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## ETHNOTOURISM AS A TOOL FOR REGIONAL ECONOMY DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF MARI EL

*The paper is devoted to the evaluation of regional touristic potential using the case of the Republic of Mari El in Russian Federation. The object is the establishment of the Program of the Development of Tourism using the concept of ethnotourism.*

*Keywords: program, ethnotourism, regional touristic potential.*

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## ЕТНОТУРИЗМ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ РОЗВИТКУ РЕГІОНАЛЬНОЇ ЕКОНОМІКИ: НА ПРИКЛАДІ РЕСПУБЛІКИ МАРІЙ ЕЛ

*У статті проведено оцінювання туристичного потенціалу регіонів на прикладі Республіки Марій Ел в Росії. Розроблено Програму розвитку туризму з використанням концепції етнотуризму.*

*Ключові слова: програма, етнотуризм, туристичний потенціал регіонів.*

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## ЭТНОТУРИЗМ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ РАЗВИТИЯ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ЭКОНОМИКИ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ РЕСПУБЛИКИ МАРИЙ ЭЛ

*В статье проведена оценка туристического потенциала регионов на примере Республики Марий Эл в России. Разработана Программа развития туризма с использованием концепции этнотуризма.*

*Ключевые слова: программа, этнотуризм, туристический потенциал регионов.*

### Introduction.

The contemporary Russian approaches to regional tourism have been developed on the basis of Western academic tradition. Anna Y. Alexandrova of the Moscow State University was among the first scholars to develop the touristic clusters approach in Russia (Alexandrova, 2007), basing on the "Porterian", or business clusters concept (Porter, 1990). The clustering approach in tourism development has been widely recognized worldwide. One of the successful examples is the South African Tourism Cluster Project (South African Tourism Collaborative Action Process, 1999).

Russia, with its strong tendency for centralization and weak initiative on the local level, had to wait for more than decade until the government issued the Federal Target Program "Development of domestic tourism in the Russian Federation" (Federal Target Program, 2011), which, in its core, is certainly a clustering concept product. The development of regional tourism clusters is seen through the growth of the "root businesses", or touristic companies creating original product, while supporting businesses (hotels, restaurants, transportation, trade, and entertainment) would sell them their services thus forming a cluster. Collaboration at the local level is seen there as the necessary condition for the competition at the global level. Many Russian academicians support the touristic clustering concept; for those interested we can refer to several works issued in the 2000-s (Kovalev, 2011; Shabalina, 2009; Sokolov, 2010).

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Another concept of regional tourism that finds its promoters in Russian academia is the destination concept, developed by Prof. Neil Leiper of Massey University, New Zealand (Leiper, 1989). In Russian (and post-Soviet in general) discourse, the destination concept was also interpreted (Aleynikova, Golovchan, 2008; Morozov, 2006). The Smolensk University of Humanities is now hosting a school of Regional Tourism Studies led by Prof. Larisa Mazhar that is focusing on the construct of regional touristic and recreational systems (Mazhar, 2011).

The concept of ethnotourism is well known to Russian scholars, and it is becoming more and more popular due to natural cultural and ethnic diversity of the country, and features of the growing federalism in the interior development in the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when almost all "ethnic" republics (autonomies) of the Russian Federation have launched their own strategies and programs of tourism development, using the ethnic factor as the key one.

#### **Official approaches to regional tourism development.**

Russia with its huge territory and great ethnic and cultural diversity can be considered as one of the prospective destinations for ethnotourism, although distant regions of Siberia and the Far East are much more known to the Western public for their indigenous minorities than Mari El in European part of the country, being much closer to Moscow as the key international logistic hub. Republic of Mari El is the part of PFO (Privolzhsky Federalnyi Okrug – the Volga Federal District) – one of the 8 federal districts of the Russian Federation.

According to the "Strategy of social-economy development of the PFO to the year 2020", the current position of tourism in the regional economy is described as "difficult", although PFO is on the third place in Russian internal tourism rating (2,5 mln. people per year, or 10% of Russian internal tourism). The development of the PFO's internal tourism is cramped by some factors: poor tourism infrastructure, lack of modern hotels, and investment failures and deficit of touristic attractions. The Strategy is planning to launch new large investment touristic project named "Big Volga", which is expected to have both Russian and international scale in future. All 14 regions of the PFO will be participants of this project. The new touristic "ring" route will connect the cities situated on the Volga and Kama rivers: Nizhniy Novgorod, Kazan, Samara, Ulyanovsk, Saratov, Izhevsk, and others (The Strategy, 2011).

One of the touristic attraction factors of the PFO are cultural traditions: national holidays, preservation of traditional arts and crafts, folklore and traditions of many ethnic groups populating the area: the Tatars in the Republic of Tatarstan, the Bashkirs in the Republic Bashkortostan, the Mari in the republic of Mari El, Erzya and Moksha Mordva people in the Republic of Mordovia, the Udmurts in the Udmurt Republic etc.). In this case, any tourist can combine recreation with studying the historic and cultural heritage. Literally any local community in the region nowadays shows the renaissance of traditional arts and decision of serious social tasks, for example, creation of new jobs, growth of living standards, improvement of touristic infrastructure.

#### **The case of Mari El.**

The Republic of Mari El is one of the regions of the PFO. According to the Independent Ecology Rating Agency (NERA) of Russia, it holds the third position among Russian regions by the level of ecological safety. Moreover, the Republic of

Mari El is one of those many "national" subjects of Russian Federation that enjoys a certain degree of ethnic autonomy. But there is a feature that makes Mari people standing out of other ethnic groups in European part of Russia: paganism. Mari people have kept their unique pagan religion based on the cults of nature: sacred birch grooves are still the temples for the modern Mari as they used to be through the centuries. Mari people continue the ancient practices of paganism: they remember their gods, conduct ceremonies of praying and sacrifice, weddings and funerals, calendar holidays. The pagan pre-Christian culture is reflected in Mari folklore and arts. Altogether, this shapes the unique touristic potential.

The Program for the Tourism Development in the Republic of Mari El refers to the heritage, ecological and agrotourism, but does not stress the ethnic factor. However, it is the combination of heritage and ethnotourism that might be the best solution for regional tourism development in Mari El, as there are many such examples worldwide. But today the share of tourism in the gross regional product is less than 1% (The Republic Program, 2010). In December of 2010 the Program "The Development of Tourism at the Mari El Republic from 2011 to 2016" was started.

The main measures of this Program are:

- 1) The organization of modern legal base and system of the state regulation of the touristic activity.
- 2) The organization of the modern touristic complex in the Republic of Mari El.
- 3) Organization and promotion of the touristic product of the Republic.
- 4) The development of the system of human resource potential of the touristic industry and promotion of study and methodology in the field of tourism.

The Program consists of two stages:

- Stage 1 (2011–2013), or preliminary, includes organization of system conditions for the investment in regional tourism.
- Stage 2 (2013–2016), or the main period, implies organization of competitive touristic branch at the Republic of Mari El, promotion of regional branding, and the integration of touristic potential of the Republic of Mari El for the inter-regional touristic cluster. The main capacity of finance of this Program is 3,083,102, thousands rubles (including, 800 180 thousands rubles – from the Federal budget; 212,030 thousands rubles from the budget of the Republic of Mari El; 64,100 thousands rubles from local budgets, and 2,006,792 thousands rubles of private funds).

The Program also includes key indicators of the goal achievement:

- 1) 1,3 fold increase of internal and external tourism in the Republic of Mari El (up to 145,000 people);
- 2) The significant growth of the number of hotel rooms (6,000 rooms);
- 3) The raise of the kind of touristic services, and 1,7 fold increase of the income capacity (up to 200 mln. rubles);
- 4) 2 fold increase of income capacity of hotels and healthcare resorts (up to 650 mln. rubles).

There is one complex of measures in the Program that needs a more detailed analysis. "The organization of the modern touristic complex in the Republic of Mari El" is seen by the Programs authors (regional Ministry of Physical Culture, Sports, and Tourism) through the following set of actions:

- preparation of the Plan of touristic attractions and location of touristic infrastructure of the Republic of Mari El, with indication of several perspective touristic zones;
- assistance in land development for construction of touristic sites and infrastructure;
- the reconstruction of the health-resorts system of the Republic of Mari El;
- the creation of the agrotourism cluster "Prostory";
- the creation of the touristic-recreation cluster "Völzskiiy";
- the creation of the cluster "Mari El near Volga river";
- the creation of the biosphere reservation "Kugu Kakshan" of the base of the existing National Park "Bolshaya Kokshaga", and development of ecology tourism in Mari El;
- bulging of the Museum of Russian Technology in Novy Toryal;
- organization of bus stations in potential touristic destinations in Mari El;
- development of restaurant businesses for tourism;
- creation of touristic gateways to the Republic of Mari El, or "touristic stations" on the main roads and waterways.

#### **Critics of the regional program.**

The brief analysis indicates that the Program for the Tourism Development in the Republic of Mari El doesn't include a concept and consolidate strategy aim. Instead, it proposes a set of separate subjects, which have some relation with tourism. There is no connection between the parts devoted to the "new touristic complex". This situation can be explained by the attempt of the authors of the Program to develop regional tourism in several key directions at the same time: ecological, health resort, recreation, agrotourism, excursion, culture etc. Of course, all these types of tourism in Mari El go in close relation with each other, but it is very important to choose the mainstream, or foundation for the concept of tourism development. Formulation of such concept might become the beginning of the new touristic cluster of the Republic of Mari El.

Then, let's look on the third set of measures in the same Program, entitled "Measures of the organization and promotion of the touristic product of the Republic". It consists of:

- organization of measures leading to the development and improvement of existing touristic offers (at the market);
- conduction marketing research of the touristic industry of the Republic of Mari El;
- creation of the Republic's touristic brand with the development of new "brand centers" on the territory of the Republic according the regional touristic potential;
- wide use of traditional holidays of the Mari people and different culture, sport, public events for the promotion of touristic potential of the Republic;
- organization of publicity tours to Republic of Mari El;
- promotion the Republic's touristic product through participant in touristic exhibitions, conferences, forums, seminars, which will be organized in Russian Federation and abroad;

- support of actions undertaken by the Information, Touristic, Cultural and Business Center of the Republic of Mari El and other touristic institutions busy in the promotion of the Republic on the interregional and national levels;
- organization of various competitions in the Republic of Mari El, aimed at the inspiration of touristic industry development.

So, the activities listed above do not refer to the main idea, or the concept, which could be the key element of the Strategy for the development of touristic potential in Mari El. It is too early to speak about the "touristic brand" of the Republic of Mari El, as it must reflect such concept, and should be applicable for the use in different types of regional tourism. Besides, such brand must be a unique one, and should differ from other regions of the FO and Russian Federation as a whole.

#### **Ethnotourism: the appropriate solution.**

The majority of the researchers of Russian tourism (from other parts of Russia, not the Republic of Mari El) suppose that the uniqueness of this region can be found in paganism: the ancient religion, and traditional life of indigenous Mari people who still practice them nowadays. The fact that thousands of local people are still practicing pre-Christian cults of Nature in the very heart of the Orthodox Christian Russia is probably the most intriguing attraction for potential tourists. However, paganism and traditional lifestyles of the Mari has rather weak support (if any) at the regional level. Many ethnic Mari scientists and politicians oppose this idea, because they consider the development of regional tourism as a threat to the conservation of national traditions, and survival of pagan cults and customs.

Alternative suggestions imply, for example, the creation of special touristic attractions ("thematic parks"), which would show through animation different subjects of the Mari folklore and mythology. But these initiatives aren't understood by the Mari representatives either, because they these "shows" "will be not approved by the Mari people". However, hard economical situation makes many Mari people choose tourism as the way of survival and a new source of income. For example, in 2008 the Head of the administration in the village Shorunzha agreed to the creation of the touristic attraction "Mari Village". Visitors are shown the traditional Mari wedding ceremony, sacrifice in the pagan sacred grove, the Mari traditional arts and crafts, and cuisine. The village of Shorunzha opened for Russian and international tourists, and attracted about 200 visitors for the first two summer seasons (2008 and 2009), most of them from Finland. But then, the Government of the Republic of Mari El did not support the investment plan of this project, and the number of tourists gradually decreased. The main problem of this touristic attraction is the absence of a hotel.

The new Program of Tourism in the Republic of Mari El needs very serious revision. Correction of the Program on the basis of the ethnotourism concept would include 4 stages:

- 1) Development of touristic passports for all regions and towns of the Republic.
- 2) Development of business plans on ethnotourism.
- 3) Promotion of the newly revised Program.
- 4) Practical implementation of business projects with the following monitoring of the results.

Every stage will be developed through different activities, but they must be based on the idea of ethnotourism, and use of traditional culture and religion as the key

elements of attraction. Moreover, every region within the Republic should determine their own specific direction or theme of traditional culture, which will be promoted on their territory. It is necessary to create the brand of Mari El, which would reflect the unique touristic concept of ethnotourism. The process of working out of the next Program of Republic Mari El Tourism will not be easy. At first, it will need serious political support at the level of the regional Government: at least, the Ministry of Physical Culture, Sports and Tourism of the Republic or even the Head of the Government, on the issue of revision of the current Program (adopted for the years 2011–2016). Probably, the lack of any serious successful projects within the current Program will be a good argument in favor of the revision.

### Conclusion.

Fairly, the acting Program of Tourism has positive examples, too. The second part of this Program ("the creation of the agrotourism cluster "Prostory" at the Mari El Republic") implies the building touristic-recreation complexes "Mari Ethno Village Vizimbir", and "Russian Ethno Village". The total budget of these project is 586,500 thousand rubles (including 140,000 thousand from the federal (national) budget; 31,300 thousand from the regional budget; 1,200 thousand from local (municipality or community) budgets; 414,000 thousands of private investments). This is the only measure in the Program that exploits the concept of ethnotourism, but sure this is not enough.

Finally, at present most of Russian regions, including regions in the PFO, have adopted their own programs for tourism development. The Republic of Mari El has launched such program at 2010, but this Program doesn't discover the real touristic potential of Mari El. The successful program must be based on the ethnotourism concept. Realization of the Program for the Tourism Development in the Republic of Mari El on the principles of ethnotourism should foster the development of hospitality and restaurant business in the area, and give the multiplicative effect for the whole regional economy.

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