

## Tourist information centre as a relevant assistant for regional development in area

TÁŇA KARLÍKOVÁ  
*University of Pardubice*  
Studentská 84, 532 10 Pardubice  
Czech Republic  
tana.karlikova@upce.cz

### Abstract

Regional development can be caused by many various reasons. In every case we should pay attention to the local possibilities and conditions. Cities of the Czech Republic realize that the tourist trade and incomes could deeply influence economical situation in territory of the cities and regions. We can call tourist information centre as a “gate to the city”. Question remains: quality of the tourist information centres and reaching the minimal level of it. State (and its bodies) knows, how important tourist trade for the regional development is. This paper focuses on situation – basic quality characteristics – in the area of tourist information centres of Czech Republic.

**Key words:** Tourist information centre, A.T.I.C., tourist trade, CzechTourism.

### 1 Introduction

Tourist trade is one of the fastest growing sectors of economy in the Czech Republic and becomes one of most important elements for regional development in many Czech regions.

The foreign currency revenue from tourism from January to December 2006 reached 5.0 billion USD, which is approximately 7.1 % more than in January - December 2005. The foreign currency revenue from tourism represents about 3.5 % of the GDP. This is reason why Ministry for regional development pays attention and gives money to tourist development. [1] The starting point for activities conducted by the Ministry for regional development is the State Tourism Policy Concept for the Years 2002-2007. An updated version of the Concept was acknowledged by the Government and the Concept defines an ensemble of measures leading to the implementation of the basic objectives of the government's tourism policy. These objectives can be generally summarized as improvement of the competitiveness and economic benefits of tourism in the Czech Republic, reduction of unemployment, development of regions, growth of small and medium enterprises, and protection of the environment.[2]

The measures include executing the State Tourism Support Programme, securing financial aid from the EU's Structural Funds under the Joint Regional Operational Programme, creating a **tourism information system**, supporting creation and utilization of tourism products mainly targeting cultural sightseeing, balneology, congress and incentive tourism, rural tourism,

agrotourism, ecotourism, biking, hiking, and the like. Between the priorities belongs support of the creation and utilization of regional tourism products, and to improve the effectiveness of tourism marketing. As regards legislation, the main objective is to formulate the applicable legislation and to create a legislative framework supporting the development of tourism from the viewpoint of bodies of the central and local governments and private organizations.

The main institution providing tourist information is CzechTourism (Czech Trade is allowance organization established in 1993 in order to advertise Czech Republic as a cool destination on local and foreign market. Important partners are: home tourist regions, cities and municipalities, as well as entrepreneurs. CzechTourism belongs to Ministry for regional development.). For the regional information is better to find tourist information centre (TIC). Many cities and municipalities established tourist offices. As the municipalities are different and the local government has various priorities, the scale services and quality are different.

## 2 Tourist information centre (TIC)

Czech Republic (78 000 km<sup>2</sup>) is divided into 14 regions and there is over 6 240 municipalities. Most of them have less than 10 000 inhabitants as shows table number 1.

Table 1: Size of the Czech municipalities

Size of the Czech municipalities	
Population	Number of municipalities
over 50 001	22
50 000 - 10 001	109
less than 10 000	6 117
<b>Total</b>	<b>6 248</b>

Source: Czech Statistical Office

Tourist Information centre (henceforth TIC) is a special-purpose organisation providing, in the areas where it is active (cities, tourist areas, regions), comprehensive information about all services related to the travel industry. Founder of TIC is mostly municipality, in some cases it were private corporations. Later the business stayed in municipality hands or was transferred in hands of private corporation or allowance organization.

Important thing for easy identification by visitors and inhabitants (specially by foreign visitors) is simple picture which is always the same. This idea gave CzechTourism in cooperation with A.T.I.C (Association of Tourist Information Centres) and regional governments in project “Official Tourist Information Centres” (OTIC). TIC who fulfilled conditions has right to use sign showed at the imagine number 1.

Uniform signing appears as a white "i" on a green background with a fundamental size of 50 x 50 cm<sup>2</sup> (to indicate information centres, i.e. places where information is provided).

Image 1: Official sign of TIC

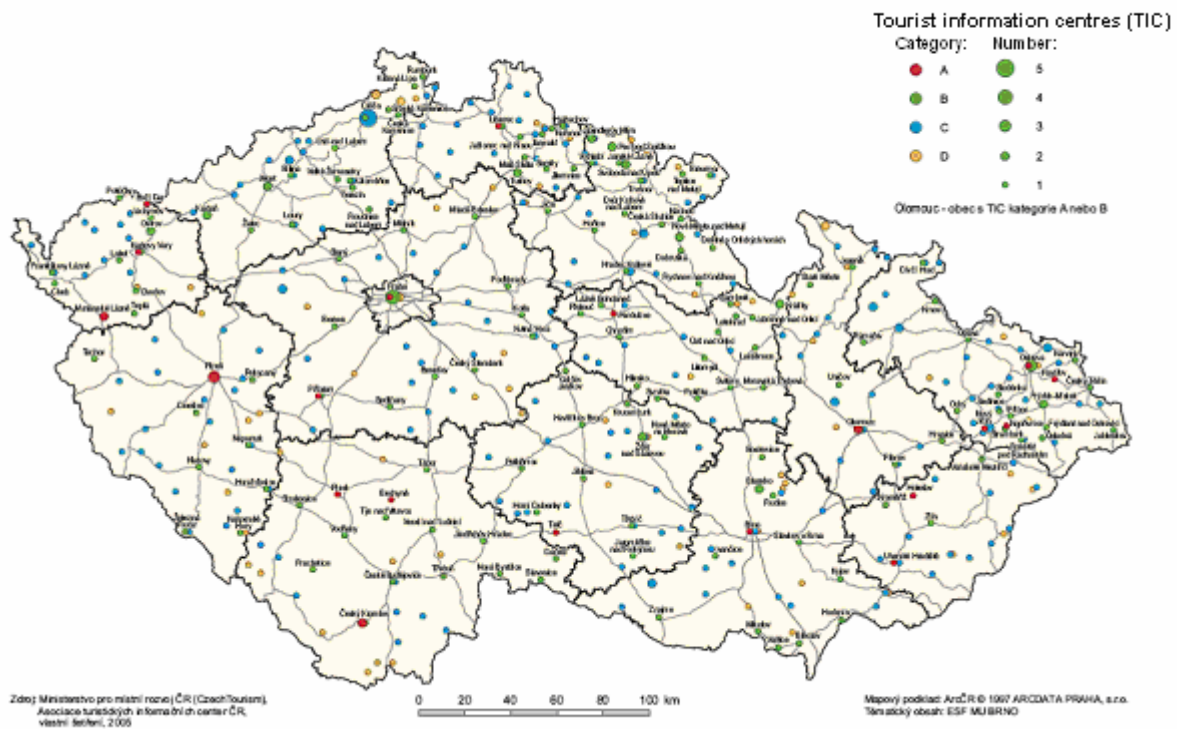


Source: . [3]

Sign does not represent only tourist office and does not only indicate where it is situated, but guarantees a minimum range of services required by CzechTourism and A.T.I.C. (more about services in part 2.2 Services provided by OTIC).

Nobody knows how many information centres are in the Czech Republic. We have information about TIC which is member of A.T.I.C. (see image 2), A.T.I.C. applicant or member OTIC (in January 2007 had 290 members). There is no rule or law specifying conditions what size of the city should be connected with TIC foundation.

Image 2: Regional and local tourist information centres (year 2006)



Source: [4], page 11.

Problem represents fact, that there is no act pressing on obligation to become member of A.T.I.C. or –at least- follow the basic association rules connected with the minimum level of quality.

### 2.1 A.T.I.C.

Association of Tourist Information Centres has 182 members and 7 applicants (January 2007). Aim of this organization is to become center of the information network within the frame of tourist trade of the Czech Republic which should serve as an information connection among visitors, city and municipality inhabitants and corporations. A.T.I.C. wants increase professional level of their members.

Association is taking part in OTIC, so every member of A.T.I.C. has right to use sign of TIC showed above. Other activities include education and sharing experiences, etc.

### 2.2 Services provided by OTIC

The minimum scale of provided services contains [5]:

- that TIC gathers information on the basis of standards it has set with regards to documented activities and produces a comprehensive databank of travel activity in a given area (the databank contains tourist, cultural and general information, i.e. information on the scope of their activities, their attractions, accommodation and dining possibilities, transportation, shopping, and cultural and sporting programs). The basic condition of the databank's creation is its being up to date.
- TIC provides information through all available ways: oral, by phone, printed, electronic). At least oral ways has to be free of charge, charged service has to be included in price list.
- While carrying out its activities, TIC can also offer other services related to travel activities (e.g. operate as a travel agency) as long as they do not disrupt the comprehensiveness, objectivity and quality of the information it provides.
- TIC has connection to internet with appropriate equipment (PC, printer, copy machine) and has a presence on the world wide web (own or founders').
- TIC is opened throughout the entire year or in season, its office hours amount to a minimum of 5 days per week,
- employee provides verbal information in at least one world language free of charge (from 3 employees in 2 world languages).
- TIC lead statistic of visitors.
- TIC should be signed as tourist information centre (not only office, access roads too).

Problem starts when TIC is not member of A.T.I.C. or does not take part in OTIC.

### 2.3 The most frequent problems of TIC

TIC is total of building (or office room), employees, technical equipment, knowledge and information.

Many Czech municipalities are quite small and they did not found or support foundation of TIC for their village or small city and they do not see reason why to cooperate with other municipalities in the same region.

Another problem is the opening hours. It is not helpful when the TIC is closed on Saturday afternoon and whole Sunday. Opening hours are mostly close connected with the organization providing TIC services. E.g. travel agency has open 5 days as the working hours are. Library is opened 5,5 days (working week hand Saturday morning). Money exchange is mostly opened for the whole week, in the main hours.

Employees who are able to speak one foreign language are workable, but not if they work in Moravský kras and speak just Russian.

It is not common service in information centre joined with cash desk of some tourist attraction to have possibility to pay by credit card.

This is a short list of problems often occurred.

### 3 Conclusion

In the end of my paper I have more questions than answers. How to solve difficulties? In true the main weight and responsibility lies on provider shoulders.

He should accept employees which are well educated, cares about local cultural life and has awareness about main tourist objectives, which are friendly and open minded.

As we are members of European Union (2004), at least one English speaking person should be present in TIC all the time.

Opening hours should follow needs of tourists and local inhabitants. How many people travel and make one or two days trips (except holidays) through the week?

Other thing is that some municipalities does not have own TIC, another has more than 1. They do not have branch office of one TIC, but there are two or more different providers which do not cooperate.

Question is if we need stronger rules and law or the power and lobby of visitors is enough for changing bad manners of some TIC? How important is feed back for TIC?

We have to keep in mind that visitors mostly do not give second chance after first bad experience and specially when we can read in many foreign guide books about Czech Republic in the early beginning sentence: Czech Republic is full of nice places and interesting cultural, natural and historical objectives – just services are very poor.

First steps for improvement were made by Ministry for regional development, CzechTourism, A.T.I.C. and others.

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