

## Regionalni zaštitni znak - alat za povećanje konkurentnosti turističkog proizvoda u ruralnim područjima

## Regional trademark - a tool for boosting the competitiveness of the tourist product in rural areas

Dessislava Alexova<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>International Business School, 14 Gurko Str., Botevgrad, Bulgaria, [dalexova@ibsedu.bg](mailto:dalexova@ibsedu.bg)

### Abstract

*The sustainable development of tourism at the local level is determined by various factors. These are the tourist resources, the specificity of the region and the material and the technical base, the degree of involvement of the local population in the entire sphere of tourism activity, the implementation of innovations, quality criteria, etc. Underdeveloped rural regions with a characteristic appearance and favourable conditions for the sustainable development of tourism, with proper planning and management, can become preferred tourist destinations. The purpose of the study is to present in how the principles of responsible marketing can be implemented in a regional trademark of a tourist destination. How to emphasize local identity for branding the tourist product in border rural areas with overall high competitiveness. The research methods used in the survey include: primary analysis of the tourist potential of the corresponding tourist destination; carrying out field research; chamber methods; sociological methods - verbal and written surveys, work with focus groups; graphic design, including empirical-theoretical research methods, typography and colorimetry; adaptation and testing of models. As a result of the applied methodology, several tourist brands have been developed, including the local identity of destinations in border, rural and underdeveloped regions in Bulgaria, where one of its elements is the regional trademark. The development and the integration of a quality trademark is based on the need to create a more effective marketing tool, through which the tourist sites and products in the selected destination will be more competitive in the market. The experience of these destinations can contribute to further research and development of mechanisms for managing the overall brand of destinations. Testing the model and its application in regional and municipal strategies for sustainable tourism development in the country and abroad.*

### Keywords

*brand identity, responsible tourism, sustainable development*

## Introduction

The concept of regional branding involves comprehensive management of the regional brand to achieve higher market value and maintain a high level of competitiveness. The choice of a tourist destination and the formation of preferences toward it are based on a recognizable image, good reputation, and awareness of its main competitive advantages. Managing these components helps the destination stand out in the minds and hearts of consumers. Building a successful brand identity is a competitive advantage for increasing sales and profits, but it must be noted that an approach successful in one market may fail in another if natural conditions, cultural differences, and tourism development opportunities in the region are not considered (Temelkova & Aleksova, 2013).

The creation and establishment of a regional brand aim to build trust, product recognition, and a guarantee of quality. Developing and implementing a regional trademark for quality is based on the need to create and promote a more effective marketing tool, through which products from underdeveloped, often border regions and small municipalities with limited resource potential, can become competitive and distinctive. The goal of the brand is to differentiate the product from competitors, enhance the perception of value, and increase satisfaction from the experience. Integrating elements of sustainable tourism is key to understanding how regional brands can contribute to long-term competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Anholt (2007) develops the concept of "competitive identity" and how countries, cities and regions can manage their brands to improve their attractiveness and competitiveness.

Evaluating the quality of services in a given area is an important marketing tool aimed at supporting local small businesses, improving their market position, and increasing sales. Both communication and the product itself must be adapted to the local market, ensuring personalized service, direct contact with the local community, and opportunities to experience local customs, culture, and traditions. For the purposes of this study, we demonstrate the experience of developing and testing a voluntary certification for a regional trademark in several rural destinations in Bulgaria.

## 1. Methodology of the survey

The methodology is interdisciplinary and analytical, strongly oriented towards applied research, aiming to offer concrete solutions for increasing the competitiveness of tourism products in rural areas through the creation of strong regional brands and quality systems based on sustainable principles. Taking existing quality certification systems (like that of "Strandja") or conceptual models, created by the author, for sustainable tourism and adapting them to a new local context (e.g., Radomir Municipality). This includes developing specific criteria, procedures, and subsequently testing them through real-world application and monitoring of results.

It includes a thorough review of existing strategies, plans, and local development programs, as well as an inventory of available tourist resources. The purpose of the field research is to gather information directly from the ground to obtain an authentic and current perspective on reality. The spatial analysis of resource potential has a goal to understand the geographical distribution and accessibility of tourist resources and to increase promotional efforts. They are supplemented by chamber methods used for an analysis of existing data and scientific papers that does not require direct contact with respondents.

The sociological methods include verbal and written surveys and brainstorming with focus groups for an assessment of stakeholder attitudes. They are used to gather opinions, attitudes, expectations, and behavioural patterns from a wider range of respondents, using structured questionnaires or interviews. Facilitated discussions with small, representative groups of stakeholders (e.g., local entrepreneurs, municipal representatives, tourism experts) to discuss brand elements, sustainable practices, and marketing messages.

Graphic design aims visualization and materialization of regional identity into a recognizable trademark. Applying design theory principles, empirical studies on the impact of visual elements and specialized techniques such as font selection (typography) and colour choices (colorimetry) to create effective and appealing logos, certificates, and other branding materials. Crucial for creating a strong visual identity that communicates the region's values and makes it distinctive and memorable.

These methods were applied to develop several tourist brands, with a particular focus on the

implementation of voluntary quality certification, adapting existing models for sustainable tourism development.

## 2. Quality Certification: Regional Trademark “Strandja”

A regional brand is understood as a “brand” in terms of a collection of positive images, representing a set of perceptions in the consumer’s mind. Different people have different perceptions of a given product or service, which makes them loyal to the brand to varying degrees. “By definition, a ‘brand’ is what the consumer thinks when they hear your company’s name” (D’Alessandro & Warfare, 2001:14).

An established regional quality trademark in Bulgaria is that of Strandja Nature Park. The proposal from the Strandja Nature Park Directorate is that the criteria for obtaining and using this trademark be implemented in places for accommodations and with entrepreneurs offering tourism-related services in the region. This process represents a voluntary certification system for quality and sustainable resource use in tourism facilities and other businesses related to the park’s territory<sup>1</sup>.

The idea of the brand is to be used by both tourism entrepreneurs and local producers. It is awarded by a Local Certification Group for a period of three years, after which the entities undergo recertification. The goal is to demonstrate compliance with high standards related to service quality and environmental sustainability, including: emphasis on the natural environment, cultural, and historical landmarks in the region; focus on good interpretation of the Park’s natural values; knowledge of the regional natural and cultural landmarks; proven practices of environmental sustainability and minimal negative environmental impact; advice to guests on environmental conservation; contribution to nature conservation and support for activities, related to sustainable tourism and wildlife protection; support for conservation NGOs, prohibiting guests from purchasing goods, related to rare or protected species, etc.; contribution to the local community by hiring local staff and guides; supplying locally

produced products and souvenirs, furnishing primarily with Bulgarian goods, and including traditional regional dishes and drinks in menus; respect for local culture and integration of appropriate cultural elements from the region or prepared with community participation; interpretive programs that accurately and appropriately represent local culture and traditions; care for the customer.

A significant outcome of the voluntary certification process under the “Strandja” standards is that tourism facilities and businesses holding the trademark offer authentic services and experiences to consumers. This provides an opportunity to create a unique market niche for local businesses based on an original product that guarantees a distinct experience compared to mass tourism. Additional information regarding certification standards can be found on their official website (Directorate of Strandja Nature Park, n.d.). It is a result of field survey and spatial analysis of the destination.

The assessment and certification standards are developed based on the certification system of the PAN Parks Foundation (Font & Clark, 2007) and the Regional Association “Stara Planina”<sup>2</sup> (Bulgarian Hotel and Restaurant Association, n.d.). The main goal of the standards is to promote a sustainable tourism model and local economic development. The ultimate aim is to attract more affluent customers and create a positive image for the region. The certification standards adhere to eight principles of responsible marketing: 1) focusing on the connection between visitors and the natural environment; 2) emphasis on good interpretation and experience; 3) implementing effective environmental sustainability practices with minimal negative environmental impact; 4) direct contribution to nature conservation in the area; 5) providing benefits to the local community; 6) respect for local culture through its integration into tourism products; 7) proven care for the customer and meeting consumer expectations; 8) accuracy and adequacy of presented information, forming realistic expectations for guests.

The certification covers three categories of tourism facilities and activities: “accommodation and dining”, “attractions” and “tourist treks” The “Accommodation and Dining” category includes

<sup>1</sup> Source for more information (Directorate of Strandja Nature Park, n.d.): [https://www.strandja.bg/bg/info/721-marka\\_strandja](https://www.strandja.bg/bg/info/721-marka_strandja)

<sup>2</sup> An official news publication for a regional competition for a trademark titled “Quality Mark for Tourist Services”, organized by the Regional Tourist Association (RTA) ‘Stara Planina’. The

competition aims to stimulate the improvement of quality in tourist services and products within the region, which is a key factor in enhancing the competitiveness of the local tourism product and fostering a distinctive regional identity: <https://www.bhra-bg.org/en/novini/archive/1177>

providing tourism services in accommodations and dining and entertainment establishments. The “Attractions” category involves offering additional services focused on nature. The “Tourist treks” category offers treks aimed at observing and engaging with natural and cultural heritage in the region. To date, 30 entities have been certified, including 29 accommodation facilities and one tourist attraction. (Directorate of Strandja Nature Park, n.d.).

### 3. Adaptation and testing of Regional Quality Certification: The Example of Radomir Municipality

Creating unique destination branding propositions is the foundation of competitiveness in rural areas (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004). Achieving quality branding begins with assessing the current situation of the destination, setting positioning goals, and developing a strategy to achieve these goals.

The first stage in building a destination brand is establishing the core values of the destination, which must be enduring, relevant and meaningful to potential tourists. (Roy & Cornwell, 2003) When determining its competitive advantages, available resources and consumer demand segments, it is essential to understand the quality of experiences the destination offers. The second stage in developing the destination’s commercial reputation is defining the brand’s meaning. The third stage involves gathering consumer feedback, evaluating brands both rationally and emotionally based on criteria such as trust, experience, and dignity. The final phase establishes brand loyalty and a sense of belonging to the brand among consumers (D’Alessandro & Warfare, 2001:14).

Sustainable rural tourism strategies can be used as a means of developing and conserving destinations. In his article, Brian Lane (1994), one of the leading figures in the field of rural and sustainable tourism, explores the potential of sustainable rural tourism strategies as a dual tool for development and conservation. He points out that rural tourism, when it is properly planned and managed, can bring significant benefits to both local communities and the natural environment.

Based on the developed quality certification system for the Regional Trademark Strandja and reviewed literature sources, the author adapted the methodology in her dissertation and developed it in her monographies (Aleksova, 2019; Aleksova, 2021). She created a concept for a regional quality trademark (Aleksova, 2022), and linked the theory of destination branding with practical examples of local brand identity (Alexova & Ognyanova, 2023). The author’s concepts for applying the certification system in the non-developed rural areas, are included in the strategic and programmatic documents for sustainable tourism development in the municipalities of Botevgrad, Kostinbrod, Gorna Malina, Chiprovtsi, Radomir, and Bozhurishte. However, as of now, the only destination with certified tourism facilities and local producer products is Radomir Municipality.

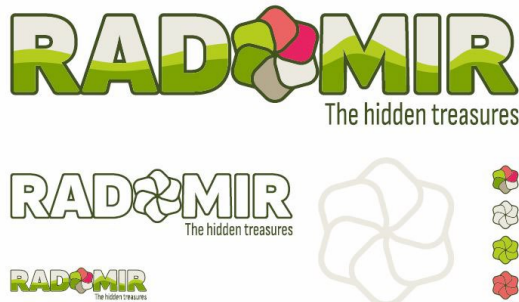
To implement voluntary quality certification in tourism in Radomir Municipality<sup>3</sup>, a combination of applied scientific methods was used, corresponding to the interdisciplinary and heterogeneous nature of the study: review of literature and other official information sources; inventory of tourism resources, identification of their interconnections, and assessment of local resources; spatial analysis of resource potential; assessment of stakeholders’ attitudes toward developing Radomir as a tourism destination through interviews with local authorities, opinion leaders, and cultural figures.

The main task was to formulate a shared vision and to create a foundation for building a sustainable tourism destination brand for Radomir Municipality. Based on the analyses, a font-based logo was created – the name “Radomir” with additional elements and the slogan “Hidden Treasures” (Fig. 1), which was created on the base on the use of described sociological methods. The main symbol is the wild peony, characteristic of the region. The design of the “Radomir Trademark” certificates includes additional symbols for different categories (Fig. 2). The message “Radomir – Hidden Treasures” fully reflects the diversity of lesser-known cultural and natural assets in the municipality, sparking curiosity, inquisitiveness, and an adventurous spirit among tourists, encouraging interest in exploring this lesser-known rural tourism destination (Aleksova & Ognyanova, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Source for more information: <https://bgtourism.bg/261022-radomir-tiristicheski-brand/> This source is a news article published by a specialized (bgtourism.bg, 2022) tourist media which covers the certification of the first tourist sites, cultural institutions, and local businesses in Radomir Municipality with a

voluntary quality mark in tourism. The publication is of particular significance to the present study, as the introduction of this mark is a direct result of the scientific research and model testing for a regional quality mark carried out by the author of this paper (Alexova) and her team.

FIGURE 1. TOURISM LOGO AND SLOGAN OF THE RADOMIR DESTINATION



Source: Author's development and design of Vihra Ognyanova, PRIM Design Ltd, 2022

The initiative for a regional quality trademark in tourism to support local businesses was implemented in three main directions: regional products, cultural institutions, and tourism facilities. A presentation of the project results and a ceremonial awarding of the first ten quality certificates took place in October 2022 during the official town celebrations<sup>4</sup> (See.bg, 2022).

FIGURE 2. QUALITY CERTIFICATES “RADOMIR TRADEMARK”



Source: Author's development and design of Vihra Ognyanova, PRIM Design Ltd, 2022

Certification systems for the municipalities of Botevgrad, Gorna Malina, and Chiprovtsi have also been conceptually developed by the author, but

there is still a lack of commitment from local authorities for their implementation (Alexova & Ognyanova, 2023). Botevgrad and Gorna Malina trademarks are a result from author's researches (Aleksova, 2019; Aleksova, 2022), corresponding to their tourism logos visualization. The destination brand for Chiprovtsi (Aleksova, 2021), both the certificates and its visual identity, have already been designed (Fig. 3).

FIGURE 3. EXAMPLES FOR REGIONAL TRADEMARKS IN OTHER MUNICIPALITIES



Trademark for quality in tourism Botevgrad Municipality by Ina Marinova, 2018

Trademark for quality Gorna Malina – Green Municipality by Mihail Tanev, 2021

Quality certificate Chiprovtsi Trademark by Vihra Ognyanova, 2021

The implementation of the developed concepts in the sustainable tourism strategies of these municipalities can contribute to their positioning, development and preservation (Lane, 1994).

## Conclusion

The modern tourist seeks a diverse tourism product combining multiple types of tourism and tied to experiences. They primarily gather information from the internet, have varied interests, and are curious about discovering new information. They are inclined to purchase local products related to the destination and regional goods. They need access to reliable information to make informed choices, are critical, and tend to share their experiences by creating content for various online channels. In doing so, they influence the overall perception of the destination and may act as “advertising agents” for the region. (Temelkova & Aleksova, 2013)

The belief that destination branding encompasses the entirety of perceptions consumers

<sup>4</sup> Source for more information: <https://see.bg/news/radomir-se-promotira-s-nov-turisticheski-brand-i-regionalna> A news article from tourist' news portal provides a comprehensive account of the certification of the first tourist sites, cultural institutions, and local businesses in Radomir Municipality with a voluntary quality mark

in tourism. Significantly, the publication delves into the details of the scientific study and the successful model approbation conducted by the author of this paper (Alexova) and her team, which directly led to the creation and implementation of this regional quality mark.

have about their experiences associated with a specific place should lead to effective management of these perceptions and experiences, ensuring lasting value for the destination, its partners, and its customers. (D'Allessandro & Warfare, 2001:14) Therefore, commercial reputation must be built at every point of contact between consumers and the destination and managed to establish the destination's brand identity.

Small municipalities, rural destinations, national and nature parks in Bulgaria have all the prerequisites for developing sustainable tourism, focusing on preserved nature, the aesthetic qualities of the landscape, and the traditional culture and lifestyle of local communities. The efforts of various stakeholders to build suitable tourism infrastructure, conduct training, and carry out promotional and interpretive activities further contribute to this goal. At the same time, there are several negative factors, such as poor infrastructure, the location and accessibility of tourism facilities, the demographic structure of the local population, low economic development etc.

Sustainable tourism development must rely on partnerships between local authorities, local businesses, and other stakeholders committed to establishing a regional brand for maximum impact. Only through this approach recognition and trust in the products and services offered, can be achieved among Bulgarian and international tourists. The local community, in turn, will benefit from tourism development as a connecting economic sector, providing alternative livelihoods and direct year-round income locally.

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