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Cultural heritage and museums in Central Asia: The Role of Cultural Institutions in disseminating Information

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Abstract: Tourism and cultural heritage are significant elements in providing success in the 'soft struggle' for geopolitical influence, arguably to the same level as trade, investment, agriculture or education. The aim of this paper is to analyse if, and to what extent, the countries of Central Asia are effective promoters of their national heritage in order to attract tourists. In my paper I concentrate on the issues the availability of Internet information for potential tourists and digital divide. The subjects of my analysis are the historical and archaeological museums in five countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords: digital divide, tourism, archaeological and historical museums

JEL codes: Z32

1. Introduction

The expected economic improvement is one of the primary motivations for a region to promote itself as a tourist destination. The countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan have great tourist potential both for foreign visitors and companies who might be interested in investing in tourism. A key factor making the place so attractive for tourists is its history, starting with the Silk Road, which dates back to Roman times (Buyers, 2003), continuing with renowned scientists and scholars of the Medieval world, through the dominance of the nomads, the Russian empire, the Soviet era. If we add the beauty of nature,

landscapes, cultural, archaeological and heritage unique attractions, hospitality of people, arts and crafts of the region, it is easy to understand why this region can be considered as a unique and very attractive tourist destination. In the literature on the subject, the authors state clearly that Central Asia already exists as a tourist destination (Jeffries, 2003, Kantarci et al. 2014, Shokirov, et al. 2014). However, one common denominator in all the studies is that all these countries, to a different degree, lack proper infrastructure and have not developed proper mechanisms to attract more potential visitors and tourists (Shokirov et al. 2014).

One of the most often quoted sentences in the literature on the tourism industry is that information is the lifeblood of tourism (Poon 1993). The communication technologies of the third millennium have revolutionised how tourism works. We can observe in the literature a growing interest in exploring the possibilities which new technologies offer in order to enhance participation in museums and galleries. The role of the Internet and new technologies in promoting museum exhibitions has been demonstrated and analysed to a large extent (Lehn et al., 2005, Sheldon, 1997, Selma et al., 1998). The Internet has changed the whole process of tourism and every element connected with this branch of the economy (Buhalis 1998). More so than in any economic sectors, the distribution of information has a significant impact on tourism.

Culture has been identified as one of the four pillars of sustainable development, together with economic growth, social inclusion and environmental balance. Cultural heritage is a significant sector of any economy, providing jobs and generating economic growth. This is particularly true of developing countries, where cultural heritage, properly managed and with proper investment, can generate significant economic growth. It has been clearly demonstrated in numerous studies that museums have direct impact on a country's economy (Grefe 2009). Museums are those particular places that store and represent cultural heritage. By facilitating access to them, proper distribution of information has an impact that cannot be denied. Museums are a widely-accepted barometer of the impact of cultural activities. Over the last few years proper management has become recognised as one of the crucial elements in the functioning of museums. Strategies similar to those applied by major media companies are adopted, and tourists are often considered as an end product that generates income.

Digital disparities can be a reason of exclusion—if cultural institutions, whole communities, touristic organizations are not able to provide accurate information in a proper way or are not able to use the Internet tools efficiently, they lose their chances on the tourist market

and determine their own destiny (Selwyn 2004). The OECD (2001) defines digital divide as “the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access ICTs and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities” (p. 5)

In any museum, digital technologies provide information on exhibitions, opening hours, events, prices. In some, social media, such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook are being used to communicate with customers and thus to attract more visitors. A term that has to be introduced and explained in this moment, is Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and website positioning. This is the process that affects the ranking of a website in a search engine's results. It is assumed, that earlier, and more frequently a site appears in the search results list, the more users will visit it (Knežević et al. 2010: 194). Museums that ensure that their websites are displayed in top positions are more likely to be visited (Jöran et al. 2010:179).

2. The research

2.1. The aim and the research question

The aim of this paper is to analyse if, and to what extent, the countries of Central Asia are competitive in promoting their national heritage. It aims to verify, to what degree historical and archaeological museums in the countries of Central Asia are able to adopt effective strategies to facilitate access to information for potential tourists in order to attract them. The issue of competitiveness of the museums on the digital level and the issue of digital divide is the most important one. Providing digital access to the exhibitions, information on museums has been analysed. Finally, it examines which of the analysed countries provides the highest quality information in the area of cultural heritage and tourism. The following factors have been identified as particularly relevant and the following research questions were asked:

- If it is possible to communicate with a museum in order to get information about the museum's activities.
- If a museum has its own website and in what way it is structured and organized.
- If there is a virtual museum and what tools there are to present the collections. Are there 3d interactive exhibits or is it purely descriptive?

- What is the language of the target group(s): Russian speaking or non Russian speaking.
- What kind of information is available about the museum as well as the region, its history and its culture.
- If a museum plays a role as a platform disseminating cultural or tourist information. Whether there are links from the website or virtual museum to other institutions, and to what institutions or cultural and tourist destinations.

2.2. Analysed material

The objects of the present analysis are historical and archaeological museums in five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. For each country two museums were chosen for the analysis. The criteria of the choice were as follows:

- State museums
- Possessing archaeological, ethnographic or historical collections
- At least one of the museums in every of the country in question is situated in its capital.

According to the criteria, the following museums have been analysed:

- The Central State Museum in Almaty, Kazakhstan. First established in 1931, is one of the largest museums in Central Asia. With its very significant collection of Kazakh historical, archaeological, modern cultural and artefacts, is considered a landmark of Almaty The (Central State Museum of Kazakhstan, 2015).
- The National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana. It is the youngest and largest museum in Central Asia. It was created in 2013 and is divided into four exhibition halls, illustrating the history of Kazakhstan from the beginning of life on Earth, appearance of the first traces of human activity, development of settled and nomadic civilizations, formation of the first state units, intestine wars and mass migration of peoples up to the impetuous events of this century to our time (The National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015).
- The State History Museum, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, first established in 1926. The museum has archaeological collection from Kyrgyz history from the Stone Age till present, both archaeological an ethnographic collections of objects documenting everyday life in

Kyrgyzstan. It has also a very rich collection of materials from the Soviet period such as the collections of documents, photographs, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and gifts presented to the Kyrgyz Republic by foreign governments (Mitchell, 2015:119).

- The Sulaiman-Too National Historical and Archaeological Museum Complex, Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Created in 1949, it has a collection of more than 33,000 artefacts. They are mainly archaeological exhibits, but also ethnographic, and a rich collection of documents, photos, and other artefacts describing the history of the Southern Kyrgyzstan from the Soviet period till the present. (Sulaiman-Too national history archaeology museum complex, 2015).
- The K. Bekhzod National Museum of Tajikistan. Established in 1934, the museum has a collection composed of over 50,000 exhibits on the history, culture and natural environment of Tajikistan (The K. Bekhzod National Museum of Tajikistan 2015).
- The National Museum of Antiquities in Tajikistan, opened in 2001 is a departmental museum, but at the same time has a national status. The museum has rich archaeological and historical collection. The museum is one of the most visited museums in Dushanbe (National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, 2015)
- The Museum of Turkmen National Values in Ashgabat. It holds collections presenting the achievements of post- independence Turkmenistan, as well as some exhibits from the Turkmen history (Brummel 2005:100).
- Ashgabat National Museum of History in Turkmenistan. Opened in 1998, is divided into six halls: independence, ancient history, antiquity, middle ages, ethnography and nature. It contains over 500,000 artefacts, mostly archaeological and ethnographic but also a significant number of fossils, samples of mountain rock and of Turkmen flora and fauna, as well as rare geological finds (Aruz 2003: 237, Brummel 2005: 103).
- The Uzbekistan State History Museum. The museum was established in 1876 and is one of the largest scientific-educational institutions in Central Asia. It serves as a scientific research institution. It holds more than 250,000 individual items. Among them a collection relating to archaeology, numismatics, ethnography, archival documents of modern and recent history and a scientific library with publications from the 19th and 20th centuries as well as earlier books and manuscripts (The Uzbekistan State History

Museum: 2015).

- Mirzo Ulugbek Museum Uzbekistan was built in 1970 (Fazlıoğlu 2008:63) to commemorate Ulug Begh, a Timurid ruler, as well an astronomer, mathematician and sultan. Astronomical museum related to Mirza Ulugh Beg in Samarkand, was established next to the ruins of the observatory, to have been one of the finest observatories in the Islamic world at the time and the largest in Central Asia (Smith 1958: 289).

2.3. Methodology

Characteristics of the participants

Forty five people participated in the survey. All of them were English speakers, 14 native English speakers, 31 speaking English at the advanced level. Twenty one of the participants were native Russian speakers. All the participants were adults, age range from 22 to 65, computer literate, all familiar with basic computer tools and being able to use typical search engines.

The procedure

The research was conducted in June 2015. The participants were given the name of the museums, and the instructions. The task was divided into two parts. In the first part of the research they were asked to find the museum website, and using the museums websites, to accomplish the following tasks:

- to find the museum contact details: address, phone number, e-mail
- to check the opening hours, ticket prices, permanent and temporary exhibitions, the days when museum is closed
- to obtain information about the museum collections, both permanent and temporary
- to verify if it is possible to buy a small object from a museum shop on-line
- to verify if it is possible to book a ticket in advance and to buy it
- to obtain information about the region, weather, currency
- to find a possibility to book a hotel on the museum website
- to check what other activities can be done in the city, region or all over the country.

There was no time limit for accomplishing the task; however, the participants were instructed,

that they might not be able to accomplish the task, as in some cases not all the information might be provided or accessible. Therefore if they considered not being able to accomplish it, they were allowed to abandon the task. The name of the museum was given both in Russian and in English. All the participants used their own PCs. No search engine was suggested and the participants were asked to use the one they were most comfortable using.

In the next part of the research, the participants were given the names of five big museums, the untreated group, and were asked to accomplish the same tasks and also to measure their level of satisfaction and time of accomplishing the tasks.

The following museums were in this second part of the research: Louvre (Paris, France), British Museum (London, United Kingdom), Hermitage (Saint Petersburg, Russia), MoMa (New York, the United States), Vatican Museum (Vatican).

After having accomplished the tasks, the participants were asked to describe their level of satisfaction in the scale from 0 (absolutely not satisfied) to 6 (totally satisfied). They were also given a questionnaire, where they had to answer 17 questions, concerning their satisfaction, ease of finding information, the museum image - whether the museum was viewed as a worthwhile place to visit, about the full range of their expectations about potential experiences in a museum, including both physical and cultural accessibility, permanent and temporary exhibitions, and finally museums' amenities. Additionally, they could express their opinions on ease in finding information and the user-friendliness of the websites.

Independently, the present author sent an e-mail to every museum which offered e-mail contact. The following questions were asked in English:

- what the ticket price is
- what the opening hours are
- if there is a special price for foreign tourists
- if there are any temporary exhibitions
- if it is possible to buy a museum catalogue

2.4 The results of the research

E-mail contact with the museums is practically impossible. The answer to e-mails came from only one museum- the National Museum of Kazakhstan in Astana. The museum managers

answered to all the questions in English, adding some complimentary information about possible discounts, temporary exhibitions, and the museum's plans for future. The others museums, where e-mails were sent, did not answer at all.

The participants were able to find 7 museums websites in total, but it is necessary to mention that not a single person was able to find them all.

Forty people in total found the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan in Almaty websites. It is rather interesting that two parallel functioning websites were found – the first one <http://www.csmrk.kz/>, in Russian and Kazakh, with no English version available, therefore very difficult to use for non-Russian or non-Kazakh speakers; and a second: http://www.unesco.kz/heritagenet/kz/hn-english/csmrk/engl/index_en.htm, in English and Russian, this time with no Kazakh language version. It was hard to say which one is the official as the e-mails were left unresponded. Two contact e-mails were provided, one where official letters and requests could be sent, and a second, where theoretically it was possible to book the tours; however, as mentioned previously, the e-mails were not answered.

The site was not highly indexed, therefore the participants of the research claimed that the museum was very hard to find, it took relatively long- from 45 seconds to 6 minutes. In the Russian-Kazakh site there were several links to long texts about the museum's history, its collections and recent exhibitions. The visitors had also opportunity to have a short virtual tour on the museum premises. The English-Russian site was purely descriptive, with no virtual tour, however, there was all the information needed, including the museum history, exhibitions, pictures of some artefacts, and also information about possibility of renting premises and various arrangements - presentations, briefings, conferences and organizing other events connected with Kazakhstani history, such as lectures, classes or guided tours.

The National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana's site: <http://astanamuseum.kz/>, was relatively well indexed compared to the previous one. Three language versions were available, Kazakh, Russian and English. The Russian version was much more developed than the English one, nevertheless both non-Russian speakers and Russian speakers participants of the research easily found basic information, such as contact details, phone, address, e-mail, map of the museum, and its history. It was the only museum with possibility to buy a ticket on-line, however this option was available only in Russian version. There were also several links to temporary exhibitions, the museum director blog, video

presentation of the museum, restoration centre, or the 3d presentation of the Golden Man. It is a symbol of Kazakh Independence, a statue of a Scythian warrior recovered from a kurgan, or burial mound, some 70 kilometres from Almaty in Issyk in 1969. In this burial mound, a skeleton was found and its believed to have been an 18 year old Scythian warrior prince dating back to the 3rd or 2nd century BC (Davis-Kimball, 1997:40). In spite of many complaints from the surveyed, the Kazakhstan sites were defined as user friendly.

Forty-four people were able to locate the Sulaiman-Too Historic and Ethnographic Museum in Osh. However, 30 of them were not sure if the website was the official one. The site was in three language versions: Kyrgyz, Russian, English. The website was very well positioned, both in Russian and in English-language versions, with a contact information, e-mail and a phone number, address, however there were no opening hours or tickets prices. A visitor could find information concerning such the museum collections, the region, its nature, history, other museums located nearby. 27 participants of the research pointed out as a significant drawback that the site was purely descriptive, with no graphic elements at all, there were many inactive links, the English version had numerous grammatical or spelling errors, such as “foto” instead of “photo”, “typo” instead of “type”, “stirred” instead of “stored”, the photos had no captions, the headings of each section had links but these were blank.

The Kyrgyzstan State Historical Museum did not seem to have an active website, despite the address www.muzeum.kg being located on Wikipedia.

Forty participants were able to find the museum website of the National Museum of Tajikistan, named after Kamoliddin Behzod. <http://www.nationalmuseum.tj>, however it took relatively long time to locate it, when basing the search only on its English name. What makes the situation more difficult and confusing, is that once the English name of the museum was put into a search engine, the first information that appeared was business databases of countries in Asia. There was information about the museum, its phone number, address, but no website, giving the impression that it did not exist. However, writing into a search engine Национальный музей Таджикистана им К. Бехзода, the website was very easy to locate and very highly indexed. Also the content of the website being only in Russian, it was inaccessible for non Russian speakers. It was purely informative, with no interactive elements. Not a single photograph could be found, only rather lengthy descriptions about the museum's history and its expositions. Last time the website was updated was in 2009. There were several non active links

and information about exhibitions, that took place in September 2009. Practically, the only information that could be obtained was the museum's address and phone number; however the phone number was not up-to-date.

Not a single participant, nor the conducting researcher was able to find the National Museum of Antiquities official website. It was possible to get some information from the URL <http://www.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/tj/>, with three language versions Russian, Japanese and English. However this was not an official website of the museum, and contact information, such as address of a phone number, could not be found. There was the museum's plan and information about its permanent exhibition, also some colour pictures of some artefacts with a short description. Only 15 participants found the website, and all of them did it through the lonelyplanet site (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/tajikistan/dushanbe/sights/museums-galleries/national-museum>).

Not a single participant of the research was able to find a website of any museum in Turkmenistan. This was also the case for the author. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, it will be assumed that these museums have neither possibility of e-mail contact, or a website.

In Uzbekistan, the Ulugbek Observatory site, <http://ulugbekobservatory.parusinfo.com>, had three language versions-Uzbek, Russian and English. The site was not positioned, therefore it took from 1 to 3 minutes to locate it. It provided elementary contact information about the museum opening hours, address, phone number but no e-mail nor possibility to book a ticket on-line. The visitors had opportunity to make a virtual tour. There were also links to microsites on the museums' history, Ulug Beg's works and mediaeval central-Asian scientists. The museum also played a role of a platform for tourists: there were several links to hotels and tourist agencies. However, the participants complained about many problems regarding the English. They mentioned many grammatical inaccuracies, spelling errors, lack of articles. Another common remark was that links were in a tiny font, in the same colour. The Ulugbek Observatory site had a visitor counter, which was not the case with the previous museums. According to it, the site had 65 visitors in June 2015 (<http://hotlog.ru/viewstat?id=2267253&attempt=1>).

The Uzbekistan State History Museum site, <http://www.history-museum.uz> was in three languages: Uzbek, Russian and English. Forty-two participants found the website and it was very well positioned; however, what needs to be stressed, positioning was better for the Russian

version. All the necessary information, the opening hours, tickets prices and possible discounts, e-mail, phone number or address, was given, there were microsites on the museum history and current and temporary exhibitions, and other activities. However the surveyed stated that that were spelling and grammar mistakes in English version, which made it sometimes difficult to understand, and sometimes just tiring to read. Some links were inactive, some were blank. There were also links to some governmental bodies, such as Press Office of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Academy of Sciences or National News Agency. The visitor counter showed that the museum has had 642 visitors (as of June 12th, 2015).

3. Analysis

When it comes to the results on satisfaction levels, the average score for non Russian speakers was 1.7, for Russian speakers 2.6, compared to 5.8 for non Russian speakers and 5.7 for Russian speakers in the case of the untreated group of the museums. Those surveyed stated that in most cases it was very difficult or practically impossible to locate a website. The main foreign target group is Russian speakers. A big obstacle for non Russian speaking tourists is that some of the museums do not have website in English or in any other language, except Russian. English language versions have spelling or grammar mistakes. The time required for retrieve any information is much longer than for the biggest world museums, starting from finding a website. E-mail contact is often impossible, as most museums either do not have e-mail or if they do, they simply do not answer. Very often information is not updated, presents old exhibitions, or have non active links. Very few museums offer virtual tours and they are mostly not interactive, only informative. It is practically impossible, apart from very few exceptions, to see individual artefacts in 3d. Other common remarks of the participants of the survey concern links, which are either inactive, or apparently active but linking to blank pages. There are no captions under the pictures, therefore the surveyed were not able to identify what they represent. The text is sometimes too long, boring, tiring too read. Another common remark was that about the overall impression the surveyed got was just one of lack of attention to details.

The participants claim that only one museum provided the possibility of on-line transactions, and, what has to be mentioned, to a very limited degree, for Russian speakers there was possibility to buy a ticket on-line, but not at all or to buy a souvenir. Not one museum had an

on-line shop. Activity generating income is booking tickets and the possibility to buy souvenirs. It has to be remembered, that in order to book a ticket on-line, it is necessary access to a secured site for on-line transactions.

A very important asset for some museums is that they work as a platform, offering links to hotels, sometimes also providing information about a country, region, its history, weather conditions, transport possibility or currency. However, the participants of the research complained that in most cases the information was boring, uninteresting for an average tourist. There are links to governmental bodies or state institutions, and the surveyed stated that this kind of information was useless for them.

Unfortunately it was impossible to verify how many visitors the analysed sites have, as only two museums provided statistics, but those data that are accessible show that the number of visitors is very modest. Kazakhstani museums managers seem realize the most how important information on the Internet is. On the other side Turkmenistan museums do not exist on the Web at all.

There are different reasons for such a situation and for such a visible digital divide. The first one is without any doubt the country's financial problems. There is a visible digital divide between Kazakhstan, whose GDP per capita was, in 2015, 12601 \$ and Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, with their GDP - 1,269 for Kyrgyzstan and 1,114 for Tajikistan (GDP per capita, 2016). Neighbours on the map, Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan and Kazakhstan couldn't be further apart in the way they use communications technology. According to the Global Information Technology Report, in 2014 Kyrgyzstan ranks the last among former-Soviet states, at 118, and Tajikistan at 112 (Trilling, 2014). Another reason of digital divide is clearly the case of two countries, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. They are not listed in the ranking at all, considered as "Internet enemies", according to Reporters without border, a watchdog based in Paris (Internet enemies, 2016). In those countries the use of the Internet is strictly controlled by the regimes. Turkmenistan is technologically and financially blocking the growth of the Internet and at the same time imposes drastic censorship, confirming the regime's extremely despotic nature. Only 2.2 % of Turkmen are connected to the Internet but the social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, considered to be a dangerous weapon for opposition – are blocked. In Uzbekistan, the Islam Karimov regime extends its absolute power to the internet to the same way it has over traditional media. The government has established legislative tools, institutional

structures, and advanced technology to guard against any threat from online content. This atmosphere is not favourable for creating and designing websites of museums.

Another reason, difficult to measure but clearly visible, is mentality and fear of mass tourism. The author of these words has heard many times in Kyrgyzstan that mass tourism and information about any touristic facilities are a danger for the country, as mass tourism brings together destruction of nature and masses of rubbish.

4. Conclusion

The main conclusion from the research is that most Central Asia museums in question seem to underestimate the power of new technologies for attracting tourists. Archaeology, history and culture are not deserted islands, and archaeologists or historians certainly do not live within a social vacuum. The participation of cultural institutions in assisting economic growth is quite evident and has been widely discussed and the economic value of heritage has been recognized by policy makers. Both social and economic value have been claimed as an adjunct to heritage. Providing reliable information on the contents of their collections should be of the main concerns of museums with archaeological and ethnographic materials. If they do not exist on the Web they are not competitive.

The Central Asian countries have been neglected as tourist destinations. There are many reasons for this marginalization, such as red tape, lack of proper infrastructure, visa problems (Horak 2014). One of the reasons is also digital exclusion, visible in every of the analysed countries to a different degree. There are many reasons for this exclusion, characteristic for developing countries; however, there is one common outcome - failure in the tourist market. Information and communication technologies have had revolutionary impact on tourist market all over the world (Sheldon 1997). The countries of Central Asia, in order to be successful, cannot ignore this medium.

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Dziedzictwo kulturowe a muzea Azji Środkowej: Rola instytucji kulturalnych w rozpowszechnianiu informacji

Streszczenie

Turystyka i dziedzictwo kulturowe są znaczącymi elementami, dzięki którym możliwe jest osiągnięcie sukcesu w "walce" o geopolityczną dominację. Są to czynniki o podobnym znaczeniu jak handel, rolnictwo, szkolnictwo. Celem tego artykułu jest przeanalizowanie, czy i do jakiego stopnia, kraje Azji Środkowej są w stanie promować swoje dziedzictwo kulturowe, w taki sposób, by przyciągnąć turystów. Obiektem analizy są historyczne i archeologiczne muzea w pięciu krajach: Kazachstanie, Uzbekistanie, Tadżykistanie, Turkmenistanie i Kirgistanie.

Słowa kluczowe: cyfrowa dysproporcja, turystyka, archeologiczne i historyczne muzea