

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TOURISM IN CREATING THE NEW CROATIAN IMAGE – ANSWERING CHALLENGES IN A SPECIFIC REGION

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ABSTRACT – Croatia is recently one of the most popular tourist destinations of the Mediterranean world, attracting millions of tourists each year with its crystal-clear sea. At the end of the last century, the country, by its secession from Yugoslavia, placed its tourism marketing activity on strategic basis, and the number of guest arrivals began to increase leaving the war-years behind – in 2013, the 28th member state of the European Union was visited by three times more tourists than the number of Croatian inhabitants at that time. Attracting tourists is one of the main goals of country branding, thus marketing activity related to tourism could play an important role in the development of the country image as well. The present study focuses on tourism development and tourism-related image development of Croatia and, with the help of questionnaire surveys carried out among the young intellectuals in Hungary and Croatia, investigates the role of this tourism feature in the country image at a date especially important for the country, the year of its EU-accession. The results of the investigations prove the fact known from the literature that there is always a difference between the image felt within the borders of a country and the one perceived outside, although in the case of Croatia, in all the studied dimensions of images, tourism will receive an outstanding role.

Keywords: Croatia, Yugoslavia, tourism, country image, country branding

INTRODUCTION

Today's tourist has a hard job when deciding where to travel. Besides the fact that fast lifestyle and the increased wish for regeneration are simultaneously present in our lives, we meet excessive amount of information every day, furthermore, we can also get informed quickly in the continuously developing online world. Tourist destinations have to fight for the favour of tourists in this highly complex environment in which a strong country brand and a positive country image can help a lot.

The country today known as Croatia appeared independently on the map in 1991 after many centuries when it was part of different other states, spending almost three-quarters of the 20th century as a member of the Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia. At the time of receiving the much desired independence, the Yugoslavian war broke out in its territory, causing serious damages in the life of the country in every aspect. However, one determinative treasure remained there – the Croatian coastline.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the development of the Croatian country brand by touching the listed fields of history and economy, and to reveal the peculiarities of the Croatian country image by the time of a new turning point, the country's accession to the European Union. Thus, the study presents the specific case of Croatia from two perspectives: it shows the development of its tourism and country brand during the decades of being part of Yugoslavia and the decades of independence until today, and the Croatian country image by the country's accession to the European Union as the 28th member state in year 2013.

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THE CROATIAN COUNTRY IMAGE AND TOURISM

Croatia traditionally sets tourism in the focus of its economic development, thus our picture about the country is in most of the cases connected to tourism. Due to its favourable geographical layout, it has always been a significant commercial centre during its history. In the early 6th century BC, Illyrians living here did trading activities with ancient Greeks, the presence of Romans is proven by the numerous buildings and archaeological remains in the coastline area, and by the time of the arrival of Slavic people, Dubrovnik played an important cultural and commercial role. With the infrastructural development, the first commercial lodging facilities were built as well. The first modern hotels were built at the end of the 19th century in Opatija, Crikvenica and Dubrovnik (Hitrec, 2002). The country may be divided into two parts from a geographical point of view in relation to the sea (continental and maritime), while regarding its morphology, three parts can be differentiated – maritime, highland, and Pannonian territories. People live from other resources on the seaside, in the mountains and in the Pannonian basin, thus the picture of the settlements differs as well – the characteristic buildings, gastronomy, style of living and the economic activity. The population also changes, migration is concentrated primarily in the seaside territories and the capital city (Reményi, 2006) and so do the tourists (DZS, 2015) even if the Pannonian parts are different and possess significant touristic values (Gerdesics, 2013). In the year Croatia joined the European Union, the number of tourists visiting the country was three times higher than the population, 6.5% of the residents worked in tourism and 16.7% of the GDP was produced by the tourism sector (DZS, 2015).

Meler and Ružić (1999) investigated the lifecycle of Croatian tourism between 1960 and 1990 in their work, in which they came to the conclusion that it began to be more and more popular with the tourists since the 1960's, it showed continuous development until the 1980's, in the middle of which it stagnated. The reasons for this type of cycle are manifold, but probably the most significant one is the inequality of the demand requirements and the quality of the supply. In that time, the discovery of the Croatian coasts by the tourists was not a result of a conscious strategy, the increased number of lodging facilities did not go hand in hand with quality improvement and there was no planned positioning activity behind it either. They believe that Croatian tourism would have begun to decline even without the horrible war as well, it was rather the last warning and, at the same time, it forced the country to work out a conscious marketing activity plan.

Jordan (2000) gets similar conclusions in his paper about the relationship of the Croatian tourism and globalisation; he pronouncedly draws attention to the fact that the Yugoslavian tourism was “dead water”, the majority of the accommodation facilities were in the ownership of the state, only few private accommodation providers could work in the sector. By the time of the war (1991-1995), the ordinary social and economic life of the country was broken and thus the tourism development as well, great part of the accommodation facilities became victims of the fights (Vukonić, 2005). The same is proven by Družić (2010), who claims that Croatia was a developed tourist destination at the beginning of the 1970's, tourism continuously developed in the period between 1968 and 1988, and after the peak in the 1980's it began to decline, drastically dropping during the wartime at the beginning of the 1990's – and the indicators started an upward trend again after the war. Numbers in tourist arrivals in the middle of the 1980's were reached again in 2005, thus, the consequences of the war were present in the Croatian tourism for around 20 years (Dulčić, 2000; Šimičić, 2007). 10.6 million tourists chose Croatia as a holiday destination in 2010 and 14.3 million in 2015 (DZS, 2015).

As it can be seen in Figure 1, the number of foreign and domestic tourists decreased alike during the wartime period, but trendlines of domestic and foreign guests show determinative differences after 1995; the number of domestic ones remains low while a steep increase is noticeable in the number of foreign arrivals. It is obvious that foreigners spend their time in Croatia more often than residents do, according to these data, but there is still another reason for the difference: before 1991, we are discussing tourism of the Croatian Socialist Republic as part of the Yugoslavian Federation, and after that date the tourism indicators belong to the independent Republic of Croatia. This fact involves an essential methodological detail as until 1991 the category of domestic tourist arrivals includes every citizen of Yugoslavia, while after 1992, namely the year of the official

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international recognition of Croatia as an independent country, apart from Croatians, residents of the other Yugoslavian member countries, Slovenians, Serbians, Bosnians, Macedonians and Montenegrins were enrolled in the group of foreign guests.

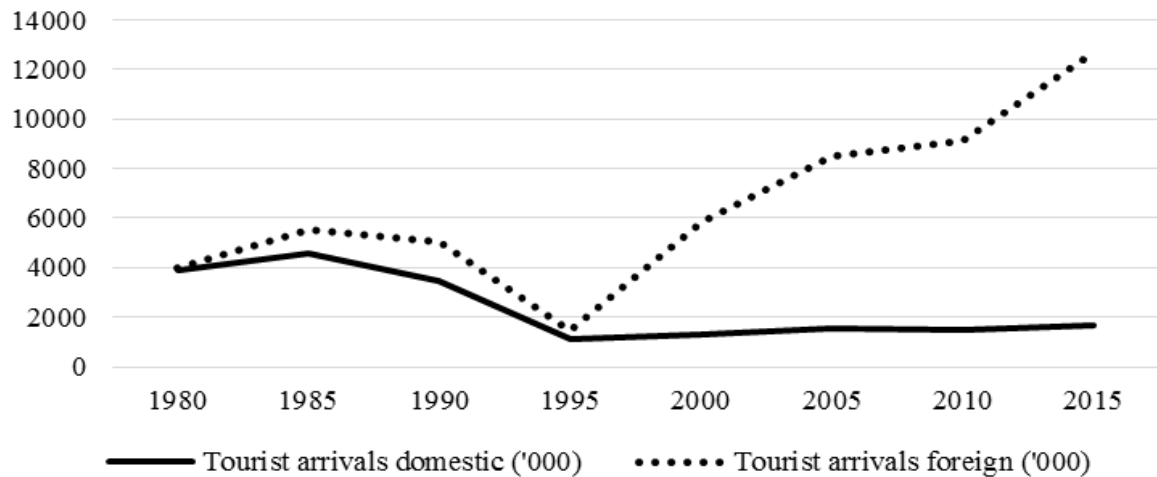


Figure 1. *The Yugoslavian and Croatian tourism between 1980 and 2015*
Source: own edition based on DZS (2015)

As before 1991, we discussed Yugoslavian tourism and after 1991 the Croatian one, the same is true for the country image – Croatia left the Yugoslavian Federation and had to work out its independent country brand and image. There was a great and complex challenge for the new leaders of the country; while the Yugoslavian war was loudly raging on, they had to introduce their new Croatia to the world and hopefully create a positive country image.

Country image is recently one of the most significant marketing terms. According to the definition of Kotler et al. (1993, p. 141) “*country image is the set of views, beliefs and opinions about a country*”. The scientific literature has been intensively dealing with the research of this field since the 1960’s, primarily focusing on the so-called country-of-origin effect, the effect of the country a given product is made in or coming from; however, recent papers write about the country image as a brand equity as well, thus the country branding has appeared (Jenes, 2010).

Though brand literature began in the early 9th century, brands truly became important in the 19th century according to Papp-Váry (2009), on the one hand because of the appearance of the mass-production coming with the industrial revolution and, on the other hand, because that was the time by which the mankind became able to read, thus the brand name received relevance. Cheverton (2005) highlights an outstanding speciality of brands, namely that they expose the majority of their functioning in the minds of the consumers. Thus, a branded product cannot be identified only by a logotype, a name or a symbol, but also by the feeling it awakes in people, therefore brand image is created by the individuals. The conscious process of branding means differentiation of the product or service by others, which actually means that, behind branding, there is a strong aspiration for achieving a unique competitive advantage. The other side of this activity is the image, namely the interpretation of the brand by the consumers. Every country has an image that is not static but continuously changing and changeable; it appears spontaneously or is developed under control (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002) and is a multidimensional concept as all other image types as well. We can differentiate previous, current and future, so-called wished images (Sándor, 2003).

There had been spectacular examples for appearance of country brands already before the concepts of country brand and country branding were defined in the literature. The development of the French nation brand began its path in the 18th century as a result of a conscious strategy, as much as in the case of England, Germany, Italy, or Russia. Great colonial empires unravelled after the Second

World War and new nations appeared in their territories, and the same happened later in the 1990's with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The successor countries vigorously began to reveal their national consciousness, personality, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and economic affiliation (Olins, 2004). There are nearly 200 countries competing in our globalized world, and the role of country image is highly prominent in this battle. According to Anholt (2005, 2007) – the first one to define country branding in 1996 – a good country brand means “soft power” in this competition and he specifically calls it a competitive identity. Country branding is the field of marketing where the subject of branding is a country, while the aim is the development and shaping of a positive country image and reputation for it. Jenes (2012, p. 38) says that “*country branding is defining a geographical unit, a country in theory and all the approaches, together with the implication of relevant and targeted marketing implications in practice... country brand can be sum of all the symbols that serve for differentiating a country and that create value through associations, reputation, loyalty and image*”. According to Papp-Váry (2009), the primary goals of nation branding are lying in the economy; tempting tourists, investors and export opportunities, but besides these, the international opinion about the country has to be improved as well for successful processes in international relations and Europeanisation (Skoko, 2005). These motivations were interweaved in the case of Croatia after it became independent in 1991 – it faced the challenges of creating a new country image after leaving Yugoslavia, reviving its economy impaired by the war and eliminating the negative stereotypes sticking on its image because of the warfare. As a quick and good solution, it received support from its tourism.

Tourism has been treated to be essential in the new country since the beginnings, foundation, operation and financing of the Croatian National Tourist Board were ratified in the early 1991, amended later by further laws in favour of the development of tourism and to regain its competitiveness (Vukonić, 2005). Although the role of foreign affairs, diaspora, sport and media in connection with the communication done for shaping the country image is unquestionable, organized country image building activity appeared only through one field, tourism marketing. Goluža (2001) claims that tourism can be used for showing practically anything: history, culture, gastronomy or people, thus, tourism seemed to be a highly suitable way of introducing the new Croatia, not to mention its significance as the almost only possible way of economic recovery at that time.

In the case of Croatia, the brand name can be treated as a new one as it had not been used solely for a long time before 1991. The brand name received a slogan; however, it has been changed several times since 1993. In their modern meaning, we use country slogans since the 18th century, they are meant to mediate the textual message of the country, including the unique product promise. Otherwise, slogans were already used centuries ago, but the aim at that time was not attracting the investors, tourists or supporting the sales of products but providing information about the country's actual political situation (Papp-Váry and Gyémánt, 2009). In 1993, in Croatia, the already mentioned Goluža's tourism slogan won: “*mala zemlja za veliki odmor*” or “*small country for a great holiday*”. The slogan “*raj na zemlji*” or “*heaven on earth*” originated from George Bernard Shaw was not successful as the term “*heaven*” seemed to be too commonly used to be effective in this sense. The third slogan was “*Mediteran, kakav je nekad bio*” or “*Mediterranean as it once was*”, which was created in 2005 as part of a new marketing plan elaborated with a Spanish company (Skoko, 2005).

Apart from the brand name and the slogan, the third element of a country brand's identity is the visual part, the logotype. Nations use logotypes in several forms and for several reasons. In this overall country brand usage, the most commonly applied symbols are connected to landscapes, natural phenomena or abstract images, including the name of the country in the majority of cases and sometimes even the slogan as well. Croatian logotype was designed by Boris Ljubičić and has been used for more than 10 years in marketing materials including the red-white-blue colours of the Croatian flag and the symbolic reference to the blue sea, the golden wheat fields of Slavonia and the green forests of inner Croatia (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *The Croatian logotype*

Source: http://www.novacom.hr/korcula-velaluka/kako_do_nas.html

Based on the review above, the Croatian tourism marketing and the tourism-related country image creation seems to be active. In the following, results of primary research will show what effects this tourism image creation had on the country image, at the specific time of Croatia's accession to the European Union.

METHODS

Above we emphasised the significance of country branding and country image in the case of a country that during its two and a half decade long independent history managed to raise its tourism on levels that had never been experienced before. In 2013, two own investigations were carried out, gaining their topicality by the EU accession, because of which the aim was to investigate the young intellectuals as future EU citizens. On the one hand, the external country image was studied by a survey in neighbouring Hungary, so as to see the country image the Croats enter the EU with – as the author is involved in the Hungarian and in the Croatian society as a citizen of both, it was obvious to study these territories, and other countries are topics of further research. On the other hand, the self-image was studied in Croatia, to know the way Croats see themselves, divided into real self-image and thought-image dimension.

Research in Hungary was performed via online questionnaires in March 2013, collecting the answers with the snowball sampling method, which, at the same time, determined the research not to be representative either for the European Union, or for Hungary. The survey implemented in Croatia in June 2013 did not provide representative results either, as the main aim was to get familiar with the opinion of the young-aged, real future Croatian residents of the EU, so the sample consisted of business university students from Osijek and Zaprrešić. However, both surveys were performed on large samples, thus the sample sizes adequately serve the aim of the research – in the Hungarian survey, the sample included 681, in the Croatian one, 434 cases. The general aim of both investigations was to reveal the image associations; neither of them was oriented towards the issue of tourism.

The Hungarian sample consisted of women in 59% and men in 41%, the average age of the group was 29 (typically between 20 and 30 years old), almost 70% of them possessed bachelor or master degree, 56% of them worked, and 43% lived in Baranya County, while 23.5% in the capital city of Budapest or its surroundings. The Croatian survey was carried out by using PAPI (paper-and-pencil) method where the aim of the 29-question-long questionnaire was to discover the self-image and the image they think they have, so the thought outside image. 68% of the Croatian student respondents were women, the average age was 23, 80% of them were studying in Osijek and 20% in Zaprrešić, near the capital city of Zagreb. In the following parts, these results will be shown, related to the focus of the paper.

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A country brand is favourably developed in the same way as any product brand. As it was emphasised above, for gaining high recognisability of a country, different tools can be used from the

marketing toolkit, thus it is interesting to investigate what colours, words or symbols are connected to a given country and besides it can help a lot in planning them if we know whether our country is thought to be a male or a female character. Questions of both surveys dealt with these topics.

83% of the Hungarian respondents associated some word in connection with tourism in the case of Croatia such as sea, seaside, the Adriatic, holiday or tourism itself (Figure 3). Results of the survey on self-image carried out in Croatia are more colourful. Although the category of tourism associations (35%) was still the leader, it appeared in lower proportion than in the Hungarian survey (Figure 4).

In range, after the associations in connection with tourism, Croatians mentioned such negative concepts as corruption (14%), crisis (8%), and unemployment (4%), but relatively many answers were connected to patriotism (3.5%) as well, which also appeared in the Hungarian answers (1.5%). Based on the results of these two surveys, it can be concluded that tourism by all means plays an important role in the country image of Croatia; according to the Hungarian respondents it is outstanding in the image seen from abroad besides the fact that Croatians think more than simply tourism about themselves, in a lot of cases even in negative meanings.



Figure 3. Associations on Croatia according to the survey in Hungary
Source: own edition



Figure 4. Associations on Croatia according to the survey in Croatia
Source: own edition

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Related to this block of association questions, Croatians were asked to write down what they think foreigners would mention about Croatia as a first word, which proportion – aside from the fact that neither of the investigations show representative results – can be compared to the answers received from the Hungarian survey. According to 69% of the Croatian answers, foreigners associate some word in connection with seaside tourism related to Croatia. Though this result is not as high as in the other survey, it represents a remarkable amount of responses. An important finding of the comparison is that while Croatian respondents think foreigners would frequently associate Croatia with the Balkans (3%), war (5%), Yugoslavia (1.5%), corruption (2.5%) and the Croatian football (6%), none of these categories reached 1% of the answers in the results of the research made in Hungary.

According to the literature, Croatians generally think that they have three strong symbols: the Croatian coat of arms with its red-and-white chessboard, the tie being a Croatian invention, and the Dalmatian dog getting its name from the territory of Dalmatia (Skoko, 2005). However, findings of the investigations are slightly different, especially in the case of the Hungarian answers. When Hungarian respondents were asked to write down the thing they think is the main symbol of Croatia, they answered similarly as in case of the first associations. Thus, according to 30% of them, Croatia is symbolized by something connected to sea or tourism. Besides these, a significant 18.5% share mentioned the red-and-white chessboard known probably not only from the Croatian coat of arms but also from the dresses of the well-known football players and the numerous souvenirs available in every single shop in the coastline area. Obviously, there was the flag (10%) and solely the coat of arms (5%) within the answers as well. According to 31% of the Croatian answers, the symbol of Croatia is also coming from the so typical sea and seaside but the chessboard (17%), the coat of arms (19%) and the flag (6%) are also listed. It is interesting that out of 681 Hungarians, only two respondents mentioned the tie, thus relative to others almost no one, and the frequency of this was not much better in the Croatian case either (17 people, i.e. 4%). Considering that the Dalmatian dog did not appear in the answers at all, the thesis claimed by Skoko (2005) does not seem to be true, at least based on the above investigations. The tie and the Dalmatian dog are unimportant according to the Hungarians compiling the sample, and only the red-and-white chessboard was recognized to be a Croatian symbol, but neither this has a primary role.

The aspect of the toolkit of the brand identity may provide considerable information regarding the colours or the personality linked to a given country. This link can naturally be developed by a simple feeling we have and also as an outcome of a conscious brand building process. Based on the research findings, the first colours of Croatia in the line are blue and red; almost 70% of the Hungarian sample chose blue and 40% of Croatians did the same while red was chosen by 13% of Hungarians and 25% of Croatians. From the side of psychology, these two colours can refer to several things, but taking into consideration the above-mentioned findings, they are supposedly connected to the sea, the flag and the coat of arms. There is a much more notable difference in the case of the answers regarding the brand identity between the two nations, so the internal and external aspect of the Croatian country brand. 60% of Hungarians think that Croatia would be a male if it were a person and only 28% that it would be a female while 47% of Croatians suppose it to possess a female character and 30% to have a male one. In this case, there may be some psychological explanations and possibly the linguistic feature that the word “Hrvatska” is feminine as well as “domovina” meaning homeland (Gerdesics, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The special characteristics of the Croatian image and the stones that have built it up could be listed and analysed without an end. However, there is one element that definitely seems to be crucial – tourism. It is not only because the economy of Croatia largely depends on coastline tourism, but there is also the reason of its significance in creating the new, independent country image of the independent Croatia after 1991, the year in which the country left Yugoslavia, of which it was a part for more than seven decades. Choosing this orientation in developing the image of the country was probably a good decision as a favourable feature of tourism marketing is that it emphasises generally accepted values,

not speaking about the fact that these pictures are in most of the cases connected to summer holidays, enjoying free time that recalls bad feelings in only a few people. This paper focuses on these positive values and investigates whether Croatia is really a tourism country, and in what extent was the more than two-decade-long tourism based image creation successful.

The 2013 research findings showed that the country image of Croatia is, in the first place, a tourism-based one in all the three dimensions observed. Although clear connection could not be proven by the investigations that were carried out in Hungary and Croatia, it can be stated that the colours of the logotype and the flag, the red-and-white chessboard, and the seaside tourism were expressed and are used in the communication activity. It can be concluded from the answers that Hungarians interpret Croatia obviously from a tourist perspective and the special outcome of the surveys lies in the results showing how the Croatians do not have by far such a positive picture about themselves. In their case, negative terms were more frequent as more than 36% of them mentioned some negative feature or concept as a first association while, on the contrary, Hungarians did not mention such things at all. Naturally, this phenomenon is completely understandable as we all have a wider picture about our own country as we know much more about it and have much more stimuli during our everyday life – thus our self-image is often much more sorrowful and disconsolate (for details see Papp-Váry, 2007).

On the other hand, from all perspectives, tourism and especially the seaside received high significance in the results, which proves the *raison d'être* of the so-called sun and beach tourism, absolutely typical for the Croatian tourism industry. As the time focus of the above detailed survey was the country's EU-accession, the marketing campaigns were also shown until the year 2013. However, a new campaign was just recently introduced in the Croatian tourism marketing activity. The temporarily used "Croatia – the new star of the European Union" slogan is meant to prepare the accession of the country in the new environment and the formerly applied slogan emphasising the treasures of the Mediterranean world was changed to "Croatia – Full of life" in 2016 (Croatian National Tourist Board, 2016). Leaders of the Croatian tourism plan the long-term usage of this slogan, which is not only a slogan but also an overall communication strategy. Thus, the campaign launching the season of 2016 in the sense of integrated marketing communication is concerned to all the platforms, focusing on Croatia as a tourist destination, aimed at arousing feelings and refers to originality as the term "life" is currently not used by other countries in their communication activities.

The main thought of the message is that Croatia is a colourful tourist destination full of feelings and experiences, abounded by natural beauties, traditions, historic memories and, at the same time, it is characterised by the Mediterranean lifestyle loved by tourists. With the word "full", the variegation is meant to be highlighted and that this place lives 365 days a year while the term "life" refers to a young, vivid, dynamic country. The reason for the change in the communication concept is – according to the official news conference – that although the Mediterranean world used previously in the Croatian tourism communication is nevertheless significant in the stable positioning of the country across the foreign markets, the modern world requires applying new tools as well apart from lying on the past. The new slogan was drawn up by the consortium of Croatian BBDO, the British AMV BBDO, and the Spanish DEC BBDO and won the announced tender with its simplicity, flexibility and originality, and mostly because it excellently synthesises everything that Croatia offers. The concept is based on a research showing that Croatia is primarily identified as a "sun and beach" destination – this is proven in the present study as well. Apart from the young and dynamic country position, the current communication also says that Croatia is more than that, it reacts to new tourism trends and today it is far more than only "sun and beach".

This is also confirmed by launching the spring campaign "say hello to someone, say hello to spring" as part of the strategy that was aimed to promote the pre-season and gave outstanding role to online marketing tools and native advertisements, targeting the most important sending countries. The new communication concept includes an innovative (Facebook based) sales promotion activity as well that started with the title "out of office". Within the framework of this campaign, foreign tourists are asked to write the most original out-of-office-reply that is automatically sent by our e-mail system to the senders when we are on holiday – obviously in Croatia (Croatian National Tourist Board, 2016).

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Justification of starting the new “Full of life” marketing campaign was proven by the above detailed researches as well. By the time of the EU-accession, Croatia was recognizable primarily based on its coastline tourism and the new campaign reveals new research directions. While in the early years of independence this coastline tourism seemed to be an appropriate orientation for new image creation, now it is reasonable to change this image – the “Full of life” concept lies on conscious strategic base with clear aims and relevant message; however, its success will be shown by the future.

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