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TOURISM, GASTRONOMY WITHOUT BORDERS AND CHALLENGES: FROM THE VAST OF THE ATLANTIC TO POLAND AND RUSSIA

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Abstract:

This research studies the experience of Portugal and Poland in establishment and development of culinary tourism and agritourism, makes suggestions as to making the process of tourism development in Russia a real breakthrough

Keywords:

major companies and small businesses; diversification and collaboration in tourism industry; experience of Poland and Portugal (Porto Santo) in tertiary sector; Russian problems and their elimination; integration of state, society and business.

Lying 40 kilometers from the coast of the Portuguese Madeira is the island of Porto Santo – with its area of only 42 square kilometers. Two and a half hours with a sea-going ferry – from island to island – and a 9-kilometer long belt of fantastically beautiful and clean beaches welcomes you. Quiet and deliberate rural mood of the island contrasts noisy crowds typical of summer resorts in other locations. One of outstanding persons held in reverence here is Christopher Columbus – the discoverer of this homelike piece of the Atlantic who spent several years on the island trying to escape the problems of everyday living.

Locals are the true tourist attraction of the “Golden Island”. Honesty, deliberation and peace of mind are their traditional traits. If you leave a wallet with money somewhere, be sure you will have it back. Believe, no one would even think of rooking or selling tainted foods to you. Unhurried attendance in stores, restaurants and bars has nothing to do with laziness. It is rather to create an atmosphere of repose and relaxation that is so typical of the provinces.

Pestana company – a representative of tourist industry in the island – demonstrates behavior that is absolutely coherent to the island, too. One of industry leaders, with its extensive network of exclusive hotels in Africa, Europe, North and South America, largest capitals of the world, the company is pointedly considerate and careful to the wealth of Porto Santo. Pestana hotels on the island are arranged in a way to vividly emphasize its natural beauty and stunning views.

The company’s potentials are nearly unrestricted. Organizing any service – in line with top quality standards – is no challenge to the company. Starting from a restaurant network with all kinds of multinational cuisines, to transportation services able to satisfy the most fastidious clients.

This realm is also governed by the laws of harmony that may only manifest itself as part of ethical civilized business. Pestana – major player in the field of tourist industry – works in closest cooperation with representatives of small businesses acting as a coordinator and a guarantor of high quality and diversity of tourist services.

Representatives of small businesses from among islanders are in charge of immediate organization of trips to cultural, recreation and entertainment sites, sale of souvenirs and so on. Numerous seaside restaurants with fresh sea foods served at very fair prices; neighborhood car, bike and bicycle rentals; shops to fit every taste; zoo, taxi-cabs and minibuses; rural tourist facilities – all these are owned by islanders. However, hotel administrators are entrusted with duties of agents to ensure the entire island – on mutually rewarding terms with small businesses – falls within the Pestano’s range of influence.

Agritourism facilities may be taken as a model. At hotel reception desk, tourists gain comprehensive information about the sites of agritourism and ecotourism. Administrator agrees the route and its duration with the client, finds out which mode of transport is preferable, asks whether a tour guide is needed, after which the order is placed with a private entrepreneur.

As a rule, this service embraces visits to rural guesthouses, ocean viewing points, small zoo, natural sites where geological processes may be observed, as

well as old refurbished windmills – symbols of the island. Vacationers' attention is largely attracted by beach-line gourmet restaurants featuring traditional Portuguese cuisine, wide choice of sea foods, and splendid ocean view.

Original old-time furnishings (pieces of furniture, chimney, fireplace, kitchenware and so on) are reproduced in a country house. Rear buildings and the yard are full of real country living items and farm animals. Cute tricks done by goats, sheep and geese delight both kids and adults greatly. Next to the house, there is shop to sell souvenirs, home-made foods and drinks.

Demonstration of all the exotic things is subject to strict safety rules. From condition of access ways, quality of food and drinks, to organization of 24/7 video surveillance of the guesthouse and other facilities. Key role rests with the tour guide who realizes his/her responsibility for tourists while being able to create relaxed, casual, nearly homelike atmosphere, which is largely promoted by small size of groups – up to five persons [1.]

Let us compare the situation to Russian lands.

One does not need a plane or an ocean liner to get to a nice old town of Tarusa that cozily settled where the Tarusa meets the Oka as far back as 1246. Several times a day, at Teply Stan bus station, one can take a Moscow – Tarusa bus to depart from the loud capital to the town located in a quiet rural area in Kaluga Region. Feel lack of comfort in a bus? Choose any type of transport – railway or a car.

Just an easy walk – and 36 kilometers from Serpukhov, you find yourself in a unique town ranked as the nature and architecture reserve on the list of historic towns and cities of Russia.

Single-storey buildings of the 19th century, amazing wild landscape that has over centuries been affected by natural factors only, and has never experienced poisonous influence of human activity. The atmosphere itself is literally soaked in history of living and work of Russian bohemian circle – writers, poets, artists and stage directors. It was something like an open-air Montparnasse or Broadway that became the venue for many celebrities – Marina Tsvetaeva, Konstantin Paustovsky, Victor Borisov-Musatov, Nikolay Zabolotsky, Vasily Polenov, Sviatoslav Richter.

Letters of Russian female poets are full of lyrical recollections of time spent in Tarusa, its genial dwellers remarkable for azure of their eyes. Scenic river valley makes the real scenery of Polenovo estate look absolutely fabulous. Polenovo

estate is the true evocation of words pronounced by the brilliant artist whose works are permeated with the light of humanism – “Art must give joy and happiness”

And there – in such a pastoral setting – a barbarous incident takes place. It was on an August night this year, in the holiday hotel Silver Age – an adorable place by the bank of the Oka River where the Tsvetaevs summer house used to be located – that a group of locals broke into two guesthouses and clobbered everyone staying there. Twelve persons sought medical advice. One of them suffered a heavy jaw injury. A weekend that the Moscow guests planned in advance became a nightmare. Furthermore, the incident was initiated by one of hotel managers. The one who should have acted as the organizer and the guarantor of high quality of tourist services. Police of Kaluga commenced a criminal case for assault [4.]

We will not interfere with the investigation held by competent authorities. Yet, let us take a slightly different approach to a combination of conditions and circumstances that form certain atmosphere and situation.

Generally acknowledged is the fact that agritourism that plays tremendous economic, social and political role in regional development is the essential mechanism for development of rural regions in the countries of European Community.

Today, the breakthrough in the Polish market of rural tourism is the prime example. In some way, the Polish student outperforms its teacher – France, the parent of the European network for entertainment and accommodation of tourists in rural areas. The reason is that the country leaders regard tourism as the top-priority trend in rural economy, which – of all non-core agricultural activities – brings the largest profit. Agritourism sector secures about 4% of total gross product, so the government believes it necessary to allocate up to 40% of all subsidies for development of this segment. Another reason for the balance to get tipped in favor of agritourism is that over 27% of population are employed in agricultural sector of Poland, while in France this figure is only 5%.

One should bear in mind the specifics of historical and economic development of Poland – during Soviet time, Poland was a member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, though – unlike other socialist states – it did not pursue collectivization en masse. Overwhelming majority of rural population were not members of collective farms and retained self-reliance as small-scale producers, which has remained the foundation for the national farming sector until now. About 38% of population resides in the countryside. Less than 6% of those are involved directly in arable cultivation. Long-range national agricultural policy

is aimed at promotion of homesteads regarded as effective means for employment of population and dealing with social and economic problems. In its turn, condition of rural areas is the most credible evidence of maturity of the agricultural sector and the degree of civilization of EU member states.

Basic elements of the Polish agricultural sector are micro farms handling 5 to 10 ha of land. With 2.9 MIO farm households, an average estate area is 5.9 ha. In southern Poland – Silesian Voivodeship and other areas – areas rarely exceed 3-4 ha. Yet, there are estates of 1 ha. Large-scale farms whose share does not exceed 9% handle estates with areas of over 100 ha. It is notable that small farms in southeast territories produce the bulk of the national agricultural commodities, with annual gain in production of 20%. Over 10% of Polish agriproducts move to foreign markets, Germany being the principal consumer.

Long-range national policy allowed coping with numerous legal, economic, human resources, environmental and other challenges for the benefit of both tourists and farmsteads operating in the sphere of rural tourism. Strange as it may appear at a first glance. The reason is simple – encouraging entrepreneurs to improve quality and diversify services makes agritourism facilities more attractive and therefore more profitable.

Government agencies offered free of charge registration of guesthouses and touristic farms. They settled the issues concerning exemption of agritourism income from individual income tax, conservation of existing rates of real estate tax, permission to perform activities other than arable cultivation, with farmers' social insurance secured. Public agencies have undertaken infrastructure development – roads, communication lines, educational institutions, public services and amenities, etc.. Information support is provided.

The role of voluntary organizations at all levels – from local agritourism associations to establishment of the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism “Guesthouses” – is difficult to overestimate. Today, there are more than 50 associations focused on agritourism in Poland.

Various training courses in organization and conduct of such business activities played a significant role in development of countryside tourism. From their school-days, young people in rural areas gain motivation along with the new profession – agritourism expert. The Ministry of Tourism, Sports and Agriculture renders assistance including financial support to nonprofit organizations and educational institutions according to the national legislation. Besides, the Services

Quality Standard to set the minimum possible level for quality of services provided in guesthouses and touristic farms was adopted at ministerial level.[5.]

Russian governmental authorities have realized that the agricultural sector of tourism is distinguished by a peculiar multiplier effect, since it creates additional jobs in other economic sectors – agriculture, transport, construction, culture, hotel and restaurant business and so on [3.]

Increased tourist traffic and improvement of the quality of life in the countryside is observed in Kaluga Region due to employment of population in the sphere of tourist excursion service.

At the same, no integrated regulatory framework for development of rural tourism has been established to allow for enhanced promotion of this sector of tourism.

To this day, no uniform system for classification of touristic farms has been developed or adopted. Classification system criteria has not been set, uniform standard for agritourism facilities has not been defined, either.

All these hinder sustained development of rural tourism and give rise to new problems such as – low quality of local service and hospitality; inadequate assurance of tourist safety, improper control of pricing policy in rural tourism; poor promotion of touristic products, and so on.

Differences in perception of such phenomena as agribusiness and agriculture on the one hand, and tourist industry and agritourism on the other hand have not been adjusted. The situation calls for elaboration of proper conceptual base as well as economic, organizational and legal framework.

The words said by the member of the Russian Academy of Science N. Shmelev, “Today, practical smaller-scale actions are more effective than broadly propagated plans for superb achievements”, become especially relevant in the current situation that economists tend to call “stagnation” with ever increasing frequency. Undoubtedly, the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Moscow Air Cluster lack investment resources. Yet, small and medium businesses are in even greater need of investments [1.]

Overcoming mistrust to regulatory authorities requires development of the structural and institutional factor of economic growth. Thus, according to official figures, there are as little as 1.5 thousand touristic farms in today's Russia. Meanwhile, leading experts believe the number to exceed 4 thousand. Private entrepreneurs would not obtain legal status being afraid of racking burden. First of

all, Russia needs to implement own business protection – the function crucial to small and medium businesses [2.]

Implementation of this function calls for establishment of the Agritourism Association on the national level and in constituent entities of the Russian Federation. Much has been said of it over recent years, yet no adequate practical steps have been made.

In accordance with already effective legislation, the Agritourism Association could have performed the following activities:

- elaboration of mandatory requirements to products (works, services), as well as draft laws and other regional and federal regulations to govern relations in the sphere of consumer protection;

- independent verification and validation of quality and safety of products (works, services) declared by sellers in respective specifications;

- distribution of information about consumer rights and actions necessary to protect such rights;

- in relations with regulatory authorities and organizations, moving adoption of measures to improve quality of products (works, services), to suspend manufacture and sale of products (works, services) that fail to comply with existing mandatory requirements;

- submission to prosecution agencies and governmental authorities of materials to prosecute persons carrying out manufacture and sale of products (works, services) that fail to comply with existing mandatory requirements;

- motioning prosecution agencies to challenge acts of regional authorities and acts of local authorities that are in conflict with consumer protection legislation;

- in courts, filing petitions for protection of consumer rights and legal interests of individual consumers (groups of consumers, undetermined circle of customers) and many others.

As yet, we may conclude that in constituent territories of the Russian Federation including Kaluga Region, the problem of employment of associations (unions) between community and businesses aimed at implementation of their creative potential in order to secure transition from inertial scenario to innovative trend in development of rural tourism does not receive proper consideration.

Perhaps, promptly adopted and successfully implemented long-range programs of Poland will serve as a model to dilatory officials, advanced systems for collaboration between big and small businesses accomplished by Pestana at

Porto Santo will set the pattern for business community, and well-defined fields of concern for agritourism associations will become an example at all levels.

In any case, international practices prove that creative ideas concerning establishment of highly ethical business in a sane commercial environment are implemented through social and economic integration of the state, community and businesses.

The situation requires adoption of breakthrough solutions to catch up with mature markets in development of tourism industry.

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