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THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE TOURISM IMAGE OF UKRAINE AS A PREFERRED DESTINATION FOR FOREIGN VISITORS

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Tourism is a global economic and social phenomenon, which has a considerable role to play in delivering sustainable development in many countries. Ukraine which has a profitable geopolitical position and tremendous tourism resources has not become a fully-fledged participant at the global tourist arena yet. Prices charged at the most popular resorts and tourist centers all over the country are usually much higher than the service quality offered. For this reason, domestic tourists are increasingly choosing to travel abroad for the same money, while enjoying a better quality vacation. But today we observe the growth of the international community's interests in this middle-income country with a wealth of natural resources and a quite developed industrial base.

In the recent years, the development of tourism industry in Ukraine is characterized by territorial unevenness, caused by a wide range of natural, cultural and social objective factors, which include as follows: historical and cultural heritage, attractive climatic conditions, the level of income of region's habitants and their possibility to spend money on recreation. Ukraine is ranked 81st out of 188 countries according to the Human Development Index 2014, trailing other countries in the region [1]. The direct contribution of Ukrainian Travel & Tourism to GDP was UAH 28,4 bn (1,9 % of total GDP) in 2014 and is expected to grow to UAH 42,0 bn (1,8 % of total GDP) in 2025 [2].

Highly uncertain and dynamic market environment, the seasonal volatility of demand for tourism services, as well as the lack of financial resources and the poor quality of the tourism product are the main sources of increased regulatory complexity of tourism business. In this regard, during the last decade the Ukrainian government got involved in the development of the tourism image of the country abroad, especially through tourism promotion campaigns. Nevertheless, each attempt made during the last 10 years, was associated with ignoring the real problems like the lack of coordination and coherence of the policies in the field of tourism promotion or poor tourist infrastructure.

“The 2014 proved to be a seriously damaging period for the Ukrainian tourism industry, with inbound arrivals and occupancy rates falling to unseen depths. While 2015 so far has been slightly better, it is unlikely that the industry will recover to pre-crisis levels by 2020. Ultimately the country represents a high risk for investors than other countries in the region” [3]. Despite the diverse problems facing tourism in Ukraine there is a wide scope for the development of a sustainable tourism industry. In general, this calls for the adoption of articulate

long-term strategies as well as medium to short-term plans and programs at the national level to improve the existing tourist image of Ukraine.

Our country is considered to be one of the greatest undiscovered gems among other countries, rich in culture, ancient history and natural resources. However, it seems few know much about this country and the sad fact is that the tourist image of Ukraine has suffered in the press in the recent years. For many people positive points, related to this tourist destination, remain buried under other preconceived notions as poor tourism infrastructure and the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant which took place 30 years ago. Nevertheless, there are still many places, attractive for domestic and foreign visitors, where everyone can find the unique combination of virgin nature and animal life (there is a huge amount of national parks, biosphere and nature reserves in Ukraine), feel the spirit of the glorious battles and fearless warriors of the defensive fortresses (located in Kamyanets-Podilsky, Lutsk, Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky, Uzhgorod, Mukacheve), and even touch harmony of nature and design at one of the most beautiful places, created by human hands. All these places have a lot to offer that will keep tourists excited and busy for a long period of time.

It is evident that one of the key advantages that Ukraine has over its neighbors, is that traditional human lifestyles continue to be preserved in different regions. On the villages of the Carpathian National Park traditional dress and farming practices continue to be maintained. Western travelers express an ongoing interest in the artisan studio tours in the Western region of Ukraine. Local wood and woven crafts still remain extremely popular within domestic tourists and members of the Ukrainian diaspora.

Within the present study we understand that the tourist potential of Ukraine is really great, particularly if we add to the existing list of tourist-attractive features certain favorable opportunities for rural tourism development, health improvement centers for the elderly, hunting, ecological tourism etc. Moreover, there are many varieties of tourism in Ukraine: cultural and educational (in the most famous historical places); health-improving and sports (at the coastal areas, in the green forest and picturesque mountain regions), ecological and green (on landscape areas), rural and agro tourism (in rural areas).

“It is clear that Ukraine has the potential to rebrand itself as an affluent, educated and trade-rich country – what the country needs is at least one specific existing (or rapidly emerging) success story, the requisite infrastructure (tourism, highways, health care, etc) and the full exercise of human intellectual potential and talent. PR and branding agencies can only go so far, for what they have failed to do to date is tap into the country’s true potential and work with its image on a level that is sustainable and, most importantly, identifiable to both Ukrainians and international audiences” [5].

The country has a great opportunity to build a new model of cooperation between the government and entrepreneurs. First of all, it is necessary to

establish a governing state body capable of independent decision-making at all levels, having an adequate budget. This structure should be embodied in the lives of three strategic objectives of the tourism industry, which can be determined as follows: streamlining legislation for tourism, e-commerce and data protection in accordance with EU requirements; measures to improve the investment climate and better development of small and medium enterprises in the tourism and hospitality through concessional lending and other bonuses for companies, which create new jobs; conducting services categorization of tourist activities (not only accommodation facilities, but also transportation companies, restaurants, tour operators, etc.), which will enable a clear structuring of the market and will facilitate fair competition and improve the customer service of the tourist product [6].

On the basis of the above observations, it can be concluded that economical and political instability and the lack of policy and planning, are the major problems in the tourism development in Ukraine. That is why national tourism developers should make every effort on increase of resources use efficiency, increase of promotion and advertisement and international experience implementation. Investments in the tourism industry of the country will attract more foreign visitors and, therefore, increase the amount of services provided. The further development of tourism industry in Ukraine as any other field of activity requires an appropriate institutional framework, a proper tourist destination management. This is quite impossible without an effective strategy, able to flourish and expand tourism in Ukraine.

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