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REVITALIZING DEPRESSED AREAS OF THE RUSSIAN NORTH (THE CASE OF VELIKY USTYUG)

ABSTRACT. The study discusses the experience of «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» - one of the most successful Russian projects of regional tourism development in scarcely populated and depressed areas of the Russian North.

Founded in 1147, Veliky Ustyug is among the oldest towns of the Russian North with a 'historic city' and 'open-air museum' status. However, in the 1980-1990s it was a typical small town with depressive socio-economic structure based on forestry, small enterprises, folk crafts and distinctive social challenges such as migration, high unemployment, et al. The project «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» comparable to Santa Claus Village in Rovaniemi, Finland has increased greatly the tourist flow to the town and improved considerably its socio-economic situation.

The research is based on extensive field studies, theoretical observations and includes statistics analysis as well as the results of in-depth interviews with experts and regional stakeholders taken in 2011-2016, review of official legislation. Study reveals that the main idea of the project is to revitalize the depressed community with a wide range of social, educational, economic, infrastructural, cultural, leisure and tourism activities to promote its future sustainable development. The project life cycle is discussed within the birth, growth and maturity periods; each of them is provided with quantitative characterization. Key problems of the project and their possible solutions are identified. The main constraints to the project connected with poor transport accessibility of the destination and high seasonality of tourism demand are considered.

KEY WORDS: tourism, sustainable regional development, depressed territories of the Russian North, tourist cluster, Veliky Ustyug, Rovaniemi

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INTRODUCTION

Veliky Ustyug is one of the oldest towns in the north of European Russia. Located in the Vologda region 450 km northeast from the regional centre and more than 900 km from Moscow, Veliky Ustyug was founded in 1147 at the confluence of the Sukhona and the Yug rivers and is coeval to Moscow and Vologda. Almost all the territory around the town is covered by taiga forests with some meadows in floodplains. Though sparsely populated the area has always been known for timber production, dairy farming, flax cultivation and local craftworks as well as active trading. In course of reforms in the 1990s most of the local enterprises were closed or privatised and the economic situation in the area became depressed. It caused distinctive social challenges such as high unemployment and migration flows to Central Russia. Disastrous flooding in 1998 aggravated the situation. The number of residents in the town has declined and now the population of Veliky Ustyug is estimated at 31.6 thousand. The population of the municipal district around Veliky Ustyug (comprising 2 urban and 17 rural settlements) is about 23.3 thousand and the population density is 2.3/km² (Municipal data sheet 2016).

Unlike Karelia and Komi regions or the Kola Peninsula where indigenous non-Russian people prevailed till the XX century, this area was settled by Russians who came from Veliky Novgorod in the XI-XII centuries and later from the Upper Volga region. Therefore, Russian cultural traditions gained a strong foothold here. Nowadays Veliky Ustyug retains its rich cultural heritage with a 'historic city' and 'open-air museum' status. It has one of the best-preserved architectural ensembles in Russia with 153 sites classified as cultural and historical heritage of national significance and 25 sites classified as cultural and historical heritage of local significance. Most of the architectural and historical attractions refer to the XVI-XVII centuries when the town was the junction of key trade routes of national importance. The way north to Arkhangelsk, the main sea-port in the medieval and early modern Russia until Saint Petersburg's foundation in 1703,

crossed the ways fur traders used collecting furs from the huge area in the east. The commercial importance of Ustyug was so big that the town was named 'Veliky' ('Great') for its role in trade and communications. The Veliky Ustyug region is also the birthplace of Semyon Dezhnev, Yerofey Khabarov, Vladimir Atlasov and other Russian explorers of the Siberia and the Far East regions whose names can be now found on the world map. Despite all of the above advantages, the town did not attract many tourists. This was largely due to its complicated transport position. There was only one paved road from Vologda going northeast to Kotlas and a sideline of Vologda-Vorkuta railroad that was mostly out of use. The local airport had occasional passenger service to Vologda. In addition, there were no tourist products attractive for travellers.

The Veliky Ustyug area can serve as a distinctive example of a marginal territory located in distant periphery and lagging behind the rest of the region in terms of economic and social development. In general, marginal areas are usually characterized by a sparse network of settlements, large areas of pristine landscapes and very limited number of economic activities. Marginal territories have the potential for development but due to their geographical position are not able to find sufficient motivation, forces and means to grow (Pokrovsky and Nefedova 2014). The idea of sustainable tourism involving the recognition of potential negative impacts of tourism activities and the need to manage them in order to achieve the sustainable development goals should also be taken in consideration (Saarinen 2006).

Industrial production in the Veliky Ustyug region remains the main sector of local economy and is represented by woodworking, food production, electric power, machinery and construction materials manufacturing. Timber production plays the key role as the forested area covers about 80% of the region. But industrial enterprises are not the main taxpayers; their share in tax revenues is small as they are often registered in other places. The main part of regional tax revenues is formed by trade, education, health care, tourism and

other services. As before, the demographic situation in the region is characterized with the population decrease; the death rate exceeds the birth rate. Migration outflow in recent years is small, but in general the region is depopulating.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on observations and records made in course of field trips held by the authors in 2011-2015. The first trip was held in 2011 when the express destination analysis in high season was made. It included observations and data collection on the main attractions, tourist activities and transport accessibility of «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project.

The study was continued in 2012 off-peak season when the Department of Recreational Geography and Tourism, Faculty of Geography, Lomonosov Moscow State University expedition group of 11 students and 2 researches made a comparative analysis on regional tourist products branding and promotion for Vologda, Tot'ma and Veliky Ustyug. There was also sociological survey on tourism development prospects held in Veliky Ustyug which covered 3 groups of respondents: tourists, local residents and experts (local tourism industry representatives) and was aimed at revealing their evaluation of current and future tourism development prospects in the region. The survey was added by detailed study of the «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» destination ancillary services and amenities.

In September 2015 a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews on «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» tourist cluster project with experts and regional stakeholders including the representatives of regional and municipal tourist administrations and managers of tour companies who offer tours to Veliky Ustyug were held in the region. The main research topics included the goals of the project, its objectives, cluster structure, infrastructure facilities, project efficiency and sustainability. Expert interviews were preceded by marketing research on prospects for youth

tourism development in Vologda region conducted in course of the «Gates of the North» tourist exhibition in Vologda.

After 2017 peak season special research supported by Russian Travel Industry Union gave the opportunity to get expert assessments on current situation and future development prospects from the CEOs of six leading national tour operators and sum up the results and problems of «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project (RATANews 2017).

The field researches, marketing research and surveys formed the basis of the study. They were added by economic and statistical analysis, comparative geographical analysis, foreign experience assessment and content analysis of tourist information presented in guidebooks and websites.

Theoretical and methodological source of the study is formed by fundamental works of Russian and foreign scientists on regional development problems in marginal and sparsely populated areas of the North. It also includes regional statistics analysis and previously published literature review. The study is supported by regulatory and normative documentation assessment aimed at providing better understanding of different types of tourism development initiatives in the remote and sparsely populated areas of Russia.

Particular attention was paid to Santa Claus Village (Rovaniemi, Finland) experience (Pretes 1995, 2006; Grenier 2007; Hall 2008). The study of the foreign experience which in many ways served as an example for «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project is of particular importance for understanding the key performance trends and means for the arrangement, promotion and modification of its tourist product as well as the impact on regional economic development and sustainability.

The project «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» was launched in 1998 on the initiative of the Moscow City Government and the Vologda Region Administration. The idea of the project came from the

Moscow City Mayor Yu. Luzhkov and was supported by the regional and municipal tourism authorities (Vinogradov et al. 2008). It is necessary to point out that the idea to place the fairy-tale hero residence in Veliky Ustyug came 'from above'; it was not a public initiative. The people who started the project in Veliky Ustyug admit that they have learned about Santa Claus Village (Rovaniemi, Finland) successful experience but the idea of their project and the conditions for its implementation were quite different.

From the very beginning, serious limitations for the project were obvious. They included poorly developed accommodation facilities (only 2 units with total capacity of 119 bed places), lack of direct transport communication with Moscow and unsatisfactory condition of local cultural attractions. However, it was counterbalanced by strong state support and enthusiastic leadership of local tourism authorities.

It is evident that the project has a universal value and contains different instruments for comprehensive and sustainable regional development. The Vologda Region Government, Veliky Ustyug Municipal Administration and the Moscow City Government, who has contributed 2 million roubles to run the project, became the founders of the venture.

In 1998 an open joint-stock company (JSC) «Ded Moroz» was registered in Veliky Ustyug. Today «Ded Moroz» JSC is a big travel company with a wide range of group and individual tours designed for the «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project. In addition, it is the owner of the «Ded Moroz – Veliky Ustyug» registered trademark which is widely used in food and beverage industry. In the same year the Moscow Mayor and the Governor of the Vologda region signed an agreement on the implementation of the «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project. It has provided a number of measures to promote the project including corporate project identity, brand name, gift books for children and souvenir production, TV and other media commercials, organisation of the annual ceremony of Ded

Moroz arrival from Veliky Ustyug to Moscow, corresponding New Year and Christmas outdoor decoration, etc. It is very important to mention that this document provided the foundation for the prearranged exchange of children and school tourist groups between Moscow and Veliky Ustyug that formed the main tourist flow for the destination at the first stage of the project.

In 1999, the key attraction – the Homeland (Votchina in Russian) of Ded Moroz located 12 km from Veliky Ustyug in a beautiful pine forest on the riverbank was opened. The house of Ded Moroz as well as cottages for tourists, special facilities for winter activities, the zoo, and botanical garden with greenhouse, shops and other amenities were built. At the same time, the town residence of Ded Moroz opened in the centre of Veliky Ustyug. It included a great hall, souvenir shops with local craftworks (Vologda lace, birch bark carving, local silver jewellery, etc.), another museum and Ded Moroz post office.

In 2007 the official website of the project (www.dom-dm.ru) was launched. It tells about «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project in detail and provides tourists with the necessary information about local tourist attractions, events and amenities. There is also a special website (www.votchina-dm.ru) with additional information on the destination. Both websites give the option to send e-mails to Ded Moroz.

Over time, the project gained additional support from new stakeholders. For example, the Russian Railways company has revived railway connection with Veliky Ustyug and launched special charter trains for children's tourist groups. These trains are used not only as a means of transport but also serve as a means of accommodation that helps to a certain extent to cope with the shortage of accommodation facilities in Veliky Ustyug. The first train of this kind started from Moscow to Veliky Ustyug in 1998 and brought 320 guests. Nowadays, Russian Railways provide up to 20 special tourist trains for children from the main cities of Russia annually from mid-November until

mid-January period (Vinogradov et al. 2008). The educational part of the project has been developed gradually. In 1999, the first special training courses for managing tourist groups attracted by the project were held. Later, training courses for tour guides, for children's groups in particular, were organized. In 2003 the regional methodical centre for advanced training in tourism and hospitality was formed. Training courses for the new specialties that are of great demand for the project such as tourism and event manager, bartender, waiter, hotel cleaner, folk craftsman, etc. started in Veliky Ustyug secondary educational institutions. Technical support for the project was provided through cooperation with scientific and research centres, investment forums and conferences on tourism development.

In the 2000s a new stage in sponsoring the project started. It was supported by the national leading oil, gas and chemical companies such as Lukoil, Azot JSC, Gazprom, Severstal and other key entrepreneurs of the Vologda region. There was continuous Moscow city budget financial support. In total, from 1999 to 2014 the project was invested with 2.5 billion roubles and 40% of investments were private (Information on the project realisation 2015). The situation in Rovaniemi was quite similar: the project was launched by state Finnish Tourist Board, and then different forms of public-private partnership started to develop. Finnish post office and Finnair as a national carrier also supported the project (Pretes 1995).

The Veliky Ustyug project growth was also supported by a series of events.

They included Ded Moroz, New Year and Christmas thematic events as well as various festivals, competitions, creative programs for children and youth from different regions of Russia, educational programmes and games, sport tournaments, exhibitions, etc. The motto of Ded Moroz «Do the Good!» became the main idea of all creative activities and events carried out within the framework of the project.

Special attention was paid to the social orientation of the project, which is mainly implemented through children's communication with Ded Moroz. Ded Moroz post office has already received nearly 3 million letters from children all over Russia and abroad at www.pochta-dm.ru. The letters' content indicates high level of interest and confidence in the project. In 2005, a new therapeutic and recreational housing for children with disabilities, orphans, and children from deprived families opened in Ded Moroz Homeland. Non-governmental organisations, business groups, small companies and individuals take part in charitable events and activities there.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

«Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project resulted in a massive increase of tourist flow to the destination. Despite the decline in tourist arrivals in some years mainly due to unfavourable weather conditions and inconsiderate price policy the tourist flow has grown up to 278.5 thousand in 2016 (Fig.1).

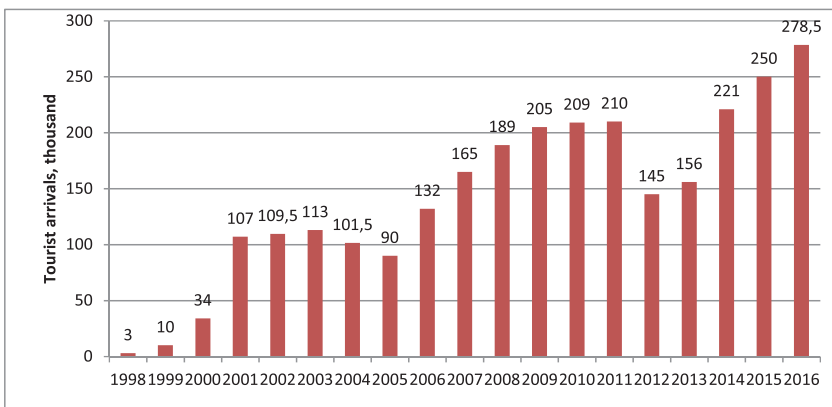


Fig. 1. Tourist arrivals to Veliky Ustyug, 1998-2016 (thousand)
Source: Department of Culture and Tourism of the Vologda region

The analysis of territorial distribution of tourist arrivals to Veliky Ustyug showed that the main target markets are located in two metropolitan areas – Moscow and Moscow region, Saint Petersburg and Leningrad region (Fig. 2).

Fig. 3 shows the distribution of arrivals by purpose of visit, indicating the dominance of cultural and leisure motivations. Other types of tourism also have good prospects for future tourism development and can help in elaborating new tourism products and reducing seasonal fluctuations.

In comparison to Santa Claus Village visited by international tourists mainly (Grenier 2007), Ded Moroz Homeland is aimed at domestic tourism only.

Rovaniemi has positioned itself as a leading North European centre for winter tourism by developing outdoor activities and special

events, with Santa Claus village acting as an addition to the existing polar attractions and activities (Pretes 2006; Grenier 2007). Santa Claus tourism has become an important Christmas season tourism activity in the region located right on the Arctic Circle. Moreover, strong brands like Santa Claus are clearly important contributors to the construction of regional advantage (Hall 2008).

In contrast to Rovaniemi, Veliky Ustyug had only cultural attractions and no additional advantages. The project here is based on the idea of common unification regarding national roots and traditions through associating with the image of Ded Moroz (sometimes translated as Father Frost) that symbolises kindness, happiness, hope and faith in future for both children and adults. The main objectives of the project are as follows:

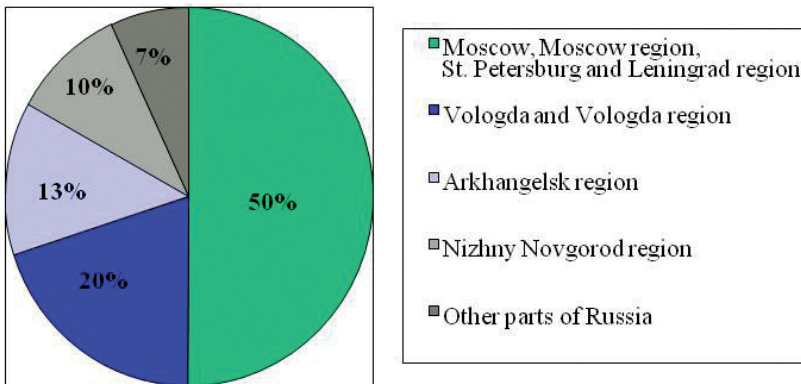


Fig. 2. Territorial structure of tourist arrivals to Veliky Ustyug, 2014 (share)
Source: Department of Culture and Tourism of the Vologda region

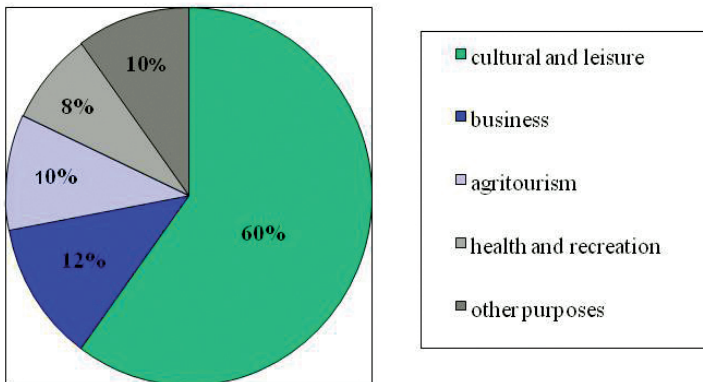


Fig. 3. Tourist arrivals to Veliky Ustyug by purpose of visit, 2014 (share)
Source: Department of Culture and Tourism of the Vologda region

1) educational – teaching young people traditional national and universal values, moral and aesthetic principles as well as kindness and mercy;

2) social – creating positive example of a small town revival in Russia;

3) economic – modern tourism industry and tourism infrastructure development and generation of unique tourism products for the national and international tourist markets;

4) ecological – conservation of cultural and natural heritage of the Russian North;

5) cultural – revival, improvement and reconstruction of local traditions and crafts as the essential part of national culture.

The project has had a positive impact on the local economy and social life. As Saarinen (2003) points out, in northern regions tourism provides more employment opportunities than any other field of economy. It is gradually used as a medium for many social and economic goals at regional and local level. Moreover, the community-based tradition of sustainable tourism growth stresses the wider involvement and empowerment of various actors, especially host communities, in development by emphasizing the elements of social capital in a local context (Saarinen 2006).

During the project implementation, transport and tourism infrastructure of Veliky Ustyug has been rapidly developed, the historical town centre was renovated, and new shopping centres and supermarkets as well as mobile communication and taxi services appeared in the town. The number of accommodation facilities in the town and its vicinity has increased significantly. There are now 14 hotels, 14 cottages, 1 sanatorium, 3 lodges, 18 guesthouses and other accommodation facilities in the area and the total number of bed places has exceeded 2.8 thousand. The average room occupancy rate was 70% in 2014 (the average room occupancy rate in Russia is just over 30%). During the same period the number of public catering enterprises increased by

six times. Eleven travel agencies are now engaged in providing tourist services in Ded Moroz Homeland while in 1998 there was only one agency of this kind (Information on the project realisation 2015).

The social efficiency of the project is proved by generating new jobs and emerging local employment (Bessolova 2013). In 1998 only 50 people were employed in local tourism industry; in 2015 there are almost 4 thousand employees in this sphere. That accounts for 13% of the total employed population of the district. Tax revenues from the project account for approximately 10% of Veliky Ustyug budget income (Veliky Ustyug municipal district data 2015).

«Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project has been repeatedly recognised as the most successful regional tourist project and regional brand in Russia. In recent years, it started to act as a model for other towns and regions of the country where other Russian fairy-tale heroes (like Snow Maiden or Baba Yaga) are used for tourism development. Ded Moroz is not a global symbol as he and other fairy-tale heroes belong to Russian culture only. However, these products are successful as they can be easily commodified. This idea supported by the regional tourist authorities and tourism industry has initiated the development of about 15 similar projects in different parts of the country. Taken together they form an interregional cultural and tourist project «Fairy-Tale Map of Russia». Not all the projects are that successful but they try to follow Ded Moroz model. It is very important to match up the potential of the suggested brand with the size and economic profile of the place and to provide its active promotion and infrastructure investments.

In 2000, a trilateral agreement on cooperation between Moscow, Vologda Region and the Lapland Province in Finland was signed to start the international project «Santa Claus – Ded Moroz». There are good relationships with foreign partners in Sweden, Germany, Belarus, Latvia, etc.

Along with the poor transport accessibility, seasonal character of tourism activities is

the key problem for Veliky Ustyug project development. Seasonality has always been a very serious problem for Rovaniemi (Pretes 2006; Grenier 2007; Hall 2008). One of the first attempts to make the season longer was connected with the celebration of Ded Moroz birthday organized annually on November, 18. Then a wide range of all-season programmes for children staying in Veliky Ustyug was arranged. They included «Festival Express» – summer recreational programmes for children, «Ded Moroz Decorations» – guided tours to introduce craftworks and traditions of Veliky Ustyug municipal district for children, «The Youth Embassy» programme – training the young ambassadors of «Ded Moroz Homeland» project to provide support for various social activities in their schools and settlements, Army Cadet School, International School of Russian Studies, etc.

The variety of events has expanded greatly. A year-round cycle of festivals in the Homeland of Ded Moroz was launched. Due to these measures, there is a positive tendency to smooth out seasonal fluctuations. The number of visitors in summer, spring and autumn periods has increased. Nevertheless, the problem of seasonality remains urgent. In 2012 a decision to turn the «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» project into a year-round tourist destination was taken. New tourist sites and infrastructure objects are constructed as parts of investment project «Ded Moroz» which has received the tourist cluster status. As Hall (2008) states, clustering and innovation are the best regional policy ideas for peripheral areas. In 2015, the project was included in the Federal Target Programme «On the Inbound and Domestic Tourism Development in the Russian Federation (2011-2018)».

The cluster plan consists of a set of inner projects and tourism infrastructure items such as:

- interactive cultural and leisure centres (new facilities for recreation and entertainment);
- sports centres and health tourism facilities, including the year-round children's campsite;

- trade and exhibition centres;
- places for agritourism, hunting and fisheries (eco-village);
- centres for national traditions revitalisation (Russian izba - traditional countryside log house).

The cluster infrastructure objects are dispersed around all the territory of Veliky Ustyug municipal district including Ded Moroz Homeland area. Therefore, it will help to develop rural territories around the town. The cluster project started in 2014 and is about to be completed in 2018. According to 2016 data the plans for the tourist arrivals and the number of bed places in collective accommodation facilities have been already fulfilled. Tourist flows are expected further increase and at least 250 additional job places will be created. The strategic goal of the project is to reach 650 thousand visitors to Veliky Ustyug municipal district in 2030 (Alexandrova and Vladimirov 2016).

Another important result of the project is connected with public initiatives for tourism development appeared 'from below' with tourist activities proposed by local community. When the positive impact of tourism on local economy and social development became obvious the residents of the Veliky Ustyug area started to suggest their own ideas on tourist activities based on local traditions, culture and history. For example, several guesthouses restoring the traditions of northern peasant dwelling with traditional Russian stoves, original utensils, traditional clothing and food were organised. They present cultural and educational programmes, events and food in traditional Russian style and other activities based on traditional folk culture, which is typical to the Russian North. Such projects are of great social importance for the area. Therefore, they are supported and promoted by the municipal authorities and have preferential tax treatment.

Some projects combine more multifaceted ideas and traditions. Starting from 2013 the project «Mit'kina Doroga» (Mit'ka's Pathway) is been developing in Veliky Ustyug area.

Local inhabitants started to restore the road built in the XIX century by a local farmer for a vow given during his wife's illness. The road goes to the old church that is now abandoned and needs restoration. This project symbolises life journey of a peasant family, their family values, religious traditions, local history and ethics. The project also has unique nature tourism potential as the road passes through Strelensky geological reserve close to the Upper Strelna and Opoki landscape protected areas. «Ded Moroz» JSC supports the project as it helps to attract tourists in summer period and to maintain year-round staff employment.

CONCLUSION

The success of Veliky Ustyug project is largely determined by particular attractiveness of the fairy-tale hero theme which brings tourists to the world of childhood, dreams and magic. This idea is widely supported by active advertising campaigns as the New Year is one of the most favourite holidays among Russians. The popularity of the project is also connected with its diverse and well-preserved environment – both natural and cultural. That is why tourists from big cities come here.

Many experts emphasise that lack of snow in winter is an increasing limitation for Santa Claus Village development. Though the location of Ded Moroz Homeland was chosen rather emotionally, thanks to the beauty of local landscapes and climate, there is no problem with snow in the Veliky Ustyug area.

At the same time, main problems are caused by inconvenient road configuration and poor technical quality of transport network and infrastructure in Veliky Ustyug which is typical for the northern peripheral regions of Russia.

The results of the study reveal one more problem that is extremely relevant but is not properly understood yet. The example of «Veliky Ustyug – Ded Moroz Homeland» shows that tourist destination which has a very strong brand, on the one hand, and the peripheral position, on the other, hinders the

development of the entire regional tourism system. Spatial framework of regional tourism system is formed by tourist centres connected by transport and tourist routes. If the central link falls out of the supporting frame, the entire system collapses and tourism spatial organisation fails.

In many respects Veliky Ustyug has appeared to become a tourist centre artificially, therefore it cannot form the regional tourism system core. According to objective reasons, Vologda should be the core of the regional tourism system (in terms of tourism potential, transport accessibility, administrative status, etc.). The amorphous regional tourism system confronts the competition between existing and new emerging tourist centres like Cherepovets or Vytegra. Instead of cooperation, which is highly important for tourism development, this confrontation leads to uneasy relations between tourist centres.

Tourist flows do not circulate around the destination because of Veliky Ustyug poor transport accessibility even despite the fact that Votchina is operating at the limit of its capacity. During high season in 2016, the organizers had to limit visits by unorganised tourists because of the huge number of guests. Only prearranged tourist groups were allowed to visit Ded Moroz Homeland. Many experts admit that the festival in Veliky Ustyug has turned into a conveyor belt with huge line of Ded Moroz visitors and no fairy tale atmosphere that emphasises its commodification.

Tourist destination, claiming to be the core of the regional tourist system, in this case cannot perform its function due to objective circumstances. Organisation of new tourist infrastructure facilities in Veliky Ustyug will only aggravate the contradictions. The peripheral position is still the main limitation to tourism development in Veliky Ustyug.

Tourism is a tool for developing the territory, which can be very effective under certain conditions. Thanks to tourism, the territory can reveal the potential for self-development and sustainability. The sustainable use of resources and the environment and the well-

being of communities are goals to which sustainable tourism should contribute. That is why the case of Veliky Ustyug gives the example of public and private initiatives combination contributing to diverse tourism

development preserving local culture and traditions as well as economic activity of the remote northern territories preventing their depopulation and depression. ■

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