

IDENTITY AS A STRATEGY FOR AFFIRMATION OF THE TOURIST PRODUCT OF PRESPI

Ph.D. Lidija Simončeska,

Full Professor, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality – Ohrid
e-mail: lsimonce@yahoo.com

Ph.D. Toni Cvetanoski

Enterprise Support Agency-Ohrid
e-mail: tcvetanoski21@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The complexity of tourism business that is the result of changes in requirements, tastes and expectations of a modern tourists contributes for global development of tourism market to and to be characterized by extreme competitiveness. In such conditions, tourist destinations management are focusing on the choice of strategies for achieving competitive advantage in the market. The strategy of creating tourist product identity is one of the strategies that today attracts more interest.

The purpose of identity is successfully position of the image of tourist enterprises and tourist destinations services in the minds of existing and potential tourists as target groups. Any tourism destination has its own identity which recognize and differentiate it from competitors.

Potential tourists differently perceive the identity of the tourist product of a resort. Destination with a strong positive identity is successfully positioned on the market.

Based on this, the aim of the paper is to determine how recognizable the Prespa region is as a tourist destination on the market and what is its image among tourists. Given the anthropogenic and cultural values as well as the natural wealth of this region, promotional activities are a key tool with which these values will be positively perceived by potential tourists.

Keywords: identity, image, tourist destination, Prespa region, promotion

Introduction

The realization of tourist activity is influenced by the factors from all spheres of national and international environment. Creation of the tourist offer depends on the movement of factors of the environment within countries and regions where tourism is develop, like the relations that exist in the market, the country's culture, natural and anthropological values, the judicature, political and social structure, and environmental requirements. Tourism today is faced with the challenges of the contemporary international environment, and among them especially with globalization and its impacts. In this context, economic development and changes in demographic, cultural and judicature -political sphere are changing the lifestyle of the people, they accelerate the lifestyle and encourage journeys which are becoming more frequent and more massive. These changes have an effect on structure and quantity of tourism demand and supply, making the tourism market extremely competitive. In such circumstances, holders of tourist offer are faced with strong and tough competition and with the problems of their placement on this market. They feel the necessity to think strategically about the opportunities which can be exploited for successful placement of their offer on the international tourist market. Before them is a responsibility to establish and maintain a system of efficient utilization of tourism potential and introducing standards for quality of tourist services.

Parallel with the development of tourism supply and utilization of natural and anthropogenic values of the destination, the holders of tourist services are facing with the problem of placing the tourism services on the market. Due to the specificity of the tourist product, especially the possibility of its substitution, the attention of the holders of tourist offers should be directed towards creating a recognition of their product on the market. This can be achieved by undertaking

activities to establish the identity of supply and building international image of an attractive tourist destination.

The identity of the tourist product is one of the few areas where holders of travel services can achieve competitive advantage. Therefore, creating the identity of the tourist offer today is very important strategy for market positioning of tourism services and achieving their greater competitiveness in the international tourist market.

The concept of identity, brand and image of the tourist destination

Identity is a category that in business theory shows how a company and its products are perceived by its stakeholders. It is explained as "a way in which an enterprise is recognized and distinguished from others and is achieved by a specially designed structure that includes all the necessary elements that will create physical differentiation."¹

Identity is the visible element of a product expressed through the way the product is presented to the public in order to differentiate it from the competition, what consumers, present and future, can see.

Identity has a special meaning in tourism for successful placement of the tourist product. Starting from the character and specificity of the tourist product, it can be said that the identity in tourism means creating the identity of a tourist offer to the individual carriers of tourist services. Each tourist enterprise and tourist region has its own identity based on which it is recognized and differentiated from competitors. The identity of the tourist enterprises and their offer largely form the identity of the tourist destination.²

However, each tourist destination has other characteristic values that need to be valued for tourism. Given that a number of tourist destinations, especially in the region, have similar key features, there is a need to create a unique and recognizable identity of the destination that will provide diversity in relation to competitors. Hence, identity unites all the resources of the destination such as

natural resources, attractions, culture, architecture, history, events, legends and myths, events and manifestations, gastronomy, local products and services. This set of material and cultural values creates a perception of the destination as a whole.

The identity of the tourist destination is not equally perceived by existing and potential tourists. The same identity can be perceived differently by two or more people. What kind of mental reflection this destination product will cause among tourists, depends on two elements: -their mental characteristics, their mood and experience, -how identity is based on truth and authenticity.

Therefore, the creation of the destination's identity begins with potential tourists and is the result of constant communication with them, because it means knowing tourists - their lifestyle, age, nationality, education, occupation, decision-making, behavior, lifestyle, location, hobby, socio-economic situation, what tourists demand from the tourist offer, whether meeting their needs or prestige, where they buy the tourist arrangement and what they expect from it.

The identity of the tourist offer is an important factor for achieving a competitive advantage and successful market positioning. It can be said that the goal of identity is to position a positive image of the product in the consciousness of tourists because a positive perception costs millions of dollars for the achieved values and achieved performance. Products with a strong positive identity generally have higher prices and much better financial results than their competitors.³ Creating a distinctive, solid identity presupposes the creation of a brand at the tourist destination. The destination brand includes the authentic natural and anthropogenic values of the destination as well as defined visual elements such as name, logo and slogan of the destination. In branding a tourist destination, the name exists and expresses the geographical name of the destination and the slogan must be adapted to it.⁴ However, the holders of the destination product must have in mind something specific of the brand, and that is that the brand means promise. The promise is not for tourists to physically find the destination, but to experience it and enjoy its attributes and

values, exceeding their expectations. Branding a tourist destination refers to the perception, expectations, association and opinion that tourists, existing and potential, have about the destination. No matter how famous it is, how rich and unique its culture and its natural beauties are, the most important measure of the brand of the destination is how the visitors really experience the destination, how they are treated and how they felt during their stay.⁵ The success of the destination brand is perceived through the tourist experience and the satisfaction of the guests, by fulfilling their requirements, which is why they are emotionally attached to the destination.

The identity and branding of the tourist destination should create a positive image for the destination and its offer. The image is a psychological construction of established views, opinions, ideas, representations, prejudices and gained experiences of tourists about the hotel, its services and the tourist destination in general. It is a product of the perceptual set that occurs in them under the influence of all external stimuli to which the tourist and the potential tourist are exposed. Because the tourist product on the market cannot be presented as a sample, and potential tourists cannot see and try it before deciding to buy it, promotional activities, through more funds and media, are the only way to present the tourist arrangement to the potential guests. Their main goal is, by presenting the offer, to build a positive image for the hotel product, hotels as entities and for the destination with all its values. The untouchability of the tourist product makes the image the only means that the potential tourist has in comparing and choosing a potential destination.⁶

It can be said that the tourist market sells a tourist image as a substitute for the original tourist product. Hence, the image in tourism should be understood as "a set of ideas and symbols that the tourist experiences, consciously or unconsciously, about a particular product"⁷, which is promoted by hotels and other bidders at the level of the tourist destination.

Tourist potentials of Prespa

The Prespa region is located in the southwestern part of Northern Macedonia and is rich in natural, cultural and anthropogenic values. It can be said that, with its treasures, this area has a unique character and strong potential to be developed into a recognizable tourist destination with a strong tourist identity.

The region is surrounded by three mountains Bigla, Baba, known for its peak Pelister, and mountain Galicica, both of which are national parks. Among them is Lake Prespa, which with its altitude of 853 m is one of the highest tectonic lakes in the Balkans and plays a major role in the development of tourism.

The region is famous for its natural hydrographic motifs and authentic flora and fauna. Characteristic for this region are the two glacial lakes, Pelister Eyes - Great and Small Lake, also known as "Upper Eyes", and perhaps the most valuable is the molybdenum - "autochthonous type of five-pointed pine with tertiary age that grows only in a few mountains on the Balkan Peninsula."⁸

From the western part of the region, 1644 species of butterflies are present in the Galicica National Park, which is a huge concentration for such a small space. According to the numerous representations of 30 species of amphibians and reptiles, Galicica National Park is approximately at the same level as the representation of herpetophagus on the whole territory of some of the Central European countries (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, etc.). The bird class of Galicica is represented by 266 species, which represents 84% of the total Macedonian ornithofauna, while the number of mammals - 51 species, represents 62% of the total fauna of mammals in Macedonia.

In addition to the natural resources of Galicica, there are a number of historical monuments that are divided into several groups of archeological sites, churches, monasteries, cave churches and monuments. Some of the religious monuments date back to the Byzantine period, although not all of them have been protected.

Prespa is a huge archeological and historical treasury. Spreading on the section that once connected the West and the Orient, the Via

Egnatia Road, the Corsican and Epirus Roads passed through it, leaving material traces.

Prespa is associated with the most important figures of the Middle Ages - the legend of the kings Justin and Justinian, King David and King Samuel, from Prespa. St. Clement and St. Naum began to spread literacy.⁹

Here is the first capital of Tsar Samuel. After the death of St. Clement in 916, "the church began to function as a real independent church with its own head and the Holy Synod, based in Prespa, in the then capital of King Samuel"¹⁰.

Many cultural monuments testify to the culture of this region, but churches and monasteries are one of the most important identities for Resen and the surrounding area. The most popular among them is the monastery in Kurbinovo, built in 1191.

Prespa is known for its pottery, which was developed a long time ago and is still present through the Resen's Colonial *Prespa's Ceramic Colony*, established in 1970 and included in the *UNESCO International Academy of Ceramics*. Every year, during the summer, many world-famous potters take part in it.

Resen, as the main settlement in the region, can locate its identity in the Neolithic era. It features a variety of buildings that have been the result of the region's various cultures throughout history. The building, such as the Nayazi-Bey Palace, now used as a House of Culture, stands out. This city also has significant historical recognition. Here, among other things, the Young Turk Revolution begins, and a number of historical and cultural figures are associated with it.

Of course, the Prespa Lake is perhaps the most important for the development of tourism. The region is protected and included in the European Green Belt and the World Network of Biosphere Reserves under the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program. This is due to the fact that there are about "200 species of birds in this region, 104 of which are waterfowl. Of that number, 62 species are listed as protected under the Bern Convention, three of which are on the European Red List of Globally Endangered Species."¹¹ Lake Prespa is

characterized by a beautiful coastline, bays, great clear water, pure nature. It stands out from the others on the Balkan Peninsula with its islands.

The island named Golem Grad, has great zoological importance because it nests on many species of birds, including some very rare and endangered species such as the white heron, the pelican, the large cormorant, and the large coastal swallow. The island is also characterized by its centuries-old spruces, trees, and an abundance of endemic animals. When the water level drops, the old settlements of the 11th and 12th centuries become visible.¹²

The values available to Prespa as a destination provide opportunities for the development of several types of tourism, as follows:¹³

Table 1. Potential types of tourism in Prespa

Pelister National Park	Winter tourism, mountain tourism
Churches and Monasteries, other religious buildings	Religious tourism
Culture and associations	Cultural events
Flora and Fauna	Eco tourism, Hunting and Fishing
Lake	Summer tourism, Health tourism
Archaeological and historical values	Conferences, Meetings

Source: analysis based on the Tourism Development Strategy in the municipality of Resen for 2020-2021

Given the fact that the establishment of the tourist product includes accommodation facilities and other business entities that offer food and beverage services, the official data of the Statistical Office indicate the following situation in the Prespa region as part of the Pelagonija planning region:¹⁴

Table 2. Active business units in catering in the period 2014-2018.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	Business units	business units	business units	business units	Business units
Pelagonija region	124	130	150	158	161
Resen	52	49	47	45	44

Source: <http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/>

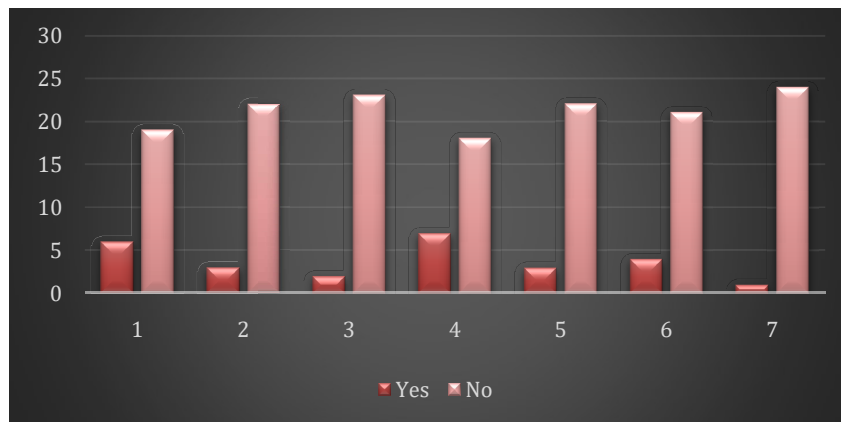
The analysis of the data indicates that the accommodation facilities as well as other business entities that offer food and beverage services in Resen are a very important part of the business units in the catering of the Pelagonija region. However, while the number of business entities in the Pelagonija region is constantly increasing during the analyzed period, in Prespa their number is decreasing.

Level of recognition and image of the tourist product of Prespa

In order to see the identity and image of Prespa as a tourist destination, a survey of 75 domestic and 25 foreign visitors was conducted. The research was conducted with two types of questions. The first type examined the knowledge of the Prespa identity through the answers to the following questions:

1. Do you know where King Samuel's first capital is located?
2. Do you know where the Young Turk Revolution started?
3. Have you heard of a city called Little Paris?
4. Do you know where you can find pelicans in Macedonia?
5. Do you know where St. Clement's teaching begins?
6. Have you ever heard of the island of Big City?
7. Do you know where a pottery colony is held in Macedonia?

The answers obtained are presented in the following graph:



Graph1. Recognition of Prespa

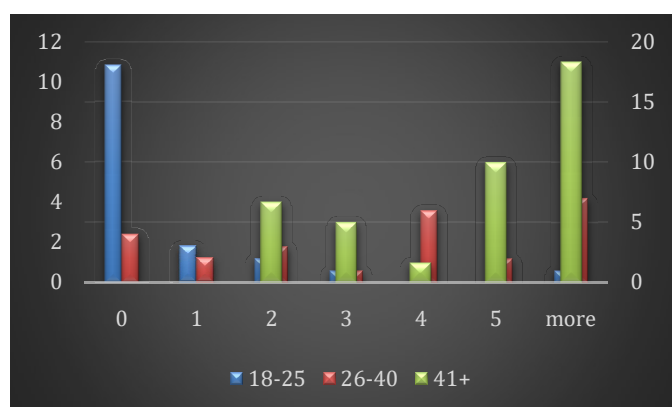
Source: own research

From the presented graph it can be concluded that the Prespa identity is little known to both foreign and domestic tourists.

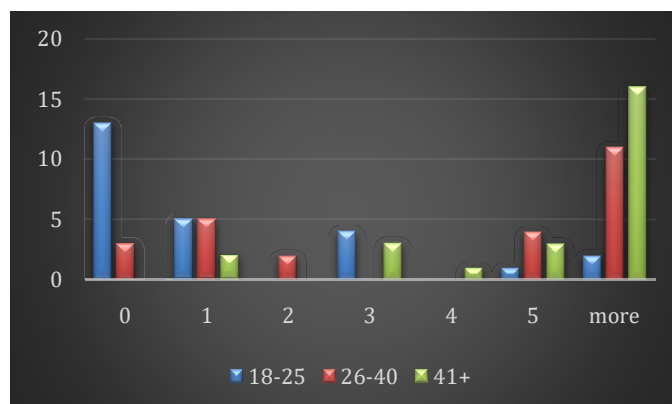
In order to determine the image of the Prespa region, domestic and foreign respondents were surveyed with the following questions:

1. How many times have you been to Resen and the surrounding villages?
0,1,2,3,4,5, more
2. How many times have you visited Lake Prespa?
0,1,2,3,4,5, more
3. How many times have you recommended Prespa to others?
0,1,2,3,4,5, more
4. How many times have you visited Baba Planina, Pelister or Galicica by Prespa side?
0,1,2,3,4,5, more
5. How many times have you found Prespa in advertising tools and media?
0,1,2,3,4,5, more
6. How would you rate Prespa?
0,1,2,3,4,5, I don't know

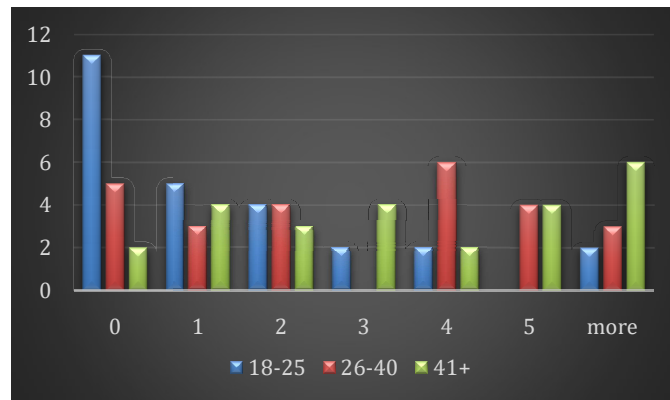
The examination of domestic tourists started from their age, so that they were grouped into three equal groups, each of 25 respondents: from 18 to 25 years; from 26 to 40 years and more than 40 years. The results of the obtained answers are presented in the following graphs:



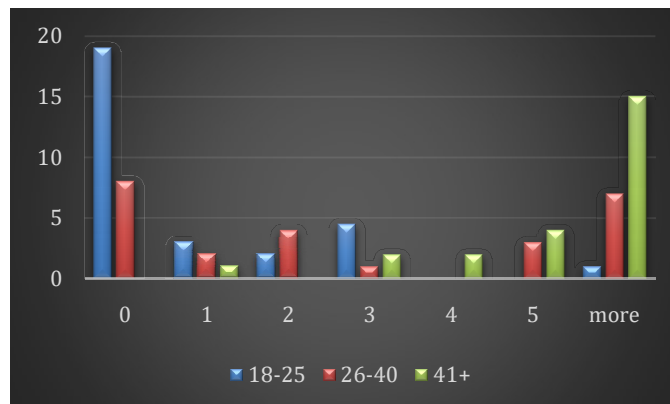
Graph 2: How many times have you been to Resen and the surrounding villages?



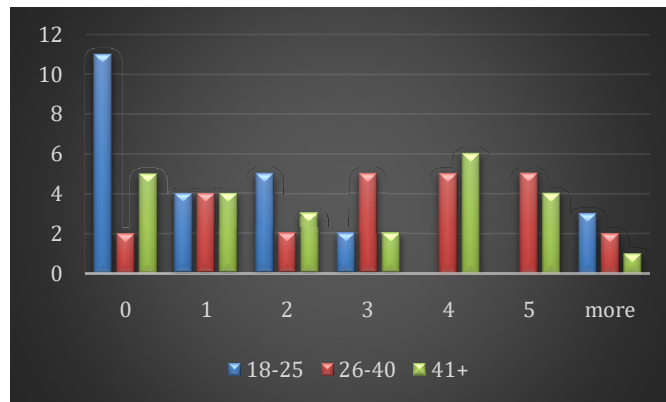
Graph 3: How many times have you visited Lake Prespa?



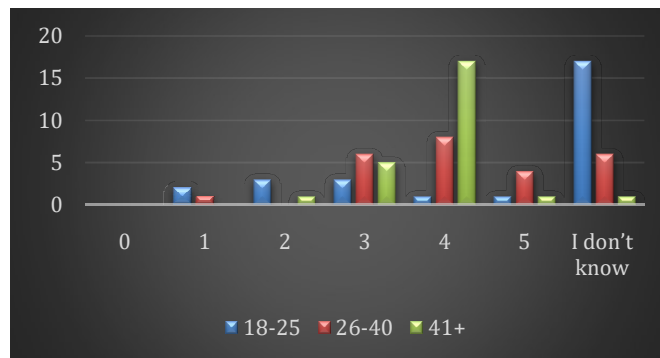
Graph 4: How many times have you recommended Prespa to others?



Graph 5: How many times have you visited Baba Planina, Pelister or Galicica by Prespa side?



Graph 6: How many times have you found Prespa in advertising tools and media?



Graph 7: How would you rate Prespa?

From the graphs it can be concluded that the knowledge, interest and image that has been formed for this region is at a very low level, especially among the younger generation. The presentation of the answers given in Graph 6 indicates that most of the respondents did not meet or very little met with the promotion of Prespa and its values through the media.

As for their recommendation of tourist services in this region, Graph 4, young people up to 25 years of age present very little of their positive experience to others. Older respondents are more likely to promote Prespa to other potential visitors.

Категория	Число респондентов
0-2	19
3	5
4+	1
0-2	15
3	6
4+	4
0-2	7
3	5
4+	13
0-2	11
3	5
4+	9
0-2	18
3	3
4+	4
0-2	3
3	9
4+	11
незнам	2

The analysis shows that the number of foreign visitors who have visited the places, sights and natural values of Prespa at least once is significant. Most of them have a positive image of them and will recommend them to their friends. From the received answers it can be noticed that most of the respondents have met very little with the promotion of this region.

Thus, in 2017, domestic tourists who visited Prespa are only 23% of visitors to the Pelagonija planning region and foreign tourists represent only 3.2% of foreign visitors. In 2018, the percentage of domestic tourists in Prespa is 18% and foreign 3.4% of tourists in the Pelagonija planning region.

The formation of the identity of each destination, as well as the Prespa region is determined by the location and appearance of hotels and restaurants, the quality of services, natural, cultural and other

attractions in it, the way it communicates with the public, the structure of guests, price and other factors in the region. Therefore, some of the activities that need to be undertaken to strengthen its recognition are the construction of new or modernization of existing accommodation facilities based on the existing, authentic environment. Branding the existing style of buildings with modern implications of sustainable technology would preserve the structure and identity of this region. Identity and image are also formed under the influence of the promotional forms through which the region communicates with potential tourists.

Promotion, through its appearance forms, is the only instrument that can present the tourist product to tourists. In this way, the promotional activities make the tourist offer visible to potential tourists and bring them closer to the content of that offer regardless of where they are and how far they are from the tourist place. They play the role of "bringing" the tourist product closer to the potential tourists. In such circumstances, only an offer with a prominent identity will be accepted and successfully positioned on the market because the identity aims to create a positive image. Therefore, the success of Prespa to become an attractive destination in the tourist market depends on the types and content of promotional forms used.

The promotion of Prespa is taking place on several levels.

Accommodation facilities, as basic receptive factors, promote their offer independently using the usual internet platforms used for tourist promotion Booking.com (Booking.com), AirBnB (AirBnB), Trip Advisor (Trip Advisor) as well as through its official website.

As a destination, Prespa is promoted in the content of the tourist offer of the Pelagonija planning region through:

- the national internet portal for tourism of the Republic of Northern Macedonia (exploringmacedonia.com),
- the official website of this region (www.pelagonijaregion.mk) as well as through the official website of the Center for Development of the Pelagonija Planning Region (www.investinpelagoniaregion.mk) which has the character of a body that unites them and should support the development of municipalities in the region.
- the advertising material and published publications of the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism in RNM, presented in printed

form, through the official website of the Agency (<http://tourismmacedonia.gov.mk/>) as well as at organized fair events. From the obtained answers of the respondents as well as from the analysis of the promotional funds at all levels, it can be concluded that the tourist values of the Prespa region are very little represented. In order to form a strong identity and a positive image of Prespa, it is necessary to expand the content of promoted values by emphasizing all the authentic motives, the rich cultural heritage of this region and the tourist opportunities it offers. In addition to the need to strengthen the promotion at the national level, the local self-government of the municipality of Resen should conceptualize and conduct aggressive propaganda in order to brand the tourist offer of the region. In this context, there is a need to establish an information center that will intensively communicate with potential tourists and will inform them with the values of Prespa.

Conclusion

Forming a strong identity and branding the Prespa Region is a strategic tool in shaping a positive image of the region. The image of this region is crucial for achieving its competitiveness in the tourist market because the tourist market sells a tourist mix as a substitute for the original tourist product. The analysis of the recognizability of the Prespa region among potential tourists points to the conclusion that this tourist region has not formed a strong identity and image. To improve the image in the eyes of the tourist public, the efforts of tourism service providers should focus on improving the identity that they brand.

Strengthening the region's image through its identity involves several activities:

- Improving material basis for creating strong identity.
- Organizing and implementing a strong promotional activity of all holders of tourism services in the region, local self-government bodies of the municipality of Resen, holders of promotional activities in the Pelagonija region, which includes Prespa.
- Organizing information centers and strengthening the education of the staff in them.

REFERENCE:

¹Jeffkins, F Advertising, M&E, 1996, pp.268

²Симонческа, Л., Промотивни активности во туризмот, Факултет за туризам и угостителство, Охрид, , 2015, pp.111

³ Clive Reading, Strategic business planning, A dynamic system for improving performance & competitive advantage, KoganPage, London, 2002, str.109

⁴Gregorić, M. i Lj. Skendrović, Uloga poduzetništva i cjeloživotnog učenja u brendiranju turističke destinacije, Visoka škola za ekonomiju, poduzetništvo i upravljanje, „Nikola Šubić Zrinski“, Zagreb, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, str. 46

⁵ Rogers, T., Conferences and conventions, A global industry, Devon, United Kingdom, ButterworthHeinemann, 2008, str. 132

⁶ O' Leary S., Deegan J.: Ireland's image as a tourism destination in France: attribute importance and performance, Journal of Travel Research, V. 43, No. 3, 2005, pp. 247-256

⁷Pritchard, A., Tourism promotion and power: creating images, creating identities, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 2000, стр 79

⁸ Wikipedia - Prespa, Baba Planina, Galicica

⁹ Concept note for border cluster "Everything for Prespa"

¹⁰ Wikipedia - The Church of Samuel's Kingdom

¹¹ Wikipedia - Lake Prespa

¹² Ibid

¹³ Tourism Development Strategy in the municipality of Resen for 2020-2021

¹⁴: <http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/>