in the chapel of Agios Ioannis Theologos in Pelion.

There are shortcomings in urban transport, road network, port facilities, coastal links with nearby islands and ports, telecommunications and transport links with surrounding areas. Respondents agree that the pilgrimage of St. John Russian could be a starting point for a series of visits to places of religious interest in the wider region, as there are many remarkable pilgrimages, with the projection of combinatorial programs as they attribute.

#### 4.4 Convergence – differentiation of research findings

The results of the survey confirm that St. John Russian in the prefecture of Evia is a tourist destination with qualitative features in natural and cultural resources, which can contribute to increasing demand for the tourist product by developing religious tourism. It is important to note that research findings on the development of religious tourism in the region are coincident with those of the review of literature in secondary research where it appears that religious tourism has not developed in the region as there was no tourist planning and was not followed specific policy strategies. Furthermore, the answers of visitors' and distribution channels' questionnaires regarding the profile of visitors, travel organizers, the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the area, the coverage of tourists' needs, the intention of combining with other activities and responding or repeating visits to the region, seem to be identical to those of the interviews almost as a whole.

A unique point of diversification of the tourist offices '(distribution channels)' responses to those of the local players and businessmen in the area was that Tour Desk representatives expressed reservations as to whether St. John's destination could be a key source of tourist attraction and increase their income (Figure 6), while the latter expressed the vision and the need for development, by improving the infrastructure, activating the state mechanism, developing promotional demonstration of the country beyond the country's narrow borders and entry into international



emerging markets or markets of co-religious countries, coordination of actions to attract Greek or foreign investors, cooperation with distribution channels for organizing combinations with other day-to-day program activities aimed at Eradication of seasonality, enhancing the competitiveness of its services and a more general study of promotion and development of its religious monuments.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The prevailing political and economic conditions both in Greece and around the world determine the general development of all forms of tourism. The development of a strategic approach to religious tourism can build on the comparative advantage of our country in this field by creating new tourist sites to attract tourists with intellectual pursuits and special interests.

Prefecture Evia has a rich range of natural and cultural resources, with the unique characteristics of beauty, uniqueness and authenticity, elements that are required for the design and development of specific forms of tourism. However, their tourism to date has not been satisfactory, with the lack of a tourism development and improvement of tourist products. Thus, for the better use and balanced development of religious tourism in the region, it is necessary to set up an organized tourism policy framework based on the selection of development priorities and the use of appropriate means of implementation (Briassouli, 2000).

The objective of religious tourism development should be to transform the comparative into a competitive advantage with respect to the environment, customs and customs of the religious site, since these are expressions of religious heritage and cultural identity. The basic prerequisite for the sustainable development of religious tourism in the region and in combination with other special forms is the undertaking of coordinated actions by all the actors and organizations of the public and private sector, the acceptance and participation of the Church and the local community in any activities, to become a place of special tourist interest. Moreover, the multiculturalism of societies requires the development of actions, promotion and promotion of the place in the international emerging markets or the markets of the Catholic countries. Actions should also aim at challenging younger visitors through healthy messages emitting religious monuments themselves. I

n particular, for the St. John of Russia area, the strategic approach should include activating the state mechanism to improve infrastructure for safer and faster access to the area, the creation of cultural centers, with concerted actions to attract Greek or foreign investors. Also, the exploitation of EU funding programs, the upgrading of the quality of accommodation, investment projects for the establishment, expansion and modernization of hostels, as well as the strengthening of the competitiveness of the services provided in the field of tourism and entertainment.

Consequently, the promotion of education and training programs in religious tourism through the creation of appropriate infrastructure, the coordination of businesses active in the region, the upgrading of festivals and religious and cultural events. Besides, the emotions, communication

and social ties that the tourist can develop with the local community and the tourism enterprises are the ones that will differentiate the destination and will entangle the tourists with the region (Sigala & Christou, 2014).

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