



Marina Y. Sheresheva, Anna N. Polukhina & Matvey S. Oborin

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## RESEARCH NOTE

# Marketing issues of sustainable tourism development in Russian regions

**Marina Y. Sheresheva**  
Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

**Anna N. Polukhina**  
Volga State University of Technology, Russia

**Matvey S. Oborin**  
The Perm Institute of Plekhanov Russian University, Russia

**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper aims to provide a 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. **Methods:** A questionnaire survey of 213 locals was performed, to analyze the prospects of positioning the Mari El Republic as an attractive tourism destination for rural and ethno-tourism, taking in account the unique character of the Mari settlements in terms of history, culture, and ecology, as well as the need to preserve local traditions and culture.

**Results:** The main obstacle for sustainable tourism development in the Russian regions examined, is the lack of prominence and absence of right market positioning. For the 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.

**Implications:** Research presented here sheds light on the Russian tourism market diversity, as well as on uniqueness of small Russian towns and villages as attractive destinations for cultural, heritage, and ecology tourism. It also underlines the need to understand socio-cultural aspects of tourism destinations to ensure positive impact on local communities that are the most important stakeholders in destination marketing.

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

**JEL Classification:** M31, Q01, Z32

**Biographical note:** Marina Y. Sheresheva is Professor at the Department of Applied Institutional Economics, Director of the Research Center for Network Economy, Head of the Laboratory for Institutional Analysis, Faculty of Economics, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia. Anna N. Polukhina is Professor at the Service and Tourism Department, Volga State University of Technology, Yoshkar-Ola, Russia. Matvey S. Oborin is Professor at the Department of Economic Analysis and Statistics, the Perm Institute of Plekhanov Russian University of Economic, as well as the Perm State National Research University, Faculty of Economics. Corresponding author: Marina Y. Sheresheva (m.sheresheva@gmail.com)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, tourism and hospitality sector has become a key driver for socio-economic progress (UNWTO, 2018). Tourism makes a significant contribution to the development of the global economy (Mowforth, Munt, 2015), becoming a source of additional income for many cities and regions, and in some cases acting as the only catalyst for the development (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2009, 2017; Amerta et al., 2018).

Tourism can be the basis of the socio-economic revival of rural areas, leveling the problems caused by the decline in agricultural production (Christou et al., 2004; Reeder, Brown 2005; Sharpley; 2007; Winkler et al., 2007; McGregor, Thompson-Fawcett, 2011).

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; Chkalova et al., 2019). The results of all 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. 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.

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## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 1.1 Sustainable tourism

The term sustainable tourism emerged in the late 1980s (Hall, 2011) and has become firmly established in tourism research (Dermetzopoulos et al., 2009; Budeanu et al., 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).

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; Blancas et al., 2018), 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; Filimonau, 2018; Jain, Thakkar, 2019). 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; Gretzel et al., 2012; Chon et al., 2013; Karnaukhova, 2013; Ajagunna, 2014; de la Maza, 2016; Muresan et al., 2016; Polukhina, 2016).

The concept of sustainable development clearly postulates that the most important goal of tourism development should be improving the quality of life of residents using economic, social, cultural, recreational and other advantages of tourism. Properly designed tourism development strategy can significantly affect the lives of local communities, help to stabilize and develop them if they are in decline (Andereck et al., 2005).

At the same time, "sustainable development and its derivative, sustainable tourism, have both conceptual and practical deficiencies that have frustrated their application" (Tao, Wall, 2009: 90). One of the most important issues is the balance of interests and building stimuli for consistent participation of all stakeholders (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, 2017; Lalicic, Önder, 2018). "Stakeholder participation and empowerment are important elements for supporting change in current practices" (Budeanu et al., 2016: 4) and for

enhancing the ability of local destination communities to respond to both planned changes and unpredictable circumstances (Moscardo, Murphy, 2015).

Therefore, an attempt to use tourism as a panacea, without calculating the ratio of benefits and costs, can lead to serious, sometimes irreversible consequences. There is a lot of evidence that sudden fluctuations in the population caused by an uncontrolled influx of tourists transform the way of life and damage the environment and material cultural heritage (Coccosis, 2016). As Budeanu et al. (2016) underline, disagreements in tourism communities about land use or resource distributions can escalate into conflicts. So, one should be aware that local community involvement is crucial for sustainable tourism.

### 1.2 Culture as a special environment and catalyst for tourism development

There is a broad understanding that culture serves as a special "breeding ground" for the development of tourism. Cultural diversity, along with increased opportunities for movement around the globe, boosted the rapid development of the tourism sector (Timothy, Nyaupane, 2009; Nella & Christou, 2016). This is due to that culture, on the one hand, preserves memory and respect for the past, on the other hand, is extremely sensitive to new ideas and views. Therefore, cultural events become catalysts for the development of new types of tourism and tourist destinations (Nella & Christou, 2014; Fundeanu, 2015).

Culture as a special environment needs the help of a special infrastructure supported by many actors, namely individual creative personalities, enterprises and organizations that are enthusiastic in preserving different kinds of cultural attractions and opening new paths for cultural projects (Kockel, 2019).

As to challenges that are crucial for tourism destinations development in connection with cultural aspects, many authors point out that there is a need to pay great attention to the interests of local ethnic communities that are among the best place ambassadors, on the one hand, and usually tend to resist change any change, on the other hand. As Karnaukhova (2013) underlines, established ethnic communities' communicative style strategically provides support or opposition to the local administration initiatives. Therefore, there is a need to preserve and defend local traditions while developing tourism (Christou, 2007; Li & Hunter, 2015; Muresan et al., 2016; Sheresheva, Polukhina, 2016).

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## 3 RUSSIAN TOURISM MARKET

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There are potential competitive advantages that 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 2742 museums, 649 theatres, 98.7 thousand cultural heritage sites historic and 59,4 thousand archaeological heritage sites (Rosstat, 2018), including "hidden gems" of small towns with their ancient churches, original local museums, and unique sights. Moreover, 29 cultural and natural objects from different regions of Russia

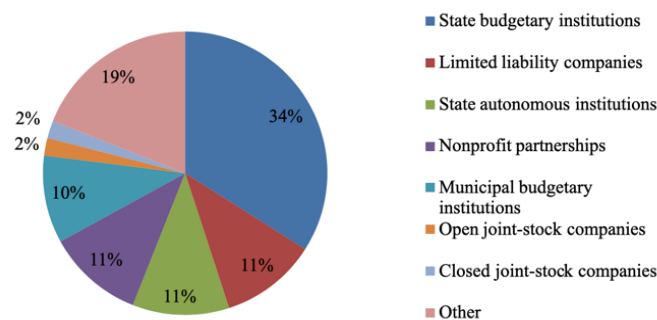
are included in the World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2019). Russia has a huge potential for active tourism (skiing, water tourism, hiking, mountaineering, cycling, sailing, equestrian tourism). There are 35 national parks and 84 forest reserves in Russia situated in different climatic zones, with extremely diverse landscapes, rivers, lakes, mountains, etc. that offer outstanding opportunities for ecotourism, rural and adventure tourism (Sheresheva, 2018).

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. Moreover, tourism is growing in importance as a way to boost the development of small towns and rural territories of Russia by embedding them into tourism routes and clusters (Mingaleva et al., 2017).

Still, potential competitive advantages are difficult to realize due to the poor tourism infrastructure, including transportation problems, shortage of accommodation and entertainment resources, the 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.

Among the relatively new tourism information sources in Russian regions are regional and municipal tourist information centers (TICs) that specialize in creating a database of tourism. In 2018, 303 TICs created in 70 Russian regions.

Figure 1. Legal forms of tourist information centers in Russia



TICs initially conceived as institutions for the accumulation of various information on tourism, establishing information communications with all interested parties, information support for the regional tourism management system. In the process of their creation, problems arose in determining the organizational and legal status, as well as sources of financing. These issues were negotiated on the regional level and resolved differently, based on organizational and economic feasibility, local tourism development features, and financial conditions on the region. As a result, different kinds of organizational approaches are used to run TICs (Figure 1).

State budgetary institutions (34%) take the largest share of the total TICs number. Limited liability companies, state autonomous institutions, non-profit partnerships (11% each) and municipal budget institutions (10%) are also common legal forms of tourist information centers in Russian regions. In the process of TICs development, their functions and tasks began to expand. It was due to the need for self-financing of these organizations, as well as the opportunity to engage in certain commercial activities, training, coordination, advertising, etc. Therefore, the work of the TIC gradually began to assume a universal character. They began to move away from the original specialized goal of their creation, to take a wider range of tasks. In some cases they duplicate the work of tourist enterprises, directly developing new tourist routes, solve local marketing problems to promote the tourism products of individual enterprises and other organizational, commercial, and educational tasks.

On the example of TICs development, one can see a clear shift to focusing on marketing issues understood as promoting Russian regional tourism products and brands in domestic and foreign markets. This is the mainstream in tourism development policy on all levels of tourism management in Russia. At the same time, the fact that marketing is not only developing a good image for tourists is neglected, though relationships with all stakeholders, including local communities, are also crucial for tourism destinations competitiveness (Beerli, Martín, 2004; Christou, & Kassianidis, 2002; Iordanova, 2015, 2017).

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

4 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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 for more than 15 years, in their own homes.

The Mari El Republic has 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 an 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 is the most attractive features of the Mari El Republic as a place for living and a place to visit (Table 1).

As to kindness or unkindness of locals, including indigenous people, the obtained results are controversial. About one of ten respondents underlined the kindness of locals as an attractive feature of Mari El Republic. Almost the same percentage of respondents are sure that inhospitable people are one of the most unattractive features of the region (Table 2).

Table 1. Most attractive features of Mari El Republic according to respondents

	N of respondents	%
Beautiful nature	184	86.4
Kind hearted people	19	8.9
A promising region for life	5	2.3
There are many opportunities for entrepreneurial-minded people	1	0.5
Other	4	1.9

Table 2. Most unattractive features of Mari El Republic according to respondents

	N of respondents	%
Our climate is too severe	11	7.3
Inhospitable people	22	14.6
Life is stuck here	67	44.4
Initiatives are not welcome here	20	13.2
Other	31	20.5

We hypothesize that this depends on the situation since indigenous people are highly sensitive to any attempts to arrange visits of tourists to their holy places. At the same time, in cases when tourist routes are apart of these places, they are quite kind to visitors (of course, if there are not too many tourist groups coming to their villages).

Still, additional research is needed to understand the deep motives of different groups of residents and identify the direction of the balance of their interests and the interests of tourists.

As an example, entrepreneurs that develop rural tourism in a number of settlements are welcoming growth of tourist flows that bring to them profits. 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 the mutual positive attitude of the entrepreneurs and the local community towards each other.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

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 relevant marketing practices that allow to benefit from local cultural and natural assets and to propose managerial instruments that will help to balance between the interests of tourism destination stakeholders in the Russian market context.

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