

## **PUBLIC EVENTS AS A MEAN OF DESTINATION PROMOTION**

**Eriks Lingeberzins**  
Turība University, Latvia

***Abstract.** Tourism is often considered as a strategic economic development priority not only in areas with high numbers of domestic and international visitors but also in more remote and rural areas. Their ability to attract visitors is often limited by the number and the range of available infrastructure and other tangible and intangible resources. Even defined as development priority, tourism promotion is often underfinanced due to municipality budget priorities and often short-term focus whereas tourism promotion requires long term approaches. Less developed areas are also lacking overall understanding of various tourism impact forms and public officers face challenges communicating tourism marketing spendings to the public. These trends fit under the category of public events as a means of tourism promotion. Two cities qualifying as regional tourism destinations have prioritised public events as tourism promotion priorities. The aim of the research is to explore perception of public events as tourism destination promotion tools in regional tourism destinations. Research is a case study of public events as a means of tourism destination promotion in Bauska and Talsi city. Primary data has been obtained via semi-structured interviews with involved stakeholders representing public and private sector to develop practically applicable recommendations to other tourism destinations.*

***Keywords:** destination management, public communication, public events*

### **Introduction: the context of public events**

In the research regarding changes organisations and destinations have witnessed over the past decades M. Witzel identified the increasing importance of communication that influences every aspect of management, be it related to organisation's communication with customers or destination communication with tourists. It all relates to the ability of transferring information with a purpose to attract attention, influence opinion and providing solid grounds for further economic growth (Witzel, 2012). If organisations have several ways including traditional marketing communication ways to promote their products, tourism destination abilities are more limited. Besides, a highly competitive environment requires unique solutions. Increasing customer expectations towards diversity of destination experience have been pushing destination management organisations towards using cross-sectoral forms of promotion in order to raise awareness and attract visitors boosting visitor economy and increasing share of tourism economics into budgets. Public events have been considered to achieve this task and Latvia has been no exception. The research aims to explore how public events

are integrated into destination promotion activities based on two case studies of Bauska and Talsi municipalities in Latvia. Results are based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with involved stakeholders in the period between March 2022 and August 2023.

### **The concept of public events**

Although events themselves are not new in our civilization and have been long existing (Backman, 2018) starting with ceremonial events as earlier form of events and celebrations to mark important occasions (Cherry, 2013) to Royal celebrations showcasing their power and wealth and related events as the major form in Medieval and Renaissance periods (Mugnaini, 2006) to festivals in towns and cities with a purpose of bringing people together. It soon became a common tradition, especially in cities with closed trade links. Town Hall squares of mediaeval cities were turned into celebration places and residents could witness festive periods throughout the year. Also, in Latvia this has been a common tradition celebrating such events as, for example, Maygrave when Riga Town Hall Square was decorated with birch branches and wreaths, competitions, spring fairs, singing and dancing were organised. The main event of the celebration was the election of the Maygrave, accompanied by the music, the townspeople went in a magnificent procession out of the city on the green (Zeids, 1978). Also, in other European cities events were used as a form of gatherings and processions (Bolton 2023; Salmin, 2020). Later on, with the rise of the middle class led to an increase in social events such as balls, receptions, and gatherings while the industrial revolution marked the beginning of exhibitions as a new form of events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Everts, 2016; Swift 2017).

In our times event management has become a vibrant industry with professionals specialising in various types of events, including corporate meetings, weddings, concerts, conferences, and sports events. Event management agencies are emerging as a new form of business aiming to deliver creativity through events. As a special form of events in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century, public events should be distinguished public events. With the term public events are understood events that are opened to the general public and are typically organised with the intention of attracting a broad audience (Abel & Bernsten, 2021) and with a purpose to make an impression (Janssen, 2015).

Forms of public events can differ – starting with festivals and regular celebrations to entertainment type events with concerts and performances to sport related public activities or educational events. Community based approach in the city development has brought up again public events as a form of community engagement stimulation seeing cities organising street fairs and community based social events (Gehl, 2018). Though, cities are also using events as a form of destination promotion attracting domestic and international visitors, enhancing

destination experience in a wide range of activities, ranging from traditional gastronomic events and festivals (Sotiriadis, 2015) to new destination products in a form of events. Events and their content are often used to measure destination experience among visitors (Lingeberzins & Jenzis, 2022). Thus, public events are often considered as a form of a tourism product that has a multiplicative effect on destination, promoting related services in the destination, primarily including the hospitality industry (Zlatanov, 2005). It is also important to emphasise this approach to the perception of a tourism destination product expands boundaries of understanding what are available tourism destination marketing concepts (Velikova, 2016).

### **Methodology**

In order to explore how public events are perceived and integrated into tourism destination promotion in Latvia, the research with 2 municipalities was carried out. Particular interest in the role of public events derives from broader research of regional tourism development strategies but particular two municipalities are of a particular interest in the area as self-promotion is often grounded in public events as a means of attraction.

Participants of the qualitative research for semi-structured interviews were selected after identifying involved stakeholders. Those include representatives in charge of tourism destination development, marketing communication and culture agencies from the respective municipalities, and hospitality service providers in municipalities. Totally 16 interviews were conducted in 2 municipalities with questions subordinate to main blocks of interest:

- planning of public events as a response to local resident well-being and life quality satisfaction in the municipality;
- using events as a mean of communication and attraction of visitors with a purpose to stimulate local tourism economy;

Conclusions from interviews with public and private sector representatives were summarised, developing general conclusions about a) understanding of the role of public events; b) factors influencing planning and preparation of events; c) possible shortcomings and areas of further development to balance needs of local inhabitants and destination visitors.

### **Public events in destination communication and development**

Following interviews there were identified common points of view among public and private sector representatives who are involved in the tourism destination marketing and can be considered as stakeholders. Conclusions are summaries regarding public events in the context of destination development and marketing communication activities.

**First**, it is a common understanding that regions in Latvia in order to reduce seasonality in tourism, which is largely influenced by the proximity of Riga, which does not contribute to the development of tourist accommodation, there are opportunities to create a conference and sports tourism offer by undertaking the organisation of national or even international events and competitions. However, it is common understanding these do not qualify as public events and would have minor economic multiplier effects on the destination ecosystem. Communication of such events is targeted at a narrow number of participants and other professionals related to the event but not to broader audience minimising ability to attract interest of possible visitors. There can be a certain misperception of the concept of a public event as the public sector tends to consider all events related to destination promotion rather than only those that are directly targeted to end consumers (tourists). As stated by Bauska municipality public sector representative, “We have general plan with culture activities in the city that we work on and do not distinguish in the preparation process if they will be interesting for tourists”.

More often the private sector during interviews questioned if municipal involvement in supporting events has been justified and analysed not only from the emotional but also practical, especially economically financial point of view. As commented by several catering segment representatives in both municipalities, “There is too little understanding that marketing is very expensive for single entrepreneurs and the aim of restaurants and cafes is to provide service and not to market destination”.

**Secondly**, there is an agreement between the private and public sector that public events are related to creative industries and activities. It is indicated here that both counties are particularly rich in cultural and historical heritage, which needs to be developed and used both in tourism and educational activities, as well as in the promotion of the area. Cultural events, art development, cultural tourism and other events can promote them among the most popular destinations for tourists in the future. In the future, the both municipalities plan to develop the cultural and historical heritage, revitalising old towns and improving the infrastructure and to develop the competences of the staff event management related staff in corresponding municipality departments, to continue supporting creativity in order to maintain a sufficient offer of cultural services for the residents. Both regions are confident about their future and will definitely highlight the need to look for innovative and creative solutions in the field of culture, which creates potential for new initiatives in various art sectors. This still requires a range of activities, that include the development of infrastructure and material and technical base of cultural institutions, recognition of tangible and intangible cultural and historical heritage, revitalising the old town areas, supporting development of cultural services, creating events and involving art industry. Overall conclusion is that cultural heritage should be considered as a

valuable resource for public event development. As commented by a representative in Talsi, “We are too hesitant about cultural values we all have and municipality needs to be more active in telling and promoting intangible and tangible values we have”.

**Thirdly**, there is a common agreement about the importance of planning in order to achieve positive social and economic goals with public events. Especially when it comes to economic benefits and more often by the representatives of private sector, it has been emphasised that the organisation of cultural events requires prioritisation of events (regional and local level events) and mutual coordination involving the private sector, coordination of marketing activities to avoid simultaneous events and avoiding competition between public and private sector. A separate offer for the young audience should be created, also exploring the possibility of organising events outside the traditional time, at night, looking for non-traditional solutions. There is a strong need to look for ideas for bringing cultural events to life throughout the year, develop digital solutions, event streaming options, and promote accessibility. As commented by Talsi municipality representative, “Times when just concerts and markets were enough have passed, now tourists are looking for more surprise and experience not seen before. It is more and more difficult to impress somebody in the times when innovation is everywhere”.

Perception of a single tourism and cultural product grounded in public events can be created. This is the **fourth** conclusion where there can be observed however no further arguments can be developed as overall respondents lack joint understanding on how public events should be developed as a tourism product. Major disagreements and points to be discussed are a) responsibility and the leaderships; b) financing procedure; c) prioritising visitors and thus boosting tourism economy vs. satisfying needs of local residents. Public sector representatives are overall more positive towards local resident’s needs rather than visitors, while the private sector emphasise the importance of visitor’s economic contribution. The sole point where both parties can agree is the lack of reliable statistical data and the need to develop methodology for measuring the economic impact of public events. As commented by a hotel manager in Bauska, “Everybody has some data and wants to prove they are right. The problem is that each of us often has different data creating different truths about the same thing”.

Though throughout the question about local residents, it is admitted that sustainable cultural tourism development is based on a significant principle of proportionality between the planned cultural activities, which are primarily intended for the residents of the county and secondarily, the public cultural events organised by the county can be used to create a cultural tourism offer for city guests. Despite the fact that the number of cultural events is relatively large, there are different opinions about the suitability of the ongoing public cultural events for the needs of tourists. Certain measures have promoted the attraction of tourists,

including promoting the attraction of foreign tourists, primarily from Lithuania and Estonia. However, taking into account the general trends, the most important tourist destinations in the regions of Latvia (Sigulda, Cēsis, Kuldīga, Liepāja, Alūksne, etc.) have also defined the development of events as a tourism priority. Therefore, it is necessary to expect an increase in competition in the offer of events, which can be particularly significant in attracting local tourists.

Overall, it is commonly agreed that the events that take place both in Talsi and Bauska and related districts can be considered a significant achievement in creating the destination's image and diverse tourism offer. For a more effective use of events as an activity promoting the attraction of tourists, a more in-depth coordination can be implemented, covering the entire county more broadly, ensuring the planning of events without overlapping, identifying the most important events and connecting them with purposefully identified target groups of tourists.

Although the organised events are an important part of the cultural environment of the city and its inhabitants, they can be used more widely in the implementation of destination marketing activities. An important prerequisite for the positioning of events as a tourist attraction is the cooperation and coordination of the municipal cultural administration, the tourist information centre and the organiser of events independent of the municipality, planning the event calendar and selecting events that can be positioned as attracting tourists.

As a potential area of development should be mentioned attraction of foreign tourists and development of service exports. For the attraction of foreign tourists, the measures taking place in the district are secondary, if the set goal of increasing the average length of stay and the number of overnight stays in the district is not achieved. Individual events that can also attract foreign visitors, or thematic events that are intended for certain target groups, can also be positioned in the Lithuanian and Estonian markets, in the segment of individual customers whose travel motivation is the events taking place at the destination. In order to ensure a larger number of foreign visitors, it is necessary to plan marketing activities that are focused on the course of the event itself and the content of the event.

As a specific area in case of Bauska municipality weddings have been mentioned as events, even though they also do not qualify as public events. Taking into account the event venues, guest houses, manors, scenic areas and cultural-historical heritage in Bauska County, weddings in Bauska County can be highlighted as a thematic customer segment. Although the number of customers decreased due to the consequences of the pandemic, the existing offer is adequate to highlight this as a destination advantage that also has a positive economic impact, as various tourism and hospitality services are used during weddings, including accommodation, catering, sightseeing, motivating activities. Celebrations that are held before the wedding (hen parties and bachelor parties) complement the wedding tourism offer with creative master classes, knowledge

of Latvian life, and active recreation. The diversity of service providers allows for the development of this direction as a tourism product, involving a wide range of tourism service providers, covering the entire county.

In order to develop an action plan, based on interviews it has been concluded there are two areas of tourism communication with related information delivery and communication goals.

*Table 1 Tourism destination communication*

<b>Tourism information and communication</b>	<b>Purpose of information and communication</b>
Motivation for choosing a destination, before the trip, thoughts about the trip and preparation	Tourism product news, events, event calendar, general thematic offers, uniqueness of destination. It can be implemented as public communication in the mass media in the form of news, in the county's tourism social networks, in the digital environment. Recognition of the brand.
Trip planning, selection of tourist attractions, choice of places, priorities, interests	Upcoming events, the most important holidays, product news, information on working hours, service prices, renewed information on the tourism website and advertising of the official tourism website, directing potential tourists to the website.

*Source: interview data  
n=16*

This summary shows that public and private tourism stakeholders have common views about the areas of communication and messages to be delivered to promote public events and to boost local tourism economy with the help of public events and it can be suggested to elaborate further action plans based on common agreements based on this mutual understanding.

## **Conclusions**

It can be concluded that public events are foreseen as a means of destination development among tourism destination management organisations and events are often seen as a preferred method of tourism development in regional destinations also by the private sector. However, there are areas where all stakeholders have to agree on coordinate actions in order to achieve their social and economic tasks:

First, it is a change of perception of public events from random cultural or social happenings into a part of tourism ecosystems. That requires development of events as a destination product, positioning it in the context of existing destination development strategies.

Secondly, the partnership approach to avoid competition between the public and private sector has a negative impact on the business environment. Private sector is expecting its involvement in public event planning.

Thirdly, development of public events respecting the needs of the domestic market but seeing the potential of an international audience. Ability of commercialising services for export can provide better opportunities for the local economy but at the same time it requires balancing with meeting local needs and satisfying local population with the content of public events.

Overall, it can be concluded that tourism destinations will be integrating more often public events in their destination promotion strategies, responding to changing expectations of domestic and international travellers where just “seeing” based tourism products in the destinations are not satisfactory.

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