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CAN WE MAKE A GREEN TOURISM BRAND? THE EVIDENCE OF MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT: Every country has strengths and weaknesses, and a good brand may project country’s strengths while recognizing its weaknesses. Despite the fact that Macedonia has been an independent country for more than two decades, it seems that it is still trapped in its transition period and still strives to create new patterns. The article draws on primary and secondary data to provide insights into the processes and conflicts over efforts to create a green tourism brand in Macedonia. Moreover, the research assesses how Macedonian hospitality industry stakeholders manage the environmental quality, which directly leads to increase of destination’s competitiveness. It has a practical significance since it discusses the level of environmental quality of Macedonia as a base for creating a national green tourism brand. The paper underlines that tourism branding in Macedonia cannot be conducted successfully without considering the context of “green” tourism. It was found that the improved image along with the enhanced competitiveness are strong determinants, thus, provoking better interest than the increase of number of guests. Yet, a large number of surveyed hotel managers lack measures to reduce the conventional energy use and replace it with renewable sources of energy. Although being fully aware of the importance of the environmental concept, this is not the managerial priority of Macedonian hotels. These findings may assist in further steps when creating marketing strategies to enhance country’s distinctiveness. A positive national image is an essential ingredient for promotion that raises the issue for necessity of investing into national branding as part of the image-building strategy.

Keywords: Environment, image, promotion, brand, green tourism

1 INTRODUCTION

The puzzle, which needs to be solved so that the country can be more attractive, poses the issue of initiating the national branding process. It is known that every country has strengths and weaknesses and a good brand may project country’s strengths while recognizing its weaknesses. Therefore, the purpose of branding is to position the country in the best possible way in the world system, giving its strengths and weaknesses, by si-

multaneously being truthful and believable.

Therefore, starting from the benefit that branding offers a differentiation in the market [1-4], to the dilemma what constitutes the branding process [5-7], branding provokes large interest. It is often reported as a kind of destination image [8-9] or analyzed as a process of destination positioning [10-11]. On the other hand, brands classifiable as green are those whose users’ primary associations are environmental conservation and

sustainable practices [12].

Creating and developing a brand is not an easy task, so even developed countries do not find brand management an easy mission. Very few countries have successfully launched a national brand. Its inception evolved from various fields including imaging and communicating. It consists of international and external connections, based on the country's positive values and perceptions that are relevant to export development. The brand concepts, once researched, tested and defined, are then used as the basis of targeted promotional campaigns when encouraging tourism development.

Despite the fact that Macedonia has been an independent country for more than two decades, it seems that it is still trapped in its transition period and still strives to create new patterns. There is a lack of global image and bad prejudice, which may be a good sign and a rare opportunity if the country may start to build the brand in its own way. Hence, building a position on new markets requires time, but the fact to be a brand-new destination can be the key asset to go faster and more efficiently in building awareness in tourists' perception. In such a dynamic context, the way out is detected in favoring tourism as a possibility to enhance national economy. The rapid expansion in the past few years, in terms of the number of tourists, caused tourism to be recognized as one of the national strategic priority areas in Macedonia. Significant marketing efforts have been made to introduce the country in the international competition playground.

Although this study may add to the current research on green tourism and hotel industry in Macedonia [13-16], its main contribution lies in the intention to provide insights into the processes and conflicts over efforts to brand Macedonia as an eco-friendly destination. Moreover, this research assesses how Macedonian hospitality industry stakeholders manage the environmental quality, which directly leads to in-

crease destination's competitiveness. It has a practical significance since it discusses the level of environmental quality of Macedonia as a base for creating a national green tourism brand. The above-mentioned underlines that tourism branding in Macedonia cannot be conducted successfully without considering the context of "green" tourism.

After the introductory section, the following notes some references on green brand and some facts discussing how green Macedonia is. Section three includes the methodological framework; section four provides the main findings and discussion, while the final section offers conclusions and recommendations.

2 BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The vagueness of environmentally sound behaviours reflects the loose definition of a green brand. Hoteliers have rearranged their priorities and tried to make the establishments green, due to the fact that environmentally-conscious and adequately informed tourists are more willing to pay than others [17], and rather consume green products and stay at green hotels [18]. Yet, tourists are willing to participate in energy reduction efforts if it does not greatly diminish their holiday experience, if it is easy, or if it saves them money [19]. Consequently, hotels urge to apply environmental protection programs for reducing the energy consumption, recycling and composting food scraps [20-22].

Generally, tourism accounts for about 5% of GHG emissions worldwide, out of which the largest proportion of 75% is associated with transportation, whereas 40% is caused by air traffic [23]. Another factor that contributes to the environmental footprint of tourism is accommodation. This sector represents approximately 20% of GHG emissions generated from tourism [19]. The variety of tourism types, which rely on clean nature and unpolluted environment as core values, impose the necessity to strive for sustainable

tourism. Consequently, the hotel management introduces such energy practices that enable environmental protection by reducing carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and other harmful emissions that provoke global-warming and climate changes. Yet, despite the gain in efficiency, the emissions from global tourism sector are predicted to grow 161% by 2035 [19]. This actually means that tourism implicates many negative effects that must be prevented or at least decreased.

Around 90% of the primary energy in Macedonia is produced from fossil fuels, mainly lignite and heavy crude oil. Moreover, the energy sector contributes with over 70% in total emission of GHG. As a result of these two factors, an enormous pollution of the environment is provoked. Based on the State of Environment report [24], the total emissions by sectors in Macedonia are due to combustion processes (60%), transport (30-40%), and other (less than 5%). The share of recycled packaging is 12% of the total packaging placed on the market. The air quality notes an abundance of daily limit values of PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}, which remains a challenge for the future. However, Macedonia continues to adopt and implement EU Acquis.

Being identified as the best way to achieve energy independence and simultaneously take care of introducing and maintaining sustainable development, the renewable energy sources (RES) are heavily promoted as the least pressure production on the environment. In 2015, the renewable energy share was 15.9% of the European energy mix, which is twice as much as it was in 2004 and almost one percent more than it was in 2014 [25]. While the EU countries are largely investing to increase that share, Macedonia is facing immense problems. Although the transition period passed years ago, Macedonia is still in its starting point when it comes to the development of alternative energy sources and the concept of sustainable development. As a country aspiring for the EU membership, Macedonia is obliged to transfer the

legislation into its legal system, which consequently leads to the preparation of several strategic documents such as the Strategy for Energy Development in the Republic of Macedonia until 2030 [26], the Strategy for Utilization of Renewable Sources in the Republic of Macedonia by 2020 [27], and the Strategy for Energy Development in the Republic of Macedonia until 2035 (in Macedonian) [28].

Within the latest Strategy for Energy Development, it is foreseen an increase in competitiveness in the wider regional energy market and high energy efficiency [28]. The objectives proclaimed by the EU in the energy field until 2020 are as follows: improvement of energy efficiency by 20%, provision of energy from RES in the amount of 20% of the final energy consumption, and at least a 10% share of RES in the final energy consumption in traffic [26]. In this line, the maximization of the utilization of the RES is noted to be among the strategic priorities, which is proved by the constant increase from 4.2% in 2012 [29] to 13.8% in 2005 in the final energy consumption. Consequently, Macedonia belongs to the countries with a relatively high utilization of this type of energy [26]. Moreover, based on many scenarios within the strategic documents, it is indicated that Macedonia can target a share of RES set at 21% [27].

3 METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of the study is to determine the level of environmental quality of Macedonia as a base for creating a national green tourism brand. To achieve it, the study investigates the perception of hotel management in application of eco-policies and environmental practices by exploring standard indicators. Moreover, the assessment is made on how the hotel management copes with the environmental quality, which directly leads to an increase of the destination's competitiveness.

The study uses quantitative and qualitative

methods. The quantitative method consists of an online survey among 127 managers and department supervisors of three, four and five-star hotels in Macedonia, conducted in May 2015. It was based on 32 indicators already discussed in [30]. The questionnaire was structured in three sections (Environmental policy; Usage and savings of resources; and Benefits and constraints) with two-choice questions and a five-point Likert scale. The low response rate of 35.4% was expected due to the lack of personal contact when conducting an online survey. By applying the Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA) technique, the number of variables was reduced, while the reliability of the components was checked by the Cronbach Alpha. The scores of the perception components were compared by Kruskal-Wallis tests, while the indicators for benefits and constraints were perceived by calculating medians in the components scores.

A consultation of secondary sources was conducted in the qualitative method. It included a review of literature and websites, thus adopting a multidisciplinary approach. Information collected via these procedures enabled triangulation and validation of the data.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As noted, the questionnaire was structured in three sections. Section I comprised of 12 questions defining the environment policy ($\alpha=0.81$; average score of the mode = 3 i.e. medium level of influence). There is a variety of available tools that can be used to implement efficient environmental policy and environmental management system (EMS). Among the investigated, the top three items perceived by the managers are: Prevention interventions (0.834); Employees' training (0.718); and medium knowledge of the environmental protection standard ISO 14000 (0.664). There are also over a hundred global and regional certification programs for sustainable tourism (e. g. Green Globe, Green Key, TourCert, Travelife) which sup-

port hotel management in the establishment of appropriate EMS through the use of labels (Font, 2002). Therefore, Ecolabels and Eco certificates are widespread tools for policy and marketing tourism strategies and are frequently used to show guests' reliability. Additionally, they may add credibility to green brands, but are unlikely to actively communicate the array of functional and emotional benefits consumers, other than the greenest, seek. In the case of Macedonia, 60.9% of the surveyed hotels do not have Ecolabels and 64.6% do not hold an Eco certificate. This is opposite to some facts that certification programs provide benefits and impose more efficient operations [31]. It was also found that Macedonian hotel management rarely prepares written plans for environmental protection which is not in favor of supporting the European environmental impact assessment regulation. This legislation started to develop in the 1970s and since then, many documents, action plans and standards have been established by the European Union. Besides industry, energy, transportation and agricultural sections, tourism is also introduced as a segment that must conform to the Fifth Environmental Action Program. Due to the fact that Macedonia is a candidate country for EU membership, much attention should be put so that hospitality industry stakeholders meet the internationally set standards.

Section II includes 11 questions for assessing the usage and savings of resources ($\alpha=0.74$; average score of the mode = 4 i.e. strong level of influence). Environmental management may serve as an effective strategy for hotels and destinations to create additional value in the long run. This was found not to be the case with Macedonia. The findings are alarming since they point to extremely limited use of alternative energy sources and new innovative approaches in saving energy consumption. The findings for the items referring to geothermal energy, biofuel, photocell lighting, "smart rooms", dimming system and the use of

treated water, are far below the critical values. Hence, Macedonian hotel management lacks EMS, which reduces resource use which cuts down operational costs, becoming increasingly important especially when considering the ever-increasing resource prices (e.g. energy prices) or local shortages of resources (e.g. water). On the other hand, the awareness of guests is constantly rising. Namely, the signs in hotel bathrooms that encourage guests to use their towels more than once to contribute to saving the environment are part of Macedonian hotels' policy. This is known as one of the oldest environmental protection strategies in tourism, initiated for about thirty years now. By saving money due to less dirty laundry to wash, it may contribute to environmental protection.

Section III covered 10 questions in the line of measuring the managerial perception on the benefits and constraints for applying the energy consumption concept ($\alpha=0.63$; average score of the mode = 4 i.e. strong level of influence). As per benefits, the top three items perceived by the managers are: Environmental protection (0.642); Improved image (0.612), and Enhanced competitiveness (0.514). They are assessed as strong determinants for introducing and sustaining energy efficiency practices. The summarized results confirm the findings as in [32-34], that although being aware of the importance of the energy consumption and environmental protection, its stewardship is not a top priority. Namely, the problem is the gap between the environmental awareness and the daily practice of the hotel management.

As per constraints, the top three items being perceived as determinants with medium influence are: Lack of subsidies (0.567); Cost increase (0.511); and Technical limits (0.447). This supports the market postulate for minimizing the costs and maximizing the profit so that the hotel can survive. The blame is put on the restricted financial resources and high operation costs for the limited application of RES. Due to the economic and

socio-political problems, the hotel management is often faced with existential difficulties. Hence, the environmental issues have just recently come to attention. This is very different when compared to the Scandinavian countries where the environmental protection is of high importance and has long received political and financial support at local and national level.

When calculating the nonparametric correlations between hotel types and managerial perception scores (in terms of the components resulting from the CATPCA), we found:

Presence of positive correlation between hotel type and managerial perception; and

Positive and significant correlation between five-star hotels and the environmental practices.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Contemporary tourists expect an environmentally responsible hotel management to meet their environmental needs and expectations. This provokes a profound modification in the hotel industry which has steadily recognized the necessity for becoming greener in order to be well positioned on the competitive tourism market. Consequently, hotels (as leading accommodation facilities) are rapidly becoming environmentally responsible. By developing the idea of having eco-hotels, a "green" brand may be initiated which may position the country positively to be differentiated from competitors in a way that authentically resonates across stakeholders.

This research found that the improved image along with the enhanced competitiveness are strong determinants, provoking better interest than the increase of number of guests. Yet, a large number of surveyed hotel managers lacks measures to reduce the conventional energy use and replace it with RES. Although being fully aware of the importance of the environmental concept, this is not the managerial priority of Macedonian

hotels.

Based on the survey findings, we may conclude that Macedonian hotel management possesses relatively low level of environmental quality, resulting in poor and insufficient base for initiating the creation of a national green tourism brand. Therefore, some recommendations may be followed and allow the creation of more pro-environmental marketing strategies to enhance the country's distinctiveness. The hotel management must take steps to become more environmentally sustainable, even if there are initially costs for the implementation of the changes (technological, behavioral and organizational) in their everyday business, which will lead to cutting the operating costs and resulting in constant improvement of the efficiency. This should be done even if tourists do not demand it as part of their expectations. Additionally, Macedonia can impose frequent penalization of the environmentally unsound concepts practiced in hotels. In the same line, in order to meet tourism sustainable development goals, the hotel management must find a way to avoid the fragmentation driven by the competitiveness, and work along in order to shape policies, not just react to them. This fully fits with the findings of [35-36] which state that the emerging destinations are by far challenged to achieve competitive advantage.

In the line of assisting Macedonia to be a step closer to be identified as "green", some initial actions are recommended. For example: To set targets and benchmarking, as well as to apply for eco certification; To motivate tourism employees, tourists and all other stakeholders in tourism development, through awareness-raising and through incentives for energy reduction;

To support engagement of architects and urbanists in the process of planning, designing and refurbishment of energy efficient architecture; To install energy-efficient devices; To use alternative fuels (e.g., biodiesel) and RES (e.g., wind, photovoltaic, solar, thermal, geothermal,

biomass and waste); To integrate emission management (including supply chain management) and wider environmental management (e.g., waste); To develop an environmental 'Code of ethics', (checklist or criteria that a hotel can provide to its suppliers to help them perform their services to the sector in an environmentally respectful manner; To include energy-efficiency and renewable energy use support programmes in national tourism policies and development plans (Agenda 21, guidelines, regulations, incentives, planning, capacity building, stakeholder cooperation) etc.

The capacity and capability of introducing RES may become an important criterion for the level of the sustainable development of Macedonia, thus contributing to its national green branding. It does not mean just having an attractive logo and a tag line. It means much more and serves for a deeper purpose - to position the country so that it can achieve maximum success in the world system. This requires government actions for unprecedented political commitment and effective policy design and implementation. Only the government knows the full agenda of the country and has the power and resources to lead the country in a branding process. That is the only way Macedonia may establish and maintain competitive and sustainable development if it aspires to be based on tourism. By initiating the "green electricity" production, it may be a step closer to creating preconditions for green tourism development as well. Instead of having tourism and hospitality facilities that are highly dependent on fossil fuels, the inclusion of the renewable energy for energy production may allow improved and protected environment being detected as one of the preconditions for developing green tourism.

The study results are subject to several limitations, so further improvements may be undertaken on theoretical and practical level.

First, the assessment is based on a relatively

small sample of hotels, which may put a doubt on the representation of the findings for the country in general. The investigation may employ multiple models and theories related to the green branding;

Secondly, it applied a relatively small set of indicators to trace how “green” Macedonian hotels are. Additional examinations may be done by introducing more criteria for assessing the application of energy policies and environmental programs;

Thirdly, the selected respondents represent just one interest group, so improvements may include other aspects (e.g. hotel’s employees, hotel’s guests, etc.). By combining and comparing responses, a more comprehensive overview may be accomplished.

Yet, the study may assist in better understanding of the possibilities for branding Macedonia as a destination that provides green tourism, upon which specific communication strategies may be set. Overall, the research generates useful findings and points to valuable directions for further work in the field of tourism branding.

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