

BOYANA MASTER AGAINST MICHELANGELO

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The oldest functioning Christian church in the world. The high season, Sunday. Let's assume you are not part of a royal family, nor a head of state – how much would then cost you to visit a place of such calibre so that there are no tourists around you? In fact, nobody wants your money. You just go to the St. George rotunda behind the President's Offices, Sofia, Bulgaria. A whole city is losing billions of euros to provide you with the luxurious option to look, undisturbed, at the wonderful frescoes there.

According to United Nation's World Tourism Organisation the tourist industry is on the verge of unprecedented boom and the record high number of journeys in 2006 (846 mln for all countries) will soon become a ridiculously small figure, especially when it reaches 1.6 bln in 2020. In the same time, the global financial crisis, which is hardly likely to finish tomorrow, will lead to a serious redistribution of the market shares, mainly because many people are expected to slice their holiday expenditure, probably replacing the most expensive destinations with a proper substitute. For the first six months of 2008 the number of U.S. visitors to Paris dropped by 20% year-on-year, while Spain as a whole marked an annual decrease of 8% for June – its otherwise strongest month.

CLEARLY RECOGNISABLE IMAGE

The charms of the mass tourism, which Bulgaria is used to developing, have already started fading. New and alternative forms are increasingly sought after, and among them is cultural tourism. According to the consultancy agency IPK International cultural tourists are people with above-average and high personal incomes – but what is more to the point – they tend to spend more when on a journey. The question what is being done in Sofia in this particular moment for promoting the city as a culturally worthy destination is in fact a question of billions of euros. Apart from possessing a Christian temple older than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Temple in Bethlehem, there are several other exceptional things about Sofia that can be simplified to succinct messages-slogans with potential to make foreign tourists seriously consider Sofia as a destination for their journeys. In other words – to create what in the *National Strategy for Sustainable Growth in the Tourism Sector 2008-2013* is called “clearly recognisable image and emotional tie with the end-consumer”. Unfortunately, the multitude of tourist guides and advertising materials for Sofia contain none of the right sentences to do so. The right messages cannot be found on the city's website either, although according to the international research organization ATLAS, city guide books and Internet are on the second and third places as sources for tourists to decide where to travel to. The only factor that outmatches them are family and friends. The friends from Sofia, however, will not be very helpful in this respect because they prefer talking about the potholes and litter on the streets, totally forgetting about their city's good sides. But there is a lot of litter in the centre of Barcelona, too, as well as potholes on the streets in New York that you don't find described in guide books. This specific kind of pessimism costs a lot of money to Sofians because there is no way you can sell a product you know nothing about, nor a product you generally consider bad.

CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

It was something totally different from pessimism that was radiating from the words of Bozhidar Dimitrov, director of the National Museum of History in Sofia. “Before 2000, when the Museum was in its old spacious building in the centre of town, it had about 30,000 visitors a year. In 2007 this number climbed to 252,000”. The once residence of Bulgaria’s last communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, [a smaller building that is now housing the Museum] has welcomed 47 heads of states for the last two years, including George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin. Asked about how this fantastic increase has been achieved, especially since the central exhibition is now located in a suburban district of the city, Mr. Dimitrov pointed out the serious efforts towards advertising and promotion. “I have also a TV show, you know.” How else could we name all that, except – a successful business story, an example for good cultural management? Unfortunately, not quite so.

Mr. Dimitrov forgot to say that the National Museum of History now includes several other expositions of cultural interest in Sofia and in the country, which means that if we have a rise in the visitorship to the central exhibition at all, the increase is not quite significant.

Another problem: compared to the grandeur of all the 42 halls of its former building in the centre of town, the present exhibition is a total disappointment and looks rather like a provincial private collection.

“Do you feel any change in the number of visitors after Bulgaria joined the EU?” – I ask the assistant in the souvenir shop at the Museum, Gugutka Stoimenova. “Yes, I do. We now have less foreign visitors, and those who come are poorer and uninterested.” Mrs. Stoimenova, who is a historian by education, spotted my surprise and tried to explain: “You see, the foreigners usually know what to look for here. They are well aware of the fact that the golden treasure from Panagyurishte is always visiting foreign museums. And they don’t buy tickets to enter, because what they really want to see is not here. The largest treasure discovered in Europe in the last decade, the one from Rogozen, is also not in the National Museum. It was discovered near Vratsa, they said, and gave it back to the local museum there. People come, ask where this Vratsa is and when they learn it’s 200 kilometres away, just smile and go back. The Borovo treasure is also not here. All the large museums in Europe do their best to concentrate everything they can under a single roof, and it is only the Bulgarians who try to do the other way around.”

SOFIA IS MORE EXPENSIVE THAN ROME

According to legal advisors, the minister of culture has the right to say where an exhibit should be kept. Mr. Stefan Danailov may find it useful to contemplate for a while on the question what would remain from the Louvre, for example, if French authorities supported the regional principle, too, and if they returned each piece of art to its place of origin. The problem with the National Museum in Sofia is truly of national importance because, if 47 heads of states visited its exhibition halls over the last two years, and if they saw what I did this August, they must have laughed at Bulgaria a lot.

For all other tourists the things are very simple: they want to know what value they receive against their money. At present a three-hour tour to Boyana Church and the National Museum of History is offered for 35 euros by the Bulgarian travel agency *International Travel*. On the other hand, for 51 euros, you can visit Villa Borghese and the Vatican Museums – again for three hours. The tour is organized by the Italian sector company *Enjoy Rome*. In nominal terms the price in Sofia has obviously reached two thirds of that in the Eternal city, but unfortunately the Bulgarian museum at present cannot compare even with two thirds of the masterpieces on display in the Vatican city, while the fine Boyana master will have to compete with Michelangelo and his world-famous Sistine Chapel. This means simply that Sofia has become more expensive than Rome and it could be a justifiable reason for those

who have visited Bulgaria's capital not to recommend it to their family and friends. We can't neglect the fact that, according to the European Travel Commission, the overall number of foreigners who visited Bulgaria in 2007 dropped by 0.1% as compared to the previous year. Isn't that an evidence that the country boasting of endless Black Sea sand beaches has failed to make use of the increased attention to it as a new EU member state? Just for comparison - Romania marked an upsurge of 12.5% in foreign guests over the same period.

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF GROWTH

Between elation and despair there is a real opportunity for making profits and it is called faith tourism. According to the World Religious Travel Association (WRTA) the sector generates an annual revenue of \$18 billion worldwide and there are 300 million people who travel to visit places important for their religion. Around 200 million of them are Christians. And although Sofia is full of exceptionally worthy (from the viewpoint of Christianity) relics, legends and monasteries, so far it hasn't taken even the smallest slice from this enormous cake. What is more, the term "faith tourism" is completely missing from the text of the *National Strategy for Sustainable Growth in the Tourism Sector*. At present, important destinations for religious travels worldwide are towns in the Canadian province Quebec and the American state Ohio, while Sofia, which with its several thousand years of history has the potential to compete even with the top European centres, has so far remained virtually unknown.

According to unofficial information, no Bulgarian companies or institutions have so far applied for participation in the first World Religious Travel Expo to take place in Flordia at the end of October. Bahamas, Tanzania and Venezuela will be there, though. According to World Travel & Tourism Council, an organisation researching the transport and tourist sectors as a whole, Bulgaria is now on the 62nd position globally in terms of the overall value of the product this industry generates. The small Balkan state is forecast to increase it by 4.5% annually over the next ten years, which is a very beneficial outlook having in mind that only 31 countries in the world are expected to achieve higher figures. The bad thing about these figures is that a growth of such extent can make many people put their pink glasses on and attenuate their sense of what has not been done. The companies offering unreasonably high prices will most probably not go bankrupt and will continue chasing potential tourists away with their prices. In the same time the people from the public sector, who are in charge of taking important administrative decisions (not necessarily associated with vast expenses), will simply not feel the need to take them.

If the oldest Christian temple in the world stays empty and there are no visitors to queue for entrance at all, opposite to what is the case with monuments in Europe of relatively lesser importance, this means that the figure of 4.5% annual growth for Sofia is absolutely tiny, because the potential here is at least for a double-digit increase every year. "In mid-term perspective the tourism sector in Sofia has the capacity to grow by 1,000%", said Bayko Baykov, chief executive officer of *Bohemia* travel agency and a member of the Sofia Municipality's Tourism Council. In his words more than a half of all foreigners arriving at the city show interest in its cultural heritage.

Many social figures have repeatedly pointed out the need more money to go for repair, conservation and maintenance of cultural monuments. This is basically true, but if Sofia fails to learn how to present its sights to both its guests from abroad, and to its own pessimistic citizens, so that it fascinates them and captivates their imagination, it will never start profiting from what it has. Sofia Municipality's *Culture* programme sponsors all kinds of events with dubious potential for economic returns, but is a bit stingy on materials promoting the city itself and gives only up to 5,000 Bulgarian leva (around EUR 2,500) for

such a project. That is why St. George Rotunda, if at all, is known by the general public only as the “oldest building in the city” and not as something much more interesting.

Private sector, on its turn, has also failed to find ways how to improve the situation: the tourist agency Profi Tours Ltd. in their short description of Sofia’s sights has found it important to say about the rotunda that “its frescoes were made by amateurs”. As it turns out, the cultural know-how is still not regarded as a sector where investment may produce serious yields. It is no secret that tourists, attracted by the wonderful achievements of human spirit spend their money not only on entrance fees and souvenirs, but also on restaurants, hotels and in dozens of other sectors, which is a boost to the revenue of local enterprises and – indirectly – to the taxes payable to the municipal and state budgets.

Unfortunately, the town in the skirts of Vitosha mountain, with its dozens of mineral springs and breathtaking history, is still behaving as if in a teenage period when people are often more interested in what is going on today rather than how to improve their tomorrow. It is high time, Sofia, apart from growing in size, grew a little bit older, too.* BW

* Allusion to the city’s official motto: *Crescit nec senescit*. (“from Latin: “It grows, but does not age”)
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