

Illegal Tour Guiding and Travel Agency Activities: Current Status of Inspection and Regulation in Türkiye

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Article History

Received: 30.12.2024

Accepted: 10.04.2025

Keywords

Tour guidance

Illegal guiding activities

TUREB inspection

Document review technique

Abstract

This study aims to examine illegal guiding activities in Türkiye and evaluate the effectiveness of Union of Turkish Tourist Guides Chambers (TUREB) inspections conducted to prevent such activities. Using document analysis technique, a qualitative research method, the field inspection reports conducted by TUREB between 2018 and 2023 were analyzed. The findings reveal that illegal agency and unguided tour activities were the most common violations during this period and that these violations increased every year. As a result of the analysis, the most recurring violations between 2018 and 2023 were found to be 'unlicensed agency activity', 'unguided tour activity' and 'unlicensed (illegal) guiding activity'. It was also observed that the current penalties and inspections are not deterrent, indicating the need for more effective regulations. This study has a unique value as it draws attention to the inadequacy of the measures taken against illegal guiding activities in the Turkish tourism sector and sheds light on future regulations. In addition, some suggestions such as the development of mobile license monitoring systems and whistleblowing mechanisms are presented to prevent illegal guiding activities.

Article Type

Research Article

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DOI: 10.21325/jotags.2025.1604

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the tourism industry and the significant gains it generates for its stakeholders increase legitimate activities but also encourage illegitimate activities (Mak et al., 2011). In this context, regulatory bodies face the challenge of ensuring fair and ethical practices in the industry (Forsyth, 1997). One of the leading regulatory bodies is the Association of Tourist Guides, which aims to supervise and regulate the activities of tourist guides in Türkiye (Inan et al., 2024). TUREB conducts extensive inspections to detect and punish illegal guiding services (TUREB, 2023). These inspections aim to ensure that licensed and qualified professionals provide guiding services and that tourists are protected from unqualified persons.

Illegal attempts in tour guiding are one of the most important problems of this profession and also of the tourism sector (Ababneh, 2016). Illegal tour guiding activities in the tourism sector is one of the major problems especially in underdeveloped or developing countries such as Türkiye (Karakaş, 2018). These activities not only pose a threat to the authenticity and quality of tourists' experiences, but also have serious impacts on the livelihood of licensed tour guides (Tsaur & Lin, 2014). On the other hand, it causes many negative effects such as providing incorrect or incomplete information to tourists, violating standards, and reducing business opportunities for licensed guides (Chowdhary & Prakash, 2008). Misinformation can lead tourists to misunderstand cultural and historical facts, which can damage the image of the destination (Bahar & Cansu, 2020). Reduced job opportunities for licensed guides may lead to a decrease in the quality of professional guiding services and disrupt the competitive balance in the sector (Yetgin, 2017).

The studies on the professional problems of tourist guides and the difficulties faced by other stakeholders in the tourism sector are frequently found in the literature (Buzcu & Oğuz, 2015; Demirdelen Alrawadieh, 2021; Inan et al., 2024; Karacaoğlu & Sert, 2018; Karamustafa & Çeşmeci, 2006). In these studies, various issues such as unethical behaviors faced by tour guides (Efendi & Karakaş Tandoğan, 2019; Güzel et al. 2014; Türkmen & Deniz, 2022), burnout (Kaya & Özhan, 2012; Yetgin & Benligiray, 2019), work-family conflicts (Boz et al., 2021) were addressed in a wide range. However, it is seen that studies on the inspection practices of the organizations responsible for legal inspections in the tourist guiding profession (Çakmak, 2019) do not find enough coverage in the body of knowledge.

The aim of this study is to comprehensively examine the current situation of illegal tour guiding activities in Türkiye, focusing on the effectiveness of inspections conducted by TUREB. A comprehensive analysis of the available data revealed the current status of the extent of illegal guiding, the challenges faced by licensed tourist guides, and the effectiveness of the implemented regulatory measures. In addition to revealing the landscape of the reasons surrounding illegal guiding activities, this study has also provided recommendations for improving the inspection processes to curb this unethical practice.

Theoretical Framework

Legal Regulations in Tourism Sector and Turkish Tourist Guides Association (TUREB)

Legal regulations and inspections in the tourism sector are critical for the sustainability of the sector and the safety of tourists (Öğretmenoğlu & Çıkkı, 2023). These regulations have undergone significant changes since the beginning of tourism activities. Initially, regulations and standards in this sector were mostly determined and implemented at the local or regional level (Çetin & Kızıllırmak, 2012). However, over time, the increasing global importance and

impact of tourism activities have made it necessary to set legal regulations and standards in this sector at the international level (Çolakoğlu et al., 2014).

Legal regulations cover various issues such as the safety of tourists, the environmental impacts of tourism activities, the rights of employees in tourism enterprises and the economic sustainability of the tourism sector (Perran, 2007). For instance, environmental standards and criteria have been established to reduce the environmental impact of tourism activities and to ensure the protection of natural resources (Tetik, 2012). At the same time, legal regulations have been introduced to ensure that tourism enterprises comply with health and safety standards, provide quality service to customers and protect the rights of employees (Düzgün & Kurt, 2020).

At the international level, organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) lead the development of sustainability and ethical standards in the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2023). UNWTO works to help member countries determine tourism policies and strategies, improve the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism, and promote international cooperation in the tourism sector.

At the international level, besides UNWTO, there are also leading organizations for the tourism guiding profession (Çıktı et al., 2023). In particular, the World Federation of Tourist Guides (WFTGA) plays a leading role in the training, certification and development of professional standards for tourist guides. The WFTGA is in constant communication with Tourist Guide Associations and strives to promote and protect the interests of professional tourist guides. In Türkiye, the Association of Tourist Guides (TUREB) aims to raise standards in this field by monitoring the professional qualifications and service quality of tourist guides.

With the Republican era, legal regulations and by-laws were put into practice for the tour guiding profession in Türkiye (Demir, 2017). These regulations cover important issues such as the practice of the profession, the organization of vocational courses and training contents. In 1925, the first legal framework for tour guiding and interpreting services was established with Decree No. 2730 (Değirmencioğlu, 2021; Polat et al., 2022). In 1971, the first regulation was published under the name of Interpreter Guide Courses and Interpreter Guide Regulation and this regulation was updated in 1974, 1981, 1983 and 1986 (Çokışler, 2002). In 2005, the regulation was named “Professional Tourist Guidance Regulation”. With the Tourist Guiding Profession Law No. 6326, which entered into force in 2012, the tour guiding profession has gained a more organized structure (MCT, 2014).

Following the 2012 revised regulation, the Professional Law on Tourist Guiding was revised again in 2024 and this new regulation abolished the requirement to speak a foreign language for admission to the tour guiding profession and introduced the possibility of guiding only in Turkish. In addition, the obligation to have a guide on school trips was abolished and guides were required to take a language exam every five years. Graduates of art history and archaeology were offered the opportunity to become tourist guides, and the way was paved for guides to work in Far Eastern languages, especially Chinese (TÜRSAB, 2024).

Legal Regulations in Tourism Sector and Turkish Tourist Guides Association (TUREB)

Illegal guiding activities have become a serious problem in the tourism sector, especially for those practicing the tour guiding profession, other stakeholders and tourists (Celep, 2022). In recent years, while studies on the professional difficulties of tourist guides have increased, illegal guiding activities have emerged as a prominent theme in these studies (Aslan & Çokal, 2016). While the problem of illegal tour guiding, which has received intense

academic attention, is sometimes the main subject of research (Caber et al., 2019; Çakmak, 2019), sometimes it is a prominent finding as a result of research (Akbulut, 2006).

Saatçi and Demirbulat (2018) analyzed the inspection reports conducted by the Association of Tourist Guides in 2017 and concluded that illegal guiding activities continue due to insufficient inspections. Çakmak (2018) aimed to dig deeper into illegal guiding activities and reveal the demographic characteristics of those who carry out these activities, and in this context, the Istanbul Chamber of Guides analyzed the inspections carried out for 2 years (2016-17). On the other hand, Çakmak (2020) aimed to reveal the factors underlying illegal tour guiding activities. As a result of the research, it was determined that illegal tour guiding is in demand due to various reasons such as the inadequacy of penalties for deterrence and lack of supervision.

Karacaoğlu and Sert (2018) concluded that illegal guiding is one of the most important problems in their study on the problems experienced by tourist guides on tours in Cappadocia. Yenipınar et al. (2014) emphasized that the Tourist Guiding Profession Law No. 6326 is insufficient to solve the problem of illegal guiding. Akbulut (2006), in his study on professional tourist guides, emphasized that in order to solve the problem of illegal tour guiding, first of all, sanctions should be increased and follow-up should be done regularly. In addition, in this study, it was seen that those who think that the problem of illegal guiding cannot be solved are quite high. This study examines the problem of illegal guiding in depth and reveals the current outlook and deterrence status of inspections and penalties.

Methodology

This research was conducted using qualitative research method to examine the inspection processes in the field of tourist guiding in Turkey. Qualitative research aims to examine social phenomena in depth within a meaningful context (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). In this framework, document analysis technique was preferred in the study, and with this method, it was aimed to systematically evaluate the phenomena by using official documents created in advance. Document analysis, as one of the basic techniques of qualitative research, provides a structured analysis of written materials and allows the researcher to access data sets that have been formed over time (Patton, 2002).

The data for the research was obtained from a total of 64 field inspection reports covering illegal activities between April 2018 and December 2023 on the official website of the Union of Turkish Chambers of Tourist Guides (TUREB). These reports were obtained from publicly available sources and secondary data based on these documents were used in the research (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2016; Kırıl, 2020). Secondary data is defined as data sources that have been collected by other individuals or organizations for different purposes but that can contribute to the current research (Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019). Such reports facilitate the researcher's access to content that is not directly accessible. The analysed reports document how often and on what grounds inspections were conducted, and clearly present the administrative sanctions imposed and the types of violations.

Results

Data on the field inspection reports published on the TUREB website between 2018-2023 are given in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 1, 10,025 inspections were carried out between the specified years. During these inspections, penalized actions were taken on 22 items. According to the data in Figure 1, in the inspections carried out in the mentioned years, penal actions were taken on 20 items. In the inspections carried out, it is seen that 'Acting as an Agency without a Document' ranked first with 2910 reports, 'Tour Activity without a Guide' ranked second with 2608

reports, 'Guiding Activity without a Document' ranked third with 2447 reports, 'Guiding Activity without a Document (illegal)' ranked fourth with 904 reports, 'Lack of Documentation (Agency)' ranked fourth with 904 reports and 'Tour or Package Tour Guiding Activity without a Contract' ranked fifth with 391 reports.

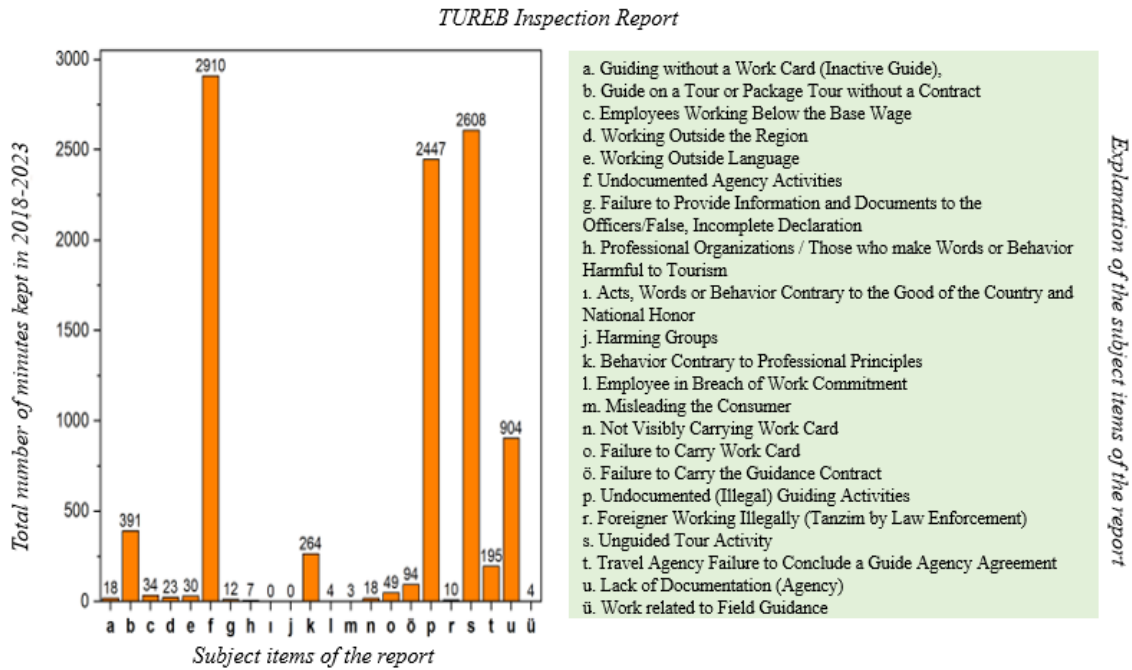


Figure 1. Number of TUREB field inspection reports between 2018-2023

Source: Created by the authors in line with the statistics of the General Directorate of Investment and Enterprises (2024).

As can be seen in Figure 1, during the inspections carried out in the mentioned years, no minutes were kept under the articles of 'Acts, Words or Behavior Contrary to the National Interest and National Honor' and 'Harming Groups'. In addition to this, it is seen that the least number of reports were made for 3 'Misleading Consumers', 4 'Working in Field Guiding' and 'Working Contrary to Work Commitment', 7 'Speaking or Acting Harmful to Professional Organizations / Tourism', 10 'Foreigner Working Illegally' and finally 12 'Not Providing Information and Documents to the Officers / Making False, Incomplete Declarations'.

Table 1. 2018-2023 Overall Number of TUREB Field Inspection Reports

Subject of The Report	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	Total
1 Guiding Activity without a Work Card (Inactive Guide)	0	2	6	4	1		1	1	1	1	0	1	18
2 Guiding a Tour or Package Tour without a Contract	12	10	35	26	37	41	32	43	51	52	33	19	391
3 Employees Working Below the Base Wage	3	1	4	3	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	13	34
4 Working Outside the Region	0	1	0	3	1	5	3	1	2	6	1	0	23

Table 1. 2018-2023 Overall Number of TUREB Field Inspection Reports (devamı)

5 Working Outside Dili	2	1	1	4	0	8	1	0	2	5	1	5	30
6 Engaged in Undocumented Agency Activities	167	162	152	228	186	287	293	354	335	319	250	177	2910
7 Failure to Provide Information and Documents to the Officers/False, Incomplete Declaration	1	0	1	0	2	2	0	2	1	2	1	0	12
8 Professional Organizations /Harmful Words or Behavior to Tourism,	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	2	1	7
9 Acts, Words or Behavior Contrary to the Good of the Country and National Honor,	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10 Harming Groups,	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11 Behavior Contrary to Professional Principles	6	5	8	16	27	33	39	47	19	41	14	9	264
12 Employee in Breach of Work Commitment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	4
13 Misleading the Consumer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	3
14 Not Visibly Carrying Work Card	0	4	0	0	1	1	2	1	2	6	0	1	18
15 Does not carry his/her work card with him/her.	1	17	4	4	5	3	6	4	1	3	1	0	49
16 Failure to Carry the Guidance Contract	0	4	4	4	14	10	12	2	18	8	11	7	94
17 Undocumented (Illegal) Guiding Activities	94	103	157	146	174	221	293	310	298	314	171	166	2447
18 Foreigner Working Illegally (Tanzim by Law Enforcement)	0	0	1	0	0	4	1	0	4	0	0	0	10
19 Unguided Tour Activity	121	145	106	220	185	254	376	437	224	232	159	149	2608
20 Travel Agency that does not make a Guide Agency Contract	3	2	13	16	23	17	30	24	34	9	7	17	195

Table 1. 2018-2023 Overall Number of TUREB Field Inspection Reports (devamı)

21 Lack of Documentation (Agency)	36	32	58	83	55	77	149	131	78	85	83	37	904
22 Work related to Field Guidance	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	4

Source: Created by the authors in line with the statistics

Table 2, created in line with the data obtained from TUREB, shows the administrative fines imposed under Law No. 1618 between 2018 and 2023 and the payment options with 1/4 discount. Each item in the table represents the types and amounts of fines imposed for different violations. As of 2018, it is observed that the fines imposed have been increasing every year. This increase indicates that regulations in the tourism sector are inadequate and fines are not taken seriously enough.

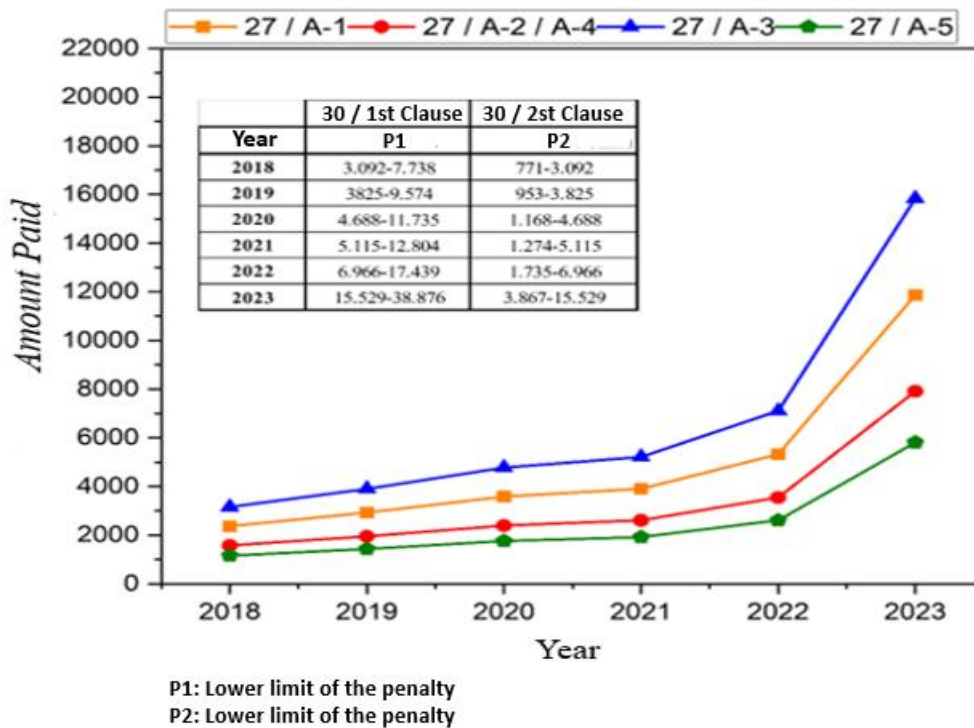


Figure 2. Distribution of Administrative Monetary Fines imposed under Law No. 1618 in 2018-2023

Table 2. Administrative Monetary Penalty Amounts Imposed under Law No. 1618 between 2018-2023

	27 / A - 1			27 / A - 2			27 / A - 3			27 / A - 4			27 / A - 5			30 / 1.sub-clause	30 / 2.sub-clause
	Pe	D	Pa	Pe	D	Pa	Pe	D	Pa	Pe	D	Pa	Pe	D	Pa	Lower and upper limits of the penalty	
2018	3,151	787.75	2,363.25	2,100	525.0	1,575.0	4,205	1,051.25	3,153.75	2,100	525	1,575	1,545	386.25	1,158.75	3,092-7.738	771-3.092
2019	3,898	974.5	2,923.5	2,598	649.5	1,948.5	5,202	1,300.50	3,901.5	2,598	649.5	1,948.5	1,911	477.75	1,433.25	3825-9.574	953-3.825
2020	4,778	1,194.5	3,583.5	3,184	796.0	2,388.0	6,376	1,594.00	4,782.	3,184	796	2,388	2,342	585.50	1,756.5	4,688-11.735	1,168-4.688
2021	5,214	1,303.5	3,910.5	3,474	868.5	2,605.5	6,956	1,739.00	5,217.	3,474	868.5	2,605.5	2,555	638.75	1,916.25	5,115-12.804	1,274-5.115
2022	7,101	1,775.25	5,325.75	4,731	1,182.75	3,548.25	9,474	2,368.50	7,105.5	4,731	1,182.75	3,548.25	3,479	869.75	2,609.25	6,966-17.439	1,735-6.966
2023	15,83	3,957.5	11,872.5	10,546	2,636.5	7,909.5	21,12	5,280.00	15,840	10,546	2,636.5	7,909.5	7,755	1,938.75	5,816.25	15,529-38.876	3,867-15.529

27/A-1: It covers the penalties imposed on tourism enterprises operating without a license. This penalty is applied against businesses operating without a license. While the 2023 fine for Article 27/A-1 was 15,830 TL, the 2018 fine was 3,151 TL. This shows that the fines have more than quintupled in five years.
 27/A-2: Includes penalties for unauthorized guiding activities. This penalty is applied to people who act as a guide without a tourist guide authorization.
 27/A-3: It covers penalties imposed on tourism establishments in case they violate certain standards. For example, businesses that fail to meet set hygiene and safety standards are penalized under this article.
 27/A-4: It includes penalties imposed on tourism enterprises that fail to fulfill their legal reporting and declaration obligations.
 27/A-5: It covers fines for illegal advertising and promotional activities of tourism agencies.
 30/1. sub-clause: This provides for penalties for non-compliance with general rules by tourism enterprises. The penalties in this clause cover serious violations in the general management and activities of the enterprise.
 30/2. sub-clause: It includes penalties imposed if tourism businesses do not correct their violations within a certain period of time. This applies in the case of repeated violations or failure to correct violations.
 Penalty: Pe., ¼ Discount: D., Payment: Pa.

Source: Created by the authors based on the statistics obtained from the Legislation Information System.

Under Law No. 1618, it can be stated that the increase in the amount of administrative fines imposed between 2018 and 2023 has reduced, if not completely eliminated, the illegal guidance practices and thus acted as a deterrent. In this context, it is of great importance that the fines are applied without a discount. The possibility to pay discounted fines causes individuals engaged in illegal guiding activities to take fines less seriously and therefore to be less hesitant to violate the law.

Conclusion and Discussion

Illegal guiding activities in Türkiye have negative impacts on tourism sector stakeholders. Tourists unwittingly put themselves at risk by participating in tours organized by unlicensed guides. This situation not only reduces the quality of their experience, but also compromises their safety due to lack of information and uninsured activities. In addition to tourists, the national economies are also negatively affected by unlicensed guides, reducing the income of registered travel agencies and leading to unfair competition.

Unlicensed guides offer services at lower prices compared to legal tour guides, causing unfair competition. This negatively affects the income of legal tour guides and jeopardizes their professional sustainability. Furthermore, illegal guiding activities reduce the quality of tourists' experiences and damage the image of the destination. Inaccurate or incomplete information provided by unlicensed guides can lead tourists to misunderstand cultural and historical facts, which can damage the reputation of the destination in the long-term.

An analysis of the inspections conducted by TUREB between 2018 and 2023 reveals that there has been a steady increase in certain violations. For example, 'operating as an agency without a license', 'operating tours without a guide' and 'operating as a guide without a license (illegal)' are among the most common violations. The fact that these

violations increase every year shows that laws and regulations are not deterrent enough and inspections are insufficient to completely prevent such activities.

On the other hand, travel agencies employing illegal guides also contribute to the continuation of this problem. According to the inspection reports, the violation of 'operating as an agency without a license' was the highest number of violations and 2,910 reports were filed. This shows that travel agencies do not comply with legal regulations and are prone to illegal activities. Moreover, the frequency of violations of 'Tour Activity without a Guide' and 'Guiding Activity without a Document' negatively affect the quality and safety of guiding services.

The increase in violations detected in inspections over the years shows that penalties and inspections are not sufficiently deterrent and illegal guidance activities continue. For example, while the number of violations detected in 2018 was 1,045, this number increased to 2,608 in 2023. This increase reveals that existing regulations and inspections are insufficient and more effective strategies are needed.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

In this section, in line with the findings of the study, theoretical contributions to the field of tourism guiding as well as practical policy and strategy recommendations for the prevention of illegal guiding activities are presented. With the revised Tourist Guiding Profession Law, there is a high probability that illegal guiding activities will increase. In order to prevent illegal guiding activities, it is very important to increase penalties and make inspections more frequent and comprehensive. However, these steps alone are not sufficient. Training and awareness-raising activities will play a critical role in reducing illegal guiding activities. Trainings for travel agencies will raise awareness on legal responsibilities and ethical standards.

Raising public awareness is also an important strategy. Tourists should be informed about the importance of licensed tourist guides and the negative impacts of illegal guiding activities. This will enable tourists to make informed choices and contribute to a reduction in illegal activities. Furthermore, increased international cooperation and coordination can help prevent illegal guiding activities. At the national level, it is crucial that all stakeholders in the tourism sector (travel agencies, hotels, tour guide associations and local authorities) cooperate and develop joint strategies. These strategies should include the display of informative posters at airports and bus stations in tourist areas, and the creation and distribution of brochures in information desks and tourist centers highlighting the risks of illegal guiding activities and the importance of licensed guides.

At the international level, cooperation with other countries will enable mutual exchange of information and experience in detecting and preventing illegal activities. In particular, joint work with international tourism organizations and tourism authorities of other countries will facilitate effective measures against illegal guiding activities. Joint supervision and control mechanisms to be established at the international level will also contribute to the effective management of the cross-border dimensions of illegal guiding activities.

Technological solutions are one of the most important tools to increase the effectiveness of inspection processes. Through mobile applications and online platforms, the license status of tourist guides can be confirmed and illegal guiding activities can be reported quickly. In this context, through this platform or application, a continuously updated database can be created that includes the tours and other professional information of licensed tourist guides in a way that does not contravene the Personal Data Protection Law (LPPD).

Effective reporting and complaint mechanisms need to be established to effectively detect and prevent illegal guiding activities. A complaint system should be established for guides through the Turkish Guide Information System (GIS) and for tourists and locals through the same or a different website. This system will ensure that illegal activities are reported quickly and necessary measures are taken by the authorities. Keeping the identities of whistleblowers confidential and ensuring their security will increase the effectiveness of whistleblowing mechanisms. In this way, tourists and locals can anonymously report illegal activities without hesitation. In addition, integrating a reward system can make this system more powerful. After the complaint, a percentage of the penalty imposed on the verified illegal activity can be transferred to the individual who made the complaint. This would make the system more memorable and sustainable.

As the regional distribution of inspections and the analysis of violations in specific regions were not analyzed, a general assessment is presented. Identifying the areas where illegal guidance activities are most prevalent and sharing statistics on these areas is of great importance in terms of raising public awareness. In this context, it is suggested that TUREB's current inspection reports be examined in detail and the regional distribution of inspections be made public. On the other hand, data analytics and artificial intelligence tools can be utilized to predict the regions and periods where illegal guidance activities are concentrated and to prevent them. In this way, inspections can be conducted in a more focused and effective manner.

Limitations and Future Directions

The research has some limitations. The data used in this research are secondary sources and no primary data collection methods (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, focus groups) were used. Therefore, the scope of the research is limited to the data in the reports and represents only the part of illegal guidance activities reflected in official inspections. On the other hand, the data in the reports were not analyzed in terms of regional distribution. Variables such as the intensity of illegal activities in certain regions, local inspection practices or seasonal differences were excluded from the scope of the research. This limits a more detailed assessment of the spatial dynamics of illegal counseling activities. In future research, in addition to field inspection reports, interviews with guides, travel agencies, tour guides and tourists can be conducted to explore the causes, consequences and solutions to illegal activities in more depth. Furthermore, quantitative data collection tools can be used to obtain data from larger sample groups to measure the perception and social impact of illegal guiding activities.

Declaration

All authors of the article contributed equally to the article process. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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