

EVALUATION OF CONGRESS PERFORMANCE AND CONGRESS ATTENDEES' SATISFACTION – A CASE STUDY OF NOVI SAD (SERBIA)

Vanja Dragičević
Uglješa Stankov
Tanja Armenski
Snežana Štetić

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Abstract

The congress industry is a young, dynamic industry, which is growing and maturing at a rapid rate. It is now a truly international industry, witnessing huge investments across all continents. Due to economic and other benefits of a more intangible nature, the number of congress destinations and venues worldwide is growing. In order to provide the sustainability of congress destinations and venues, it is important to examine congress delegates' experience, their overall satisfaction as well as behavioural intentions regarding destination. This study was conducted in the city of Novi Sad, which is after Belgrade the most important international meeting destination in Serbia. The purpose of this study is to examine the experience and overall satisfaction of the attendees at international congresses held in Novi Sad. Also, the relationship between overall satisfaction, word-of-mouth and intention to return were examined. A questionnaire survey was used as an instrument for the study. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS standard package. The results showed high level of attendees' satisfaction with the congress elements and with destination choice. Also, the results confirmed that Novi Sad has a great potential for development of congress tourism, as the majority of the respondents show great interest to visit Novi Sad again and they would recommend city as a meeting destination. The results of this study are valuable for congress centre managers and for destination management organizations.

Keywords Congress, Attendees, Satisfaction, Behaviour, Novi Sad

INTRODUCTION

The meeting and congress industry is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry. The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) reports that the total number of association events held in 2009 was 8,294. The number of events per year in the ICCA Association Database has grown with more than 3,000 events over the past 10 years (from 5,186 events in 2000 to 8,294 in 2009). Europe is still the most popular destination with the majority of 54.4% of the meetings being hosted there in 2009. However Europe's market share has been decreasing over the past 10 years and so has the relative popularity of North America and Oceania, due to an increase in popularity of Africa, Asia/Middle East and Latin America (ICCA Statistics Report, The International Association Meetings Market 2000-2009). A greater market share has being won by countries in Eastern Europe and in the Asia/Pacific region in particular (Rogers, 2006, 25).

At the beginning of 21st century, Serbia did not have a robust international congress business. At how many international congresses are listed as being scheduled in the years 2004 – 2015, Serbia ranked 47th overall in ICCA category, with a total of 0.2% of the meetings, while countries in the region (Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania) were in better position (Grimmer, 2005). In 2006 the Strategy of Tourism Development (2005-2015) in the Republic of Serbia was adopted. It recognized MICE (*Meetings, Incentives, Congresses/Conferences and Exhibitions*) tourism is as one of nine tourist products which should be country's priorities in tourism development. The cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad are identified as primary destinations in Serbia for attracting international meetings, as these cities have necessary meeting and accommodation facilities and easy access. MICE tourism is considered to be a "quick win" product that could, in a short period of three to five years, improve tourism industry and the image of the abovementioned cities. As a result, in 2006 Serbian Congress Bureau was formed with the aim to promote Serbian meeting destinations and to improve image and position of Serbia on the international meetings market. Since the establishment of Serbian Congress Bureau there has been an almost 320% increase in the number of meetings held in Serbia between the 2007 and 2010 rankings. Serbia has improved its world ranking by over 20 places in three short years (www.iccaworld.com).

Conferences and meetings are increasingly used to promote tourism destinations since most towns, resorts and cities feature hotels and other facilities that can be used as venues (Wootton and Stevens, 1995). Besides a suitable venue for the meeting, Swarbrooke and Horner (2001) add that a meeting destination has to offer sufficient accommodation (if a venue is non-residential), attractions, good accessibility to the generating markets and efficient transport system within the destination. Crouch and Weber (2002) state that the service provided in a destination and its facilities are critical to the success of the meeting destination. Through developing of congress tourism a multiply goals for a destination could be reached, such as urban renewal, improving infrastructure, tourism capacity, etc. Additionally, large international meetings can bring not only economic prosperity to the destination, but may increase international recognition and destination image. According to Weber and Chon (2002), congress tourism is also associated with other benefits of a more intangible nature: social and cultural benefits to the destination, the exchange of ideas, the cultivation of business contacts, the provision of forums for continuing education and training, facilitation of technology transfers. Therefore, there is a great competitiveness between congress destinations who strive to enter to the European tourism market. It has highlighted the need for better understanding of the congress attendees' behaviour, including their decision-making and their evaluation of the congress experience (PCMA Survey, 2003).

In literature, there are numerous studies which investigated site selection choices (Crouch and Louviere, 2004; Crouch and Ritchie, 1998; Jun and McCleary, 1999, Ching-Fu, 2006; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Crouch and Louviere, 2004; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Yoo and Chon; 2008, Zhang et al., 2007), attendee motivation factors (Oppermann and Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat et al. 2001; Severt et al. 2007; Mair, Thompson, 2008), image of the destination (Oppermann, 1996), congress destination competitiveness, etc. Zhang et al. (2007) noted that an extensive literature review of convention and meeting tourism revealed that the majority of studies were convention

and meeting planner related (Bonn and Boyd, 1992; Bonn et al., 1994; Oppermann, 1996; Go and Zhang, 1997) while only few convention attendee-related studies were found (Var et al., 1985; Oppermann and Chon, 1997).

However, congress attendees' satisfaction assessment is fundamental to the well-being of attendees, to the profits of hotels and congress centres hosting congresses, and to the stability of destinations and congress centres (Oliver, 1996, Severt et al. 2007, Dragičević et al., 2010). Volkshandel (1984) argued that congress attendees are normally opinion leaders who could influence others about a destination and its offerings. With their favorable word-of-mouth comments, they help in promoting tourism in the host destination. Zhang et al. (2007, 1126) stated that "the conference program itself can satisfy the attendees' needs by offering them an opportunity to keep up with any changes in their professional field, to hear speakers who are respected experts in their field and to learn new skills". Therefore, the core product for a conference should be the conference program, while the location (host destination) may offer either an actual or augmented product, which could result in a higher quality conference or create unexpected surprises for the attendees. The maximization of the number of attendees is the common goal of both the conference/congress organizers and host locations (Var et al., 1985). Therefore, they should and they do work together, in order to provide successfully organized conference at an attractive location. The attendees' overall experience and satisfaction will be influenced by conference program, but also by the tourist attractiveness of the host destination. In a study conducted at a large convention center in the southeastern United States, Severt et al. (2007) found the relationships between attendee's evaluation of conference performance, overall satisfaction, word-of-mouth and intent to return to be significant. They add that "satisfaction is critical in determining convention loyalty and includes behavioral intentions regarding next year's return and whether or not to recommend the conference to others", and it should bear in mind that returning attendees bring significant benefits to host destinations.

Despite its economic importance and other numerous benefits, congress industry has not been well researched or documented in Serbia. There are numerous topics that should be explored in Serbia from the perspective of meeting organizers (planners), stakeholders and final consumers – congress attendees. This study takes the perspective of the attendees and examines issues about their satisfaction and evaluation of the congress performance, as well as their behavioural intentions associated with Novi Sad as the congress destination. The paper consists of two parts: firstly, the congress industry of Novi Sad will be shortly presented, and in the second part of the paper, the results of the study will be interpreted and discussed.

1. CONGRESS INDUSTRY OF NOVI SAD

Novi Sad, as administrative, economic, cultural, scientific and educational centre of Vojvodina Province (northern part of Serbia) and known as "town of fairs" (it has long tradition in organizing fairs – since 1923) has strong potential for smaller international conferences. In 2006 Novi Sad Fair opened a new congress centre Master, capable for hosting up to 4,000 congress attendees and started to affirm congress industry in Novi

Sad and in whole region of Vojvodina. The Novi Sad Fair also offers some 60,000 SQM of indoor exhibit space. At the same time, hotel "Park", renovated into five-star hotel (in that time it was the only five-star hotel in Vojvodina), also, opened up-to-date congress centre with capacity of 1,200 seats. Novi Sad University also provides an opportunity as its Agriculture Faculty is one of the most respected in Europe. It is strong in the fields of genetic research, medicine, environmental sciences and engineering. In addition, SPENS (Sport and Business Center) is the largest sports centre in Europe and one of the three largest in the world. SPENS is host to major international championships in bowling, basketball, karate, volleyball and Davis Cup Tennis. This represents another congress opportunity for Novi Sad, as there are many sports related associations that hold congresses and would be interested in meeting there (Dragičević, 2008; Dragičević et al. 2009).

In 2000, 88,100 tourists visited Novi Sad, the majority (82%) were domestic. From 2002 to 2005, total number of tourists decreased due to smaller number of domestic tourist arrivals, meanwhile the number of foreign tourists increased. This trend continued in the years to come. In 2009, 86,920 tourists spent 167,253 nights in Novi Sad. The share of domestic (47%) and foreign tourists (48%) is almost equal (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Statistical Yearbook 2001-2010). The reason lies in the number and the attractiveness of cultural and especially business events organised in Novi Sad in the last couple of years. The research conducted by Blešić, Wallranbestein and Dević (2008), on the main motives of tourists visits of Novi Sad, showed that their visits are mostly business related: individual business trips, congresses, seminars, exhibitions, etc.

The average length of stay in Novi Sad is around two nights, again due to mostly short business visits. The biggest concentration of tourists is in May and October, when Novi Sad Fair is the host of international and traditionally organized exhibitions, which every year attract great number of visitors and exhibitors from country and abroad (Dragičević, 2008). In 2010 Novi Sad Fair had more than 1,000,000 visitors. From its opening (September 2006) by the end of 2010, more than 700 meetings, with 80.000 attendees from 60 countries worldwide, were held in Congress Centre Master.

In order to provide the sustainability of congress destinations and venues, it is important to examine congress attendees' experience, their overall satisfaction as well as behavioural intentions regarding congress destination. This study was conducted in Congress Centre "Master", as it represents up to date congress venue and the host of almost all international meetings held in Novi Sad. Data were collected during four international congresses held in the congress centre. The study results reported focus on the following areas: the profile of the respondents, their behaviour during stay in Novi Sad, performance evaluation of the congress and behavioural intentions.

2. METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was used as an instrument for the study. The study instrument was developed after an in-depth literature review on the topics related to congress attendees' behaviour. The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part of the

instrument consists of basic socio-demographic characteristics of a respondent (gender, age, country of origin, level of education). The second part comprises five questions about respondent's behaviour during stay in Novi Sad. Satisfaction of respondents with the performance of congress and their behavioural intentions referring to Novi Sad are examined in the third part of questionnaire. The respondents expressed opinions on the level of their satisfaction of cited elements of the congress using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "very satisfied" (5) to "very dissatisfied" (1).

The attendees at four international congresses, held at the city congress centre in a period from January to June 2008, were used as the sampling frame for this study. They were invited to take part in the data collection process on a voluntary basis. Each congress expected 200 attendees (all together 800 attendees) which was the population for the study. Data collection was conducted last day of the congresses. Our successful interceptions resulted in 165 usable surveys. The data were analyzed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences 17 (SPSS).

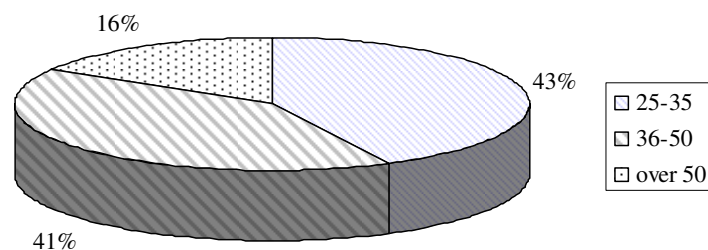
3. STUDY RESULTS

The study results reported focus on the following areas: the profile of the respondents, the behaviour of the respondents during stay in Novi Sad, performance evaluation of the congress, and the relationship between performance, satisfaction, and behavioral consequences.

3.1. Profile of respondents

The sample taken for this research consists of 165 respondents. Among them 46% are males, and 54% are females. Regarding their age, the respondents were classified into three groups: 43% of the respondents are in a group of 25-35 years, 41% of the respondents have between 36 and 50 years, and the rest (16%) are over 50.

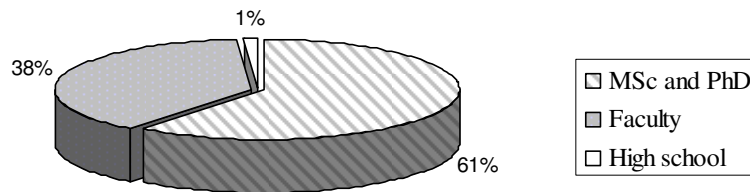
Figure 1: The percentage of respondents by age



Source: Author's Research

By their education level, respondents holding MSc and PhD degree are dominant making total of 61%, followed by university degree (38%), whereas only two respondents (1%) has high school degree.

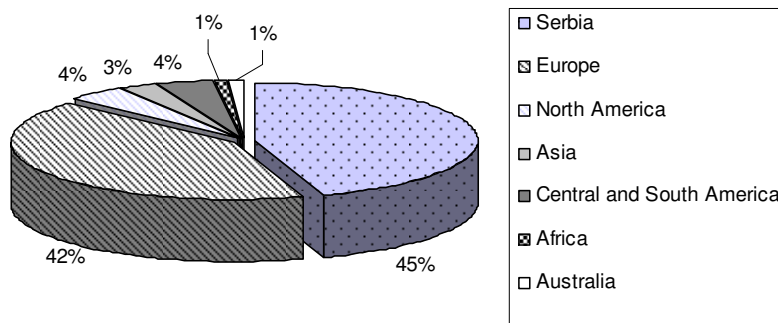
Figure 2: The percentage of respondents by education level



Source: Author's Research

In terms of their origin, 45% of the respondents are from Serbia, whereas foreign attendees come mostly from Europe (42%). Attendees from North America (4%), Asia (3%), Central and South America (4%), Africa (1%) and Australia (1%), also, participated in this research.

Figure 3: The percentage of respondents by origin



Source: Author's Research

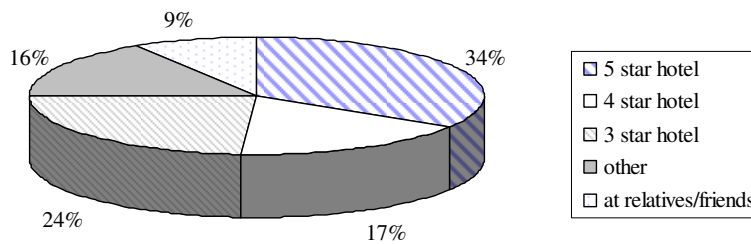
3.2. The respondents' behaviour in Novi Sad

In this paragraph, four elements of the respondents' behaviour will be reported and analyzed: length of stay, type of accommodation, arrived at congress alone, with spouse or with colleagues and spending.

The international congresses included in this study lasted from three to seven days. The respondents who took part in this study spent at least two days in Novi Sad, while the longest reported stay was 11 days. The average length of stay was 3.87 days. The respondents from abroad stayed longer than respondents from Serbia. The majority of foreign attendees (attendees from Europe) stay 4.16 days in Novi Sad, meanwhile the respondents from other continents stayed longer (5.57 to 10 days). In terms of accommodation, slightly more than one-third of the respondents (34%) claimed that they stayed at five star hotel, whereas 17% of the respondents stayed at four star hotel and 24% at three star hotel. The respondents who used some other types of accommodation available in Novi Sad (such as hostels, apartments) make 16% of total

sample, whereas 9% of the respondents (all of them are from Serbia) stayed at relatives or friends in Novi Sad.

Figure 4: Types of accommodation used by respondents



Source: Author's Research

The largest percentage of the respondents (41%) attended congress with colleague/s, followed by 37% of the respondents who came alone and 22% arrived with spouse. During their stay in Novi Sad, the majority of the respondents (86%) spent on a daily basis 50 euro or less, mostly on food and drink.

3.3. Performance evaluation of the congress and behavioural consequences

The respondents were also asked to evaluate three elements of congress performance (the venue, the organization of congress and available technical equipment). Regarding their personal satisfaction, the respondents validated each of cited elements using a five-point Likert scale, with "1" indicating very dissatisfied to "5" indicating very satisfied. The mean and standard deviation of the evaluation items, as well as minimum and maximum value, are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' satisfaction with the elements of congress

| Elements | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Venue | 2 | 5 | 4.70 | 0.589 |
| Organization | 2 | 5 | 4.36 | 0.863 |
| Technical equipment | 3 | 5 | 4.56 | 0.674 |

Source: Author's Research

As can be seen from Table 1, all the elements received the average score higher than 4 (4 – satisfied). In an expectant manner, the respondents estimated all the elements of the congress about their satisfaction as satisfactory on average. The "venue" element received the highest score of the respondents' satisfaction among all the elements (M=4.70). More than two third of the respondents (75.2%) reported they were very satisfied with the venue of the congress, whereas only 1.2% of the respondents were dissatisfied (Table 2). Such high percentage of very satisfied respondents, with the average score higher than 4 (M=4.56) for the element "technical equipment", supports

the fact that Congress Centre Master is a venue convenient for holding international meetings.

In terms of the organization of congress, more than a half of the respondents (56.4%) claimed that they were very satisfied, while slightly less than one third of the respondents (29.1%) were satisfied and 5.5% dissatisfied (Table 2).

Table 2: The degree of respondents' satisfaction with the elements of congress

| Level of satisfaction | Frequency of the respondents (%) | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| | Venue | Organization | Technical equipment |
| Very dissatisfied | - | - | - |
| Dissatisfied | 1.2 | 5.5 | 0.0 |
| Neutral | 3.0 | 9.1 | 10.3 |
| Satisfied | 20.6 | 29.1 | 23.0 |
| Very satisfied | 75.2 | 56.4 | 66.7 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Author's Research

To examine if certain groups of respondents differ according to their level of satisfaction with the congress performance, the authors divided the respondents into groups according to age, level of education, origin and gender.

Regarding their age, the respondents were divided into three groups: 25-35, 36-50 and over 50 years. Using the One-Way ANOVA method for investigation of significance of mean value differences, it may be concluded with 95% accuracy that, between three groups of respondents of different age, there is no statistically significance in the level of respondents' satisfaction with the congress venue ($F=1.35$; $df=2$; $Sig.=0.262$), with the organization of congress ($F=2.554$; $df=2$; $Sig.=0.81$), nor with the technical equipment ($F=0.012$; $df=2$; $Sig.=0.988$).

Also, One-Way ANOVA was applied for investigation of differences between three groups of respondents according to their educational level. Results in Table 3 show that there is no statistically significance between groups of respondents regarding their level of satisfaction with all cited elements of the congress (Significance of F statistics – Sig. is higher than 0.05, so there is no statistically significant difference between the groups).

In addition, t-test was used for testing differences in mean satisfaction between the respondents regarding their gender and, also, their origin. The results indicate that there are no statistically relevant differences in mean satisfaction by the elements of congress performance between two groups of respondents of different gender (for "the venue" element $t=1.100$, $df=156.318$, $Sig.=0.273$; for "the organization" element $t=1.153$, $df=163$, $Sig.=0.251$; for "technical equipment" element $t=0.038$, $df=163$, $Sig.=0.970$).

Table 3: Compare Means - One-Way ANOVA. Dependent List: venue, organization and technical equipment. Factor: educational level of the respondents

| Variables | | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| Venue | Between Groups | 0.669 | 1.953 | 0.145 |
| | Within Groups | 0.343 | | |
| | Total | | | |
| Organization | Between Groups | 1.122 | 1.515 | 0.223 |
| | Within Groups | 0.740 | | |
| | Total | | | |
| Technical equipment | Between Groups | 0.858 | 1.908 | 0.152 |
| | Within Groups | 0.450 | | |
| | Total | | | |

*F (value F statistics)

**Sig. (significance of F statistics – if lower than 0.05 – there is 95% of certainty that there is statistically significant difference between the groups)

Source: Author's Research

Table 4: Compare Means - T-Test Independent Samples Test. Test Variables: venue, organization and technical equipment. Grouping Variable: origin of the respondents

| Test Variables | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
| Venue | Equal variances assumed | -0.684 | 163 | 0.495 | -0.063 | 0.092 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | -0.666 | 135.552 | 0.506 | -0.063 | 0.095 |
| Organization | Equal variances assumed | -4.167 | 163 | 0.000 | -0.537 | 0.129 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | -4.037 | 130.113 | 0.000 | -0.537 | 0.133 |
| Technical equipment | Equal variances assumed | -0.628 | 163 | 0.531 | -0.066 | 0.106 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | -0.633 | 160.314 | 0.528 | -0.066 | 0.105 |

*df (divisions of sums of squares' deviations)

**t (value t statistics)

***Sig. (2-tailed) (significance of t statistics – if lower than 0.05 – there is 95% of certainty that there is statistically significant difference between the groups)

Source: Author's Research

Regarding their origin, the respondents were divided into two groups: domestic and foreign respondents. From the results of t-test (Table 4), it can be concluded that there are no statistically relevant differences in mean satisfaction for the venue and technical equipment element between domestic and foreign respondents, but there is statistically significant difference between these two groups in mean satisfaction of the organization element (Sig.=0.000).

The last two questions of the study addressed respondents' behavioural consequences: intention to return and intention to recommend Novi Sad as a congress destination. On the question "Would you like to visit Novi Sad again?", 98% of the respondents answered affirmative and as reasons they cited future congresses, sightseeing, cultural motives, hospitality of local residents, and, in case of domestic respondents, visiting friends and relatives. Only 2% of the respondents reported that they will not visit Novi Sad again as there are a lot of world-wide destinations which should be visited.

Most of the respondents (95%) would recommend Novi Sad as a destination for holding congress or other business events because of up-to-date congress facilities, high-quality accommodation facilities, cultural and historic attractions, hospitality of local residents, lower prices in comparison with other congress destinations in the region and safety. Only 5% of the respondents wouldn't recommend Novi Sad as a destination for future congresses mostly due to lack of the airport. Although meeting planners are those who recommend destinations for future meetings, the congress attendees' opinion about destination is important, especially if attendees are members of different associations and/or academics. Therefore, they might be in position to influence an association's decision on destination choice for future congress.

According to these results, most respondents were satisfied with their travel and congress experience in Novi Sad. Also, these results confirm Novi Sad has a great potential for development of congress tourism.

CONCLUSION

From 2006, when Novi Sad Fair opened modern congress centre, the affirmation of congress tourism started. Since then, it has been recording the increase in the number of meetings, conferences, congresses, as well as the number of visitors in Novi Sad, particularly foreign visitors. To continue this tendency in the future and to provide quality congress tourist product, it is important for destination management organizations, hotels and congress centres hosting congresses, to conduct studies with the aim to examine congress attendees' satisfaction and behavioural intentions.

The research interpreted in this paper about the congress attendees' satisfaction and behavioural intentions, was conducted in city congress centre, on accidental sample, consisting of the international congress attendees, who voluntary took part in the research. Based on the results obtained in analysis of the satisfaction with the congress elements, it is obvious from the mean score (more than 4 – satisfied for all the elements of the congress), that the attendees showed high level of satisfaction. Behavioural intentions of congress attendees regarding Novi Sad as a congress tourist destination

were studied by examining two variables: word-of-mouth behaviour and intention to return. The results show that the majority of the respondents would like to visit Novi Sad again and they would recommend Novi Sad as a meeting destination. Based on the results of respondents' future behaviour analysis, the conclusion may be drawn that respondents were satisfied with destination choice. This research, as well as many other studies, confirms that consumer satisfaction leads to favourable word-of-mouth and might lead to repeat visit to a destination.

The results of this study are valuable for congress centre managers in Novi Sad and for destination management organization. Similar studies, about experience, satisfaction, behavioural intentions of congress attendees and meeting planners, should be undertaken periodically in hotels and congress centre in Novi Sad, to improve quality of services, improve competitiveness and effectively promote Novi Sad as a congress destination.

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Vanja Dragičević, PhD
e-mail: vanja.dragicevic@dgt.uns.ac.rs

Uglješa Stankov, PhD
e-mail: ugljesa.stankov@dgt.uns.ac.rs

Tanja Armenski, MSc
e-mail: tanja.armenski@dgt.uns.ac.rs

Snežana Štetić, PhD
e-mail: snegics@gmail.com

University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Sciences
Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management,
Trg Dositeja Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia