

ENTREPRENEURSHIP NETWORK IN DESTINATION BULGARIA FOR CULTURAL TOURISM ON THE SILK ROAD

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Abstract: The research goal of this paper is to present a managerial concept for the creation of an entrepreneurship network in destination Bulgaria for cultural tourism on the Silk Road. The authors try to systemize the theoretical foundations of the creation and functioning of an entrepreneurial network in tourism along with the presentation of the core of the Silk Road theme as a basis for the organization of tourist trips in the context of cultural tourism. This paper also shares Bulgaria's experience in the creation of an entrepreneurial network for cultural tourism on the Silk Road. The shared experience reflects the results achieved under Bulgaria's involvement in the SILC international project.

Keywords: Silk Road, cultural tourism, entrepreneurial network in tourism.

INTRODUCTION

With their rich cultural and historical heritage, the countries along the Silk Road possess significant potential for joint tourism development through the creation of integrated tourism products. International organizations such as UNESCO, the World Tourism Organization (WTO), and the European Union (EU) are actively working to create networks of interested parties for creating value for tourist resources related to the "Silk Road" theme.

The present article reflects the results achieved under the project "SILC Road local culture", implemented under the Joint Operational Programme "Black Sea Basin 2014-2020" with a period of execution from 2018 to 2021. Project partners include the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Economics - Varna, the Russian-Armenian University in Armenia, the International Center for Social Research and Political Analysis in Georgia, and the National Association for Rural, Ecological, and Cultural Tourism, Tulcea Branch in Romania. The project aims to identify, assess, map, and promote the cultural heritage of the Silk Road, which can be used for the tourism development of the regions located along the ancient trade route. The strategic objective of the project is to create and offer joint comprehensive tourism products through partnerships based on the Entrepreneurial Network along the Silk Road.

The research goal of the article is to present the concept of creating an entrepreneurial network within Bulgaria as a destination for cultural tourism along the Silk Road. The authors discuss the establishment and functioning of the entrepreneurial network in tourism through the use of the SILCNET LABEL

certificate. The article examines the process and criteria for certification with the SILCNET label. The SILCNET brand logo is presented, and its promotion amongst stakeholders is systematized.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road is an ancient trade route that connects China and East Asia with the Mediterranean region through its various land and sea branches. The route has been named the "Silk Road" (Seidenstraße) by geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 because silk as a commodity represents the most important part of transported product bundles on it.

The continental Silk Road is divided into the North and South branches, both of which begin from trading centres in northern China. The Northern route passes through Volga Bulgaria and reaches the Crimean Peninsula, then through the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and through the Balkans to medieval Venice. The Southern route passes through Turkestan, Khorasan, Iran and Mesopotamia, and then through Antioch to the Mediterranean or through Egypt to North Africa.¹

As a result of the state's geostrategic goals, officially the "Silk Road" emerged in the 2nd century BC to serve China's military and political purposes. An important prerequisite for initiating the Great Silk Road was the Chinese need for semi-precious stones and Arab horses, for which they offered silk in return. In the context of this historical period, trade along the Silk Road included tea, porcelain, rice, lacquered products, paper, medicine, perfumes, bronze mirrors, jewellery, and more from China. Accordingly, gold, silver, leather, precious and semi-precious stones, ivory, rhinoceros horns, Arab horses, and others were imported into China.

Indeed, the Silk Road became not only a trade route but also a cultural pathway for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. During the Tang dynasty, China experienced a high level of development, and the Silk Road played a crucial role in facilitating cultural exchange with other civilizations. At the same time, the Abbasid Caliphate, based in Baghdad, played a significant role as a cultural and trading intermediary between the East and the West during the Golden Age of the Silk Road between the 8th and the mid-13th centuries.

The exchange of goods and ideas along the Silk Road was not limited to practical or utilitarian purposes but also involved the exchange of hedonistic products and ways of life that enriched the peoples of the East and the West. Today, China is reviving the ancient Silk Road through the ambitious infrastructure project known as the "Belt and Road Initiative", which aims to position Beijing at the forefront of the "new era of globalization".²

With their rich cultural and historical heritage, the countries along the Silk Road have great potential for joint tourism development through the creation of integrated tourism products. International organizations such as UNESCO, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the European Union (EU) are actively working to create networks of interested parties for the value enrichment of the "Silk Road" as a tourist theme. UNESCO and UNWTO initiatives and projects such as Silk Road Destinations, Silk Road Transatlantic Alliance, as well as Silk Road Travel Association and Silk Road Network, invest in the unique ancient route as an opportunity to strengthen international cooperation in the fields of culture, trade, tourism, and science.³

Bulgaria has been a member of the UNWTO "Silk Road Programme" since 2012. Sofia hosted the Second International Seminar "On the Western Silk Road" in 2017, held within the framework of the "Initiative for the development of tourism along the Western Silk Road", a joint project of the UNWTO and the European Commission, and part of the European initiative "Improving understanding of European tourism". The project aims to promote the possibilities for tourist activities along the western sections of the Silk Road. One of the main ideas of the initiative is to develop tourist routes along the "Western Silk Road", and in the long term, this is expected to lead to intensified transnational cooperation among the countries participating in the UNWTO "Silk Road Programme".⁴

¹ Cholakov 2019.

² Iliev 2020.

³ UNESCO 2019; UNWTO 2019.

⁴ Ministry of Tourism, 2019; SEGA AD, 2019.

GROUNDNS FOR CERTIFICATION UNDER SILCNET LABEL

On European level, the system of evaluation and certification of cultural tourist routes has been developed and accordingly embedded as a practice by the Council of Europe through its executive agency the European Institute for Cultural Routes (EICR). For each legalized cultural route, there is an opportunity for its route value to be increased through its certification by the EICR and its relevant inclusion in the "Council of Europe's Cultural Routes" network.⁵

In this regard, the creation of the SILCNET label as per the "SILC Road local culture" project is in accordance with the principles and rules of the implementation of a specific certification process for the formation of an entrepreneurial network of stakeholders on the territory of destination Bulgaria. Every stakeholder who goes through the certification process for a SILCNET LABEL certificate has a significant chance to become a member of an entrepreneurial network and to benefit from its marketing and partnership power.

SILCNET LABEL certification is based on good practices of European Union programs having in mind the relevance of several main objectives: to create stable relationships between the affiliated SILC entrepreneurs operating within the project territory; to improve awareness of cultural routes along the local Silk Road; to form a better recognition of each SILC entrepreneur to the network of partners, as well as to increase the joint competitiveness of those partners; to promote and support tourism business from local to international levels.

In order to evaluate the opportunities for implementation of the SILCNET label the authors of this paper have conducted a feasibility study based on the following research points:⁶ review of existing scientific studies and European legal frameworks and instruments for the initiation of the process of thematic partnership on the Silk Road; systematic outline of criteria for certification of local cultural routes and stakeholders within the field of the European cultural tourism; revision of the existing European certification practices about cultural routes and cultural heritage; evaluation of the European Silk Road cultural routes in terms of their similarities and differences between the particular project partners; a field research of the current attitudes of local stakeholders for a joint economic, tourist and cultural understanding within the Silk Road destination; outline of initiatives and ways for the implementation of the SILCNET label as a generator of economic well-being across destinations.

SILCNET LABEL CERTIFICATION CRITERIA AND PROCESS

The authors of the project team from the Bulgarian side, taking into account the need for the identification of each stakeholder under one brand, along with the sustainable development of the SILCNET network in local and cross-border regions have formulated the following criteria for certification that should become mandatory for every SILCNET applicant.⁷

The *General certification criteria for SILCNET membership* based on the nature of the legal status of the applicant include:

- **Cluster tourist sites** - regional museums, national-historical, architectural, ethnographic, religious complexes and sites and others of this type which: contain more than one key theme related to the Silk Road; perform activities of national or international significance; represent a considerable part of the local (regional) cultural and historical heritage; have a high degree of location and transport accessibility and popularity; are built and connected with modern tourist infrastructure and superstructure; offer visitors a modern exposition environment (virtual options), amenities and organization of guided tours; create opportunities for organizing events and other cultural activities; possess high potential for active promotion and validation of the SILCNET label; may participate (as members) in other regional, national and international cultural routes and projects.

⁵ EICR 2020 (The European Institute of Cultural Routes (Luxembourg), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/european-route-of-industrial-heritage> (accessed 20.07.2020).

⁶ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

⁷ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

- **Individual tourist sites** – encompass all types of legally active working tourist sites that can effectively receive and serve visitors; may participate (as members) in other regional, national and international cultural routes and projects.
- **Corporate participants** – regarded as public and private organizations, institutions in the field of tourism, protection and restoration of cultural heritage (regional administrations, municipalities, tourist information centres); research centres and higher education institutions in the field of tourism; representatives of the tourism industry - tour operators and travel agents, hoteliers, restaurateurs, transport companies, souvenir manufacturers and dealers, car rental suppliers; attractions, wineries, tour guide companies, animation and entertainment agencies craftsmen and their associations and other interested corporate entities who have the desire and ambition to share and promote the SILCNET label; may participate (as members) in other regional, national and international cultural routes and projects.
- **Individual members (people)** - all legally mature individuals interested in the field of Silk Road local cultural heritage who may participate (as members) in other regional, national and international cultural routes and projects.

According to the *specific certification criteria for obtaining SILCNET membership* candidates (applicants) have to share the following characteristics:⁸ willingness to connect with places and networks of shared history and culture; willingness to support the sustainable development of cultural tourism in the SILC destination; full share of the formulated values of the Council of Europe on human rights, cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and cross-border exchange; willingness to collaborate in research and development initiatives; willingness to share and validate the purpose and historical function of the local SILC route; willingness for continuous interactive exchange of ideas, knowledge, values at local, national and cross-border level; willingness to develop tourism products in close partnership with tourism organizations, institutions, education experts and other stakeholders; willingness to raise public awareness in the field of cultural tourism as well as the opportunities of sustainable development of territories.

The *benefits and rights for the SILCNET candidate* generally include:⁹ free of charge certification process and procedures; free of charge use of the SILCNET label for an unlimited period of time; free of charge SILCNET membership for an unlimited period of time; free of charge inclusion and maintenance of membership in the virtual observatory and any other relevant opportunities for an unlimited period of time; access to all information and communication resources deriving from the SILCNET label, the SILCNET network and the virtual observatory; opportunities for running own commercial business under the SILCNET label; opportunities for co-branding, joint marketing communication and other marketing activities under the SILCNET label and the SILCNET network; opportunities for active participation in the preparation and implementation of strategic and operational plans and decisions, joint activities and initiatives under the SILCNET label on regional and cross-border levels.

The *obligations of the applicant in order to obtain membership* under the SILCNET label include:¹⁰ the applicant's obligatory attendance of a SILCNET certification training course; the applicant's consent to be included in the SILCNET network and in the SILCNET Virtual Observatory; the applicant's consent to accept the logotype of the SILCNET label; the applicant's consent to adhere to the rules for the visualization (reproduction) of the SILCNET label when used by the participant on his own means of communication and media; the applicant's consent to non-dissemination of information, damaging the image and prestige of the SILC project, the SILCNET label and network, the virtual observatory, and any other participating stakeholder; the applicant's consent not to use the SILC project, the SILCNET label and network, the virtual observatory and any other element or participant thereof to exert political influence and propaganda on communities and situations except those directly related to tourism.

Certain *indicative commitments of the applicant to obtain a membership* under the SILCNET label include:¹¹ the applicant's consent to periodically update general information about its activity and current status of

⁸ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

⁹ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

¹⁰ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

¹¹ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

participation; the applicant's consent to share additional data and information on the preparation of ongoing analyses, reports, periodic and annual evaluations upon request from the SILCNET lead partners; the applicant's consent to support the promotion, validation and development of the SILCNET label.

SILCNET LABEL LOGO

In developing the SILCNET logo, all branding principles have been taken into account, with the name written in a thin, sans-serif font within a circular shape. The letters "N" and "I" overlap each other, conveying the idea of "path", "passage", and "movement". The colour scheme, on the one hand, corresponds to the main colours of the European Union logo, the "Local Culture along the Silk Road" project, acronym SILC, as well as the "Black Sea Basin 2014-2020" operational program.



Fig. 1. SILCNET brand logo (Aleksieva et al. 2020). SILCNET Label Handbook. Varna: "FIL" Ltd.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING THE SILCNET LABEL

The authors of the project team from the Bulgarian side have outlined two general communication goals for the promotion of the SILCNET label:¹² *first* to introduce the audience to the SILCNET label as a key output of the SILC project; *second* to start up the process of market positioning of the SILCNET label. In this regard, the relevant target audiences include all participants meeting the requirements of group one from the criterion system for obtaining SILCNET membership such as: cluster tourist sites; individual tourist sites; corporate (public-private) participants; individual members (people); some adjacent target audiences and the general public.

The media channels for communication use of the SILCNET label have been envisaged as:¹³ local (regional) televisions, radios and press; specialized press related to tourism and leisure; social media; website of the SILC project; website of partnering organization (website of University of Economics - Varna); national (public-private) online tourism portals (Bulgariatravel.org, "I love Bulgaria" ...); websites of municipalities located on the local silk road; website of the Ministry of Tourism or other similar organizations; website or another communication channel of an already certified member under the SILCNET label.¹⁴

¹² Aleksieva et al. 2020.

¹³ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

¹⁴ Ministry of Tourism. Strategy for sustainable tourism development in the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2030 [Online] Available from <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/strategicheski-dokumenti/aktualizirana-nacionalna-strategiya-za-ustoychivo-razvitiye-na> (accessed 30.July.2020).

The relevant means for communication of the SILCNET label have been focused on: webinars; video conference meetings with SILC partners; press releases; public interviews; public statements; printed publications (including scientific publications); round tables; briefings and SILCNET label seminars.¹⁵

Communication vehicles of the SILCNET label have been prepared in the forms of: audio-visual materials; brochures; leaflets; posters; document forms; business cards; stickers, labels.¹⁶

The communicated message content of the SILCNET label has been planned to meet two requirements: *first* to be uniform in reproduction and presentation (visualization) of the SILCNET logo through all used communication channels, means and media; *second* to provide optimal synchronization and integration of the communicated message between partners in favour of the SILCNET label.

The communication strategy has been organized for performance into three indicative periods (stages): *introductory, training and resuming stage*.¹⁷

The main tasks in the introductory stage (duration of one month) are the: activation of SILCNET label, by informing the general public about the SILCNET label; communication with potential participants about the pilot implementation of the certification process; organization of a webinar with the active participation of all SILC project partners; announcement of the forthcoming pilot implementation of the SILCNET certification process.

The *training stage* (duration of one month) manifests the general tasks for: continuation of the activation process of the SILCNET label, by focusing on the communication of the pilot implementation of the certification process; the priority communication with the selected participants in the pilot implementation of the certification process; the organized meetings with the SILC project partners. In the meantime, the main tasks of the *resuming stage* (duration of two months) coincide with the imposition (affirmation) process of the SILCNET label; the reflection of the results achieved in the training stage and the announcement of the next steps regarding the market development of the SILCNET label; focus on communication with all stakeholders and the general public and organization of a webinar with the active participation of all SILC project partners.

The authors of the project team from the Bulgarian side have also proposed a type of cooperation memorandum as a document for legalizing the affiliation of members to the SILCNET network after having gone through the SILCNET label certification process. In this regard the memorandum as a legal act reaffirms the readiness of the five leading partners of the SILC project countries to continue their efforts for joint activities and partnership together with all certified SILCNET members, SILCNET entrepreneurship networks and third stakeholders for the development of "Local Silk Road" in the project area, as well as the preparation of joint strategies, plans, programs and additional products to it. The parties of the memorandum also legally manifest their will to ensure optimal reliability, a high degree of coordination, synchronization and consistency of the content of the ongoing information between the five leading SILC project partners, all SILCNET certified members, SILCNET entrepreneurship networks and third stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of an entrepreneurial network for cultural tourism along the Silk Road aims to increase the internationalization, connectivity, and competitiveness of the stakeholders in the respective countries. The destinations covered by the entrepreneurial network receive a spatial-cultural horizon and priorities for tourism development through the strategic framework for the realization of the potential for tourism growth of the local cultural heritage along the Silk Road in the Black Sea region, and in a broader perspective, in the cultural-tourism space of the Caspian and Black Seas via the Balkan Peninsula towards the Mediterranean and Western Europe. The planned entrepreneurial network SILCNET provides connectivity for the stakeholders in the destinations with other local and interregional networks in the Black Sea basin, thus creating opportunities for new sustainable tourism business practices.

¹⁵ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

¹⁶ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

¹⁷ Aleksieva et al. 2020.

The tourism entrepreneurs in the destinations will be able to take advantage of the marketing effect of the SILCNET certification label. The holders of the label will participate in the creation of stable links between SILC entrepreneurs. They will have good knowledge of routes along the local Silk Road. They will benefit from the formation of good recognition and belonging of each SILC entrepreneur to the network of partners. The established and institutionalized cooperation through the SILCNET label between the interested parties will lead to better management of the capacity of the local tourism opportunities, as well as to the promotion and support of small and medium-sized businesses in local cultural tourism.

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