MANAGEMENT OF COMMUNICATION AND REPUTATION PROCESSES AS A BASIS FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: In this paper, we attempt to highlight the importance of communication and reputation management as factors for the development of regions. The dynamics of these factors are shown in the conditions of the Information Society and are determined as fundamental in forming public attitudes. Here we present some of the main reasons leading to the need to synthesize positive images in the development of regions and the creation of unique identities.

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In modern-day business and especially in the regional aspects of tourism, communication and, in particular, reputation are the factors whose good governance will help to achieve the goals set. The main problem with these factors is the high speed at which modern society moves. The images created at this speed can lead to an abyss, but also to desired peaks. Parallel to the communication process, with regard to external target groups, it would be beneficial to conduct a successful internal communication targeting residents of a region or tourist destination.

The purpose of such processes is to convince the residents of the region that local authorities are making the necessary efforts to increase the variety of high-quality services. These services will not only benefit the residents but also maintain and improve regional infrastructure, help preserve and renovate regional attractions, maintain park spaces, and both the tangible and intangible cultural assets. An important goal in these processes is to create additional attitudes to increase self-esteem, economic and social enthusiasm among locals. These efforts are part of the information and communication policy for the development of the regions. It is believed that raising the positive awareness of the local population and increasing individual participation in self-management are of great importance to the tourism industry.

As a result of internal communication processes, an additional burden will be attached to the opinion of the permanent residents of the tourist destination. Additionally, this will increase the individual importance of the population in terms of decision-making - within the dynamic coalitions at local, regional or national level; of associations and business representatives, not only as entrepreneurs in the diverse palette of industries but also as investors. Here, it can be added that internal communication actions are one of the possible options for measuring the results of public relations campaigns.

Despite the wide variety of PR techniques and growing public confidence that PR usage is essential, it has to be mentioned that one of the primary goals of public relations is to improve the image and reputation of an institution, individual or product, or in the specific case of a region or its tourist destinations. The common technique, which is used to achieve the main goal, is to *encourage* media

representatives to *generate favourable information* about a specific region and the related products and values.

Despite the widespread conviction for vividness, too often the launch of PR campaigns aimed at improving the image of regions has a relatively high degree of complexity, which is also the result of ambiguous options for measuring the results of these actions.

One of the most commonly used methods for evaluating public relations campaigns is based on the number of media articles or reports covering a specific region before and after the PR campaign conducted. This method also contains some questions because it is not possible to establish with certainty whether the target audience has read or heard about the published articles and broadcasts or how that audience reacted when it received the message. Therefore, it has to be concluded that the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of a PR campaign is of a relatively lower degree in comparison to the evaluation of the outcome of a marketing campaign.

In order to successfully manage the communication processes, it is necessary to answer one sufficiently important question - why is a specific region trying to change its image?

One of the main reasons for the growing popularity of specific regions or their tourist destinations is the ongoing efforts of regional centres to adapt and transform themselves from the image created from the passing Industrial Society to the image created by the emerging Information Society.

Nowadays, in the human consciousness, the industrial regions are primarily associated with the following images:

- Economic issues;
- Pollution;
- Decreasing immigration;
- Social unrest.

On the other hand, the regions of Modern Times call upon the images of:

- Clean streets;
- High technology industry;
- Growing services sector;
- Population with high socio-economic status.

In addition to the ongoing transformations, countries with not so democratic regimes of governance or other social issues, are trying to improve their image to attract both new tourist flows as well as new investors. Though simple, in this paper prerequisites based on which to search for and explain the underlying causes that lead to the need to improve the image of a particular region or tourist destination are defined. Here, a few of these reasons are derived.

Much effort must be put into changing the image of a region, which arises in the minds of people living outside the region. In principle, this is the traditional reason for the launch and promotion of regions or tourist destinations that seek to attract investors, tourists and / or immigrants. At the core of this effort is the encouragement to replace the image which springs to mind when referring to a region. Changing the image also leads to the replacement of existing perceptions. The ultimate goal of these transformations is to create more attractive images for both external and internal target groups.

Promoting creation of post-industrial images. Numerous factors and elements of identity are present in the image of most regions and tourist destinations. All this diversity needs change, corresponding to the public transformation from Industrial to Information Society. To succeed (though incompletely), this endeavour is related to improving the quality of life by *fully clearing and partly removing* the results of industrial development. The visible results in this direction could be the creation of new environmental zones, nature reservation parks, restoration of the virginity of some seaside beaches or sheltered lakes, *awareness of the real feelings* of forests or clean urban parks.

Alongside with recreating these harmonious areas, local authorities can attempt to attract clean modern industries or create and enhance opportunities for cultural events – biennials, festivals, concerts and many other public events. Globally, examples of such events may be found in cities like Syracuse in the state of New York, a large part of the cities in the north of England, the former Glasgow industrial centre in Scotland, and in Bulgaria, an example of this may be one of the passing symbols the metallurgy - Pernik or the chemical and textile industry - Vratsa. My personal experience gives me the opportunity to try to summarize what I have seen in Vratsa (the town where I was born) and Pernik (a town near which I am now living), but also Glasgow, which I have often visited over the past few years. It is true that the Annual Festival "Review of Small Theatre Forms" in Vratsa and the Kuker Festival "Surva" in Pernik have positively influenced their current development, but the change in Glasgow seems much larger.

For two centuries, Glasgow's economy was mostly dependent on shipbuilding, heavy, textile and chemical industries. All of these production spheres are characterized by an economic downturn in recent decades, and they are associated with images of poverty, street crime, systemic alcohol abuse and unacceptable violence. Over the last four decades, however, Glasgow has been transformed into a city that symbolizes the post-industrialism. The creative campaigns carried out in this regard also generate good news related to the city. As a result of these changes, Glasgow was elected European Capital of Culture in 1990, and in 2014 the Transport Museum won the prize for the best museum of Europe. At the same time, there were many prestigious international sports competitions and intense concert activity. It must not be overlooked that the city has established itself as a major modern university centre.

Rehabilitation and reconstruction of already existing as well as construction of new urban areas. Changes in the architectural space of the cities and towns can intensify the transformations in urban environment, creating a new, inherently vital, dynamic and fresh spirited place. Such positive transitions can be promoted both by building new urban spaces and by preserving classical architecture in the restoration of well-known old neighbourhoods. Here, it has to be kept in mind that too often such transformations are complex and costly processes. On the other hand, attracting visitors, investors and new residents of reconstructed areas may not be so easy to achieve from a communication point of view. Certain difficulties are likely to arise not only from the current inhabitants of the settlement but also from the owners of existing business premises who would like to avoid possible changes in the already established environment. The reasons for such an occurrence can be found in the fact that local retailers (for example in the central city areas) often oppose municipal rehabilitation projects. They believe (sometimes reasonably) that changes may negatively affect their business or encourage some of their customers to shop in the big shopping centres, which are located in the suburbs. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the transformations considered are long-term processes, and the purpose of communication and marketing strategies is to convince residents, investors, traders and consumers that changes in a particular settlement or tourist destination will lead to direct and indirect various positive results that need to be supported.

Raising international competitiveness and improving national status. The diversity of regions and specific destinations offered on the dynamic tourism market require continuous re-engineering of their images. These actions are a mandatory element among the prerequisites for success on both the international and the national stage. The examples in this regard are multidimensional - for example, the rivalry of hosting prestigious exhibitions or major sporting events which attract large capital investment and increase tourist visits. However, it should not be forgotten that competition can also create co-operation. Synergy between regions can not only improve their co-operation, but can also lead to the creation of new attractions. This will definitely improve the current status of tourist destinations.

Modern scholars and reputable professionals apply different methods to determine the status of a tourist destination or region. If the international status of a region is examined, it will be noticed that it is determined by its financial importance, its geographic location, the number and quality of international

companies and organizations (having offices in the region), the speed of business growth, of the population, of its culture, of the available telecommunication opportunity, of transport connections, of the quality of life in the region, and last but not least of its international importance and its attractiveness as an immigration destination. This once again shows how important it is to manage reputation in the Information Society.

Marketing processes encouraging changes in cities and towns.

Why do the images of the regions or tourist destinations change over time? What are the events that can lead to changes (regardless of their direction) in terms of common perceptions of a given place?

In attempt to summarize the prerequisites for changing the image and reputation of a region or tourist destination without making specific references in the scientific literature, the following groups are identified:

- Changes in the politics area - for example, changing the political system or changing major societal priorities;
- Changes in the manufacturing technology - such as switching from the heavy industry to information technology;
- Changes in transport technologies and infrastructure – for instance, construction or renewal of railways, seaports and motorways;
- Changes in consumer behaviour - for example, increasing the interest in ecological, cultural, adventure or other specific types of tourism.

Implementing an optimally functioning legal framework and, as a consequence, well-functioning market mechanisms.

The creation of an institutional and legislative framework, administrative and program resources, effective financial management of the funds as well as creating competitive projects which are a major tool for the development of the regional economy. Building efficient market mechanisms is a prerequisite for creating incentives for investors and improving competitiveness. As a result, the motivation of the regional economy and its efficient management will be increased. For market mechanisms to function well, the focus should be on achieving the most common benefit (Stefanova, S., 2011).

As a result of these changes, some regions can quickly become extremely attractive to a large number of people who have tended to ignore them before the changed. Here, it is necessary to clarify that not always tourist destinations and regions benefit from the changes that take place. Some locations sometimes show a significant reputation reduction, thus their ability to attract a variety of resources is diminished. Such a downturn can lead to economic recession, negative migration, rising unemployment and an increase in crime.

The positive side of change in status can be summarized as:

- Increasing the modernizations and attractiveness of the region;
- The introduction of new industries;
- Creating new tourist attractions;
- Growth in the search for real estate;
- Overall improvement of life.

The conclusion that can be made based on these positive changes is that it is always better to control the circumstances instead of letting the circumstances control us. People who are authorized to make decisions locally need to constantly monitor the reputation status of their region and maintain their positive characteristics.

Branding and reputation problems in a specific region can hardly be resolved easily and in one go, but where a great deal is done, a brighter future can be seen. Too many regions around the world are

offering similar (even sometimes identical) tourist products. In order to survive in the conditions of increasing competition, tourist destinations should make the necessary efforts and come closer to creating their own unique identity. This identity and the reputation of the destination are a combination of features, functionality, and added value creation.

With the development of the Information Society, the reputation and positioning of a region is becoming increasingly important, sometimes even greater than its actual characteristics. Today, reputation management and branding are one step ahead of traditional marketing, creating additional benefits for regional development.

To conclude, it is precisely the unity in the diversity of features that emphasizes the uniqueness of regions and tourist destinations, while at the same time satisfying the specific needs of the target audience.

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