

**Perceptions of Russia as a meeting conference and
exhibition destination: A study of European meeting professionals**

Frederic Dimanche

<http://trc.aiest.org/members/frederic-dimanche>

SKEMA Business School, Department of Marketing, France

Abstract

Russia is one of the fastest growing tourism markets (+8% growth in 2011) with many resources that are yet untapped. This paper first presents NETOUR, a project of European and Russian universities that aims at boosting Russia's competitiveness as a tourism destination. The purpose of this project, funded by the European Commission through a TEMPUS grant, is to propose a model for cooperation between universities and the main stakeholders in the tourism sector, in order to favour development through educational excellence in Russia. Following a situation analysis of tourism in Russia, both from a supply and demand side, the researchers conduct an analysis of the gaps that exist between what Russian universities propose in tourism management education and what tourism professionals expect from higher education training and the competences they need to succeed. The results lead to university curriculum revisions on the one hand, and continuing education proposals on the other hand. The pillars that support NETOUR are: (1) Knowledge transference between Universities and society: facilitating the adoption of innovations by tourism firms, as well as reinforcing students' employability; (2) Lifelong learning: identifying tourism professionals' knowledge, updating needs, and proposing specialized training according to their requests; (3) Open dialogue between the various stakeholders in the sector (i.e., policy makers, entrepreneurs, local population, alumni, students, professors, professional associations, etc.); (4) Design of new tourism management curricula according to the real educational needs of the sector.

This particular aspect of the project looks at the business tourism potential of Russia as a meetings, conference, and exhibition destination. An empirical Importance-Performance study was conducted to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Russia as an MCE destination, as perceived by European meeting planners and other professionals. The sampling frame consisted of a list obtained from Meeting Professionals International (MPI), the largest international professional association. Eighty nine respondents (12% response rate) completed the online survey. The survey was designed based on previous studies conducted on destination image by event professionals. In addition to attributes typically found in similar studies, the researchers added some items that were thought to be valid in the context of this study.

The results demonstrate the potential of Russia as an attractive destination for business events. About half of the respondents had previous travel experience to Russia. Of the attributes that were identified as being problematic, some are not easily controlled or managed by meetings and destination professionals. For example, political and economic stability were seen as weaknesses. Others could lead to industry actions in both management and marketing. Specifically, sustainability issues were thought to be poorly addressed and need more attention from Russian professionals.

The results of this study, combined with others that are within the NETOUR project, should contribute to give professionals management and marketing recommendations. They should also contribute to update and refine tourism management curricula at university levels. This ambitious three-year project should yield benefits for most tourism sector stakeholders and contribute to improving the competitiveness of Russia as a growing tourism destination.

Keywords: MCE, Tourism, Competitiveness, Higher Education, Importance Performance

Analysis

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