

# NETWORKING, CLUSTERING AND CREATIVITY AS A TOOL FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREA OF BELARUS

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The article aims to demonstrate effectiveness of networking and cluster formation for tourism development in rural area of post-soviet countries. Tourism clusters impact on the destination competitiveness is discussed on the basis of economic theory using three case studies from Belarus and the field work method as well as the literature study. A conceptual model of visitor experience value chain has been upgraded and proposed for discussion together with key design principles in experience creation.

**Key words:** Networking; tourism cluster; Belarus; rural tourism development; visitor experience value chain; creative economy; heritage interpretation.

## СЕТЕВОЕ ОБЪЕДИНЕНИЕ, КЛАСТЕРИЗАЦИЯ И КРЕАТИВНОСТЬ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ РАЗВИТИЯ ТУРИЗМА В СЕЛЬСКОЙ МЕСТНОСТИ РЕСПУБЛИКИ БЕЛАРУСЬ

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Цель статьи - продемонстрировать эффективность применения сетевого объединения и кластерного подхода для развития туризма в сельской местности постсоветских стран. Рассмотрено влияние туристических кластеров на конкурентоспособность дестинации на основе экономической теории с использованием трех примеров из Беларуси и метода полевых работ, а также изучения литературы. Разработана и представлена модель цепочки создания стоимости впечатлений посетителей вместе с ключевыми принципами проектирования при создании впечатлений.

**Ключевые слова:** Сетевое объединение; туристический кластер; Беларусь; развитие сельского туризма; цепочка создания стоимости впечатлений посетителей; креативная экономика; интерпретация наследия.

Tourism is fast growing industry which attracts now a lot of new actors from rural periphery willing to develop it. At the same time tourism is cross-cutting industry. Unlike other products offered by manufacturing companies, tourism products are heterogeneous and consist of plenty complementary

components provided by suppliers from various public and private sectors. There are several socio-economic models and frameworks which demonstrate their effectiveness in tourism development in rural area. One of the most successful is cluster model based strong public-private partnership (PPP) and networking.

Two types of functional tourism networks are defined in the literature: formal and informal networks. The informal networks are comprised of individuals who run their own small businesses and interact with friends, relatives on an informal basis to obtain their support and help [1]. Such tourism networks characterize rural periphery in developing and post-socialist countries where informal contacts are the main assistance available [10]. Formal tourism networks, on the other hand, denote business interaction either between individual businesses and various private or public organizations or between individual businesses only in order to take advantage of economies-of-scale and marketing [5, 3].

The formation of tourism clusters seems to be the simplest way to create a formal network and organize offer that would objectify a complete tourism product at the level of tourism destination [6].

Belarus is a country with transition economy, tolerant people mentality and big resources for tourism. Belarus is situated in the center of European continent. The forests, rural countryside, villages, towns and cities of Belarus provide an excellent venue for an outstanding, world-class visitor experience. One of the most important elements of this experience is interacting with the warm, friendly and hospitable citizens of Belarus.

Over the past decades, Belarus has made a strong beginning in developing rural tourism.

For tourism development in rural destination two models are supposed to be the most effective and inspiring for local community of Belarus – tourism cluster and experience visitors value chain. They help to create holistic product with distinct theme and brand, develop new creative tourism businesses, and enhance place quality and attractiveness of destination.

Experience visitors value chain model in developing tourism cluster has its peculiarity and differs from classical Porter's version. The author suggests new upgrading version of it. According to this model visitors experience is core element of the chain and should be incorporated in its every element (Figure 1). Also it demonstrates that tourism SMEs have much more freedom than in classical model and may promote and sell their services and goods directly to the customers. They are rather independent actors. They are not really links in one production chain. They also provide additional access to other cluster members which complement the whole tourism product. It is sort of cross-

selling. Being united in one destination product and being promoted under one brand they have more customers.

A tourism value chain approach is used like the methodology for analyzing the process and identifying gaps and opportunities to increase value through positive actions or the elimination of constraints. It demonstrates which actors are needed in tourism clusters and help incorporate them in whole process. It will result in value enhancement and increased competitiveness.

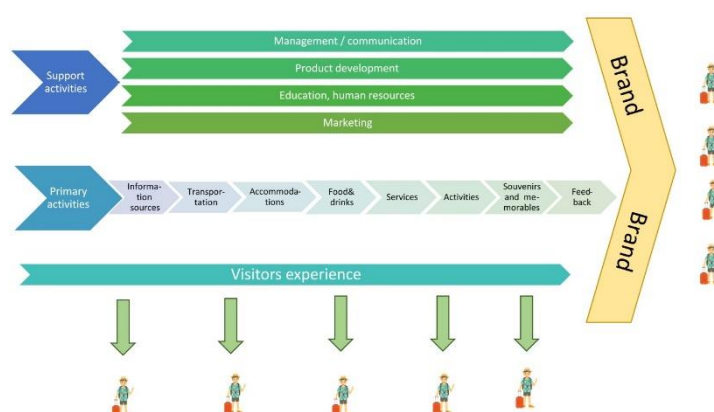


Figure 1. Visitor Experience Value Chain

Source: created by the author on the basis of Porter model.

Three different cases of tourism cluster development are described below. They have three different scenario of cluster formulation and development – “Volozhin routes” in Minsk region is based on cooperative management, “Muhavetc Pantry” in Brest region is managed by private business owner and “ZelvaDiary” in Hrodna region where local authority conduct the process but all of them use experience creation.

### “Volozhin Routes” cluster

The most successful examples which illustrate the process mentioned above is cluster “Volozhin Routes”.

There are several items that make the Volozhin region an excellent destination for tourists. First, the natural and cultural landscapes are outstanding. The Naliboki Forest is one of the best ecosystems anywhere in Europe. It also contains a fascinating human story (Jewish partisans during II World War) that was transformed into the movie “Defiance.” There are 184 heritage sites here which are included in state Belarusian heritage list. Second, the region has a number of established farmsteads that can accommodate tourists. Third, there is a variety of other activities for tourists to enjoy, from the Monkey EcoPark, to river canoeing and kayaking, to hiking and bicycling trails.

Ten years ago initiative group created strong informal network for tourism development based on friendship. It was a bottom-up approach and now Volozhin region benefits from strong local leadership. Initiative group included 20 active people – country homestay owners, craftsmen, historians, representatives of local natural reserve, artists, musicians, farmers, etc. This group has become a real team and the region became soon a pilot territory of UNDP project “Sustainable development on local level” (2009-2011). In frame of this project, the Greenway was developed as well as logo, brand and name “Volozhin Routes”. Several banners, signs, booklets were produced and mini-grants program supported local tourism initiatives has been implemented. Strong public-private partnership was established (local authorities, local community, business, NGOs) and since that time the network is growing fast.

Some facilities on the ground that support tourism started to be developed. “Volozhin Routes” are based on a fundamental concept in Greenways sort of tourism cluster. In essence, the greenway ‘visitor experience’ involves moving through the landscape, usually by non-motorized transport (walking, bicycling, paddling, riding) along a continuous linear Greenway route that connects sites of natural, historic or cultural significance and farmsteads. The quality of the visitor experience is determined by the environment (for example, the weather or physical characteristics of the trail, roadway, or waterway) and by the information (for example, greenway brochures, websites, tour guides, or interpretive signs) provided to the visitor to help understand the significance of the sites and region. The goal in designing the ideal ‘visitor experience’ is to touch all the visitor’s senses in a deep and memorable way through interpretation.

The Greenway “Volozhin Routes” has become an innovative tourism product with a variety of activities, tourist sites and festivals. Newly created ecomuseums raised tourists interest – these are places where one can get acquainted with bee life, taste pancakes with honey, learn to dance and sing Belarusian songs, do something with clay and the like. Modeling interactive excursion along the Greenway was developed which was presented on International tourism exhibition in Minsk (capital of Belarus). The informational center was established. These processes led to rapid tourism development in the region. It unites people from different places of the region and name “Volozhin Routes” is used now for all destination.

**Tourism development in Volozhin region**

Indicator	Year													2020
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Number of farmsteads	3	13	20	25	29	26	28	33	36	39	41	49	59	65

Source: Sport and Tourism Department, Volozhin Region Executive Committee.

“Volozhin Routes” was the first destination in Belarus, which has organized non-governmental organization – “Cooperative for Rural Tourism Development” and took responsibility for growth and formalization of the cluster. It united the most active tourism leaders, farmers, craftsmen and act as accelerator of innovations.

The cooperative has developed website, participate in different project initiatives, and attend tourism fairs.

Creativity became a main feature of the destination. There are farmsteads with unique educational programs, master-classes, workshops where tourist can learn how to make bread, pottery, musical instruments, create your own handmade paper, sing and dance traditional songs, try life of Belarusian partisans in the forest, learn how to plant flowers and look after bees, watch horses show, etc. It inspired many other SME to do something creative, provide experience and work together. The destination has got 59000 tourists last year and amounts of groups from tour operator increased from 131 in 2015 till 231 in 2017.

New EU project “Volozhin without barriers” has been launched here and many services and attractions became more accessible for people with disability. The first accessible ecotrail in Belarus has been opened in Naliboky forest recently. Cluster “Volozhin Routes” plans to reach new level, be involved in different project initiatives, sign new contract with international tour operators, become a learning arena for tourists and visitors.

#### **“Muchavec Pantry” cluster**

This cluster has been formulated within the framework of the USAID Project “Local Entrepreneurship and Economic Development” (LEED Project), implemented by UNDP in Belarus (2012-2014).

The LEED Project was aimed to strengthen the role of the private sector in the economy of Brest region and in the thriving tourism sector of the Republic of Belarus. One of the LEED Project’s targets was to establish destinations possessing tourist resources and high PPP, based on clustering potential.

As a result, the LEED Project has given impetus to the establishment and development of 17 tourism destinations and one of them was “Muchavec Pantry”.

Since 2014 much has been achieved in this destination. The main theme connected with local culture and history has been formulated for this territory – “pantry of valuable things”. The local activists did a lot in finding and restoration artefacts connected with local cultural heritage, ethnographic and ecological festivals organizing, safeguarding of traditional folklore, rites and crafts.

Informal network for cluster development “Muchavec Pantry” consists of 13 homesteads ready to provide meal and accommodation for more the 90 people. There are 5 thematic club provided different programs of medieval period, Belarusian folk music, horses entertainment. Also there is company producing different souvenirs by disable young people. There are 8 craftsmen with their workshops (pottery, carpentry haft, etc.)

The destination is famous for its gastronomic traditions and master-classes with local chefs from homesteads. At least 20 different thematic programs have been developed and at least 5 annual festivals are taking place here every year. The leader of this strong network is local businessmen who represents interests of all members of this informal cluster.

They have their own website [www.kumora.by](http://www.kumora.by). They are very active in social network – Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Russian nets – V Kontakte and Odnoklassniki.

The cluster representative has signed contracts and cooperated with 16 tour operators from Belarus and neighboring countries. They promote and provide 50% of all sales. Some indicators demonstrate steady positive growth in “Muchavec Pantry”.

Number of events with special program for tourists increased from 17 in 2016 till 30 in 2018. Number of tourists taken part in these events increase from 447 (including 58 foreigners) in 2016 till 873 (including 488 foreigners) in 2018. Foreign tourist are mainly from Russia, Israel, Sweden, Poland.

There are no really big businesses in the destination and there are no huge investments right now. This is the reason why local SMEs took course to experience economy creation. All programs, activities, events they organize and promote are based on experience, creativity and have been checked by experience wheel models. They do not require a lot of financing.

Most of tourism components of value chain have creative elements. It makes product unique and provide competitive advantages. Good example of creativity is one of the most popular programs – water tour on ancient Vikings boat with people in special costumes. Vikings tell tourists the stories about their life and treat them with old traditional food [7].

The support activities in cluster development is provided by private business leader. This person became an accelerator of most innovative process in product development and marketing. Most of small actors (tourism SMEs) united around this leader and work very actively. Some of big SMEs still operate independently and join cluster program only time to time. It creates some difficulties in management and coordination. There is no any organization, which can act as formal cluster. But members are planning to set up an organization soon and attract more people.

#### **“Zelva Diary” cluster**

Zelva Diary destination is located in Hrodna region in western part of Belarus. It is not very popular tourist destination, which at the same time possesses the necessary infrastructure for accommodation, catering, entertainment and recreational activities. There are 8 farmsteads, 6 private farms, 8 state agro-enterprises, one of the biggest artificial lake, the oldest gothic church of XV century in Synkovichy, big annual Hanna Fair which used to be the biggest in Europe after Leipzig Fair in Germany. But there is no something special in this tourism product which differs it from competitors and most of tourists and tour operators considered it as a transit destination.

This is the territory where local authorities took initiative to develop tourism and the strategy of tourism cluster development has been formulated within the framework of the USAID “Local Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Project” (as LEED Project).

The local community, including private companies operating in tourism industry, local authorities and NGOs were involved in strategic planning process. Efficient network and cooperation within public-private partnership can help to establish a tourism cluster to serve as a basis for forming regional tourist product.

During last years members and partners of informal cluster decided to structure and upgrade their tourism product and we suggested them a visitor experience value chain as an efficient tool for that.

Some years ago, they have chosen Greenway concept to create tourism product “Zelva Diary”. But they couldn’t find something special and unique to attract tourists. They finally decided to use their culinary heritage as main theme for their tourism product, create experience around food and use local culinary intangible heritage, turn Zelva region into gastronomic destination and add creative component in each elements of value chain. Country Escape managed to get two small grants from US Embassy in Minsk for that.

To inform potential visitors about tourism product cluster members use many promotional tools. They are very active in social network (Facebook, Instagram, V Kontakte, etc) and use many really good photos of food and people enjoy it. They put very good article and organize voting and discussions in frame of culinary regional contests. They put a beautiful billboard with culinary map of the region. They added a gastronomic component to annual Hanna Festival – big food court with cooking classes, degustation, samplings, presentations and food souvenirs. The numbers of visitors attended this festival is growing from 3700 people in 2015, to 4500 in 2017 and 5000 in 2018.

Within last years few expeditions of local schools organized few culinary expeditions. They found many old recipes in the village, analyses them, print booklets and postcards with the best dishes.

Then regional culinary contest with very active participation of local population and media has been organized. It helped to raise awareness about local culinary heritage. Also 9 best dishes were chosen as the best traditional dishes and they have been introduced to local cafes and restaurants for its menu. In addition, few culinary tours and cooking class have been developed. One unique program has been introduced – a performance based on local folklore. Local poet wrote a play about local rite “Svezhina” connected with making different dishes from pork after Christmas lent. This program now is very popular. Owners of local farmstead “Veres” actively participated in it. It is the most desirable program in wintertime.

Local authority in Zelva region are very active trying to strengthen network of people developing tourism in the region. They have designed and implemented 18 different projects sponsored by EU funds, USAID and USA Embassy in Minsk. 15 of them are connected with tourism and accelerate its growth. They are leading process of cluster development. They are very active and creative. However, number of tourism SMEs is still not enough to create critical mass, which turn this region into popular tourism destination. Their latest initiative in gastronomic experience sounds very promising. The region became a partner in EU Project “Promoting preservation and promotion of culinary heritage and crafts”. They recently created destination management organization “Zeleva” and make their activity more structured and efficient based on visitor experience value chain.

Tourism cluster development may follow different scenarios and have different starts. In case studies from Belarus clusterization in different destinations is conducted by local nongovernmental organization, private business representative and local government. They provide management and communication, education of local SMEs and community representatives, product development and marketing of the destination. However, at the end success depends on the strength of ties between cluster members network and their ability to work together as one team.

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