

THE EVALUATION OF LITHUANIA'S TOURISTIC IMAGE CHANGES

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ABSTRACT

The image formation and support, reputation-building and active marketing are vital for the existence of the nowadays modern country and its development. Today the country's nature, history, people and traditions became the exclusive brands that strengthens the economy and cross-border relations, a competitive advantage is obtained. There are many image definitions and classifications, each author analyses it from own perspective. It was found that individual elements make a big influence for a general country's image. In order to use it effectively systemic attitude is required. Country's image in the international tourism market is explained by tourist behavioural characteristics: how a person behaves in respect of country, how he or she perceives the country – as a neighbour or distant, closed or open, acceptable or unacceptable, how much the person trusts the provided information, if he or she is ready to travel to the country. Personal characteristics has an influence for perceived location's image. Despite Lithuania's efforts to make the image better abroad and inside the country, it's rank on the international agencies surveys, evaluating country's political and economic situation in the world context and how famous it is, remains low. There are no innovative strategy for building Lithuania's image. During the 2006–2015 period, there were no core changes in associations, created for foreigners by the word "Lithuania". The research found that foreigners imagine Lithuania as underdeveloped, neglected agriculture country, people are closed, not willing to communicate – the same as was imagined in 2006. Lithuania's touristic image was better after the visit. More facts about Lithuania was known by tourists from neighbouring countries. During the 9 years Lithuania's touristic image has not changed.

KEY WORDS: *Lithuania's touristic image, tourism economics.*

JEL CODES: L83, Z19

Introduction

The country's tourism image formation – a process, requiring thorough, consistent and complex work. Countries, caring their image, provides the world an information about preserved ethnic traditions and culture, economic and political advantages, tries to create an interest in unique values. The image formation and support, reputation-building and active marketing are vital for the existence of the nowadays modern country and its development. Today the country's nature, history, people and traditions became the exclusive brands

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that strengthens the economy and cross-border relations, a competitive advantage is obtained. Purposeful, having a clear and defined priorities image formation strategy strengthens the country's political importance, the awareness in the world, national identity and allows to achieve the strategic economic development goals. Tourism is also regarded as the factor of cultural and economic prosperity. It encourages the establishment of new businesses in the country, creates jobs and income for residents, acts as urban and rural development catalyst. Therefore, the tourism sector development and efficient exploitation of the country's image in forming the competitiveness of tourism products is particularly significant for Lithuania.

The considerable funds has been invested in the formation of the image of Lithuania, but there is no a single idea of what the image aims, so the question is if the used tools deliver the intended results. It is important to analyse how the current image-making strategy works, what kind of marketing tools are used in practice to improve the image.

The article problem: At the moment the problem is not a negative Lithuanian touristic image, but just not knowing it, not being able to recognize it. Tourists often do not have an information about the country and its achievements not because they are looking for information and cannot find it, but because they are not inclined to look for that information. Country's image is created by its actions and behaviour, expressed by specific events, while Lithuania has not delivered the world really exciting news for a long time and so does not have a strong image.

The article object – Lithuania's touristic image.

The article aims – after analysing the elements and theoretical models of the country's image in touristic market to identify how Lithuania's touristic image changes and determine the possible directions of image formation.

The article objectives:

1. To analyse the concept of the country's touristic image while defining country's touristic image features;
2. To analyse the priorities of Lithuania's touristic image formation;
3. To identify the changes of Lithuania's touristic image.

The research methods: scientific literature and strategic documents analysis, filing, survey, descriptive statistical method, correlation analysis.

1. Touristic image concept and elements

In the Tourism Encyclopedia (Turizmo terminų žodynas, 2009) the image is defined as a subjective visual, emotional perception of a particular object (product, service, company, person or group of people, location). According to M. Čeikauskienė (1997) usually the image includes certain individual attributes – features that are specific to a particular object. These signs may exist objectively, or be assigned by people, distorting the reality. The image not formed once by someone and stable, it is dynamic, its attributes change depending on the changes on the carrier itself or group of people's mind. Thus, the image of the object can be created as not meeting the reality.

G. Drūteikienė (2002) has identified these qualities that characterise the image as a specific mental visual image:

- The image cannot be measured. It is an ideal object, appearing on people's minds, the only measurement unit of the image – changed people behaviour, life habits, decisions.
- Effective image – integral and impeccable.
- The image is unstable and must be continuously maintained by advertising or other actions.
- The image consists of a defined number of components. A complex multi-dimensional image is more complicated to accept resulting in lower efficiency.
- The illusory image have connections with reality. Emphasizing good features too much can decrease the trust.

- The image is pragmatic, oriented to certain objectives of the organization, referring to the development progress.
- Effective image is flexible, adaptable to changes. A strict, inflexible structure of image can be deadly for the long-term image. There are rapid changes of society behaviour and life style, image must meet these changes.

Summarizing the authors it can be said that the image is created in anticipation of the emotional response, but not the rationale substantiation, because it affects society through the feelings. A well-developed image stimulates the public benevolence, which later develops into a trust and ultimately results in rating and choices.

G. Роџерсов (Почепцов, 2001) states that the image is a phenomenon having a lot of factors, because on the one hand – the influence to the attitude is made through various channels, on the other hand – the human being is used to refer to multiple structures, which can be treated separately and accepted, realized personally.

G. Роџерсов (Почепцов, 2001) describes the image as the intersection of four elements (factors) (Fig. 1):

1. Marketing element, which has an aim to distinguish an object from the integer.
2. Sociological element – the audience decision, choice.
3. Situational element, the context influence.
4. Communicative element – creating the message.

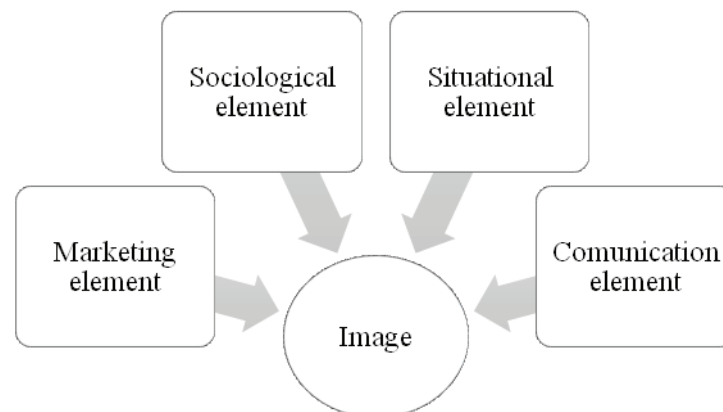


Figure 1. Image structure according to G. Роџерсов

Source: Почепцов, 2001

There are many definitions and classifications of the image, each author examines the image through the prism of their own. The world practice of organization image creation is regarded as one of the most important strategic management and marketing goals. It is not less important than the introduction of new technologies, the stabilization of the finances, etc.

A system of the image is characterized by complex relationships between the three main elements: its own image, others image and the desired image (Почепцов, 2001). Country institutions often uses them together thinking that it is needed only to create characters and export them to the international environment, however, it is forgotten that the communication process information receiver is not merely a passive element, he or she is influenced by own cultural values, beliefs and symbols (Zykas, 2006).

Some scientists believe the local tourism sector's image is formed by marketing actions during the travel purchase. Consumer behaviour studies focus on multi-stage travel purchase process, because the user's choice is directly related to the quality of service compliance with its requirements. A. Beerli and J. D. Martin (2004) believes that it is important to distinguish the first time visitors, and the individuals, visiting the area not for the first time because it is affected by several factors. Firstly, there may be the image perception

differences, which can influenced the results. Secondly, the connection between the secondary sources of information and perceived image can be analysed only visiting the area for the first time because returning visitors may have difficulties to identify the sources of information they used before visiting the area. Thirdly, difficulties may arise between the two groups due to their knowledge of the area and the motivation that led them to visit the site.

According to V. Snieška and I. Zykienė (2011), tourists chooses the touristic area based on the region's natural, cultural and historical objects, touristic infrastructure, providing accommodation, catering, event organization services, the development level, region's accessibility and transportation within the region.

S. Anholt (2006) says that today's world is one market and rapid progress of globalization means that every country, every city and every region must compete with other global consumers, tourists, investors, students, entrepreneurs, international sporting and cultural events, international media, other governments and other countries residents' attention and respect. S. Anholt indicated the implementation of the first and so far the only one study – Nation Brands Index (NBI), analysing a countries images, based on residents surveys. The study is based on criteria which are used for evaluating countries tourism potential (Fig. 2).

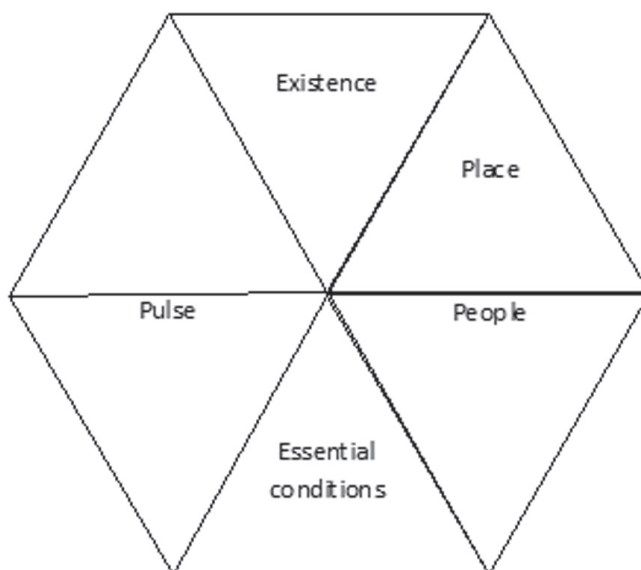


Figure 2. City branding structure

Source: Anholt, 2006; The City Brands Index. How the World Views Its Cities

City branding structure commented as follows:

- *Presence* – describes city international situation and reputation. This study part aims to evaluate how famous the city is and the city impact to the world's culture, science.
- *Location* – analysed peoples' perception about each city aspect: attractive and not attractive places for tourists, environment and climate.
- *Potential* as an indicator assesses the economic and teaching abilities which each city is believed offers for tourists, organizations. It is related to business start and development abilities, university studies system, residents employment level.
- *Pulse* – vivid city life energy, attractiveness is an essential part of every city brand image. Using this criteria it is analysed if people think that cities are interesting, easy to find interesting activities for both short term visitor and long term resident.
- *People* – is an important touristic place participants, because their attitude to tourists, safety, dominant language and culture is very important.

- *Essential conditions* related to the city welfare, which is reflected in the living conditions, tourism location infrastructure service quality.

During the study the ranking consisted of countries, systemically forming their images. Lithuania, which began to implement the “brave” country image in 2008, was evaluated for the first time entered into the ranking. According to the researchers, staying in the ranking means that the country is systematically working hard to develop its image and visibility. At the same time it is a tool to increase awareness of the country, because all countries more or less working in this area uses this study as a guideline. Lithuania in overall rankings took 42 place. Top nine consist of big European countries – Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, as well as Canada, United States and Japan (Aidukienė et al., 2011).

Summarising it can be said that individual scientists believe the local tourism sector’s image is formed by marketing actions during the travel purchase. Consumer behaviour studies focus on multi-stage travel purchase process, because the user’s choice is directly related to the service quality compliance with the requirements.

Country image comes from the geography, history, art and music, famous people and other features. The entertainment industry and the media plays a particularly important role in people’s opinions about the country during the image making process. The country’s attractiveness for tourists is mostly linked to the distance to its geographical location, climate, disposed of natural or cultural resources, local culture and the political situation.

2. Lithuania’s touristic image formation concepts and tools

Lithuanian tourism image-building process lacks the purposefulness and continuity. There were several distinct tries to change established image formation system: the strategic marketing concept of presenting Lithuania in the world (2008), “Sumani Lietuvos reklama. Kūrybinio ir strateginio šalies ekonominio įvaizdžio formavimo gairės” (2009), Lithuania’s tourism communication and social media marketing strategy (2013). Unfortunately, these attempts failed to deliver expected results. In 2008 proposed tools – to build a globally important building in Lithuania or to make a Hollywood movie about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania fights and etc. does not meet reality and it is not clear from which funds it will be financed. It is not clear whether Lithuania is financially capable to amaze the world community with those tools. The created brand (the so-called “Lithuania from the blocks”) for some time was used by “Invest in Lithuania”, “Exporting Lithuania”, Tourism Department, some Ministries, governmental institutions, the brand image of Lithuania was approved by the Lithuania’s image formation committee, but the Government did not verify it, currently it is used only by a few institutions. 2009 guidelines provide truly valuable approach from the outside, which is different from the local image makers approach because this approach was prepared by the experts from abroad. However, no concrete tools on how to meet the inspirational guidelines were provided.

Lithuania’s tourism communication and marketing strategy for 2009–2013 years (2009), The plan for Lithuania’s touristic image formation and marketing communication tools (2010), the Governmental Tourism Department’s Tourism Marketing Plan (2012), Lithuania’s tourism communication and social media marketing strategy (2013) pay more attention for communicating Lithuania’s tourism image.

National Tourism Development program for 2010–2013 (2010) provides the tourism development priorities which are inherent from the targeted image-building policy. Lithuania’s Tourism Development Programme for 2014–2020 (2014) the strategic goal – to increase the competitiveness of the tourism sector in Lithuania. Secreted objectives: to develop tourism infrastructure and improve service quality, increase the awareness of Lithuania as a touristic country and improve its image, reduce tourism seasonality, but the tools are not specific: improving infrastructure, electronic marketing, international marketing projects, cultural events out of season, improving accessibility, tourism workers’ training. These tools are not detailed, so there is a threat that it will not be implemented or implemented ineffectively and will not bring the desired benefit.

In the national progress program for 2014–2020 (2014) there are also defined also several tasks, useful for improving the image of Lithuania’s tourism – tourism infrastructure development, Lithuanian origin for-

eigners nationality promotion, which also ensures a positive flow of information. It also refers to the development of rural tourism, cultural heritage restoration and its adaptation to nowadays needs. However, once again there is no concrete action plan, the implementation of these tools seems vaguely.

After analysing Lithuania's tourism marketing plans for 2004–2007, strategic marketing concept of Lithuania's presentation in the world in 2008, Lithuania's tourism image building and marketing plans for 2008–2009, "Sumani Lietuvos reklama. Kūrybinio ir strateginio šalies ekonominio įvaizdžio formavimo gairės" (2009), it can be said that most of Lithuania's tourism image-building activities are limited by the same tools – participation in tourism exhibitions, tourism information centres abroad, publishing publications about Lithuania, organizing trade missions, the support of resorts cultural events. These tools are repeated every year, and stated on the period plans that it was participated in the exhibitions and business missions, tourism information centres abroad served more people, the publications were published, resorts cultural events supported. The greater part of concepts is more the list for the Governmental tourism department yearly agenda than the image-building tools, it lacks new ideas.

3. Lithuania's touristic image changes research methodology

Tourism is regarded as the criteria of cultural and economic prosperity. It encourages new businesses establishment in the whole country, jobs creation and growth of residents' income, acts as an urban and rural development catalyst. Tourism sector development and efficient exploitation for gaining tourism products competitiveness is significantly important for Lithuania. In order to find out the existing Lithuania's image, in 2006 Lithuanian tourism fund ordered a TNS Gallup research analysing Lithuania's attractiveness for business and tourism (Lietuvos turizmo ir verslo prekės ženklų sukūrimas. Kokybinio tyrimo ataskaita, 2006 m., Lietuvos turizmo ir verslo prekės ženklų sukūrimas. Kiekybinio tyrimo ataskaita, 2006 m.). This research was made 9 years ago, it is important to analyse how Lithuania's touristic image is seen today, what changes have happened, especially that since 2006 there were various attempts on the country level to improve and strengthen the image of Lithuania.

The object of research – Lithuania's touristic image changes.

The research problem: at the moment the problem is not a negative Lithuanian touristic image, but just not knowing it, not being able to recognize it. Tourists often do not have an information about the country and its achievements, but not because they are looking for information and cannot find it, but because they are not inclined to look for that information. Country's image is created by its actions and behaviour, expressed by specific events, while Lithuania has not delivered the world really interesting image communication solutions and do not have a strong image in the international tourism market.

The research aim – to identify Lithuania's touristic image changes in 2006–2015.

The research objectives:

1. Determine what associations the word "Lithuania" creates for the Lithuania's visitors.
2. Determine the basic facts about Lithuania the visitors knew before coming.
3. Identify the Lithuania's visitors travel expectations.
4. Determine the changes of Lithuania's touristic image elements evaluation.

The research data collection methods: written survey.

The research general set: tourists, who visited Lithuania within one year – 5.3 million visitors from abroad (Lietuvos turizmo būklės trumpos apžvalgos [Short overview of tourism statistics in Lithuania], 2014).

The selection method and survey sample: sample – a part of population that is used for statistical analysis (Žydzūnaitė, 2007). There was non-probability convenient sampling because it is very tricky to survey tourists – they do not have and do not want to spend time answering questions, using other selection methods would increase the risk of not receiving the desired number of answers.

The survey sample is based on Paniott formula (Valackiene, 2004):

$$n = \frac{1}{\Delta^2 + \frac{1}{N}}$$

n – sample size;

Δ – sampling margin of error;

N – general population size.

The survey sample consists of 400 tourists. The biggest risk for the validity is that there may be very similar groups of tourists whose knowledge about Lithuania is similar and it may not reflect the opinion of all the tourists. The risk reduction method – searching and surveying different demographic groups.

The data analyse method is descriptive statistical method.

Time and place of survey: May – October 2015. Questionnaires were present for tourists in Lithuanian hotels, tourist information centers and through travel guides.

4. Survey results analysis of Lithuania's touristic image changes

The interviewed tourists and one day visitors were from the countries shown below (Fig. 3). The biggest part of respondents – 15 % were Germans. Russians, Americans – 8 % each, Poles, Italians, Spaniards, Belarussians, English – 7 % each.

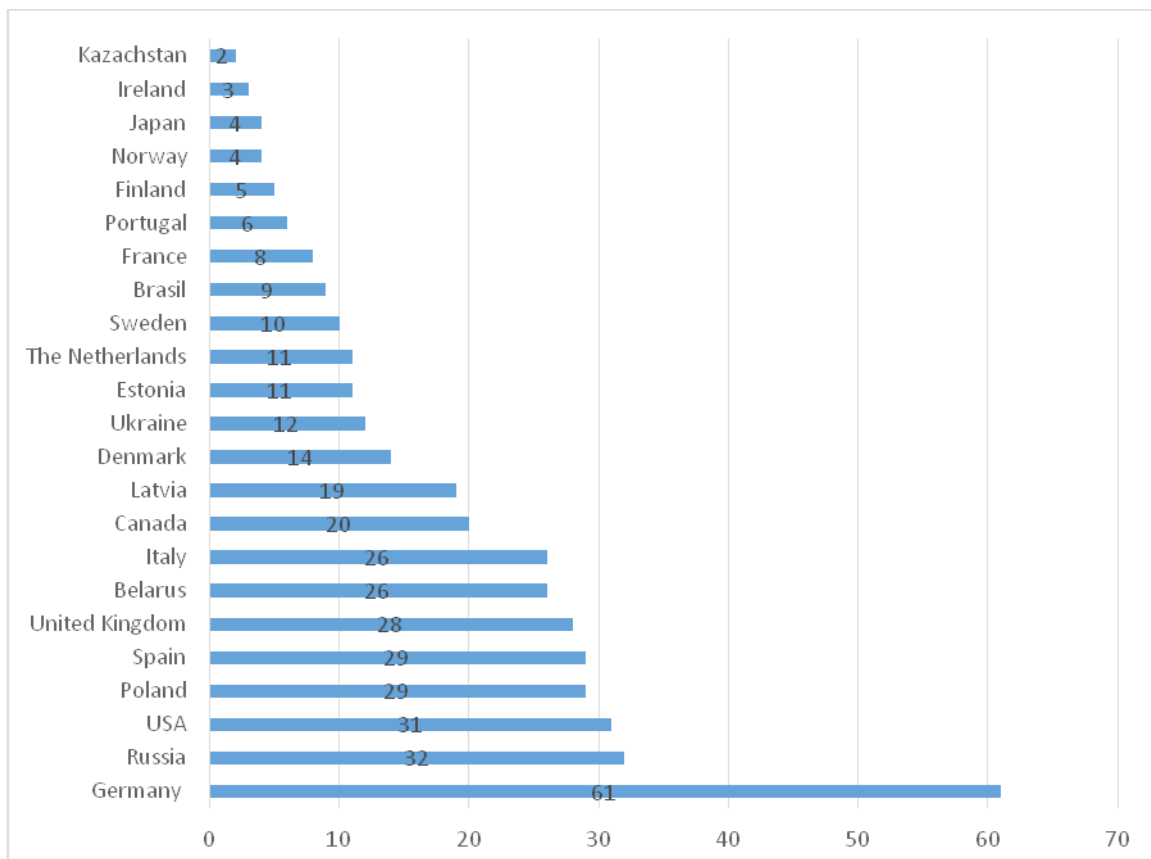


Figure 3. The distribution of the respondents by country

Source: composed by the authors

Men participated more active in the survey – they accounted for 61 % of all respondents, women – 39 %. It can be stated that in the research the gender distribution were maintained proportionality, because accord-

ing to Statistics Lithuania, men account for about 64 % of foreign visitors in Lithuania. It can lead by the fact that for business purposes men travel more than women, men more often than women prefer to travel alone.

The distribution of the respondents by age were not even (Fig. 4). Mostly there were older visitors in the research – from 51 years.

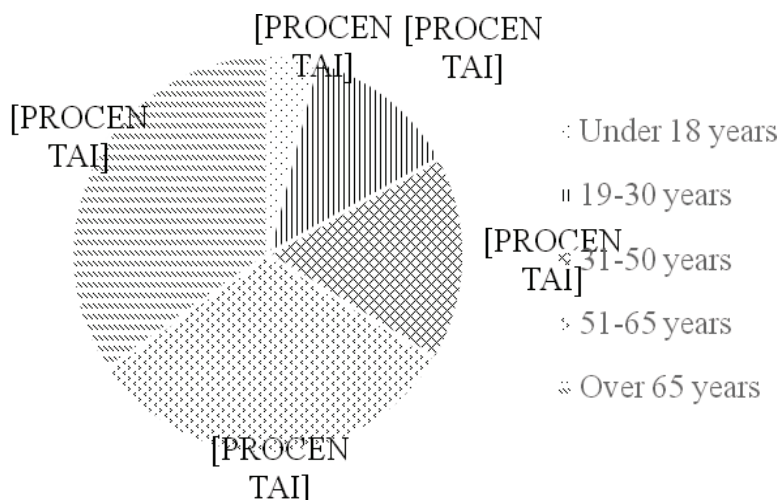


Figure 4. Distribution of the respondents by age, percent

Source: composed by the author

Interviewed Lithuania’s visitors mainly came for vacations (57 %). 27 % of the respondents visited for work/business, relatives were attended by 11 % of the respondents. The visitors for other purposes other purpose amounted to 9 % of the respondents, mostly other purposes were identified as shopping and wellness.

During the research visitors were asked to say what kind of associations occurs after hearing the word “Lithuania”. The main associations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The word “Lithuania” associations, provided by the respondents

Germany	Italy, Spain, Portugal	Russia, Belarus	United Kingdom, Ireland
“The country, suffered from strong neighbours”, “The Curonian Spit”, „from the history the nation, close to the German people“, „car trade“, „post-Soviet republic“, „world wars“, „a strong nation whose future is bright“, „beautiful nature landscape“, „situation with Russia“	„Cold weather and cold people“, „beautiful girls“, „funny people“, „good basketball players“, „produces delicious beer“, „hard-working people“	„The resistance to the Soviet Union“, „hostility“, „in Lithuania feeling like at home“, „Palanga, Druskininkai“, „we have a lot friends in Lithuania“, „a great country“, „once belonged to Russia“	„A lot of Lithuanians working with us“, „probably here is a very poor economic situation“, „delicious food and great beer“, „we hear about Lithuanians on the evening news, usually not in a good way“, „a country that is engaged in livestock, agriculture“
The Ukraine	USA, Canada	Denmark, the Netherlands	Japan
„Nations love for freedom“, „brotherly nation“, „friendly, hospitable people“, „will, strength, freedom“	„Sabonis, Marčiulionis, Ilgauskas, Valančiūnas“, „there are many Lithuanians in Chicago“, „hard-working people“, „poor country in Europe“, „interesting culture“, „friendly people“, „I have no knowledge“, „NATO, EU“	„We know students from Lithuania“, „engaged in agriculture“, „one of the three Baltic countries“, „near Russia“, „friendly people“, „beautiful girls“, „one of the least developed countries in EU“	„Exotic country“, „beautiful nature“, „interesting culture, traditions“, „beautiful people“

Source: composed by the author

During the research it was seeking to find out what expectations visitors had before the trip, what impressions they hoped for before coming to Lithuania. Some information was disappointing – “I was expecting to see a poor country, I thought that most people would be farmers”, “I thought that I would not be able to have conversations in English, people would be cold and not friendly”, “I was thinking that I would see dilapidated buildings”, “I imagined that people here were not stylish”, “I was wondering if it would be safe here”. Others hoped to see the Curonian Spit, Old Town, to communicate with interesting people. A significant part of the respondents expected to see a lot of forests, nature. About one third had no expectations, did not know what to expect from Lithuania.

According to the respondents, Lithuania is best presented by nature, clean environment, landscapes. That was said by 36 % (144) of the respondents (Fig. 5). However, the results distributed more or less evenly – the history and traditions, culture were each chosen by almost 31 % of all respondents. Lithuania is represented least by entertainments and events – this option was chose only by 2 % (8) of the respondents, but it was marked together with other options. This shows that Lithuania lacks high quality and exclusive events.

The respondents were asked to evaluate the individual elements that affect the touristic image. Local people hospitality and friendliness met or exceeded the expectations of the vast majority of the respondents (90 %). 10 % of the respondents were disappointed by local people and their communication. Service staff helpfulness was disappointing for even higher proportion of visitors (21 %), some even pointed out that the staff were “very unfriendly”. Price level were more or less in line with the expectations or was better than expected, only 7 % of visitors evaluated it as worse than expected.

Environment quality, climate mostly met and exceeded visitors expectations (Fig. 5). Culture was also considered as favourable – worse than expected was experienced by only 1.5 % of the respondents. Positively assessed security, according to the respondents it was the same as expected (32 %) or better (63 %).

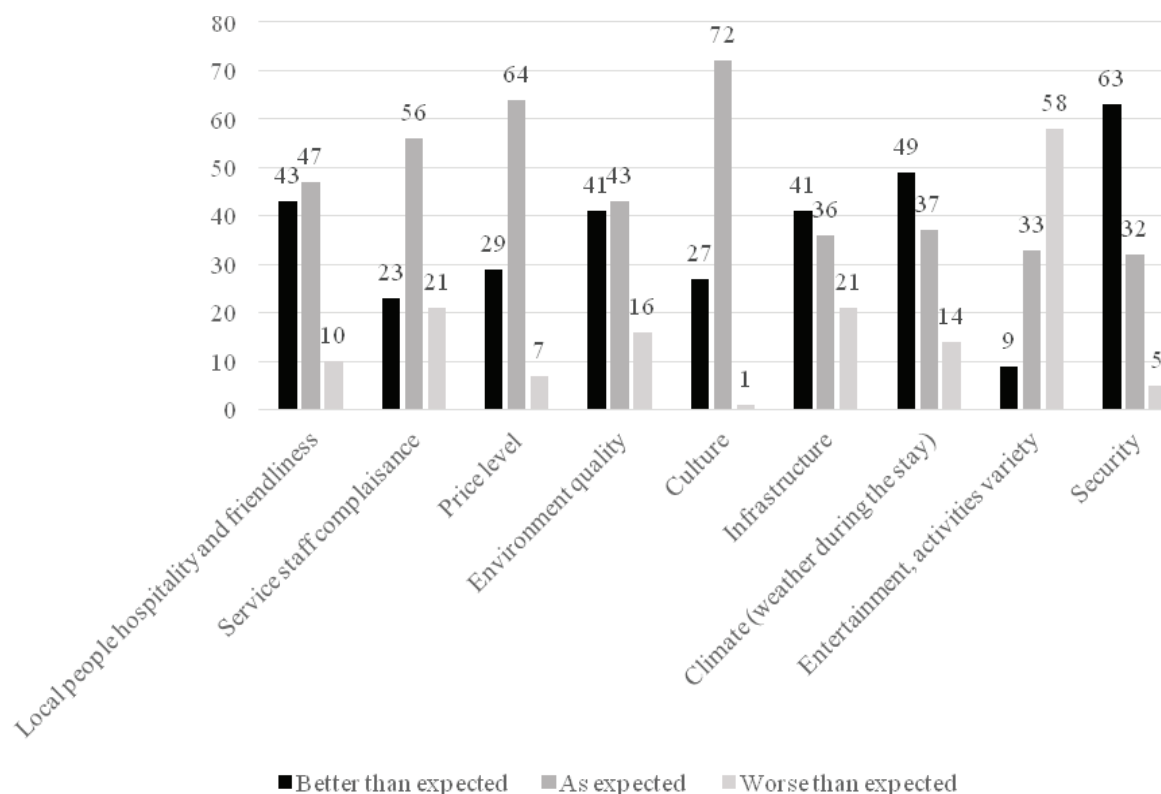


Figure 5. The evaluation of individual country elements in percent

Source: composed by the authors

The most negatively assessed elements that disappointed visitors were infrastructure and entertainment, variety of activities. Infrastructure was negatively evaluated by 21 % of the respondents. Entertainment and

variety of activities were evaluated even worse – it disappointed 58 % of the respondents. These results are not surprising because residents emphasize the lack of entertainment and activities as well.

In general, the stay in Lithuania was evaluated as a very well by 185 respondents. Lithuania did not only meet but exceed their expectations. 212 respondents evaluated the trip well, because it they received everything what they expected. Only 3 of 400 respondents evaluated their travel as average because they expected more. None of the respondents specified their travel as bad. These responses show that Lithuania is capable to welcome tourists and leaves more positive impression.

62 % of the respondents would like to visit Lithuania again. The other 38 % would not want to return to Lithuania because of various reasons: due to old age, because there is nothing to do, they already saw everything they wanted and so on. However, 96 % of the respondents (384) would recommended a trip to Lithuania for their relatives or acquaintances.

Summing up the results it can be stated that after a visit to Lithuania Lithuania's touristic image is seen more positively – the majority of the individual elements affecting country's image was evaluate better than expected. Only few factors, such as entertainment supply, infrastructure and staff were disappointing. However, it did not ruin the overall image of Lithuania, since a large proportion of foreigners indicated that Lithuania not only met but exceeded their expectations, therefore, they would recommended their relatives and acquaintances to visit Lithuania. Tourists were able to identify more positively than negatively surprising things.

In year 2006 study, foreign tourists after the visit to Lithuania, saw Lithuania as developed, modern and fast growing country. Existing supermarkets, service was not different from the Western Europe countries. People were not only warm, friendly and helpful to foreigners, but also educated, knowing foreign languages. According to the research in 2015 research, opinion after the visit was similar – a lot of constructions, buildings renovation, global brands shops, stylish people, knowing foreign languages, interesting culture and cuisine.

Conclusions

There are many image definitions and classifications, each author analyses it from own perspective. It was found that individual elements make a big influence for a general country's image. However, in order to use it effectively systemic attitude is required. Country's image in the international tourism market is explained by tourist behavioural characteristics: how a person behaves in respect of country, how he or she perceives the country – as a neighbour or distant, closed or open, acceptable or unacceptable, how much the person trusts the provided information, if he or she is ready to travel to the country. Personal characteristics has an influence for perceived location's image. Experience influence for perceived image is one of the most important – after visiting the location the person creates its image, for choosing the location his or her criteria becomes narrower, there is no need for additional information sources.

Despite Lithuania's efforts to make the image better abroad and inside the country, its rank on the international agencies surveys, evaluating country's political and economic situation in the world context and how famous it is, remains low. Summarizing Lithuania's touristic image improvement concept, it can be said that various strategies and plans do not differ from each other. The same tools are selected each year, new period plans states that all actions were carried out. The bigger part of strategies is more institutions annual agenda than the tools for improving image, new ideas are not delivered, only year is changed. There were several tries to change the existing image formation system: Lithuania's tourism communication and marketing strategy for 2009–2013 years (2009), The plan for Lithuania's touristic image formation and marketing communication tools (2010), the Governmental Tourism Department's Tourism Marketing Plan (2012), Lithuania's tourism communication and social media marketing strategy (2013). However, these tries did not bring the expected results.

During the 2006–2015 period, there were no core changes in associations, created for foreigners by the word "Lithuania". The research found that foreigners imagine Lithuania as underdeveloped, neglected agri-

culture country, people are closed, not willing to communicate – the same as was imagined in 2006. It was identified that Lithuania's touristic image is evaluated better after the visit – the vast majority of elements, making an influence to country's image, was evaluated better than expected. More facts about Lithuania was known by tourists from neighbouring countries. Tourists from more far countries had no information about Lithuania. It shows that Lithuania does not provide an interesting information for the world, which would force to remember Lithuania's name. About half of the respondents were looking for the information before coming to Lithuania. It confirms the problem, defined in the beginning of the article, that tourists frequently do not have an information about country and its achievements. It is not because they are looking for the information and cannot find it but because they are not tended to look for the information. After comparing the results, it can be stated that during the 9 years Lithuania's touristic image has not changed. It can be caused by not existence of united idea what Lithuania should show for the world. Foreigners (especially from far away countries) did not receive any information about Lithuania's exclusivity, they did not have any need to look for it specially.

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LIETUVOS TURIZMO ĮVAIZDŽIO POKYČIŲ VERTINIMAS

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Santrauka

Šalies turistinio įvaizdžio kūrimas – kruopštaus, nuoseklaus ir sudėtingo darbo reikalaujantis procesas. Šalys, besirūpindamos savo įvaizdžiu, pateikia pasauliui informaciją apie išsaugotas tautines tradicijas, kultūrą, ekonomikos ir politikos privalumus, stengiasi sudominti unikaliomis vertybėmis. Įvaizdžio kūrimas ir palaikymas, reputacijos stiprinimas ir aktyvi rinkodara yra būtinos šiuolaikinės modernios valstybės egzistavimo ir plėtros sąlygos. Šiandien šalies gamta, istorija, žmonės ir tradicijos tampa išskirtiniu prekės ženklu, kuris padeda stiprinti ekonomiką, tarpvalstybinius santykius, įgauti konkurencinį pranašumą. Tikslinga, aiškūs ir apibrėžtus prioritetus turinti įvaizdžio kūrimo strategija didina šalies politinę svarbą, žinomumą pasaulyje, stiprina nacionalinį tapatumą ir leidžia siekti strateginių ekonomikos plėtros tikslų. Turizmas laikytinas ir kultūrinės bei ekonominės gerovės veiksmu. Jis skatina naujų verslų ir įmonių atsiradimą visoje šalyje, kuria darbo vietas, užtikrina pajamas gyventojams, veikia kaip miesto ir kaimo vietovių raidos katalizatorius. Taigi Lietuvai ypač svarbi turizmo sektoriaus plėtra ir efektyvus šalies įvaizdžio išnaudojimas siekiant užtikrinti turizmo produktų konkurencingumą.

Tyrimo problema: šiuo metu tai ne neigiamas Lietuvos turistinis įvaizdis, o tiesiog jos nežinojimas, neatpažinimas. Turistai dažnai neturi informacijos apie šalį, jos laimėjimus, ne todėl, kad ieško informacijos ir jos neranda, o todėl, kad net nelinkę tos informacijos ieškoti. Šalies įvaizdis sukuriamas tos šalies veiksmais ir elgsena, kurie išreiškiami konkrečiais įvykiais, o Lietuva seniai nepateikė pasauliui iš tikrųjų įdomių naujienų, tad ir neturi stipraus įvaizdžio.

Tyrimo tikslas – išanalizavus šalies įvaizdžio turizmo rinkoje elementus ir teorinius modelius, nustatyti, kaip keičiasi Lietuvos turistinis įvaizdis, kokios galimos jo kūrimo kryptys. Atlikus tyrimą, nustatyta, kad 2006–2015 m. asociacijos, kurias užsieniečiams kelia žodis *Lietuva*, iš esmės nesikeitė. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad užsienio turistai įsivaizduoja, jog Lietuva yra atsilikusi, apleista žemės ūkio šalis, žmonės čia uždari ir nelinkę bendrauti, kaip manyta ir 2006 m. Nustatyta, kad apsilankius Lietuvoje, šalies turistinis įvaizdis vertinamas palankiau: didžioji dalis paskirų elementų, kurie daro įtaką šalies įvaizdžiui, įvertinti geriau, nei tikėtasi.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *Lietuvos turizmo įvaizdis, turizmo ekonomika*.

JEL klasifikacija: L83, Z19,