

# ТЕРРИТОРИАЛЬНЫЕ ТУРИСТСКО-РЕКРЕАЦИОННЫЕ СИСТЕМЫ: ОСОБЕННОСТИ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ И РАЗВИТИЯ

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Original Research Article

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## TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN CITY OF MERSIN (TURKEY): LOCAL'S OPINION

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### **Abstract**

**Aim.** This study seeks to identify both the opportunities and challenges for tourism development in the Mediterranean city of Mersin based on opinion of local residents.

**Methodology.** The study is based on data of two sociological surveys, various literature sources, and the author's own observations. The opinion of local residents is evaluated through two sociological surveys conducted among Turkish citizens and the Russian-speaking residents of the city of Mersin from December 18, 2022, to February 5, 2023, and from April 4, 2023, to July 16, 2023. The empirical data consists of 245 anonymous questionnaires: 143 were completed by Turkish citizens in Turkish, and 102 by Russian-speaking people in Russian.

**Results.** The findings indicate a generally positive view among locals regarding the prospects for tourism development in Mersin. Key potential benefits identified from tourism development include the creation of new jobs for locals (53.5% of respondents), enhancement of the city of Mersin's image (46.5%), and improvement of services available to both tourists and residents (46.5%). Despite this shared optimism, notable differences in opinions were observed between the Turkish citizens and the Russian-speaking community. The study revealed five main obstacles for tourism development in the city: infrastructural (underdeveloped tourism infrastructure), environmental (sea and beach pollution (especially with plastic); litter on the streets), economic (inflation; underinvestment of tourism; lack of a tourism development strategy), socio-cultural (language barrier, both Russian and English) aspects as well as legal challenges (changes in legislation, e.g., in requirements for getting a temporary residence permit for foreign citizens).

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**Research implications.** The outcomes of this study offer valuable insights into the preferences of the Russian-speaking tourists and the factors impeding tourism growth in Mersin. These findings may assist in boosting both the inbound tourist flow and the local tourism market. Additionally, the results may be applicable to other tourist destinations aiming to enhance or maintain tourist traffic from Russian-speaking countries.

**Keywords:** tourism development, Mersin Province, Turkish citizens, Russian-speaking people, Russian tourist

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Научная статья

## РАЗВИТИЕ ТУРИЗМА В СРЕДИЗЕМНОМОРСКОМ ГОРОДЕ МЕРСИН (ТУРЦИЯ): МНЕНИЕ МЕСТНЫХ ЖИТЕЛЕЙ

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### **Аннотация**

**Цель.** Выявить возможности и препятствия для развития туризма в средиземноморском г. Мерсин на основе мнения местных жителей.

**Процедура и методы.** Исследование базируется на данных 2 социологических опросов, литературных источниках и собственных наблюдениях автора. Опросы проведены среди турецких граждан и русскоязычных жителей г. Мерсин в период с 18 декабря 2022 г. по 5 февраля 2023 г. и с 4 апреля 2023 г. по 16 июля 2023 г. соответственно (на турецком и русском языках). Эмпирические данные представляют собой набор из 245 полностью заполненных анонимных анкет (143 – граждане Турции, 102 – русскоязычные жители города). Распределение респондентов по полу (среди граждан Турции 75,5% респондентов – мужчины, среди русскоязычных респондентов 80,4% – женщины) во многом отражает специфику двух государств. Распределение выбранных групп по возрасту схоже, с высокой долей населения 30–45 лет с позиции возможностей для изменения занятости и жизни. Половина русскоязычных респондентов прожила в г. Мерсин более 1,5 лет (53,9%), 18,6% – более 5 лет.

**Результаты.** Исследование выявило положительное восприятие местными жителями перспектив развития туризма: экономические выгоды, улучшение качества жизни и улучшение имиджа г. Мерсин. Несмотря на схожесть, выявлены существенные различия во мнениях. Русскоязычные респонденты более оптимистичны: развитие инфраструктуры для использования как туристами, так и местными жителями (разница в ответах 40,1%); развитие услуг, доступных как туристам, так и местным жителям (22,7%); сохранение,

воспроизводство и продвижение природного, культурного и исторического наследия региона (22,1%) и улучшение качества услуг (19,1%). Возможные негативные последствия роста турпотока, можно разделить на 2 группы: экономические и социокультурные. Среди первых – возможный «рост цен» (70% респондентов 2 групп) и конкуренция за ресурсы (29,4%); среди вторых – возможные изменения в образе жизни (25,3%) и потенциальные конфликты (24,5%). Существенна разница в восприятии факторов, способствующих туристской привлекательности г. Мерсин. Кроме средиземноморского фактора (климат и море, 85,3% респондентов двух групп), для русскоязычных респондентов ключевыми аттракциями являются свежие фрукты и овощи, музеи и достопримечательности, фестивали и отели «всё включено». Граждане Турции считают, что основными точками притяжения для русскоязычных туристов являются торговые центры, магазины, рестораны и кафе. Выявлена существенная разница в восприятии готовности г. Мерсин принимать русскоязычных туристов. На фоне почти равного разделения мнений среди граждан Турции относительно готовности и неготовности города принимать русскоязычных туристов (45,5% и 43,4%) показательно негативное мнение русскоязычных жителей (71,6%). Выявленные различия в восприятии имеют решающее значение при формировании стратегий развития туризма в г. Мерсин. Исследование выявило 5 основных препятствий развитию туризма: инфраструктурные (недостаток развитой туристской инфраструктуры), экологические (загрязнение моря и пляжей, особенно пластиком; мусор на улицах города), экономические (инфляция, недостаток инвестиций в сферу туризма, отсутствие стратегии развития туризма), социально-культурные (языковой барьер), а также правовые ограничения (изменения в законодательстве, например, условия получения временного вида на жительство для иностранных граждан).

**Теоретическая и/или практическая значимость.** Результаты дают представление о предпочтениях русскоязычных туристов, их мнении о туристских «изюминках» г. Мерсин (Средиземное море и его природные достопримечательности; культурные и исторические объекты, окружающие город; аутентичная «турецкая жизнь» и гостеприимство), а также о факторах, препятствующих развитию туризма. Результаты могут иметь более широкое значение для других туристских направлений, заинтересованных в поддержании или увеличении туристского потока из русскоязычных стран.

**Ключевые слова:** развитие туризма, провинция Мерсин, граждане Турции, русскоязычные жители, российские туристы

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## Introduction

Both the unique cultural and historical sites of Turkey (officially the Republic of Türkiye) with its rich history and the location between Southeastern Europe and Western Asia, as well as Mediterranean nature attract travelers from across the world. The Mediterranean city of Mersin

is a good example of destination influenced from both the West and the East. At the same time the city of Mersin is undeservedly missing from the list of the most popular destination in Turkey for international visitors [6, p. 158; 11, p. 150]. Is there potential for tourism development in Mersin? What challenges hinder the

city's tourism growth? Do opinions about tourism development differ between Turkish citizens and Russian-speaking residents of the city of Mersin? This article seeks to explore these questions through the insights of local residents.

The first part of the study examines local perceptions regarding tourism development among both Turkish citizens and Russian-speaking residents. The second section investigates the attitude of Turkish citizens towards the potential increase in Russian-speaking tourists in Mersin. The third section aims to uncover Mersin's hidden tourism potential by presenting the views of the Russian-speaking residents on the city's tourist highlights and the barriers to its development.

### Materials and methods

The hypothesis of this study is that the unique tourist and recreational potential of the city of Mersin, located on the Mediterranean coast, is not fully utilized. This raises several research questions for discussion:

1. Does Mersin, as a Mediterranean city, have the potential for tourism development?
2. If residents hold a positive view towards tourism, what barriers might be impeding its growth in Mersin?
3. Are there differences in perspectives on tourism development between Turkish citizens and Russian-speaking residents of Mersin?

The study is based on data of two sociological surveys, literature sources, and the author's own observations. The locals' opinion is evaluated through two sociological surveys conducted among both Turkish citizens and Russian-speaking residents of the city of Mersin during December 18, 2022 – February 5, 2023 and

during April 4, 2023 – July 16, 2023 respectively. Thus, the empirical data used in this study is a set of 245 anonymous questionnaires what were conducted among the Turkish citizens in the Turkish (143) and among the Russian-speaking people living in Mersin in the Russian (102) languages. The questionnaire contained several sections with closed- and open-ended questions. Keeping in mind the focus on the increase in the number of Russian-speaking tourists to the city of Mersin, the Russian-speaking residents were additionally asked about tourist "highlight" of the city as well as hindrances to its tourism development. The median values are used in the study.

The age distributions of the selected groups were similar representing a high share of the active population of the city of Mersin from the perspective of opportunities for change in employment and life (Table 1).

Among the Turkish citizens 75.5% respondents were males and 24.5% were females; majority of the Russian-speaking respondents were female (80.4%). The distribution by gender largely reflects the specificity of the countries: Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation. According to Heba Elgazzar, Program Leader for Human Development at the World Bank, "Turkey's female labor force participation is only 32%, less than half that of males"<sup>1</sup>.

A majority of the Russian-speaking respondents have lived in the city of Mersin for more than a year and a half (53.9%), so they can be viewed as competent for this survey (Table 2). Only 14.7% of those

<sup>1</sup> Elgazzar H. Back to the future: Harnessing women's capital for new growth in Turkey. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/europeandcentralasia/back-future-harnessing-womens-capital-new-growth-turkey> (accessed: July 25, 2024)

Table 1 / Таблица 1

Groups of respondents by age, % / Возрастные группы респондентов, %

age	number of respondents, people		share of respondents, %	
	Turkish citizens	Russian-speaking persons	Turkish citizens	Russian-speaking people
18–29	44	6	30.8	5.9
30–45	58	44	40.6	43.1
46–59	38	33	26.6	32.4
older 60	3	19	2.0	18.6
total	143	102	100	100

Source: according to the data of surveys

Table 2 / Таблица 2

Duration of the Russian-speaking respondents' of Mersin / Продолжительность пребывания русскоязычных респондентов в г. Мерсин

№	duration of stay in the city of Mersin	number of the Russian-speaking respondents, people	share of respondents, %
1	less than 6 months	15	14.7
2	about 1 year	32	31.4
3	1,5–2 years	19	18.6
4	from 2 to 5 years	17	16.7
5	more than 5 years	19	18.6
total		102	100.0

Source: according to the data of surveys

surveyed have lived in the city for less than six months, 31.4% have lived there for about a year. However, every fifth Russian-speaking respondent has lived in this Mediterranean city for more than five years.

There are several reasons for choosing Russian-speaking tourists to focus on in the study of the tourism development in the Republic of Turkey. First of all, Russian-speaking people are the main consumer of the Turkish tourism. According to Statista, "in 2023, Russia was the leading inbound travel market for Turkey based on the volume of tourist arrivals,

reaching over 6.3 million visitors"<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, the Russian organized tourism flow to Turkey has shown a stable rising trend during last years except 2016-2016 and the COVID-19 period. Thirdly, the share of the Republic of Turkey in the outbound organized tourist flow of Russians abroad was 29.1% in 2004–2022 with more than 53% in last 3 years [16]. Russian-Turkish marriages numbered by thousands can be recognized as fourth factor for Russians

<sup>1</sup> Leading inbound travel markets in Turkey 2019–2023. Official website of Statista. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/398664/leading-inbound-travel-markets-in-turkey/> (accessed: August 26, 2024)

visitings to Turkey. According to USAK report 2013, "the number of Turkish men who are married to Russian women in Moscow is the highest of all nationalities excluding those from Russia's neighborhood". Also, "a significant proportion of the Russian brides have acquired Turkish citizenship" [22, p. 66]. According to statistics from the Turkish Directorate of Migration Affairs, the number of Russian citizens living in Turkey with a residence permit (RP) in January 2023 was over 154,000 people (a total of about 1.3 million foreign citizens lived in the country). At the same time, Russian citizens are leaders regarding the number of tourist residence permits – 71,000 people<sup>1</sup>. Thus, according to the Centre for East European and International Studies, "Russian citizens are now the largest migrant group to hold long- and short-term residence permits in Turkey. As of early 2024, 100,000 Russians held a long-term residence permit, another 67,000 had a short-term residence permit, and nearly 12,000 had a family residence permit"<sup>2</sup>. According to RBC company, the city of Mersin ranks the second place among the Turkish locations with affordable daily rent<sup>3</sup>. Thus,

Russian-speaking peoples are considered as both a major category of international tourist in Turkey and experts in what Russian tourists need.

There are several limitations in the study. Firstly, the planned number of questionnaires among the Turkish citizens could not be obtained due to a series of devastating earthquakes that occurred since February 6, 2023 in the eastern Turkey, after which the survey was stopped for ethical reasons. The selection of respondents (both the Turkish citizens as well as the Russian-speaking residents) was limited by unwillingness to take part in the survey. The findings are limited to respondents and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

### City of Mersin: study area

The origins of the city of Mersin go back to prehistoric times. According to historical background on the Mersin Governorship official website, "it is understood that Mersin has been an important settlement center since prehistoric times in the excavations carried out in Yumuktepe and Gözüle. In the excavation started in 1937 by Liverpool University Archaeologists in Yumuktepe, the city center of which is in Mersin; "Neolithic Age" was determined as the lowest layer"<sup>4</sup>. During the classical period Mersin was called Cilicia<sup>5</sup> "In the Roman period, the ancient city of "Soli-Pompeipolis", which is bound to the Mezitli district, in the center of Mersin, gained importance as a port and it was a culture city of the Eastern Mediterranean"

<sup>1</sup> Gasyimov N., Lakstygai I. (2023). The number of Russians with a residence permit in Turkey has decreased by a third Among the reasons are the tightening of the law and problems in the economy). Available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2023/12/13/1010745-chislo-rossiyan-s-vidom-na-zhitelstvo-v-turtsii-sokratilos> (accessed: August 27, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> Turkey: A New Hub for Migration from Russia. ZOIS Spotlight 5/2024. Official website of the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS). Available at: <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/turkey-a-new-hub-for-migration-from-russia> (accessed: August 27, 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Popular among Russians cities of Turkey with cheap rent are named // RBC company. Available at: <https://reality.rbc.ru/news/64d612>

[f89a79471d74fbafac](https://www.mersin.gov.tr/mersin-tarihcesi) (accessed: August 27, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> History of Mersin [In:] İçel Tarihi, Güzel Sanatlar Matbaası, Ankara, 1968. P. 245-246. The official website of Mersin Governorship. Available at: <http://www.mersin.gov.tr/mersin-tarihcesi> (accessed: August 25, 2024)

<sup>5</sup> In the same source.

[1, p. 511]. During the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Yıldırım Beyazıt, the region came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Mersin, which was invaded by the Allied Powers in the First World War, came under Turkish rule again on January 3, 1922 through the National Struggle. In 1924, it became a province with the name of Mersin, and in 1933 it was merged with Mersin İlçel and took the name İlçel. With the Law No. 4764 published in the Official Gazette dated 28 June 2002, the name of the province became Mersin again<sup>1</sup>. According to Mersin International Port report 2021, "Mersin was a small fishing village in 1800s' that life has revitalized since 1954 with the construction of Mersin Port<sup>2</sup>.

There are several views of the origin of the name of the city of Mersin. The first one is connected with the Myrtus-Myrtle tree, an introduced plant of the Mediterranean climate, growing vicinity. The second is related to a Turkmen family named "Mersinoğulları or Mersinoğlu"<sup>3</sup>.

The Turkish city of Mersin, founded in the foothills of Taurus Mountains, is stretches along the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Akdeniz, Turkish) is provincial capital of the Mersin Province (Fig. 1).

Mersin Province features a "321 km long sea shore with its unique natural beauties and sea, sand and sun trio (108 km of Mersin City shores are natural sandy beach) but also offers variety of



**Fig. 1 / Рис. 1.** Location of the city of Mersin / Расположение г. Мерсин

Source: Strategies for Strengthening Citizen Participation. Mersin Metropolitan Municipality  
Available at: <https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc1552.pdf> (accessed: August 27, 2024)

<sup>1</sup> History of Mersin [In:] İlçel Tarihi, Güzel Sanatlar Matbaası, Ankara, 1968. P. 245-246. The official website of Mersin Governorship. Available at: <http://www.mersin.gov.tr/mersin-tarihcesi> (accessed: August 25, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> Sustainability at Mersin International Port 2021. Available at: [https://www.mersinport.com.tr/en/Images/ContentImages/MIP\\_Sustainability\\_Report\\_2021\\_eng.pdf](https://www.mersinport.com.tr/en/Images/ContentImages/MIP_Sustainability_Report_2021_eng.pdf) (accessed: May 11, 2024)

<sup>3</sup> History of Mersin [In:] İlçel Tarihi, Güzel Sanatlar Matbaası, Ankara, 1968. P. 245-246. The official website of Mersin Governorship. Available at: <http://www.mersin.gov.tr/mersin-tarihcesi> (accessed: August 25, 2024)

tourism”<sup>1</sup>. According to Prof. Dr. Ahmet Çamsari, Rector of the Mersin University, Mersin “is one of the rare cities that have managed to preserve its natural beauty, history and culture for many years” [9]. According to Mazlum A., “it can be said that after Istanbul, Mersin is a small miniature of Turkey, a city that can be considered a prototype. With migrations from every region of Turkey, it exhibits a mosaic image with its very different ethnic and religious foundations” [20, pp. 134–135]. “Mersin is the eighth-largest city in Turkey and the third-largest city on the Mediterranean Sea after Antalya and Adana”<sup>2</sup>. Mersin port (Turkish gateway to the Middle East, of strategic importance in the eastern Mediterranean) is one of the biggest and most important ports of Turkey by many criteria [14, p. 1720]. “Mersin, also called as the “Pearl of the Mediterranean” is a “Blue” and “Green” city with a very important commercial port on the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey, situated on the western part of the famous plain of Çukurova, a geographical, economic, and cultural region”<sup>3</sup>. Today, the city of Mersin “with 13 administrative districts and a population of 1,916,432, is an important hub of Turkey's economy”<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 2).

As advertised by the Official website of Travel Store Turkey LTD, “Mersin has

grown to be one of Turkey's best-known tourist destinations, thanks in large part to the construction of brand-new hotels along the coastline in recent years, along with several bustling facilities and companies that serve the tourism industry”. Mersin's abundance of stores draws tourists who come there for shopping. “The most well-known retail centre is called Forum, which was named the top mall in Europe in 2009”. “To boost yacht tourism in the city, the main yacht port was finished with 800 berths that met international standards, and bids were also made”<sup>5</sup>. Tourism is supported by a variety of cultural events, including the Mersin Festival for Turkish Music and the Mersin International Festival for Multi-Voiced Choruses. Additionally, at various periods throughout the year, the cities of Akdeniz and Yenisehir host free theatrical performances for both domestic and international audiences”<sup>6</sup>. Also, the Mersin Citrus Festival is an annual event on rich agricultural heritage of the Province of Mersin, one of the largest producers of citrus fruits in Turkey.

While the districts of Mersin Province hold significant potential for tourism development, the extent to which this potential is utilized varies. This disparity arises from several factors, including the historical context of tourism development in the region, the quality of transportation and tourist infrastructure, and the strategic vision for future development in each district. For instance, according to Sarıkaya Levent et al. [25], “the initiation of tourism development in the Kızılkalesi settlement [*Erdemli district, Mersin Province*] can be traced back to the 1970s, yet it was

<sup>1</sup> Strategies for Strengthening Citizen Participation. Mersin Metropolitan Municipality. Available at: <https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc1552.pdf> (accessed: August 27, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> Tourism in Mersin: Everything to Know is Here. Official website of Travel Store Turkey LTD. Available at: <https://www.travelstoreturkey.com/mersin/> (accessed: May 11, 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Strategies for Strengthening Citizen Participation. Mersin Metropolitan Municipality. Available at: <https://www.oidp.net/docs/repo/doc1552.pdf> (accessed: August 27, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> In the same source.

<sup>5</sup> Tourism in Mersin: Everything to Know is Here. Official website of Travel Store Turkey LTD. Available at: <https://www.travelstoreturkey.com/mersin/> (accessed: May 11, 2024)

<sup>6</sup> In the same source.



**Fig. 2 / Рис. 2.** Administrative districts of the city of Mersin / Административные районы города Мерсин

Source: MERSİN Tarihçesi. Official website of the T.C. Mersin Valiliği.  
Available at: <http://www.mersin.gov.tr/mersin-tarihcesi> (accessed: July 2, 2024)

accelerated in the 1980s by the construction of tourism accommodation facilities, including hotels, pensions, and summer houses, in alignment with the national policies, and it received further assistance from regional strategies". "In 1994, there were 67 tourism accommodation establishments, as well as 856 summer houses [15; 26]. In 1994 Kizkalesi served about 176 thousand people a fifth of them were foreign tourists; the total number of tourists with daily-visitors reached 800 thousand people [15, p. 350]. Dr. Halil Koca and Dr I. Fevzi Şahin highlighted that Kizkalesi was a town during the tourist season (May–September) only, except of this period the settlement – "large village". The number of tourism accommodation facilities growing from 1994 to 2021 (104 tour-

ism accommodation establishments and 1814 summer houses) "demonstrates that the destination has the capacity to accommodate hundreds of thousands of tourists and temporary residents during the summer months" [25]. Mehmet Şirin Öztıp, Vice President of the Kizkalesi Tourism and Culture Association, pointed out that "there are accommodations in Kizkalesi suitable for everyone's economic situation, ranging from star-rated hotels to guesthouses, making it an affordable place to visit"<sup>1</sup>. The study of U. Yenipinar and E. Bak [28] evaluated the roles entities like "City Councils" play in the development

<sup>1</sup> Tourism activity continues in Kizkalesi. Daily Sabah. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkiye/tourism-activity-continues-in-kizkalesi/news> (accessed: May 11, 2024)

of urban destinations' sustainability in the light of projects developed by the Mersin City Council. Although tourism is included in Mersin's strategic management plans as an important sector (coming in third after agriculture and logistics), support from the city's mayors and governors for innovative and beneficial ideas related to tourism is essential. The study has revealed that "a high-level tourism destination management that will be the driving force for the region is needed in order to implement these works in coordination and to bring dynamism to Mersin's tourism" [28]. Due to Mersin's relatively recent development as a tourist destination, the number of foreign visitors remains quite low.

### Literature review

Tourism development is a multifaceted phenomenon that influences the interests of the local community, causing both positive and negative attitudes. Maintaining a balance of interest (in economic, ecological, cultural, sociocultural and other spheres) in tourist destinations is a significant challenge and a priority for regional and local authorities, business and society as a whole.

### Turkey as a popular tourist destination

"Being the crossroad of civilizations and hosting the traces of more than 3,000 ancient cities" [18] along with a great number of attractions of natural assets Turkey has a significant potential for the development of tourism as an economic sector. "In addition to cultural and historical tourism, Turkey has other types of tourist destinations as alternative choices for foreign tourists, such as spa tours, medical tours, adventure sports,

golf tours, ecotourism and marine tourism". "Various choices of Turkish tourist destinations are one of the factors for the large number of foreign tourists who are interested in coming to Turkey" [23]. According to Sarıkaya Levent et al. [25], "since the 1980s, the government has implemented regulations and incentives to support tourism's development as a significant economic sector, in accordance with national policies". According to Statista, "in 2023, following Italy, Turkey ranked fourth among the most popular destinations in Europe, having welcomed over 55 million travelers. That year, Turkey's inbound tourism receipts amounted to 49.5 billion U.S. dollars, which placed the country fifth among other European destinations"<sup>1</sup>. "The tourism sector GDP share in Turkey was forecast to continuously increase between 2023 and 2028 by in total 3.9 percentage points. The share is estimated to amount to 12.65 percent in 2028" (the forecast has been adjusted for the expected impact of COVID-19)<sup>2</sup>.

A significant part of studies has investigated the Russian tourist flow to the Republic of Turkey, revealing "a correlation between economic growth in Russia and Turkey's tourism sector" [24]; push and pull motivations of the Russians [10]; the decline in the Russian tourist arrivals to Turkey in 2016 due to an incident at the Syrian-Turkish border [3; 4; 24; 27]. In recent years, the Republic of Turkey has become a top foreign destination for Russian tourists traveling in organized groups. On average (median), Turkey's share in the outbound organized tourist flow of the

<sup>1</sup> In the same source.

<sup>2</sup> Share of the GDP of the tourism sector in Turkey 2013–2028. Statista. Official website. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/aboutus/our-research-commitment/484/j-degenhard> (accessed: August 27, 2024)

Russian citizens abroad in 2004–2022 was 29.1%. Besides, Russian-speaking tourists are one of the main customers of the Turkish tourism as confirmed by a steadily rising trend of their arrivals in to the country [16]. The Russian tourism "has not only become a significant source of economic gain" for Turkey, "increased with mutual visits, social interactions" "tourism has also had a transformative, positive impact on the Turkey-Russia political and economic relations" [22, p. 55]. "As the mobility between the societies increases, the psychological distance between the two countries declines" [5, p. 58]. According to Statista, "in 2023, Russia was the leading inbound travel market for Turkey based on the volume of tourist arrivals, reaching over 6.3 million visitors"<sup>1</sup>. Prof. Dr. Levent Şahin and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hasan Akça [24] revealed an absence of an "effect of GDP increase in Russia on number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey" based on data (GDP in Russia and the Russian tourists who prefer Turkey as the tourist destination) for the period 2001–2011. The results of regression analysis indicated "that most of the Russian tourists visiting Turkey have a medium income level" because "they prefer Turkey due to cheap holiday opportunity (all inclusive), being closer to Russia and high-quality service" [24].

"Demand for travel is highly susceptible to external and internal economic, environmental, and socio-political factors, which are mostly beyond the control of its suppliers" [5, p. 247]. The crushing decline in Russian tourist arrivals to Turkey in 2016 "put pressure on the state of

Turkey's tourism sector". "Total spending generated through Russian tourists decreased from \$2.6 billion to \$570 million in 2016, which saw Turkey lose \$2 billion just from Russian tourists". ("Due to the decrease in Russian tourist visits to Turkey caused by tourism restrictions in 2016 the Turkish government then formulated a strategy to increase Russian tourist visits to Turkey" [23]. The application of hard power (sanctions and limitations) by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Turkey followed the incident with the Russian aircraft on the Syrian-Turkish border in November 2015 and was analysed by the Russian scholars [3; 4]. The study "revealed both the tourism and hospitality sector in Turkey suffered more and more rapidly due to the strict restrictions imposed by Russian authorities" and "the sanctions also triggered a crisis in Russia's outbound tourism industry" [3; 4]. Later, "lifting sanctions on the sale of package tours and the charter flights renormalized the tourist flow to Turkey in the low season" [5, p. 247].

According to Özdal et al. [22], "the vast majority of Russian tourists who come to Turkey for holiday purpose generally spend their time on the Mediterranean and the Aegean coasts" mainly arriving between May and September. The study has found out that "Turkey means sea, sand, and sun for Russian tourists. Most of the Russian tourists spend their time between hotel rooms and beaches. Therefore, Russian tourists are unable to get closely acquainted with Turkish culture. This situation is the result of agencies offering vacation packages with the "all inclusive" label, fixed tour programs, and tourists' desire to relax" [22, p. 60]. Besides the opportunities of beach holidays in the resorts of the Mediterranean

<sup>1</sup> Leading inbound travel markets in Turkey 2019–2023. Official website of Statista (June 25, 2024). Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/398664/leading-inbound-travel-markets-in-turkey/> (accessed: August 26, 2024)

Sea, within the "all inclusive" the Russian scholars have pointed out both the natural and the cultural and historical potential as a factor making Turkey so popular among Russian tourists [3, p. 54]. It is also stated that "Russian tourists are attracted to Turkey by the country's hospitality, warm climate, uninterrupted sandy beaches, visa-free system, inexpensive package tours" [5, p. 239].

Some studies have presented a profile of Russian tourists in the Antalya region [2; 8]. The study of the dining experiences (based on 131 reviews written for ten restaurants operating in Antalya city center, Side, Kemer and Alanya districts in 2019) has revealed that Russian tourists "follow their eating routines at home and prefer familiar dishes" [8, p. 10]. Also, they "pay attention to restaurants with a good atmosphere to spend good and quality time with their families" [8].

### **Tourism potential of Mersin Province**

"As Mersin is a settlement area dating back thousands of years, it has a very different and colorful appearance with its handicrafts, nomadic traditions and customs, local dishes, folk dances, folk songs and melodies" [21]. Districts of Mersin Province have good opportunities for tourism development and use them to promote this economic sphere based on a unique natural, historical and cultural potential. Examples are the Anamur district, Erdemli district, Tarsus district, some districts of the city of Mersin, and others. The Tourism Strategy Plan suggests the following main strategies and tourism types for the Mersin Province [19, p. 126–128]:

- to develop means for alternative tourism types led particularly by health, thermal, winter, golf, sea tourism, ecotourism and plateau

tourism, conference and expo tourism activities;

- to develop thematic tourism routes utilizing historical and natural texture, Tourism Development Corridors (Faith tourism Corridor – culture tourism: starting by Tarsus District (Mersin) towards South-Eastern Anatolia including Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Mardin);
- to plan tourism settlements capable of competing the world leaders by becoming a global brand, 10 new tourism cities, including Anamur Coastline Tourism City;
- to develop nature tourism according to development plans Ecotourism Zones (Taurus Mountains – inlands of East Antalya towards Mersin).

The studies focused on the different dimensions of the Mersin Province tourism development potential can be divided into several main groups.

Most of them deal with the tourist potential of the Mersin Province as a whole or of one of its districts. First of all, it is worth mentioning a series of 13 brochures and tourism atlas of Mersin published by the University of Mersin in several languages (including the Russian) about the tourist and recreational potential of the Mersin Province [7; 12]. Other studies investigated the area's tourism potential through a sociological survey. One of the first studies made suggestions about the development of the Mersin tourism situation and potential of Mersin tourism, and the adverse factors [1]. According to the opinion of eight experts (public institution representatives, academicians and private sector), the tourism potential of Mersin Province includes: history (100% of respondents); culture (100%); nature (75%); faith (75%). The lowest scores

gained by such potential as (in increasing order): caves (12.5%), gastronomy richness (25%), eco-tourism, business tourism, plateau and long coastline (37.5%). The factors highlighted as having the most adverse effect on Mersin tourism potential were: being in the shadow of Antalya (100% of respondents); no alternative transportation between Antalya and Mersin outside the highway (87.5%) and lack of airport (75%) [1]. A recent study [13] presented the utilization of Tarsus district's historical and cultural assets in the Mersin Province, with a focus on its tourism potential. The study identified Tarsus's strengths, such as its cultural heritage, historical landmarks, and natural resources, while also addressing the current lack of representation and several challenges, including the vulnerability of historical sites, inadequate infrastructure, and unregulated tourism practices [13].

Another group of studies evaluated some districts of the Mersin Province in terms of tourism development based on tourist activity, tourism planning and opportunities of the area for different kinds of tourism. Examples are a study of the contribution of the town of Kızılkalesi, Erdemli district to the tourist activity [15] or a recent research of Sarıkaya Levent et al. [19] on the role of tourism planning in the spatial development of Kızılkalesi tourism destination. [21]. On the other hand, the study of Dr. Cansel Oskay focused on the tourism potential of Mersin and its role in the Turkish economy. According to Prof. Dr. Ahmet Çamsarı, Rector of the Mersin University, a high tourism potential of the Mersin Province in April 2019 "Turkey's most honored and respected high-level international symposium on tourism, held each year on Tourism Week" was organized in Anamur [9]. Despite the high

potential of Mersin, its "attractions could not achieve the expectations and could not create an important income impact on Turkish economy" that according the author these "serious tasks should be undertaken by local administrators" [21]. The study of Levent T. et al [19] based on total number of tourists per the provincial population confirmed a lack of tourism development in the Mersin province (less than 24 %, 2018).

Mersin Province possesses considerable tourism potential but this potential is not being fully realized. The studies of tourism development in the Mersin province have largely focused on its tourist potential as a driver for regional and local growth, highlighting both its strengths and the challenges that may hinder further development.

## Results

### Locals' attitudes towards tourism development

The survey indicates that residents of Mersin have a strong interest in tourism development. In fact, a significant majority of Mersin residents (84.5%) view tourism as an important or promising avenue for the city's growth (Fig. 3). The Turkish citizens exhibit a much higher level of confidence in the significance of tourism development compared to the Russian-speaking respondents, with a difference of 20%. Overall, 90.2% of the Turkish citizens either strongly agree or somewhat agree with the idea of developing tourism in Mersin, while the agreement among the Russian-speaking residents is lower at 76.5%.

In locals' opinion, the potential positive effects of an increased flow of tourists to Mersin include of new job opportuni-

ties for residents, which is seen as a primary source of income by 53.5% of respondents. Additionally, 46.5% believe that it could enhance the city's image, and the same percentage sees the growth in tourist services benefiting both visitors and local residents (Fig. 4). Responses indicate that the Russian-speaking participants tend to be more optimistic about the positive impacts of increased tourism compared to the Turkish citizens. Notable differences emerge in their reactions regarding:

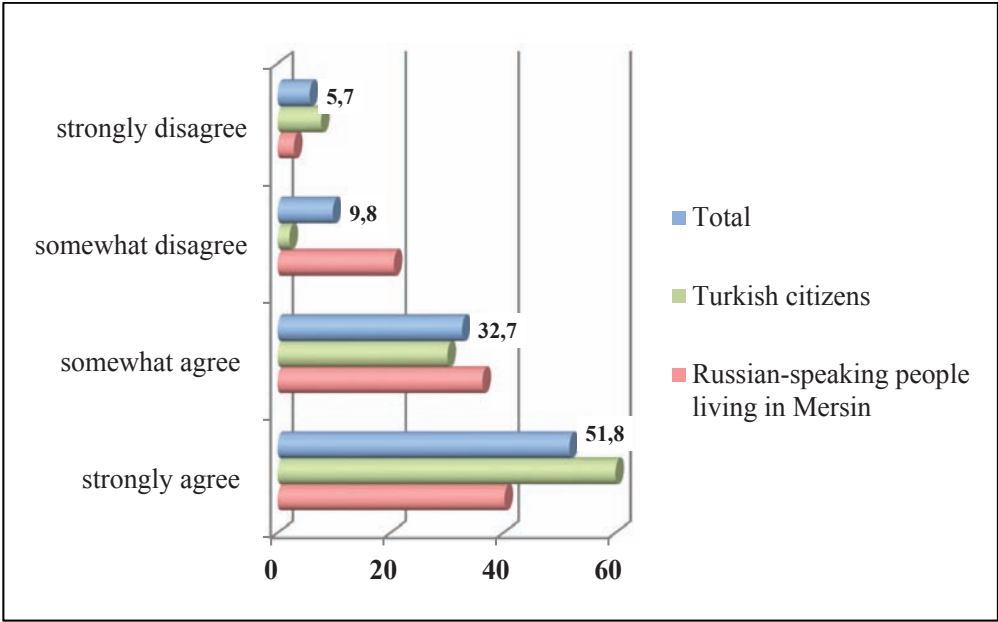
- infrastructure development for use of both tourists and local people (40.1 difference);
- development of services available to both tourists and local people (22.7);
- preservation, reproduction and promotion of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of the area (22.1);

- improvement of the quality of services (19.1);
- attraction of investments (17.8);
- development of existing and creation of new tourist objects, local museums, tourist complexes, etc. (17.7);

Despite the differences in the responses of the Turkish and the Russian-speaking citizens, three points with shared opinion regarding possible positive effects of tourism development can be identified (Table 3):

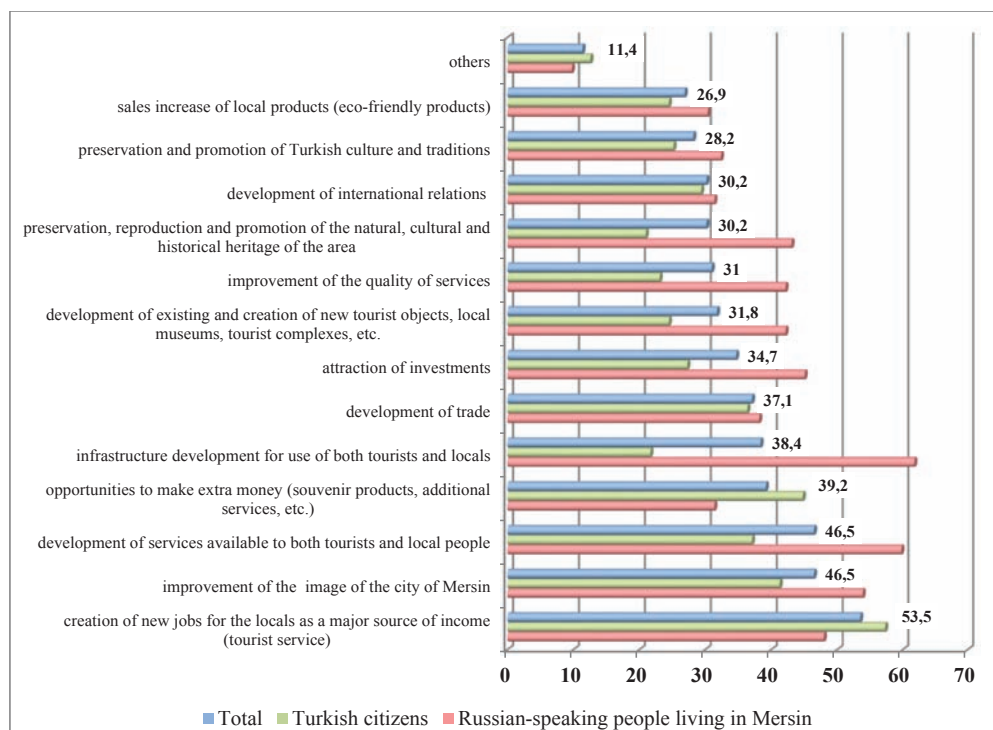
- economic benefits;
- improving the quality of life;
- improvement the image of the city of Mersin.

The distribution of responses to the question "What is (or maybe) the negative impacts of an increase in the number of foreign tourists in the city of Mersin?" is



**Fig. 3 / Рис. 3** Responses to the question ‘Do you think that tourism to city of Mersin is a significant or promising direction for its development?’, % in the selected groups / Ответы на вопрос «Считаете ли вы туризм значимым или перспективным направлением развития г. Мерсин?», % в выбранных группах

Source: according to the data of surveys



\* rank in descending order

**Fig. 4 / Рис. 4.** Responses to the question ‘What, in your opinion, are (or may be) the positive impacts of an increase in the tourist flow on the development of the city of Mersin?’, multiple answers acceptable, % in the selected groups / Ответы на вопрос «В чём, по Вашему мнению, проявляется (может проявиться) положительное влияние роста турпотока на развитие г. Мерсин?», возможно несколько вариантов ответов, % в выбранных группах

Source: according to the data of surveys

quite indicative (Fig. 5). The answers revealing the possible negative consequences of an increase in the number of foreign tourists can be roughly grouped into 2 categories: economic (socio-economic) and socio-cultural. Among the possible economic negative effects, a major concern for locals is "rising prices" (72.7% of respondents) is quite indicative (Fig. 5). One in three respondents fears a possible future competition for resources (29.4%). Socio-cultural consequences rank second among concerns: one in four residents points out possible changes in lifestyles as well as potential conflicts.

Despite the similarity of opinions on most points, there are some differences in the answers of Russian-speaking residents and the Turkish citizens. Their opinions differed significantly regarding the emergence of private recreation areas inaccessible to locals, which was a concern for 32.4% of the Russian-speaking peoples and only 15.9% of the Turkish citizens. Considering the share of respondents opting for the “absence of negative impact” (14.7%) possible negative impacts such as “appearance of signs in foreign languages” and “more foreign speakers on the streets and in public places” on socio-cultural

Table 3 / Таблица 3

**Points with shared opinions regarding possible positive effects of tourism development in locals' opinion, % in the selected groups / Общие позиции относительно возможных позитивных изменений от развития туризма по мнению местных жителей, % в выбранных группах**

#	Responses to the question	Russian-speaking people living in Mersin	Turkish citizens	Total
<i>economic benefits</i>				
	creation of new jobs for the locals as a major source of income (tourist service)	57,3	48	53,5
	opportunities to make extra money (souvenir products, additional services, etc.)	44,8	31,4	39,2
	attraction of investments	27,3	45,1	34,7
	development of trade	36,4	38,2	37,1
<i>improving the quality of life</i>				
	development of services available to both tourists and local people	37,1	<b>59,8</b>	46,5
	infrastructure development for use of both tourists and local people	21,7	<b>61,8</b>	38,4
	improvement of the quality of services	23,1	42,2	31
	development of existing and creation of new tourist objects, local museums, tourist complexes, etc.	24,5	42,2	31,8
<i>improvement of the image of the city of Mersin</i>				
	improvement of the image of the city of Mersin	41,3	<b>53,9</b>	46,5
	preservation, reproduction and promotion of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of the area	21	43,1	30,2

Note: response rates above 50% are in bold

Source: according to the data of surveys

space of the city of Mersin can be overlooked .

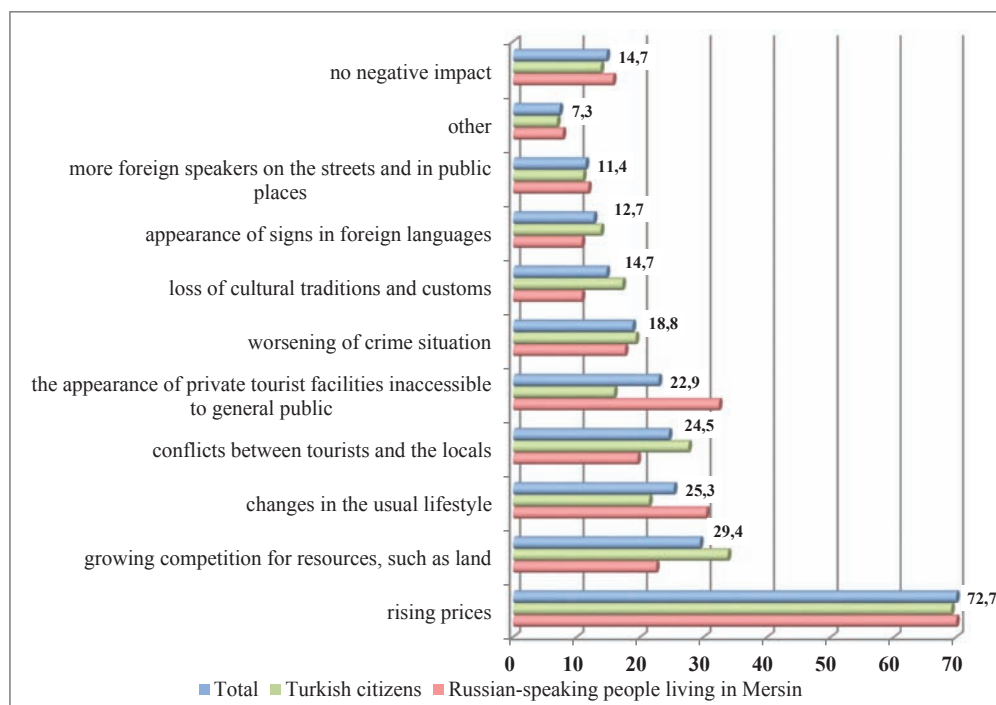
**Russian-speaking tourists:  
opinion of locals**

Since Russian-speaking tourists contribute notably to the inbound tourism to the Republic of Turkey, how locals perceive them is a crucial matter.

Most Turkish citizens view the increase of Russian-speaking tourists in Mersin

positively, recognizing the economic advantages it brings can be missed along (Fig. 6). However, one in five respondents expresses a negative opinion on this topic, associating it with challenges and difficulties caused by these tourists.

According to locals', the most attractive factor of the city of Mersin for the Russian-speaking people is its location on the Mediterranean: firstly, the climate and sea, and secondly, fresh fruits and vegeta-



\* rank in descending order

**Fig. 5 / Рис. 5.** Distribution of respondents' answers, revealing the possible negative consequences of an increase in tourist numbers for the city of Mersin, multiple answers acceptable, % in the selected groups / Распределение ответов о возможных негативных последствиях увеличения турпотока для г. Мерсин, возможно несколько вариантов ответов, % в выбранных группах

Source: according to the data of surveys

bles (Fig. 7). The "climate and sea" option was chosen with equal frequency by both Russian-speaking residents of the city of Mersin and by Turkish nationals (85.3% exactly).

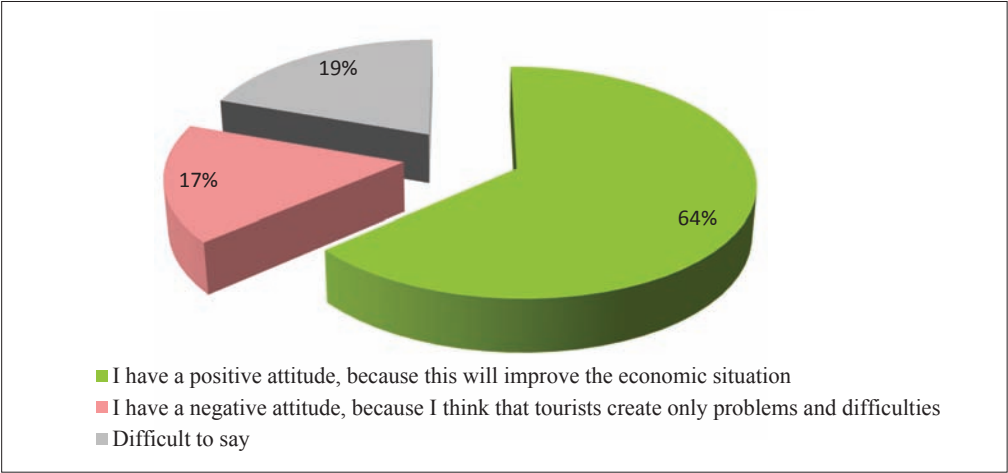
The distribution of answers to the question "Are you willing to participate in providing services of Russian tourists?" shows a positive feedback of the locals (Fig. 8).

Thus, two thirds of the respondents (67.7%) were already working in the tourism industry or were willing to start working with Russian-speaking tourists on certain conditions. The conditions required were economic benefits in one case and knowing Russian in the other. Interest-

ingly, there were equal shares of negative and neutral responses among the Turkish citizens and the Russian-speaking people (respectively, about 22.9% and 9.4%)

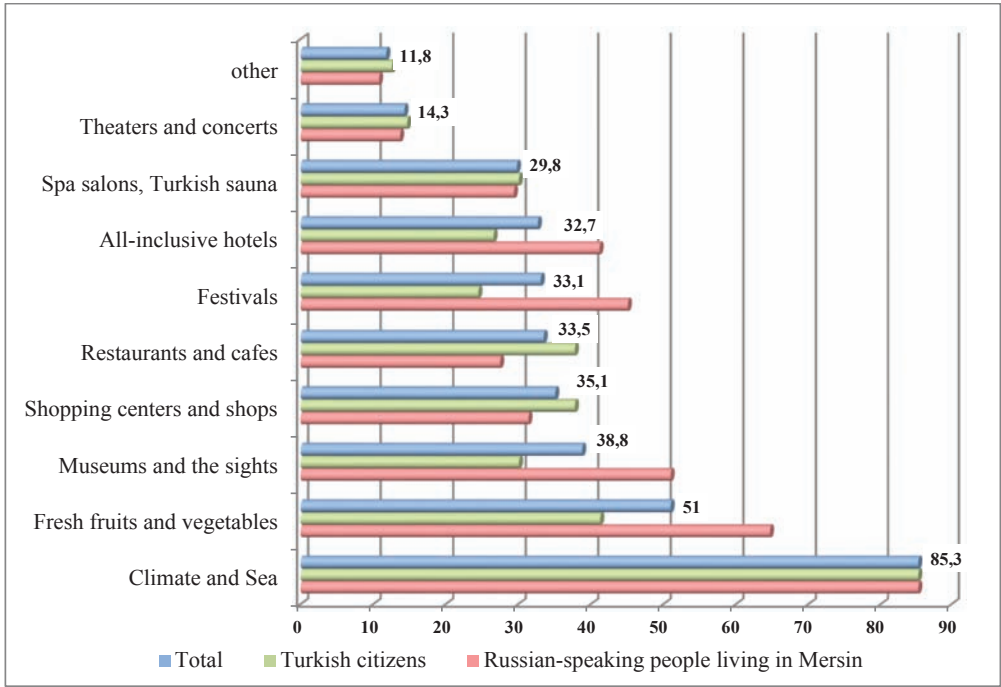
There is a significant difference in how the readiness of the city of Mersin to receive Russian-speaking tourists was perceived (Fig. 9). While the opinions of Turkish citizens regarding to the city's readiness and unwillingness to receive the Russian-speaking tourists were distributed almost equally (45.5% and 43.4%), the negative answers of Russian-speaking residents are noteworthy (71.6%).

The study reveals that the language barrier is recognized as crucial for tour-



**Fig. 6 / Рис. 6.** Responses to the question 'How do you feel about the possibility of an increase in the Russian-speaking tourist flow to the city of Mersin?', % of the Turkish citizens / Ответы на вопрос «Как Вы относитесь к возможности увеличения потока русскоязычных туристов в г. Мерсин?», % от числа граждан Турции

Source: according to the data of surveys



**Fig. 7 / Рис. 7.** Distribution of respondents' responses to the question 'What do you think can be of interest for Russian tourists in the city of Mersin?', multiple answers acceptable, % in the selected groups / Распределение ответов на вопрос «Что, по Вашему мнению, может заинтересовать российских туристов в г. Мерсин?», возможно несколько вариантов ответов, % в выбранных группах

Source: according to the data of surveys

ism service by both groups of respondents. The importance of serving of Russian-speaking tourists in their native language was equally highly recognized by both the Russian-speaking people and the Turkish citizens (80.4%). At the same time every fifth resident of the city of Mersin did not attach much importance to providing service in Russian (19.6%).

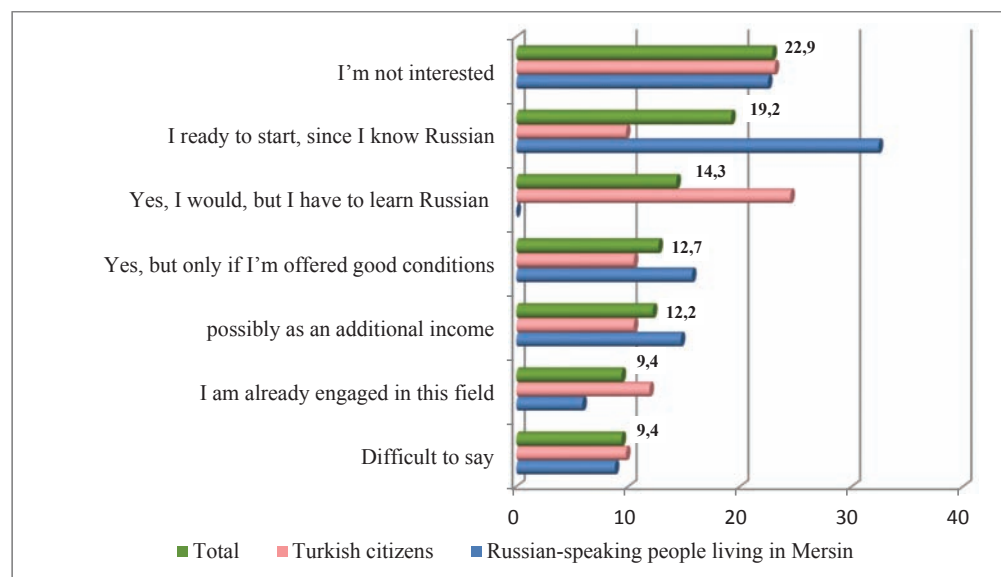
### **Tourist "highlights" of the city of Mersin and challenges of its tourism development: the view of the Russian-speaking residents**

Special open-ended questions for the Russian-speaking residents about tourist "highlights" of the city of Mersin and challenges for its tourism development were considered as key questions for the Russian tourism development of the city. Ac-

cording to the Russian-speaking residents of the city of Mersin, the tourist "highlights" of the area for the Russian tourists are the Mediterranean nature with natural places of interests as well as cultural and historical sites in the city surroundings (Table 4).

Other tourist "highlights" mentioned by the Russian-speaking respondents (7%) were the cultural identity and hospitality along with the "Authentic Turkish life" of the city is another tourist "highlights" of the place. About 7% of respondents failed to come up with any tourist "highlights" of the city of Mersin. However, answers within the selected group differed significantly depending on how long the respondents had lived in the city of Mersin (Table 5).

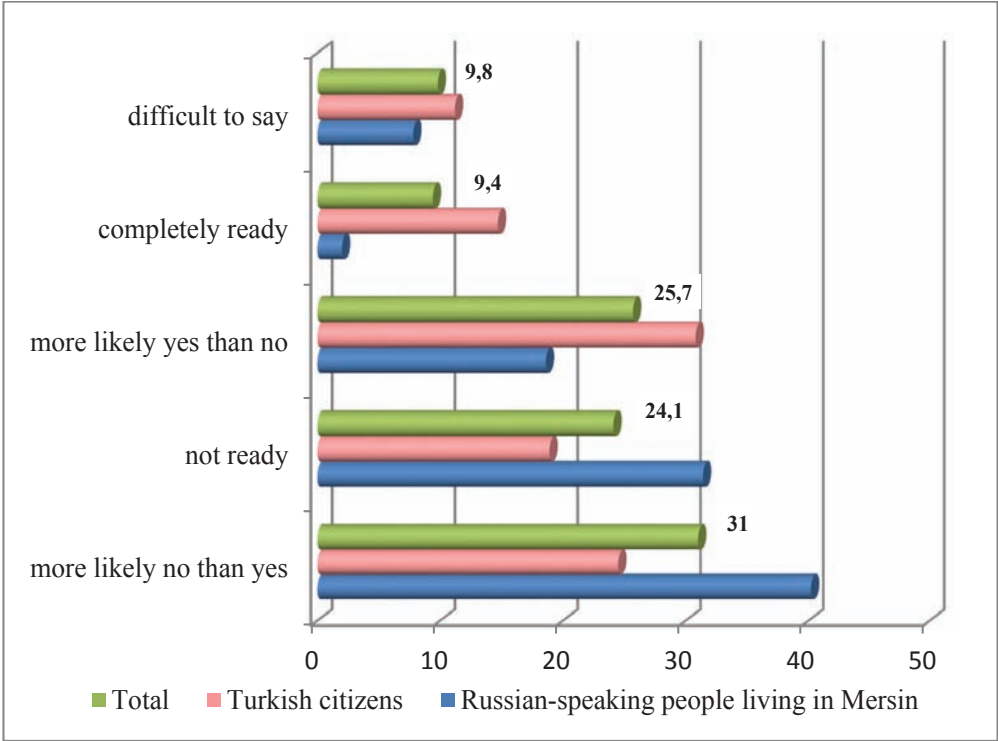
Some patterns can be identified:



\* rank in descending order

**Fig. 8 / Рис. 8** Distribution of respondents' answers to the question "Are you willing to participate in providing services to Russian tourists?", % in the selected groups / Распределение ответов на вопрос «Готовы ли Вы участвовать в обслуживании российских туристов?», % в выбранных группах

Source: according to the data of surveys



**Fig. 9 / Рис. 9.** Responses to the question ‘To what degree, in your opinion, is city of Mersin ready to receive Russian-speaking tourists?’, % in the selected groups / Ответы на вопрос «Насколько, по Вашему мнению, готов город Мерсин к приёму русскоязычных туристов?», % в выбранных группах

Source: according to the data of surveys

– the selected groups believe the most appealing aspects of Mersin for the Russian-speaking tourists are its Mediterranean coastline, along with its cultural and historical attractions;

– the duration of the Russian-speaking respondents' residence in the city of Mersin influences their perception of various tourist highlights. For example, respondents who have lived in the city for less than six months consider the Mediterranean Sea and the city's esplanade and marina as primary highlights. This can be explained by the short time they have spent in Mersin, limiting their chances of ex-

ploring the surroundings. This group represents the smallest portion of respondents (20%). The shorter-lived Russian-speaking residents of Mersin tend to express stronger impressions regarding the local cultural identity and the friendliness of residents. As the duration of residency increases, the proportion of enthusiastic responses about cultural identity and local hospitality declines from 20% to 5%. This trend also applies to responses indicating a lack of identified tourist highlights.

The Russian-speaking respondents see several barriers to tourism development

Table 4 / Таблица 4

**Tourist “highlights” of the city of Mersin for Russian tourists / Туристские «изюминки» г. Мерсин интересные российским туристам**

№	Tourist “highlights”	Number of the Russian-speaking respondents, person	Share of respondents, %
	Cultural and historical sites	28	27.2
1	Mediterranean Sea with beaches and the coastline	28	27.2
	Natural places of interest	23	22.3
	Nature	23	22.3
	Esplanade and marina	23	16.5
	Climate and fresh fruits	16	15.5
	Taurus Mountains with caves, canyons and waterfalls	14	13.6

\* multiple answers acceptable

\*\* rank in descending order

Source: according to the data of surveys

Table 5 / Таблица 5

**The distribution of answers about tourist “highlights” of the city of Mersin in the selected groups, % / Распределение ответов о туристских «изюминках» г. Мерсин в выбранных группах, %**

#	Tourist “highlights” of the city of Mersin	The duration of Russian-speaking residents in the city of Mersin				
		less than 6 months	about 1 year	1–1,5 to 2 years	from 2–5 years	more than 5 years
1	Mediterranean Sea	26,7	25	50	11,8	25
2	Cultural and historical sites	20	37,5	21,1	35,3	25
3	Esplanade and marina	26,7	21,9	10,5	17,6	15
4	cultural identity, friendliness of the locals	20	9,4	5,3	5,9	5
5	Mediterranean Climate	13,3	18,8	15,8	0	10
6	Difficult to say	13,3	6,3	0	0	0
7	Nothing	0	0	5,3	5,9	20

\* multiple answers acceptable

Source: according to the data of surveys

in Mersin (Fig. 10). A significant percentage expresses dissatisfaction with the absence of an international airport (20% of respondents), alongside concerns about litter on the streets and insufficient tourist infrastructure (13% for each).

These hindrances can be grouped into five groups of challenges:

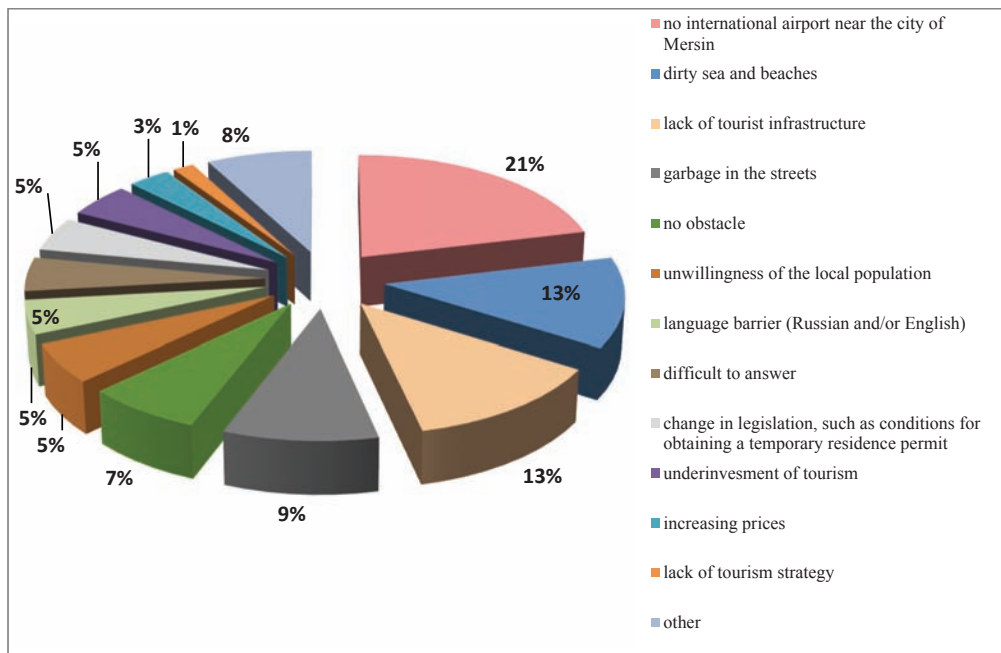
- *infrastructural challenges*: lack of international airport and underdevelopment of tourism infrastructure;
- *ecological challenges*: dirty sea (especially plastic pollution) and beaches as well as litter on the streets;
- *economic challenges*: rising prices and underinvestment in tourism as well as lack of tourism strategy;

– *socio-cultural challenges*: language barrier (Russian and/or English) with unwillingness of the local population;

– *legal challenges*: changes in legislation, for example, conditions for obtaining a temporary residence permit for foreign citizens.

Infrastructure and ecological issues are the primary factors hindering tourism development, according to the Russian-speaking residents.

The views of the Russian-speaking residents on Mersin's tourist "highlights" and the limitations on its tourism growth are contradictory. On one hand, Mersin boasts numerous advantages and promis-



**Fig. 10 / Рис. 10.** Responses to the question 'What, in your opinion, is (could be) hindering tourism in the city of Mersin?', % among the Russian-speaking people, multiple answers acceptable / Ответы на вопрос «Что, по Вашему мнению, препятствует (может препятствовать) развитию туризма в г. Мерсин?», % среди русскоязычного населения, возможно несколько вариантов ответов

Source: according to the data of surveys

es for tourism development. On the other hand, certain negative aspects have also come to light. Notably, some key strengths of Mersin are at the same time viewed as weaknesses.

### Discussion

Although Mersin is not included in the list of Turkey's top destinations for international visitors, a substantial majority of its residents (84.5%) view tourism as a crucial or promising direction for the city's growth. Meanwhile, the belief in the significance of tourism development is notably higher among the Turkish citizens (90.2%) than that of the Russian-speaking respondents (76.5%).

The investigation of opinions regarding the increase in tourist traffic in Mersin revealed favorable attitudes among the Turkish citizens and the Russian-speaking residents. Key potential benefits expected from tourism development include new jobs for locals, considered a significant income source by 53.5% of respondents, enhancement of Mersin's image (46.5%), and improvement of services available to both tourists and residents (46.5%). Analysis of responses from different demographic groups indicates that the Russian-speaking respondents tend to have a more optimistic perception than their Turkish counterparts. The most pronounced differences between the groups concerned infrastructure development for tourists and locals (40.1% difference), the improvement of services available to both groups (22.7%), and the preservation and promotion of the area's natural, cultural, and historical heritage (22.1%), as well as enhancements in service quality (19.1%) etc. Notwithstanding the differences, the groups similarly evaluated three variants of positive changes anticipated from tour-

ism development: economic benefits, improved quality of life, and an enhanced image of Mersin.

The potential negative effects of an increase in foreign tourists can be broadly categorized into two groups: economic (or socio-economic) and socio-cultural. A primary concern for locals, including the Turkish citizens and the Russian-speaking respondents, is the possibility of "rising prices," which worries about 70% of those surveyed. While there are many shared perceptions among respondents, notable differences exist between the two groups. For instance, regarding the creation of private recreational areas that are inaccessible to locals, 32.4% of the Russian-speaking respondents expressed concern, compared to only 15.9% of the Turkish citizens. Additionally, a portion of respondents from both groups (14.7%) indicated that they do not anticipate any negative impacts, which might lead them to overlook certain socio-cultural issues in Mersin, such as the "appearance of signs in foreign languages" (12.7%) and the presence of more foreign speakers in public spaces (11.4%).

A significant portion of the Russian-speaking tourists coming to the Republic of Turkey emphasize the need for locals to understand the potential greater crowdedness, particularly in the city of Mersin. The survey indicates that a majority of the Turkish citizens (64%) view the increase in the Russian-speaking tourists positively, recognizing the economic advantages.

Aside from the Mediterranean factor (climate and sea, which is noted by 85.3% of both selected groups); there is a noticeable difference in how the Russian-speaking individuals and the Turkish citizens perceive factors that contribute

to tourist attractiveness. For the Russian-speaking respondents, the key attractions include fresh fruits and vegetables, museums and landmarks, festivals, and all-inclusive hotels. The Turkish citizens, on the other hand, believe that shopping centers, stores, restaurants, and cafes are the primary draws for the Russian-speaking tourists. Additionally, spa salons and Turkish sauna (29.8%) as well as theaters and concerts (14.3%) are also regarded as important by residents of Mersin. These differing perceptions regarding the most appealing aspects of the destination are crucial for shaping tourism development strategies in Mersin. Furthermore, there is a significant disparity in how each group views Mersin's readiness to accommodate the Russian-speaking tourists. While the opinions of the Turkish citizens split nearly equally between readiness and unpreparedness (43.4% and 45.5%, respectively), the Russian-speaking residents expressed a predominantly negative view, with 71.6% indicating unpreparedness. One critical factor impacting tourism development in Mersin identified by both groups is the language barrier.

Russian-speaking residents were asked a special open-ended question about the tourist "highlights" of Mersin, which are seen as pivotal for the city's tourism development aimed at Russian tourists. The area's main attractions for these visitors include the Mediterranean Sea and its natural features, along with the cultural and historical sites surrounding the city. Additionally, the cultural identity and hospitality, as well as the authentic "Turkish life" of Mersin, are also regarded as major attractions by 7% of respondents. There is a notable disparity in preferences based on how long the Russian-speaking individuals have resided in Mersin:

- those who have lived in Mersin for less than six months primarily highlight the Mediterranean Sea and the city's waterfront area with its marina, which may be attributed to their limited time in the region, preventing them from exploring surrounding areas.
- respondents who have been in the city for approximately a year have the strongest impressions of the local cultural identity and the friendliness of its residents.

As the length of stay increases, enthusiasm for the local culture and hospitality declines, dropping from 20% to 5% in certain groups. This trend is also reflected in the responses indicating "there are no tourist highlights."

Infrastructure and ecological issues are identified as the most significant barriers to tourism development by the Russian-speaking residents.

The findings confirm previous research, which suggests that a positive attitude among locals towards tourism is crucial for promoting tourism activities. Studies by Sinkovics&Penz [26] have shown that the favorable perception of tourists within the local community boosts their eagerness to travel [13; 26]. Furthermore, challenges such as language barriers, lack of information about tourism offerings, and limited online booking options are critical for the development of the destination [17].

Taking into account a negative opinion of the Russian-speaking residents regarding to the city's readiness to receive tourists, their opinion is a key importance. Numerous obstacles to Mersin's tourism development can be classified into five main categories: infrastructure, ecological, economic, socio-cultural, and legal

challenges. Addressing these issues could augment the influx of Russian tourists to Mersin. A key factor for improving transportation connectivity is the anticipated opening of Çukurova International Airport on August 10, 2024, which promises to expand tourism possibilities in the Mersin province. For example, during a discussion on July 24, 2024, the Russian Tour Operators Association explored the question, "What attractions might Çukurova International Airport offer to Russian tourists?" This inquiry highlights Mersin's tourism potential among Russian visitors. Currently, travel from Russia to Mersin is minimal, primarily involving individuals associated with the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (including builders and their families), as well as some property owners and a few independent tourists. As of now, Çukurova International Airport facilitates direct flights from Moscow to Mersin Province five times a week via Aeroflot Russian Airlines. By September 2024, it is expected that one of the primary challenges to tourism development will have been ad-

dressed, allowing Mersin to concentrate on ecological issues, tourism infrastructure, and socio-cultural challenges to move forward.

### Conclusion

The city of Mersin, situated on the Mediterranean coast, possesses a unique potential for tourism and recreation which remains largely untapped. It is surprisingly absent from the list of Turkey's most popular destinations for international visitors. A study based on two sociological surveys conducted among the Turkish citizens and the Russian-speaking residents of the city revealed a generally positive outlook regarding its tourism development prospects. However, it identified five key obstacles hindering this progress: infrastructure, environmental issues, economic challenges, socio-cultural and legal factors. The findings offer valuable insights into the preferences of the Russian-speaking tourists and the barriers to Mersin's tourism growth, highlighting opportunities to enhance inbound tourism and boost the local tourism market.

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