

# **Destination branding challenges in the multiethnic context: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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## **Introduction**

Destination branding is still a relatively an underinvestigated phenomenon, especially the influence of destination branding on the destination competitiveness. However, the current body of knowledge provides growing evidence that destination branding has a significant impact on destination competitiveness. The process of destination branding, which is a very complex process in itself, becomes even more complex in the context of those destinations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have multiethnic character. Given the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country of three constituent peoples (ethnic groups), and therefore is characterized by very complex and complicated governmental structures and administrative-territorial organization, the question arises how is it possible to efficiently implement tourism destination branding process in such a complex environment. Taking into account all the constitutional and legislative complexities, the lack of jurisdictions on the national level and the overlapping jurisdictions on the lower levels of government and significant fragmentation and functional incoherence of the

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governmental institutions, it can be concluded that the tourism branding process of Bosnia and Herzegovina will face with many challenges.

In order to successfully implement the destination branding process, it is necessary to establish and strengthen the cooperation between the relevant governmental institutions and to harmonize legislative framework, all with the goal of presenting Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single tourism brand which will no longer be associated with former Yugoslavia or with the past war conflicts. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to explore the role that rich cultural diversity and multiethnicity might play in the destination branding process of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to some authors (Van den Berghe, 1994; Grünewald, 2006) cultural and ethnic characteristics for specific ethnic groups, which define them in opposition to other ethnic groups, can become important elements of overall tourism destination appeal or destination image. The hypothesis that multiethnic wealth can represent one of the most important attributes of overall destination appeal and destination image is also demonstrated in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina in a research conducted by Skoko (2012). The research results showed that the multiethnic character of the country and its rich cultural diversity are some of the most distinctive features associated with the image of Bosnia and Herzegovina among the countries in the region. Having this in mind, this paper analyzes the potential of cultural diversity and multiethnicity to become one of the most important tourism attractions and branding attributes, regardless of the fact that it currently represents one of the greatest obstacles to a comprehensive and systematic branding of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single tourism destination.

## **Literature review**

Destination marketing and destination brand development today have become strong strategic tools due to the growing competition among destinations. According to Kotler & Keller (2009) and the American Marketing Association (2012), a brand is a 'name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers'. The UNWTO (2009) defines 'destination brand' as a destination's positioning in the mind of potential tourists and destination's competitive identity. It is what makes a destination distinctive and memorable and what differentiates it from all others. Tourism destination brand is also presented by country name, flag, and related symbols (Tasci, Gartner & Cavusgil, 2007).

In the last 30 years branding has become a very important marketing approach which involves many heterogeneous stakeholders, who must collaborate in order to achieve a successful outcome (Green, 2005). On the other hand, destination branding is still a 'young' field of knowledge. Croatian authors Došen, Vranešević and Prebežac published the first article about the need for destination branding in 1998 (Pike, 2009). The need for place branding can also be explained as an evolution from place marketing, but even if place branding is clearly linked to place marketing, it is a separate field of study and practice in its own right (Govers, 2011). Although destination

branding is a vital management function, most researches have only focused on destination image (Boo, Busser & Baloglu, 2009), which is actually a product of destination branding.

Kotler, Bowen and Makens (2006) argue that the products and the brand are extremely important for the destination success, and the destination must constantly manage its products. In order to be widely recognized, destinations don't need to have some spectacular attractions (Kotler et al., 2006), it's essential to have 'something' and to manage that in the best possible way. Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) pointed out that a brand has become the key for destination success, along with products and price. Zenker & Braun (2010) defined the destination brand, similar to Ritchie and Crouch (2003), as 'a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design'.

When it comes to destination branding process, there is almost no difference between product branding, except that destination branding is a more complex process. In order to achieve a successful destination brand, destinations have to go through all phases of destination branding process. This process includes target groups' definition, destination competition analysis, SWOT analysis, definition of vision, destination brand building, destination brand integration into the social, tourism, economic and political sphere, destination brand communication to all previously defined target groups (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 2000; Anholt, 2007; Paliaga, 2007; ETC/UNWTO, 2009).

Although it is logical that destination branding is one of the factors that influence destination competitiveness, there is still no clear linkage between destination competitiveness and destination branding. It is partially mentioned in two most known destination competitiveness models. On one hand, according to Ritchie and Crouch (2003), positioning/branding is a part of destination policy, planning and development dimension, while destination brand 'conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination and it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience'. On the other hand, Dwyer and Kim (2003) recognized destination positioning and clarity of destination image as variables that influence destination competitiveness, but they don't discuss destination branding process explicitly.

### **Multiethnic features of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a specific country in many ways, especially because of its unusual administrative, legal, political and territorial organization, which makes Bosnia and Herzegovina a truly unique country in the world. Constitutional structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which defines central government and its authorities, is the result of the document called General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted in December of 1995, which divides Bosnia and Herzegovina into two major parts, the Federation of Bosnia and

Herzegovina (51% of the territory) and the Republic of Srpska (49% of the territory). The two abovementioned territorial entities both have their own constitutions, that must be in accordance with the constitution of the entire Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Besides this, the third part of Bosnia and Herzegovina is Brčko District, which represents an independent administrative-territorial unit, and which is also the result of 'international' solution from the year 2000, in which the former town of Brčko with its near surroundings became an independent territorial district on the basis of international arbitration (Final Award of the Arbitral Tribunal for Dispute over Inter-Entity Boundary in Brčko Area).

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of ten cantons (Una-Sana Canton, Posavina Canton, Tuzla Canton, Zenica-Doboj Canton, Bosnian Podrinje Canton, Central Bosnia Canton, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, West Herzegovina Canton, Sarajevo Canton and Hercegbosnia Canton) that are administratively subdivided into 80 municipalities. The legislative body of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Parliamentary Assembly which consists of two houses: the House of Representatives and the House of People. The executive authority consists of the President and two Vice-Presidents and the government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The city of Sarajevo is the capital of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the capital of the entire Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Republic of Srpska is an administrative-territorial entity consisting of 61 municipalities and towns. The legislative body in the Republic of Srpska is the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska. The executive authority is in the domain of the President and two Vice-Presidents of the Republic of Srpska and in the domain of the government of the Republic of Srpska. Banja Luka is the capital of the Republic of Srpska.

The area of Brčko District is under arbitration and was not annexed to any of the two abovementioned entities. Based on the decision of the International Commission from the late 2000, it was placed under the administrative authority of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a separate district. Brčko District has its own multi-ethnic government, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Executive Committee and the police forces.

Four 'levels' of administrative, legal, political and territorial organization, with each level having its own separate set of legal norms (constitution, different laws and regulations) are, to a large extent, reflected in all segments of everyday life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It should also be noted that those four organizational levels are not levels in a classical sense of the word, which would suggest that one level is subordinate to another level, although this situation is not completely excluded.

Such a fragmented and complex administration, as well as the absence of strong vertical and horizontal coordination are, in everyday life, most commonly reflected through: underdeveloped institutional capacities that are additionally divided between state, entity, cantonal and municipal levels of government; underdeveloped economy / economic policy and legislation; unclear definition of authorities and responsibilities of various institutions in charge of economic

development and the lack of cooperation between entities, cantons, municipalities and various interest groups.

An additional problem is that there is no clearly defined national strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina that would provide guidelines for socio-economics and answer questions regarding the current political and economic position of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would also define basic national goals and the vision for its future development. Accurately defined objectives and clearly defined economic strategy on a national level would significantly contribute to the presentation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the positive light to the international community and would therefore significantly improve competitive position of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the global market. Having in mind all of the abovementioned, it is clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet become a sufficiently attractive destination for foreign investments and that this country has to put more effort in order to achieve a higher level of competitiveness on the world market.

### **Destination branding challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

In order to build a recognizable brand of any country as a tourism destination, it is primarily necessary to define ‘What does that country represent?’, ‘What can it offer?’ and ‘What is the message that the country wants to send about itself to the world?’. Even though answering those questions should be the most important and, at the same time, the most difficult step in the destination branding process, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina the most important and most difficult step is to establish cooperation between different constituent ethnic groups and to ensure that the entire country is represented as a single tourism destination in the international tourism market. International tourists from long haul markets sometimes even have difficulties perceiving the difference between the different neighboring countries in the same regions of the world (e.g. Southeast Europe), let alone differences between different administrative regions within the boundaries of the same country, as is often the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since the organizational structure of national and regional tourism organizations within Bosnia and Herzegovina is not unified, coherent and systematic, current tourism promotion of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not present Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single tourism destination on the international tourism market and, therefore, does not result in positive and desirable effects. This situation is largely due to the fact that each of the constituent people / ethnic groups implement their own, partial promotion of tourism offer, but those promotional activities are not coordinated and harmonized and, therefore, fail to present and brand Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single tourism destination on the international tourism market. Two parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska) both have their own national and regional / local tourism organizations responsible for tourism promotion, while Brčko District has the office within Brčko District government, which is in charge of tourism, culture and sport.

The role of the Tourism board of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is to consolidate the entire tourism offer of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina cantonal tourism boards (10 cantonal tourism boards) are responsible for the promotion of tourism for each canton and those promotional activities are not mutually aligned. It is interesting to notice that the Tourism board of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is presenting tourism offer of entire Bosnia and Herzegovina divided into five regions (Sarajevo region, Herzegovina region, Central Bosnia region, Northwest region and Northeast region, see picture 1) and those regions are not based on its administrative, legal, political and territorial organization. Through these promotional activities, Bosnia and Herzegovina is presented as a specific, heart-shaped country, with rich cultural and historic heritage, preserved and diversified nature, which can be a basis for different forms of special interest tourism development. However, the current cultural diversity and multi-ethnicity, that stems from cultural and ethnic characteristics for specific ethnic groups (constituent peoples), despite its huge tourism potential, still does not play an important role in promotion of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a tourism destination.

*Picture 1. Tourism regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina*



Legend:

1. **Sarajevo region** – 'A place close to heart'
2. **Herzegovina region** – 'A taste of the Adriatic'
3. **Central Bosnia region** – 'The seat of the ancient Bosnian kingdom'
4. **Northwest region** – 'Krajina: The green emerald'
5. **Northeast region** – 'A home away from home'

Source: Official web site of Tourism board of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (<http://www.bhtourism.ba>), accessed in April 2013.

On the other hand, through its promotional activities the Tourism organization of the Republic of Srpska clearly communicates administrative borders of the Republic of Srpska, as well as specific forms of tourism that the Republic of Srpska is trying to develop (adventure tourism, cultural and historic heritage, fishing, hunting etc.), without any effort to incorporate and to align those promotional activities with the rest of the tourism offer in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to present Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single tourism destination. The main goal of the Tourism

organization of the Republic of Srpska is to promote the Republic of Srpska tourism, while local tourism boards are responsible for tourism promotion on local levels, development of tourism programs, development of tourism strategy and master plans, as well as improvements of conditions for tourists' stay and accommodation in specific tourist destinations.

Picture 2. Tourism map of Republic of Srpska



Source: Official web site of Tourism organization of Republic of Srpska (<http://www.turizamrs.org>), accessed in April 2013.

The previously described shortcomings and characteristics of Bosnia and Herzegovina tourism promotion are mostly the result of complicated administrative-territorial structure. In order to develop coherent and meaningful tourism brand of Bosnia and Herzegovina, tourism promotion activities should be harmonized in order to develop destination brand and to achieve synergic effects, since the current form of tourism promotion is confusing and counterproductive. Therefore, it is necessary to stimulate and encourage the institutional and legislative changes aimed at all segments of the organization and promotion of tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina has a beautiful and still very well-preserved and diverse nature, rich cultural and historical heritage, high-quality eno-gastronomic offer, but what is most important, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country known by its diversified and multi-ethnic heritage, which has a huge tourism potential, but is very often unjustly neglected and marginalized.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has a high potential for tourism development, such as excellent and well-preserved natural heritage, rich history and diverse cultural and traditional

heritage and diverse cuisine, those potentials are still not fully utilized. This situation is reflected in the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is still not recognized by its valuable tourism potentials in the international community and is still very often associated with the unfortunate war conflict from the early 1990s.

Based on the previously expressed points of view, and based on the authors' experience while working on various consultancy projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it can be concluded that the major obstacle for a successful positioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a tourism destination is its multi-ethnic diversity, which consequently affects the administrative-territorial organization. However, at the same time multi-ethnicity represents one of the most important and most recognizable features of Bosnia and Herzegovina and has the ability and the potential to become one of the key attributes for market positioning and branding of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a tourism destination on the international tourism market. Destination branding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina is additionally hindered by the fact that there are no relevant governmental institutions on the national level (eg. the Ministry of tourism and the National tourism organization).

However, in the end it should be stressed out that, despite all previously mentioned limitations, Bosnia and Herzegovina has a bright perspective when it comes to the future of tourism development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council predictions and UNWTO tourism development vision (Tourism 2020 Vision), tourism should become a strategic industry in the following period in Bosnia and Herzegovina, greatly contributing to the economic prosperity, economic growth and development of the national economy. Finally, all this will be possible only if and when Bosnia and Herzegovina recognizes and evaluates all of its tourism potentials (one of the most important being multi-ethnicity) and, through horizontal and vertical integration and cooperation of all relevant government institutions, begins to present and to brand itself as a single tourism destination.

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