

Ms. Milena Filipovic the Expert on Cultural Tourism for the Triple P Tourism Project implemented by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and funded by the European Union, in the interview for the Bosnian Federal News Agency, FENA

Connecting regional tourism offer through culture tourism in Western Balkan

Regional Cooperation Council is implementing an EU funded project focused on connecting tourism of Western Balkans economies and joint promotion of the region?

Regional tourism development and promotion project is focused on improving the quality of tourism offer of the region by developing joint tourism product offer of the Western Balkans (WB) primarily in the area of cultural and adventure tourism. The aim is to make the offer more diverse, attract more tourists from the region and beyond to visit the region and stay longer and return. All this would then contribute to creation of new jobs in these local communities and boost the overall economic development.

The focus of the project is to present and adequately valorise the richness and diversity of both cultural and natural heritage that the WB region can indeed take pride in, which represents significant development resource. To that end we work with our partners in the region to reduce obstacles to better development of tourism industry and facilitate administrative procedures, including support to small-scale infrastructure projects through small grants scheme to boost development of regional tourism products.

What is the project value and which economies does it include?

The project includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo*, North Macedonia and Serbia. The main value of the project lies in this all-inclusiveness as it links tourism offer across the region through cooperation of stakeholders at all levels – public, civil and private – working together to change the image of the region and show what they have to offer – all cultural richness and natural resources, which add up to their potentials for sustainable development.

When it comes to cultural tourism, it is divided in topical components?

Yes, true. Cultural tourism has the leading role in creating new social and economic opportunities for tourism development and is one of the fastest growing tourism trends in the world. In addition to enriching visitor's experience, cultural tourism encourages tourism exchange, strengthens cultural identity of a destination and inspires closer links between guests and local communities.

The guiding idea of the project was equal representation of all economies through developing themes and designing itineraries that would connect them. This resulted in project's three priority

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

areas of cultural tourism which include quite a diverse typology of cultural heritage – archaeological sites, establishments dating back to Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, religious heritage, urban complexes, monumental architecture, etc.

What are the themes in question and how the selected themes connect region's economies? To what extent are their stories interesting to tourists beyond the region?

Well, there are three priority themes within which we are implementing our activities. These are: ***Illyricum Trail***, which includes archaeological heritage from Roman period, from 1st to 4th century AD and represents an extension of the European Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route (Council of Europe certified route). There are 8 archaeological sites along the Illyricum Trail in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia. Illyricum is a geographical term that was used by the Romans in the late 1st century BC and early 1st century AD to describe the new Balkan territory which they were conquering to annex to the Roman Empire. It included the lands which extended from the western boundary of modern Greece to the Alps on the west and from the Danube River on the north to the Adriatic Sea.

The second theme – ***Balkan Monumental Trail*** is dedicated to post World War II monuments, primarily futuristic monuments which have extraordinary symbolic and artistic value. This monumental heritage is a distinct and unique European resource in how it communicates the universal ideas of the region's anti-fascist history. Though these ambitious architectural and artistically sophisticated monuments had been often marginalised as tourism resources, interest in them has been exponentially increasing worldwide over the past couple of years. These are indeed specificity of the Western Balkans and as such deserve to be properly valorised.

The third theme is ***Western Balkans Crossroads of Civilisations*** as a joint regional identity of this part of the world. The main objective of this regional identity is three-fold: promotion of rich and diverse cultural heritage of the region, repositioning the region in international travel market and support to development of high quality services, products and main tourism infrastructure in identified destinations. Total of 40 sites have been identified as the starting point of the Crossroads of Civilisations. The main products are regional cultural itineraries which will provide high quality and authentic cultural experience for visitors through storytelling.

Will COVID-19 pandemic impact this project, i.e. tourist visits?

Unfortunately, COVID-19 pandemic has already significantly impacted not only this project, but tourism sector in general in the region and worldwide. In order to grasp the consequences of the pandemic outbreak, we have conducted a survey of private sector, travel agencies and tour operators, and the figures are quite worrisome. The survey showed that the pandemic has affected and hit hard the whole sector as 78% of respondents reported high impact on income projected for 2020 as early as in April this year, with slightly lower impact on agencies that operate adventure programmes. Similar situation is in the cancellations where over 70% of respondents reported that between 50% and 100% of planned trips had already been cancelled. The agencies are cutting the number of employees (42%) while some reduced the salaries to a minimum wage. 41% reported having resources to survive for a maximum of up to 3 months. Since April the overall situation has been made even more complex for this sector because travel

restrictions are still effective, which together with the omnipresent virus still strongly affect the opportunities for implementing tourism activities.

The remaining project implementation period will surely suffer certain modifications due to this situation in order to adjust, to the extent possible, to the current needs. Many activities will be based on digital solutions.

And here I would refer to the recently ended Balkathon, 1st ever Western Balkans' regional online competition in innovative digital solutions, organised by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and funded by the European Union. Smart Tourism was one of the competition categories and we were glad to see that there are plenty of smart solutions that can assist the regional tourism sector to bypass these difficult times of the pandemic. The winning idea offered us an entirely new perspective of tourism – augmented reality, which in turn with limited tourism activity mostly focused on domestic destinations, while the travel restrictions due to the pandemic are present, can become an alternative to promotion of regional tourism offer. We are looking forward to this idea being developed fully to include the entire region. This, for example, might be a way forward in adjusting our activities to such unprecedented situations.

The Regional Cooperation Council, with the financial support of the EU, awarded the winners in all 3 categories with 10,000 euros each, to further develop their idea to practical application. The competitor from BiH won the first prize in the category of 'smart tourism'. It is Miron Lukač who, on behalf of the Portal World team, devised an augmented reality solution that allows its users to experience the locality they visit through content that overlaps with their surroundings.

In your opinion, to what extent is Bosnia and Herzegovina an interesting country for cultural tourism?

Bosnia and Herzegovina is extremely interesting country for even greater development of cultural tourism, which is in place to a certain extent, though focused on particular centres – Sarajevo, Mostar, Blagaj, Trebinje. Diversity of culture BiH is rich in makes it rather specific and this, in combination with natural resources, offers unique experience that should be designed in a product covering the entire economy.

Which sites did you select for presentation?

Based on the priority areas in cultural tourism and guided by the defined criteria, the project, in cooperation with relevant institutions, identified a number of locations. Illyricum Trail includes Mogorjelo near Čapljina, Monumental Trail has the largest number of monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including Tjentište in Sutjeska, Kozara near Prijedor, Partisan Cemetery in Mostar and Monument by great Bogdan Bogdanović in Novi Travnik, Vraca and Vogošća in Sarajevo, Museum of the Battle for the Wounded on Neretva River in Jablanica, Antifascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) Museum in Jajce, monuments in Zenica and Banja Luka. These are indeed masterpieces of monumental architecture we want to present to the visitors who wish to get to know the art and architecture or history of this area.

The sites proposed as part of the Western Balkans – Crossroads of Civilisations are Sarajevo, Jajce, Mostar, Travnik, Stolac, Višegrad. By the way of illustration, Stolac – Crossroads of Civilisations project, we are implementing in cooperation with Mak Dizdar Foundation and

which is about to end, presented cultural heritage of Stolac and surrounding area in a very nice and educational way, developing cultural and tourism route leading us through the most attractive locations and beautiful nature.

Project duration, goal and outcome?

The project ends mid next year and we hope that majority of these activities will continue through the work of organisations with which we have established cooperation and which are engaged in cultural and active tourism. The RCC will continue addressing tourism through activities which will partly build on the results of activities already implemented, but this is yet to be defined. In any case, the project has contributed to diverse tourism offer in the region, launched new products primarily in cultural and adventure tourism and promoted the region in international market.