

Marketing Issues of Sustainable Tourism Development in Russian Regions¹

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to provide better understanding of marketing issues relevant to sustainable tourism development. Marketing issues are of crucial importance for Russian regions with unique landscapes and many small towns with their ancient churches, original local museums and other attractions. The main obstacle for sustainable tourism development in these regions is lack of prominence and absence of right positioning for target audiences. For Mari El Republic as one of the most prospective sustainable tourism destinations in Russia, ethno-tourism concept, based on preserving paganism, the traditional religion of the Mari people, can become a solid basis for positioning. The research presented in the paper will contribute to the literature on tourism marketing and sustainable regional development in emerging markets by shedding light on diversity of Russian tourism market, as well as on the uniqueness of small Russian towns and villages as attractive destinations in terms of cultural heritage, history, and ecology. It will also underline the need to understand socio-cultural specifics of tourism destinations to ensure positive impact on the prosperity of local communities that are among the most important stakeholders in destination marketing.

Keywords: tourism, marketing, sustainable tourism, small settlements, culture, destination development, Russia

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Introduction

Nowadays, there is a growing body of literature on sustainable tourism (Waligo et al., 2013; Edgell, 2016; Gohar, Kondolf, G. M., 2016; Weaver, Jin, 2016), including papers on sustainable tourism development in emerging markets (Fazenda et al., 2010; Legrand et al., 2012; Ghimire, 2013; Hussain et al., 2015; Maheshwari, Sharma, 2017). Emerging countries possess a lot of unique natural and cultural assets that can become an important source of rural tourism, ecotourism and ethno-tourism development (Su, 2011; Chon et al., 2013; Karnaukhova, 2013; Ajagunna, 2014; de la Maza, 2016; Muresan et al., 2016; Polukhina, 2016).

‘Sustainable tourism’ signifies a condition of tourism based on the principles of sustainable development (Waligo et al., 2013), taking “full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts” (UNEP/WTO, 2005, p.11-12). Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. Therefore, destination management helps to achieve the goals of sustainable tourism development as it offers a process for coordinating the management of all the elements that make up the destination: attractions, amenities, access, marketing and pricing (Fazenda et al., 2010).

In the last decade, a broad variety of tourism issues in Russia is discussed (Morozova et al., 2014; Silaeva et al., 2014; Ignatiev, 2015; Ovcharov et al., 2015; Aleksandrova, Vladimirov, 2016; Sheresheva, Kopiski, 2016). The results of studies confirm that tourism is growing in importance as a strategic sector of the Russian economy. There is now understanding in Russia that this sector can contribute to achieving the national development objectives. Moreover, tourism is growing in importance as a way to boost development of small towns and rural territories of Russia by embedding them into tourism routes and clusters (Mingaleva et al., 2017).

At the same time, the prospects of rural and ethno-tourism in Russia, as well as issues of sustainable development of tourism in Russian regions, remain unexplored. There is an obvious need to unveil the ways of effectively deployment of unique cultural heritage of indigenous people and preserved ancient traditions in a number of Russian regions, with positive impact on the local tourism and the prosperity of local communities.

Russian tourism market

There are potential competitive advantages which can be realized to make Russia an attractive destination. The availability of different tourist attractions and recreational resources of the country allows developing almost all kinds of tourism. According to the Federal State Statistics Service data, there are 2368 museums in 477 historic cities, 590 theatres, almost 99 ths historic and cultural monuments, 103 preservation museums and 41 museum-estates functioning in Russia (Morozova et al., 2014), “hidden gems” of small towns with their ancient churches, original local museums and unique sights. Moreover, 26 cultural and natural objects from different regions of Russia are included into the World Heritage List of UNESCO (World Heritage List, 2017). Russia has a huge potential for active tourism (skiing, water tourism, hiking, mountaineering, cycling, sailing, equestrian tourism). There are 35 national parks and 84 forest reserves in Russia situated in different climatic zones, with extremely diverse landscapes, rivers, lakes, mountains etc. that offer outstanding opportunities for ecotourism, rural and adventure tourism.

Strategies for the development of sustainable tourism became now subject of attention of federal and regional authorities. In the WEF Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (2015), Russia has risen in the ranking to 45th place out of 141 countries. Still, potential competitive advantages

are difficult to realize due to the poor tourism infrastructure, including transportation problems, shortage of accommodation and entertainment resources, poor state of many local attractions, and lack of skilled human resources (Sheresheva, Polukhina, 2016). The incoming tourism with cultural purposes is usually limited to visits to Moscow and St. Petersburg or quite traditional routes (the Golden Ring, cruises on the river Volga) which are the most famous cultural destinations in Russia (Sheresheva, Kopiski, 2016). Therefore, there is a need to understand more precisely the conditions for sustainable tourism development in promising Russian regions.

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was to analyze the prospects of positioning Mari El Republic as attractive destination for rural and ethno-tourism, taking in account the unique character of the Mari settlements in terms of history, culture and ecology.

Methodology

The evaluation of cultural, heritage, and historical resources in the Mari El Republic, as well as understanding how these resources can advance tourism development, was the primary task in development place marketing strategy. The next steps were segmentation and looking for best positioning, with the aim to develop value proposition for target audiences and to present Mari El Republic to potential visitors by marketing the best aspects of the destination.

At the same time, not only developing a good image for tourists is crucial for gaining a destination competitive position (Beerli, Martín, 2004; Iordanova, 2015, 2017). Many authors point out that local community involvement is crucial for sustainable tourism; there is a need to balance the interests of tourists and local communities, to preserve and defend local traditions (Li, Hunter, 2015; Muresan et al., 2016; Sheresheva, Polukhina, 2016). As Karnaukhova (2013) underlines, established ethnic communities' communicative style strategically provides support or opposition to the local administration initiatives.

Taking in account these aspects, the empirical study was conducted which draws both on qualitative and quantitative methods. Empirical material obtained in the form of in-depth interviews with key informants as well as by means of survey that involved 225 residents of three rural settlements of the Mari El Republic. The main goal was to study the socio-cultural and behavioral characteristics of the local population, in relationship to the development of business activities in the field of rural tourism. Selection of settlements reflected the socio-economic regionalization Mari El Republic. Presence of organizations engaged in rural tourism was an additional selection criterion. The sample covered three-quarters of the adult population permanently residing in these settlements. Observation and analysis of available secondary data used to triangulate the results.

Preliminary results and further research

Socio-demographic characteristics are broadly in line with the structure of Mari El rural population. National composition of the respondents was as follows: 56% Mari, 39% Russian, 5% Tatar, Udmurt, Chuvash. Among the respondents 21.7% - people of retirement age, 19% - young people under the age of 25 years.

The level of religiosity is high: 88.9% consider themselves believers. Supporters of the Orthodox religion dominate completely (90.4%); 3.2% are Muslim, 5% have traditional Mari pagan beliefs. A kind of "dual faith" is also widespread: a significant part of the Orthodox Mari observes some pagan rites.

61.2% of all respondents were born in the settlements where they are now living. A quarter of the respondents were born in some other settlements of the Mari El Republic, and later moved to their contemporary place of living. Only one in ten respondents came from other Russian regions. 81.0 % of all respondents live in their villages more than 15 years, in their own homes.

Mari El Republic has a low economic performance, as compared to most Russian regions. Therefore, it is not surprising that many respondents mention that they are “not satisfied” with their living conditions, 44% underline that “life here is stalled”, 13% believe that “no initiative is welcomed here”. Nevertheless, the shares of optimistic and pessimistic responses on the questions assessing the respondents’ social well-being are almost equal, with only slight predominance of negative assessments. Every third respondent is “happy to live here,” 36% are “generally satisfied”, 68.4% estimated their attitude towards the region as “positive”. Moreover, 95% of respondents do not intend to relocate. The vast majority of the respondents (86.4%) count the beautiful nature and good ecological state as the most attractive features of the Mari El Republic as a place for living and a place to visit.

There are entrepreneurs that develop rural tourism in a number of settlements. Typical examples are tourist complexes “Silent Dawns” in the village Maly Kugunur, “Expanse” in the village Aleshkino, “Yushut River” in the village Oshutyal. Conducted interviews with entrepreneurs and managers of these companies have identified their motivation. Most of them are older than the average, and have considerable experience in other areas of business. One of the motives to start their rural business was the desire “to get away from the bustle of the city” but at the same time to maintain an active lifestyle and “to be useful to people and society”, “to support the revival of Russian villages”, “to develop and maintain the national culture of the Mari people”. As a result, there is mutual positive attitude of the entrepreneurs and the local community towards each other.

The research has shown that a number of cultural attractions and many ancient archaeological sites situated in the region could make a solid base for rural and ethno-tourism but currently there are obstacles for sustainable destination development.

There are local Mari communities still preserving ancient cultural and religious traditions (paganism) but they often demonstrate their opposition to the idea of ethnographic tourism, as they feel that this is a threat to national identity and spirit of Mari people. At the same time, there are other nationalities, cultures and religions situated in the region.

Therefore, an original model of sustainable tourism destination development is needed that could help to gain synergy from all potential attractions of Mari El Republic, with the special attention to cultural integrity, small cities and villages local community involvement, life support systems, current and future social and environmental impacts, and the role of relationships and collaborative business networks.

The main purpose of the further research is to study and adapt relevant marketing practices that allow to benefit from local cultural and natural assets, and to find a balance between the interests of tourism destination stakeholders in the Russian market context.

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