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MEETINGS, INCENTIVES, CONFERENCES, AND EXHIBITIONS COMPETITIVENESS AND URBAN BRANDING IN PRAGUE, BUCHAREST AND ROME

Abstract:

Urban competitiveness in Europe and all over the world is stronger than ever. The Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is one of the most recent strategic tools which helps the economic development of the cities and their branding. This study analyses competitiveness of Prague, Bucharest, and Rome to attract international business and more European Union funds using the MICE industry. The three cities have different approaches to use MICE industry that reflect their European and world branding, historical, cultural and economic contexts.

The study evaluates three key points: MICE infrastructure and capacity, urban branding strategies, and the absorption of EU funds to improve competitiveness. Data collected from EU reports, policy analyses and national and city studies are confronted with competitiveness and branding theories to identify development trends.

Prague combines particular heritage with modern MICE facilities and demonstrates consistent know how in utilising EU funds. Bucharest offers a low cost skilled workforce and underlines innovation but lacks brand visibility and has difficulties with fund absorption. Rome has a global prestige and cultural heritage which brings a lot of advantages but faces structural challenges: high costs, infrastructure age, economic structure.

The study concludes that the three key points are vital for competitiveness. Recommendations are: stronger public private cooperation, integrated branding policies, and cross city collaboration in Europe for attracting premium MICE.

Keywords:

MICE Industry, Urban Competitiveness, City Branding, European Cohesion Policy, Central Eastern Europe, Comparative Urban Studies

JEL Classification: F00, M38, O57

Introduction

The rapid expansion of the MICE industry has overcome global business tourism industry and has positioned cities as strategic hubs for economic development, investment attraction, innovation and international collaboration. As Richards (2021) argues, “business events act as accelerators of urban growth, generating significant economic impacts and enhancing the global visibility of cities.” European cities compete more and more through their MICE events and the ability to create distinctive and credible city brands.

Urban branding has become a key point of competitiveness. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) say “the brand of a city is not merely a marketing tool but a strategic framework that defines its global identity and long-term competitiveness.” Old and “confirmed” European capitals and post communist cities from Central Eastern Europe (CEE) integrate branding strategies with MICE development to strengthen their position in the competitive economic environment of Europe.

This study analyses three very different capitals :Prague, Bucharest, and Rome and how they compete through the MICE industry upgrading urban branding to attract business investments and European Union funds. Prague has established itself as a balanced and reliable MICE hub, Bucharest is an emerging hub seeking to strengthen its visibility through cost competitiveness and EU support and Rome continues to rely on its prestige and cultural heritage but faces infrastructural and sustainability big problems. The key research question is: how Prague, Bucharest and Rome raise their competitiveness and get more EU funds through urban branding using MICE industry?

Literature Review

The connection between urban competitiveness, city branding and the MICE industry gaines growing attention.

Urban competitiveness is the ability of a city to attract investment, talent, and visitors while sustaining economic growth and quality of life. Porter’s (1990) Diamond Model, initially developed for nations, remains relevant in urban contexts and emphasises infrastructure, supportive industries, demand sophistication and governance. Malecki (2007) extends this to include knowledge flows, innovation, and reputation, noting that intangible assets are increasingly decisive in city competition.

City branding has evolved from promotional marketing to a strategic framework for urban development. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) argue that cities must construct recognisable identities to resist in competitive markets. Anholt (2010) positions branding as an expression of a city's identity, tied to long-term policy objectives. Authenticity is essential: Braun et al. (2014) highlight that stakeholder engagement improves credibility and Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) view brands as evolving through interactions between local identity and external perception.

For European cities branding strategies merge heritage with stories about innovation. Rome image is known as cultural capital, Prague blends historical charm with modern functionality and Bucharest positions as affordable dynamic innovation hub seeking differentiation from more established capitals.

The MICE sector is recognised for its high economic yield per visitor compared to clasical tourism (Davidson & Cope, 2003). Getz (2018) emphasises its role in fostering knowledge exchange, global networks, and investment attraction. Hosting international events strengthens global visibility and embeds cities within professional circuits (Rogerson, 2015).

For CEE MICE growth goes with post communist transformation. Puczkó and Rátz (2010) note that cities such as Prague and Bucharest use MICE development to reposition themselves as globally integrated hubs. Rome relies heavily on cultural heritage to remain competitive but Richards (2021) underlines that over reliance on heritage risks stagnation without infrastructure and service innovation.

EU funds play a crucial role in supporting cities to upgrade MICE infrastructure, enhance accessibility, and strengthen branding. The Cohesion Policy, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and Horizon programs provide resources for improving transport, digital capacity, and cultural sites. Bachtler et al. (2017) observe that the efficiency of EU funding depends on administrative capacity and integration of local strategies and EU priorities.

Doucet (2017) sees that cities using EU funds efficient often integrate functional and symbolic improvements: for example upgrading convention facilities together with branding campaigns. Disparities in fund absorption are high; newer EU members, like Romania, face challenges in bureaucratic efficiency.

Urban competitiveness, city branding and the MICE industry have been studied individually but their interconnections are recognised more and more. MICE events contribute to brand visibility and strong branding influences event organisers destination choices (Richards, 2021). EU funding is a catalyst for infrastructure development and city branding.

Comparative research which integrates competitiviness, urban branding and MICE industry is limited. Existing studies focus on single case stories such as balanced branding of Prague (Puczkó & Rátz, 2010), or Rome insistence on heritage (Richards, 2021). Few address how diverse urban contexts such as a mature MICE hub, an emerging market or a prestige capital differ in their integration of branding, MICE, and EU funding.

Prague, Bucharest, and Rome represent three distinct economic competitive situations and are not comparative integrated analysed. This study confronts the lack of integrated analysis and examines how these capitals use MICE development and city branding to compete for business, investments and EU resources.

Methodology

The paper compares case studies to analyse how Prague, Bucharest, and Rome use the MICE industry and urban branding to enhance competitiveness and access European funds. The comparative method is suitable for exploring similarities and differences across contexts which shape strategies (Yin, 2018).

The research focuses on three European capitals selected for their different economic environments, cultural and historical experiences. Prague represents a Central European success story with consistent MICE growth and effective EU fund utilisation. Bucharest illustrates an emerging market trying to raise its visibility and credibility. Rome embodies a heritage-driven global hub facing infrastructural and sustainability challenges. This comparison of three different elements allows for vertical city specific and horizontal cross case analysis.

A combination of primary and secondary data, like primary qualitative inputs as stakeholder interviews and policy documents from local tourism boards and secondary academic literature, EU policy documents ,statistical reports from Eurostat and publications from city convention bureaus, are integrated for contextualisation. Triangulation across data sources enhances validity and reduces potential bias (Flick, 2018).

Three key points organise the analysis:

1. MICE infrastructure and size locations, accessibility, connectivity, and service quality.

2. Urban Branding Strategies dealing with brand positioning, marketing stories and connection with city identity.

3. EU funds utilisation evaluating efficiency of European funds implementation to raise MICE competitiveness.

Porter's (1990) Diamond Model provides a framework for understanding competitiveness and Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity based model informs the examination of city branding. EU cohesion policy literature (Bachtler et al., 2017) assesses the role of funding.
The research is limited to only three capitals and reduces general view about European cities. Data is available in different volumes for each case, especially access to EU funds being unclear. But the comparative approach provides important insights into the connection of MICE, city branding and EU integration strategies.

Case studies of the three capitals

Analysing each city case provides the depth of understanding and reflects the big disparities between these European capitals.

1. Prague, centre of Europe
Prague is one of Europe's leading MICE destinations and most of the time ranks in the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) top ten. Its central European location and modernised infrastructure helps its success.

The Prague Congress Centre, with a capacity of over 9,000 delegates, helps the city build professional big scale business events. A dense network of four and five star hotels adds to the organising capacity and Václav Havel Airport connects with more than 160 destinations annually (Prague Convention Bureau, 2023). This combination gives accessibility and scalability for major international events.

Prague, under the slogan “At the heart of Europe“, promotes its cultural heritage and modern identity. Kavaratzis (2015) identifies the city as an example of branding authenticity with historic charm and a reputation as an innovative business hub. Incentive tourism takes benefit from its heritage and conferences show reliability and modern facilities.

Prague has effectively absorbed EU funds, particularly through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Investments in upgrading the Congress Centre and digital infrastructure have reinforced its competitive position (European Commission, 2022). This intersection between EU funding priorities and local MICE objectives proves strong institutional capacity.

A big challenge is saturation during peak conference seasons. Rising operational costs generates a reduction of affordability compared to new destinations .A need for continuous investment in innovation and diversification is obvious .

2. Bucharest, emerging innovation hub

Bucharest positions itself as an emerging Southeastern European MICE and innovation hub and promotes affordability, a dynamic IT sector and EU backed modernization.

The Romexpo Exhibition Centre is the largest venue in Romania and has the capacity to host large scale trade fairs and conventions. Recent expansions in high standard hotel capacity have improved competitiveness . Transport infrastructure remains less developed compared to Prague and Rome. Henri Coanda International Airport receives over 12 million passengers annually (National Institute of Statistics, 2023). Lack of a convention centre and of coherent government policy to develop modern city infrastructure is a big obstacle for modern MICE industry and city branding.

Bucharest promotes a dual identity: a historical capital with Belle Époque architecture and a modern, affordable IT and innovation hub. Affordability and innovation are appealing to cost sensitive MICE organisers. Zenker and Martin (2011)argue that inconsistent and fragmented branding remains a barrier to global recognition.

EU Cohesion Policy funding has been crucial for improving MICE related infrastructure. Projects supported by the ERDF include Romexpo modernisation and investments in digital connectivity. European Court of Auditors (2021) reports that bureaucratic inefficiencies blocks full absorption and limits the impact of EU funds and postpones necessary economic reforms.

Bucharest fights with low international visibility, with image of low service quality and weak infrastructure in transport and urban mobility. Key points to solve are the improvement of EU funds absorption and an innovative city branding policy.

3. Rome, the eternal city

Rome is one of the most attractive MICE destinations in Europe which exploits its cultural heritage and symbolic eternity. It attracts high profile international events especially in medicine, culture, luxury and governance.

Rome hosts events in modern and historic buildings. The Fiera di Roma provides large scale facilities and historic palaces host exclusive events. Leonardo da Vinci Fiumicino, number one italian airport, connects more than 200 destinations, serving nearly 30 million passengers in 2022 (ENAC, 2023). The city has one of the highest concentrations of european luxury hotels.

Rome branding exploits continously its “Eternal City” image and focuses on heritage, art and luxury. The branding addresses to premium markets and raises its symbolic capital. Richards (2021) observes that over reliance on heritage risks stagnation without significant innovation. Rome MICE branding must incorporate ideas about sustainability and digital innovation.

Rome utilises EU funds mainly for heritage restoration, sustainability initiatives and transport improvements. ERDF supported projects have modernised parts of its convention infrastructure but, compared to Prague, absorption efficiency remains low (Mendez and Bachtler, 2017).

Rome faces infrastructural strain, traffic congestion, and over tourism. High costs reduce interest of MICE organisers. Without modernising its MICE infrastructure and diversifying branding Rome risks losing competitiveness despite its prestige.

4. Comparative insigts

The three cities have divergent MICE competitiveness models:
Prague combines heritage authenticity, modern infrastructure and effective EU funding ,being in comparison with the other two a “balanced integrator”.
Bucharest leverages affordability and EU support but weaker branding and infrastructure gaps affects the results and immediate perspective. The city acts as a “rising hub”.
Rome stresses the symbolic capital and “eternal prestige”, but is constrained by structural inefficiencies and too much reliance on heritage in a very fluid economic world.

The comparative analysis supports Porter’s (1990) view that competitiveness is not defined by a single advantage but by the interconnection of infrastructure, branding and governance. The effectiveness of EU fund utilisation is a key factor for fast modernisation and innovation: Prague is successful compared with Bucharest partial progress and Rome underperformance.

Analysis and discussion

The comparative analysis of Prague, Bucharest and Rome identifies distinct models of competitiveness within the European MICE industry, developed by the interconnection of infrastructure, city branding and EU funding. Each city proves strengths born from its context but faces challenges that influence its ability to sustain global competitiveness.

Prague has a balanced and efficient MICE system with strong infrastructure and connectivity. Its combination of the Prague Congress Centre, a high-standard hotel sector and excellent air and rail links support Davidson and Cope’s (2003) emphasis on accessibility as a cornerstone of MICE competitiveness. Rome benefits from extensive facilities like Fiera di Roma and luxury hospitality infrastructure but struggles with congestion and outdated systems. Bucharest is less developed but makes progress in infrastructure like Romexpo which is expanding and hotel capacity which increases and becomes an emerging and innovation hub.

Branding shapes how these cities are understood in the MICE market. Prague leverages authenticity and balances heritage with a modern “Heart of Europe” story. Rome continues to draw on its “Eternal City” prestige, appealing to elite segments but risking stagnation through over reliance on cultural heritage (Richards, 2021). Bucharest adopts an affordability and innovation driven identity but suffers from inconsistency and limited global resonance (Zenker & Martin, 2016). These findings support Kavaratzis and Hatch’s (2013) claim that efficient city branding must align with identity while adapting to market needs.

EU funding is a key developer. Prague has high absorption and uses funds into modernising MICE facilities, digital infrastructure and reinforces its balanced model. Bucharest benefits of large funds, particularly in transport and digitalisation, but bureaucratic inefficiencies limit full impact (European Court of Auditors, 2021). Rome uses EU funds selectively, mainly for heritage restoration and sustainability projects, but relatively low efficiency reduces its ability to address infrastructure challenges. As Bachtler et al. (2017) note, alignment between EU priorities and local strategies is critical for maximising competitiveness outcomes.

Comparative competitiveness models

The findings suggest three models:

Prague combines heritage authenticity, modern infrastructure, and efficient EU fund absorption as an adjusted heart of Europe integrator.

Bucharest leverages affordability, skilled workforce and EU support but it is undermined by weak branding coherence and administrative gaps being an emerging innovation hub.

Rome exploits the symbolic cultural capital but it is limited by infrastructure age, high prices, overcrowds and too much reliance on heritage as an eternal prestige.

The study underlines that urban competitiveness in the MICE industry cannot rest on singular advantages. They are necessary integrated strategies combining infrastructure, branding, and funding. Policymakers should prioritise:
1. Integration with EU Cohesion Policy goals to maximise funding opportunities.
2. Authentic modern branding that reflects identity and innovation.
3. Public private partnerships to upgrade efficiency and promote sustainable MICE growth.

Conclusion

The study has examined how Prague, Bucharest and Rome develop the MICE industry and urban branding to strengthen competitiveness and secure EU funds. The comparative analysis highlights three distinct models: Prague, the adjusted integrator, Bucharest, the emerging innovation hub and Rome, the eternal prestige.

Prague demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating branding, infrastructure and EU funding and it secures its position among European leading MICE destinations. Bucharest emerges and illustrates the transformative potential of EU funds combined with affordability and an innovation identity. Its branding coherence and bureaucratic efficiency constrain its progress. Rome continues to use its global prestige and cultural heritage but faces stagnation due to infrastructure weakness, high costs and over reliance on permanent charm of eternal city.

The findings underlines that urban competitiveness in the MICE sector requires complex strategies. Only one advantage like heritage or affordability is insufficient without permanent modern branding, modern infrastructure and effective EU fund absorption. Institutional capacity and coherent governance are decisive factors which shape the transformation of external support into long term competitiveness.

Policy recommendations

The study suggests three key priorities for integration of the policies with the practice:
1. Integration of local strategies with EU Cohesion Policy goals to maximise funds apsorption.
2. Authentic modern development of urban branding that integrates heritage with innovation and sustainability.
3. Continuous development of public private partnerships to support efficiency and ensure high level MICE development.

The study provides insights about every of the three cities but further research should explore other european and world cities to identify the general laws of their models.Artificial Intelligence should be smart used to reach into depth of cities of the world data . Sustainability and the growing role of hybrid and digital events would provide perspectives on resilience of cities in a fast increasing very dynamic global MICE industry.

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