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Report on promoting the establishment of Tourism Information Offices

D i v i s i o n f o r T o u r i s m

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Content

Introduction	2
Role of tourist information offices	2
Municipality of Peja	3
Tourist Office in Peja	3
Municipality of Junik	7
Junik Regional Centre	7
Municipality of Gjakova	8
Tourist Office in Gjakova	8
Municipality of Prizren	8
Tourist Information Office in Prizren	9
Municipality of Rahovec	10
Tourist Information Office in Rahovec	10
Municipality of Gjilan	11
Municipality of Novo Brdo.....	12
Municipality of Shterpca	13
Analysis of findings in municipalities.....	14
Conclusions and recommendations	16

Introduction

The aim of this report is to increase awareness and encourage local administrative level to establish tourism information offices that would provide information and promote values and tourist destinations of respective municipalities to domestic and foreign visitors. In order to obtain information regarding the state of play of tourist information offices (hereinafter referred to as TIO), these offices were visited and supervisors/employees in these offices were interviewed. Whereas, in municipalities where such offices are not currently operational, or are temporarily closed for different reasons, meetings with relevant departments at municipal level have been held, and also experiences were exchanged for the purpose of closer cooperation in this activity.

Such units for provision of tourist information, which are designated as tourist information offices, regional centres or other organizations, have proved successful in the following municipalities: Peja, Prizren, Gjakova and Junik.

Some of the municipalities stated that during their activities for developing tourism, they have established such units for providing tourism information in different forms, mostly public-private partnerships, however during the reporting period, such units were not functional. These municipalities are as follows: Rahoveci, Shterpce, Novo Brdo, Gjilan, Prishtina and one of the three offices in Prizren.

Role of tourist information offices

The visitor information centre or tourist information office is a location that provides tourist information to tourists visiting the country or an area of the country.

Touristic information centres aim to provide information and advice to tourists on what to visit and do in a particular city, area or a location. Additionally, they can offer bookings for various tours, visits, or sell gifts in form of souvenirs, etc. Some may organize specific events, and generate marketing opportunities for tourism businesses. These centres can be:

- A visitor centre in a special attraction or place of special interest, as a landmark, in a national park or state park, providing information (such as track maps, information and camping sites, staff contacts, educational exhibitions and artefacts (for example, about natural or cultural history).
- A tourist information centre providing visitors a location with information on attractions within an area, settlements, maps and other tourism-related items. Often, these centres are placed in airports or at other ports of entry by local government or chambers of commerce.

A joint visitor centre provides visitors with an easily accessible window to the corporation.

The visitor centre's role has developed rapidly over the past 10 years, thereby acquiring more experience, and telling the story of the country or the brand it represents. Many of them have contributed to improving the image of respective destinations.

The staffs employed in these tourist information centres is diverse, as is the management and staff recruitment, networking, event planning, and marketing, as well as providing day-to-day management of the centre.

Municipality of Peja

Tourist Office in Peja

The tourist information office in the municipality of Peja, which is part of the Tourism Sector in the Directorate for Economic Development, commenced functioning in 2009. This is a project initiated by the tourism sector and funded from the own budget of the Municipality of Peja. The project of establishing such an office is also substantiated by strategic documents such as the "Economic Development Strategy 2013-2017" and regional strategic documents developed together with the Rural Development Agency (RDA).

The idea of opening an office also includes the establishment of a tourism infrastructure that would serve as information and guidance centre to potential visitors in terms of tourist destinations within the municipality of Peja, provide information on tourism opportunities and attractions, natural recreational opportunities, visits to cultural heritage, and directly promote tourism in the Municipality of Peja. This project was implemented following some training provided to the staff with regard to best European experiences and study visits to such countries (particularly to Trentino-Italy).

The office's main goal is to provide information on tourism opportunities in the municipality of Peja, but not only that, as this office also assists tourists by providing information about Kosovo and the wider region as well.

Organization of the Office

The information office is divided in two parts:

- Front office (Reception desk)
- Back Office (office for development, coordination and promotion of tourism in the municipality of Peja)

The Back Office in general has the most important role in managing the information office. It aims to gather all existing information in the municipality of Peja with regard to tourist potentials, opportunities for recreation and sports activities, events and festivals, organization of transport, promotion of tourist destination and tourist product, private initiatives etc. Also, this office arranges all of the aforementioned events for the purpose of processing and informing, and passes them along to the other part known as the front office.

Front Office: The reception is also a key point where tourists are contacted directly. So, the front office is the centre of providing information regarding opportunities, potentials and attractions, and other services existing in the municipality of Peja. All of the information provided by the person working at this office is received from the information processing office, which processes such data and transfers them to the reception.



Location

The premises or the location, which is of particular importance for such an office, is determined following the agreement with the municipality on transferring the administration to new location, whereby this office is now opened at the heart of the city thereby enjoying significant visibility. The office is located in the area of the municipality of Peja, which facilitates its work and expenses. Moreover, the municipality of Peja has another office, which forms part of the municipality, and is located at the entrance of the Rugova gorge.

Staff structure

From 2009 to 2016, two officials were engaged in this office, whereas upon the initiative of the mayor, who has placed greater focus on development of tourism, now there is a new staff structure. Currently there are 3 persons working full time at the office, and are considered as municipal staff. The office structure is comprised by staff positions or functions based on worldwide standards, which require such type of organization for this offices.

- Head of Tourism Sector
- Official for project development and tourist product
- Official for tourism promotion and communication

Budget

The tourism sector has its own budget, deriving from two main sources:

- Municipality's own source revenues
- Income from donations

The tourism sector has its own budget allocated by the Directorate for Economic Development, where 80% of the budget is foreseen for tourism development programs and is mainly investment in capital projects.

Also, this sector is not limited only to municipal budget since its personnel is trained in applying for projects, and consequently are awarded projects from different international organizations or ministries of the Government of Kosovo for implementing various development programs such as human resources training, building the infrastructure, and promoting tourism.

Functioning of the office

The Tourism Sector in Municipality of Peja is responsible for the proper management of the information office. The officials of this sector draft plans and plan works related to the office in order to make the office as functional as possible. Hence, during the year, officials prepare promotional materials that are placed at the office and made available to visitors, as well as collect and process information in terms of seasonal activities, transport and access to destinations, installation of tourist signalling, organization of tourist fairs, projects about revitalization of cultural heritage etc. Consequently, the function of this office is to create a chain of cooperation between different sectors and civil society in order to channel investment and create new jobs and welfare for citizens.

Tourist offer

The tourist offer of the municipality of Peja is divided into three levels, depending on the visitors' requests:

1. The cross-border offer (Peaks of the Balkans), which may last up to 12 days
2. Regional projects that can last up to 7 days
3. Local offers that may be a weekend or even daily offers.

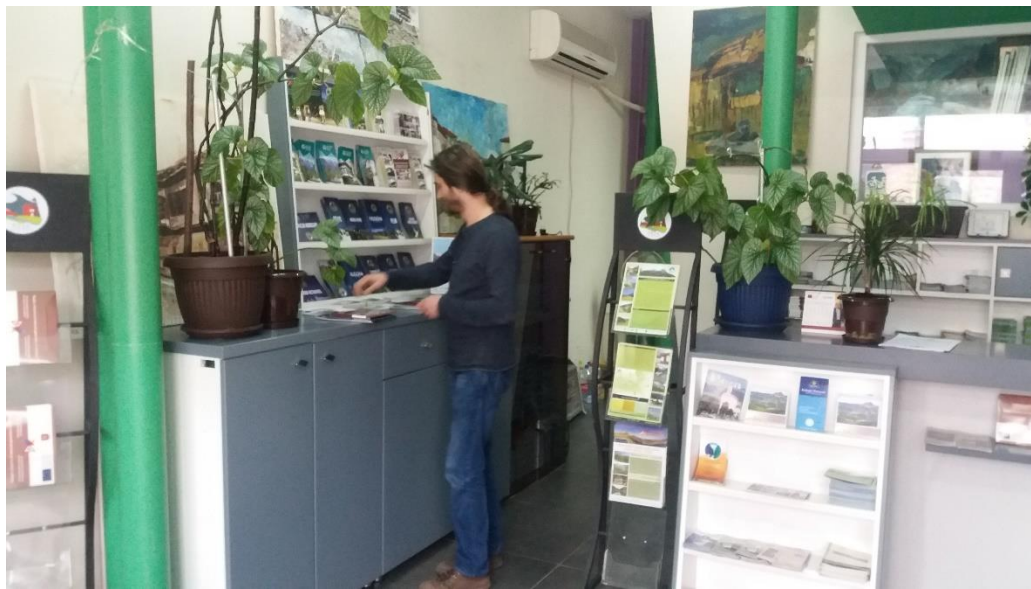
Statistics

This office is also responsible for monitoring tourist movements in the Municipality of Peja, information is gathered at the information office, and following statistical movements at Kosovo level, whereby the main source is the Kosovo Agency of Statistics.

Based on the data collected for 2016, we have 9179 visitors who sought information from this office.

Whereas if national statistics are to be analysed, one can notice that Peja is now in the second place in terms visitors with 33875 (per night) after Prishtina, which is the capital city of Kosovo.

Although this number is thought to be higher, we always rely on official statistics.



Challenges

The office's main challenge is the short working hours, considering that the office is open from 08.00h to 16.00h and does not work on weekends, while tourists require services even beyond these hours, and particularly during weekends. Although there is an office at the entrance of Rugova, which works longer hours, still it is necessary for the office at the centre to be open for longer hours, at least during the summer season.

With the aim of improving performance and increase service quality, the office conducts tourists' surveys on annual basis.

Other challenges identified for this destination include: lack of human capacities, road infrastructure, which still is not good, lack of electricity particularly in the Rugova region, insufficient promotion, and lack of organised participation at regional and international fairs.

Recommendations

The opening of such offices in this municipality has been very useful and has affected the increase of tourism turnover in the region of Peja due to increased number of visitors. Additionally, the office has also directly affected the promotion of private sector whereby private businesses (hotels, restaurants, tourist facilities, tour operators, guides, associations etc.) bring their offers and information to the office, thereby closer to the visitors, indicating that this office serves as a chain of public and private sector co-operation.

Therefore, the staff of the office recommends other municipalities take a step forward and establish such offices, which would help create a network of information offices, whereby each tourist would be able to obtain information about Kosovo as a tourism destination as well as tourism opportunities that Kosovo has to offer.

Municipality of Junik

Regional Centre in Junik

The centre was established in 2012, whereas commenced functioning in 2013. Initially, with the support of CHWB and an EU project, a tower (kulla) that is part of cultural heritage was restored and regulated and arranged to function as a regional centre and a tourist information office.

This centre is a typical tower of the Dukagjini region, which was fitted with modern elements. It is intended to promote tourism in the Dukagjini valley, including the municipality of Junik, Deçan and Peja, by directly informing domestic and foreign tourists about tourist activities.

This centre provides visitors with informational materials such as brochures, guides and other documents on tourism in Dukagjini valley. The professional team organizes the visitors' stay by providing transport, accommodation, traditional food, and cultural visits accompanied by tour guides.

Functioning

This facility is used by the Municipality of Junik, while the Directorate of Economic Development covers only utilities (such as electricity, water and waste), whereas other expenditures have to be covered by the centre itself.

The centre operates as an NGO, and has 2 employees.

Challenges

The main challenge is to ensure sufficient revenue so that the office can continue to operate. This results because of the seasonal type of tourism, whereby during winter and autumn seasons there are not many activities, hence revenues are also limited.

Recommendations

The staff recommendation is that such tourist information offices should be funded and managed by respective municipalities, in order to be more sustainable.

Municipality of Gjakova

Tourist office in Gjakova

The Office was established in 2014 based on the heritage plan, and under the Heritage Forum. Later, a memorandum of cooperation was signed between the CHWB organisation, the Municipality of Gjakova and the ProKult organisation.

Initially there were two employees, but due to lack of funds now there is only one employee, and a number of volunteers.

The office is located at the entrance of the “Çarshia e Madhe” (Grand Bazaar) in Gjakova, at the tower of Abdullah Pashë Dreni, and as such has a good position.

The office coordinates with the Municipality and the Organisation in terms of all annual plans, which are related to the office.

The building is currently property of the municipality, but there is no support in terms of budget, and there is no annual plan to support the office.

The number of tourists is quite large and there are about 8,000-10,000 tourists on average over the year.

Currently the Municipality of Gjakova has no plan for opening new tourist information offices.

Challenges

The main challenge to the proper functioning of the office is the lack of financial support from the municipality, or any other source of funding, that would help accomplish its annual plans, particularly with regard to promotional materials.

Recommendations

The staff of the office recommends other municipalities to establish tourist information offices, as this is a requirement and a necessity of our time, but initially to ensure regular funding from the municipalities.

Municipality of Prizren

Tourist Information Offices in Prizren

The Directorate for Tourism and Economic Development launched a project titled "Info Centres" aimed at establishing tourist information offices. In 2016, following many difficulties, 3 tourist information offices were established, which were then given to EO to operate with them. Nowadays, only two of them are functional, since one could not continue its functioning due to financial deficiencies.

The Municipal Directorate provides the promotional materials to these offices, whereas in 2015 UNDP also supported the offices with promotional materials. UNDP also supported the Electronic Guides of some of the main cultural and historical monuments of Prizren, and equipped offices with inventory and other electronic equipment needed for the office.



The Municipality, through the Directorate for Tourism and Economic Development, covers only a symbolic part of buildings' rent, while the remaining part has to be covered by the operators. Employees in these offices are qualified in tourism profiles such as: tour operators and tourist

guides. This was one the conditions during the tendering process. Another condition for these offices is that they have to cooperate with the municipal tour guides, since the Municipality of Prizren recognises these guides as official guides as they were certified by a municipality managed program. The working hours in these offices are set by the municipality and vary according to seasons, whereby from 1st of April to 31st of October the office should be open from 9.00 to 22.00, while during the winter the working hours are from 10.00 to 20.00, and Monday is the day off.

Location

The two functioning offices have good locations at the centre of the city but with a distance of less than one kilometre from one-another. While the third office, which is no longer functional, was located in one of the suburban neighbourhoods of the city "Bazhdarhanja", namely at the east entrance to the city.

Challenges

Challenges identified by the staff of Tourist Information Offices were the lack of funds and inability to create sufficient revenues that would ensure the operation of the offices.

Recommendations

The recommendation from tourist offices in Prizren is that such offices should be a municipality structure and should be managed by the municipality, since in the beginning it is impossible to operate as independent offices.

Municipality of Rahovec

Tourist Information Office of Rahovec

The office was established in 2011 as a public-private partnership with support by USAID, in cooperation with the Municipality of Rahovec and wine producers. The Municipality funded the official (employee) of the office according to the obligations stipulated in the memorandum. The wine producers of Rahovec supplied the tourist information office with promotional materials in order to promote their wine products.

The aim of the project was to transform Rahovec, through the touristic office, into a wine tourism area and enable the strengthening of market linkages between local and international community, thereby increasing awareness about Rahovec, a region famous for its wine.

Along with the establishment of the office was also foreseen to be provided the tourist signalling for reaching the office, maps, office website, wine routes (information tables).

The office was located within the premises of a hotel, nearby to the municipal building of the Municipality of Rahovec at the centre of the city.

Due to some ownership issues with the office's premises, the municipality was forced to temporarily closedown the office. Therefore, at the time when the Tourism Division staff studied the work of the office, during April 2017, the office was closed, whereas the employee was transferred temporarily to the offices of the municipality.

According to municipal officials, the employee will stay there until a suitable location is found and the transfer to the new location occurs.

According to municipal sources, this office will be transferred to the Wine House, which is under the ownership of the municipality. This is being done since the main tourism products in Rahovec relate mainly to wine tourism and wine activities, therefore the location is supposed to be in those areas where tourist visits are more frequent.

Challenges

Funding required ensuring functioning of the office, the necessary technology, and the fact that the office is currently not functioning seem to be some of the challenges.

Recommendations

The establishment of such offices is recommended to be initiated and managed by the municipalities. The municipality should allocate annual funds for proper operation of the office.

Municipality of Gjilan

The municipality of Gjilan in its statute and strategy for economic development, and in cooperation with the Municipality of Çair, Macedonia, has foreseen the establishment of a craftsmen information office, which would also include tourist information office that would entail cross-border cooperation between the Municipality of Gjilan and Cair, however, the reason why such cooperation failed is due to lack of budget.

Previously, within the municipality and with the support of the European Commission, were opened two tourist information offices that made it easier for tourists to access and obtain information about tourist areas around the municipality, however, they were closed due to the lack of the adequate staff.

The only option for tourists to obtain information is by using the two applications, managed by the municipality, namely: - "Gjilani smart city" and - "Gjilani për mërgimtarët".

The "Gjilani për mërgimtarët" application was launched because this municipality has, on annual basis, declared the months of Diaspora, commencing in July and lasting until the end of August.

Recommendations

The Municipality of Gjilan has good potentials for developing certain types of tourism; recent investments by the private sector in tourism make the touristic offer of Gjilan attractive for domestic and international tourists.

The establishment of offices in this municipality would be very useful and would have an impact on increasing tourism turnover in Gjilan and increasing the number of visitors, whereby visitors would be sufficiently informed about natural resources, cultural heritage and other tourist destinations.

Municipality of Novo Brdo

In this municipality, tourism seems to be a sector of priority for development, and according to the Tourism Strategy for Novo Brdo, tourism has already started to develop, with a particular focus on rural tourism. The initiative for development of rural tourism in this municipality commenced with the help of a project from the European Commission during 2007-2008. Whereas, during 2009-2010, the Tourist Information Centre was built with the support of donors. In addition to rural tourism, this municipality has sufficient conditions for development of cultural tourism. The tourist information office was under the ownership of the municipality and functioned as long as there was donor support, but at later periods the municipality did not have the resources to continue such support. Namely, the municipality was unable of providing an official that would continue working at the tourist information office. Therefore, this office no longer functions.

While there are visits, particularly of domestic tourism, but also visits from internationals, it seems like the demand for provision of tourist information is evident. In this regard, the establishment of tourist information office seems to be necessary.

Challenges

Challenges seem to be as follows:

- Unqualified human resources to work in the tourism sector,
- At the level of municipality's institutional organization, competences in terms of tourism development are not well defined. There are ambiguities among municipal departments in terms of including the tourism sector within their scope of responsibilities. There is no department of tourism development.
- Lack of awareness in every level.

Recommendations

Based on experiences in this municipality, the following is recommended:

- the working staff in tourist information offices should have skills and abilities in the field of tourism, namely vocational trainings are required.
- the municipality should manage and support tourist information offices. These offices should function as structures derived from the respective municipality.
- the source of funding for the proper functioning of the offices should be well planned.
- the donor support is also necessary
- the municipality should establish a department or a directorate for development of tourism, and tourist information offices should be established within the framework of such organizational unit.

Municipality of Shterpce

Until two years ago, a Tourist Information Office existed, which operated within the Shterpce Tourist Organization. The establishment of this office was supported by donors. Its location was very convenient, at the entrance of Brezovica centre. Later, due to lack of funds, this office was closed and now no longer operates.

The municipality of Shterpce does not have human capacities working in the development of tourism. Within the municipality of Shterpce there is no organizational structure for tourism, however the leaders of economic development sector in this municipality pledge to have planed the reopening of a tourist information office in Shterpce, located at the centre of the town. The planned property is a municipal property and is planned to be provided for use with PPP.

This municipality does not have official statistics, while according to the statements, it commits that the request to visit this municipality and particularly the tourist centre Brezovica is very large.

Challenges

A challenge seems to be the source of funding for the functioning of the offices, the required technology and the temporary non-functioning of the office itself.

Another challenge is the lack of the qualified human recourses.

Recommendations

The opening of the office in this area should occur as soon as possible. The donors and the government should support its opening. The working staff should undergo vocational training.

Analysis of Findings in Municipalities

City (Municipality)	Functional / Non-functional	Organisation	Structure of working staff	Budget	Public / Private / PPP	Location	Main challenge
Prishtina	No	-	-	-	-	-	-
Peja	Yes	Very good	Very good	Very good (Municipal budget)	Public (Municipality of Peja)	Very good	Insufficient working hours for visitors
Junik	Yes	Sufficient	Sufficient	Poor	PPP	Sufficient	Financing
Gjakova	Yes	Good	Sufficient	Sufficient	PPP	Sufficient	Financing
Prizren	Yes	Good	Poor	Poor	PPP	Good	Financing
Rahovec	No (Currently closed, possibility to reopen)	Good	Sufficient	Sufficient	PPP	Good	Financing
Gjilan	No (2 offices some time ago)	Poor	Poor	Poor	PPP	Very good	Financing , Organisation by Municipality
Novo Brdo	No (Closed time ago)	Poor	Poor	Poor	PPP	Good	Financing, Organisation by Municipality
Shterpce	No (Closed 2 years ago)	Poor	Poor	Poor	PPP	Very good	Financing, Organisation by Municipality
Mitrovica	No	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table: Comparison of municipalities in terms of Tourist Information Offices functioning

The comparative table summarizes the findings from the municipalities that were part of this research.

Based on this table, it is noticed that the municipalities of Prishtina and Mitrovica and their region do not possess TIO. In municipalities of Shterpce, Novo Brdo and Gjilan, such offices have ceased functioning (following the depletion of donor funds) because the municipalities were unable to keep such offices functional. The lack of funding was a major challenge, but the concerned municipalities have no internal organisation for tourism and face staff shortage in the tourism sector. The office in Rahovec, despite currently being closed, it is likely that the municipality will soon reactivate this office. In Prizren, the functioning of the offices seems to be somewhat good, however funding still remain a challenge to the proper functioning of these offices (2 functional offices out of a total of 3). Similarly, the office in Gjakova in general works in a satisfactory manner, yet funding remains the main challenge. The tourist office in Peja, seems to function very well according to the table, as it is managed and financed by the municipality. While the challenge seems to be the insufficient working hours (for tourists) as this office works in accordance with administrative work schedule, but this is an issue that municipality should be able to regulate.

It is also noted that only the TIO in the Municipality of Peja was established and functions in a public form and seems to be functioning better compared with other offices in comparative municipalities that have a mixed form of public-private partnership.

Conclusions and recommendations

These recommendations and conclusions are based on findings from interviews with TIOs and municipal directorates for tourism or economic development.

- Municipalities that have a larger tourist potential or are more frequented by visitors, and particularly municipalities such as Prishtina, Shterpce, Novo Brdo, Deçan etc. should create conditions for establishment of TIOs. These municipalities, within the internal organisation, should create organisational units for development of tourism (directorates or sectors) from which TIOs are managed. Whereas, other municipalities with less tourism potential are recommended to have at least one official within the municipality that deals with tourism.
- In all municipalities, with the exception of the municipality of Peja, the staff of existing TIOs needs training and capacity building, therefore it is recommended to provide vocational training for employees working in the new as well as in existing TIOs.

Based on the findings in the field, it is concluded that the need for opening new TIOs is as follows:

- At least one office for the region of Prishtina, located downtown of Prishtina and a tourist information point at Prishtina Airport;
- At least one tourist information office in the Region of Mitrovica, which includes Mitrovica, Vushtrri, Skenderaj, Zubin Potok, Zvecan and Leposavic;
- At least one Tourist Information Office in the Region of Gjilan, which will serve to this region, and a separate office for the municipality of Novo Brdo;

We recommend finding a manner for functionalizing all offices that have, from time to time, operated but which are currently not functional. As it can be seen, the best way toward sustainable operation is the public-private partnership, whereby the municipality should provide the office location and its maintenance.

Based on field analysis and findings, it is noted that PPP did not function very well since the staff could not generate sufficient revenue in order for the office to operate. It is therefore recommended that at this stage, the municipalities with the greatest tourist potential initially offer the opening of TIOs with Public Statute, whereby the municipality manages these offices and ensures their functioning. This would be an incentive for

development of TIOs within the capacity building in municipalities and development of tourism as a priority sector.

Whereas, in the other stage of office advancement and development of tourism in the concerned municipalities, namely after conditions have been and staff has acquired through trainings the required experience to function independently from the municipality, than it can be moved to the other stage whereby such offices are managed in a public-private partnership – PPP.