Original Article

The new role of sports: the use of sport in place branding activity of the local government of Debrecen (Hungary)

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the use of sports in the city politics for a specific Hungarian settlement, Debrecen. In the course of the research we analysed the development concepts of the city from the aspect of sports, and we reviewed the documents presented to the local council. We studied the reports of the companies owned by the city, the brochures published by the local government and the documents of the sports events held in Debrecen. The steps taken by the local government of Debrecen in this field correspond to the international trends: it clearly formulated the objectives to be reached; it performed major infrastructural developments; in the course of its communication activities, it strove to emphasize the link between the city and sports. The local government of Debrecen recognised that the sport has a very important role in the place branding activity of the settlements, and in the spirit of this it took several steps in this area. As a result of these, the city can boast of considerable success stories; though, of course, further steps are needed in many areas.

Key Words: urban policy, place branding, Debrecen, local government

Introduction

Beginning in the 1980s, in the United States and later on also in the Western part of Europe as well, there has been a gradual transformation in the attitude of the mainly municipal local authorities, which happened on two levels. On the one hand, local authorities started to put more emphasis on the environmental issues, the processes taking place there, as well as the analysing the influence of these on the future. On the other hand, while before the 1980s local authorities considered the development of services and infrastructure, as well as the control and regulation of the development generated by them as their main tasks, from about this time they started to realise that they should take more of an initiative in shaping the future of the area they are in charge of (Leitner, 1990).

Researchers in the field of urban and regional policy and development also turned their attention toward these changes, and because many elements of the new activity resembled the traditional marketing of consumer products, they started to talk about the “selling” and “marketing” of geographical units. By the end of the decade, certain authors (e.g. (Ashworth & Voogd, 1987) talked about *geographical marketing*, while the expression “place marketing” becoming much better established widespread in the English-speaking world. This term refers to marketing activities pursued by certain areas, and thus it includes the marketing activities pursued by of settlements, counties, regions and even countries, but it means more than just these activities of the local authorities, as it also covers the measures taken in this respect by other stakeholders, such as representatives of the private sector, local residents, etc. From late 1990s on, the keyword “place branding” started to appear with increasing frequency in the writings of researchers (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Kavartzis, 2005; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009), which is due to the fact that they began to realise the significance of “image” as a factor influencing the decisions of both potential and existing target groups.

While engaging in their place branding activity, i.e. the creation of a powerful and coherent place brand, local authorities concentrate on different areas (such as culture or medical tourism), sports being one of the possibilities that can be put in the centre. While this statement may sound somewhat surprising at first (since one may ask why we should spend on sports when other areas such as education, transportation or social services suffer from major financial problems), it can be supported with the following arguments (Gratton, Shibli & Coleman, 2005; Jun & Lee, 2007; Maenning, & du Plessis, 2009; Rosentraub, & Joo, 2009):

- sports events create a significant and direct economic revenue;
- if they leave with positive impressions, participants of sports events (e.g. athletes, spectators) may later return to the given settlement as tourists;
- the media interest that accompanies sports events is capable of giving the settlement much visibility (“putting it on the map”) very quickly, which may be important in raising the interest of tourists and investors alike;
- infrastructural developments related to sports may contribute to the competitiveness of the city in other fields, such as cultural tourism;

- successful sports events may raise the self-consciousness and add to the pride of the local residents: the emotional link created between participants and spectators symbolises the energy, vitality and strength of an emerging society (e.g., cultural or eco-tourism are not really capable of the same);
- the higher popularity of sports may play a major role in the promotion of healthy lifestyle in society;
- sports may strengthen the link between the private and the public sectors;
- if sports events become more popular, the public usually accepts them better than the other types of events.

Concerning the use of sports in the framework of place branding, Rein and Shields (2007) differentiated between three fundamental platforms:

- *event platform*: organising sports events that ensure massive media attention (e.g., Olympic Games, European or World Championships, conferences/meetings of general assemblies related to an important branch of sports);
- *team platform*: supporting teams/individual associated with the given location;
- *place platform*: “city development” relying entirely on sports (e.g. the Dubai Sports City investment project).

It was emphasised by the authors that, due to the fact that financial resources are limited, places should concentrate on the one or two platforms that best suit them (because of the very high financial demands, in most cases the third one of these will likely be the least attractive). Simultaneously, it should be noted that success on any one of the platforms is subject to the places taking all necessary steps in the following areas:

- concept: elaborating ideas in a clear, transparent way, defining the objectives to be reached;
- infrastructure: ensuring the human and physical conditions needed for the success of the activities planned;
- communication: creating familiarity with and the ensuring the availability of information on the given location, “launching” it onto the market (Kozma, 2010).

With an eye to the above areas, this article uses the example of Debrecen, a city with a population of approximately 204,000 in the eastern part of Hungary (Figure 1). In recent times, this city earned the honorary title of a sports capital of Hungary. I will refer to Debrecen to illustrate the measures taken, and then in the final section of this paper, I will evaluate the activities of the local government in terms of the successes and the failures that can be identified, and will also consider what the most important conditions of making further progress are.

Figure 1: The location of Debrecen

Material & methods

In the course of the research we analysed the development concepts of the city from the aspect of sports, and we reviewed the documents presented to the local representative body. We studied the reports of the companies owned by the city, the brochures published by the local government and the documents of the sports events held in Debrecen.

Results and Discussion

The formulation of the branding concept

For places that wish to place sports into the centre of their place branding activities, one of the first important tasks is to formulate a concept in which they determine the following:

- the given place's endowments related to sports, i.e. their strengths and weaknesses;
- the opportunities and threats that are inherent in the external environment of the place concerned;
- based on the above, the aims that have in connection with their place branding activities.

In the past, similarly to other cities in the country, there was no real branding concept developed in Debrecen; however, in the new millennium, the leadership of the city started to consider the development of sports as one of the break-out points for the city. In the spirit of the above, the sports concept accepted as early as 2000 set forth that “International and outstanding national sporting events have a significant impact for the

development of marketing, infrastructure and the branches of sports, and therefore the local governments must, as far as its strength allows, support the organisation of outstanding sporting events.” In addition, with respect to the supporting of team sports, the local government set as a condition to the provision of financial support to the business organisations operating the teams that they should

- manage their business and operate in compliance with legal regulations;
- achieve good results in the highest league of the relevant Hungarian championship;
- participate in international competitions and championships as far as possible.

Secondly, the Tourism Development Concept, Strategic and Operative Programme of Debrecen, adopted in 2004, regarded sport tourism as a separate development priority, the significance of which was given as follows: “Larger events always provides excellent opportunities for the organising countries to improve their image, induces major investment projects and developments, and the resulting facilities can be used for a long time by both the local communities and the visitors.” It is in the interest of achieving the above objectives, they emphasised the importance of constructing/developing sports facilities, as well as organising sporting events.

Thirdly, the strategic and operative programme of the city for the period between 2007 and 2013 includes as a separate measure, in the priority titled “The creation of the conditions necessary for the development of a more efficient economy,” the development of sports tourism, the main areas of which (in harmony with the tourism document) are the development of facilities and the organisation of events.

Infrastructure development

The second task in the course of the creation of the sports brand is *infrastructural development*. This consists of the creation of the physical and the human infrastructure. The former consists of the construction and modernisation of sports facilities, while the latter means ensuring a supply of young athletes, establishing the appropriate organisations, etc.

With respect to the *physical infrastructure*, we must differentiate between projects that support the development of sports directly and indirectly. In the *former category* we can find investment projects related to venues, in which case we can observe an interesting situation in case of Debrecen to the extent that in case of all four major facilities, the right to host the event was won first, before the actual physical investment project was started. To provide an example from the city of Debrecen, the 2nd IAAF World Youth Championships in Athletics served as the framework in which the Oláh Gábor Street Athletic Stadium was renovated in 2001/2002 (Photo 1). The facility won the title IAAF International Training Center in 2003, and then in 2006 was renamed Gyulai István Athletic Stadium and International Training Center.

Photo 1: István Gyulai Athletic Stadium and International Training Center

The second largest multi-purpose arena of Hungary, Főnix Arena, was constructed in 2002 in just 8 months, after success bid of Debrecen’s bid city to stage the 36th World Gymnastics Championships (Photo 2). In ice-hockey, the IIHF World U18 Championship Division II was the event that served as a chief motivation for the construction of the Debrecen Ice Hall (it was used as the training and warm-up venue for the participating teams). The most recent large-scale investment in the field of sports took place in 2006-2007, when the Debrecen Indoor Sports Swimming Pool was erected after the city successfully bid for the right to organize the 11th LEN Short Course Swimming European Championship.

Photo 2: Főnix Hall

From among *indirect investment projects* we should emphasise first and foremost high-quality hotel developments: in contrast with 2000 (two 4-star hotels with a total of 245 beds), in 2008 there were six 4-star hotels (with a total number of 946 beds), and in 2008 the first 5-star hotel in Eastern Hungary Hotel Divinus (362 beds) was opened. Of special significance from the point of view of sporting events was, in the framework of improving the accommodation offerings of the city, the renovation in 2004 of Sport Hotel, as a result of which on the one hand, the number of available beds was increased to 119, and on the other hand, it also created a much higher standard of quality (instead of the earlier one-star category, the hotel was now a three-star facility).

A crucial element of the development of *human infrastructure* is the identification of talented children in various branches of sports, which is to be followed by the professional training and management of these young talents. In the spirit of the above, a highly developed system was developed in the city in recent years aimed at the training of young athletes, which includes the municipal sports school, the youth teams of individual sports associations, as well as the “football schools.” In the interest of creating harmony between education and sports, there are public education type sports classes in a number of primary and secondary schools in the city (e.g. boy's football, girls' handball), the curriculum of which helps to achieve better preparation for sports and competitions.

In the field of football, the decision was made in 2010 in order to create the conditions of further successes that, following several foreign and Hungarian examples, the University of Debrecen, DVSC Football Co. and the local government would jointly create a football academy, which would provide more harmony between academic and athletic activities for talented young players in the framework of a six-grade grammar school (this investment will be finished in 2012).

Yet another important aspect of the *human infrastructure* development is setting up the *necessary organisational background*, which in the case of Debrecen fundamentally encompasses two areas. One of these consists of the *various units of the local government* (the competent organisational unit of the Mayor's Office, the Cultural, Youth and Sports Committee of the Local council and the Local council itself), whose tasks primarily consists of the preparation and the making of strategic decisions related to sports (e.g. the sports concept, the amount of the allocation to sports from the municipal budget, support for the organisation of various sporting events). An examination of the decisions made in the past decade reveals that the local government has invested considerable amounts in the development of sports (Table 1) which was about 1.0-1.5% of the total expenditure of local government (the decrease after 2007 can be attributed to economic crisis).

Table 1: The most important sports-related expense categories of the local government of Debrecen between 2001 and 2011 (1,000 HUF)

	A	B	C	total
2001	41,750	112,303	129,332	283,385
2002	41,863	85,020	158,750	285,633
2003	145,000	5,000	323,750	473,750
2004	317,000	87,006	248,801	652,807
2005	340,000	121,000	306,000	767,000
2006	326,000	113,218	260,433	699,651
2007	211,000	238,896	423,601	873,497
2008	211,500	32,912	453,147	697,559
2009	168,000	37,612	536,471	742,083
2010	33,624	32,994	460,200	526,818
2011	20,000	11,889	428,500	460,389

A – support to prioritised sports associations (football, handball, basketball);

B – support for the organisation of the most important sporting events (European and world championships);

C – support to the activities of Debrecen Sport Centre Public Utility Co.

Source: budgets of the local government of Debrecen

The other group of major players includes those companies, in municipal ownership, which in the course of the performance of their activities partly or entirely carry out such tasks. Firstly, for the purpose of managing sports-related issues in a prioritised and concentrated way, in 2000 the local authority established Debrecen Sport Centre NPO, a company in 100% municipal ownership (renamed in April 2009 as Debrecen Sport Centre Public Utility Co.), whose main activity is the operation of the sports facilities given into its management under the public benefit contract (e.g. Sport Hotel and the Debrecen Indoor Sports Swimming Pool), as well as the operation of the Debrecen Sports School, the renting out of properties and the organisation of sporting events. Secondly, Főnix Events Organising NPO was established in 2003 (renamed as Főnix Events Organising Public Utility Co. in 2009), the sports-related functions of which include the operation of Főnix Hall, as well as the organisation of various events. The number of employees in the two organisations is between 100 and 110, and they also have a sizable body of volunteers (approximately 250-300 persons) with considerable practice and experience in this area.

Communication

Regarding the communication of the close link between Debrecen and sports, we can differentiate two major phases: the formulation of the message and the efficient conveying of that message same to the target groups.

A central part of the message formulated should be that the municipal authority considers sports of high importance, and as a result it provides moral and financial support for the development and operation of sports. Two sub-phases may be distinguished in the *dissemination of the message*: first of all, the simple mention of the name of the city should bring the image of sports the mind of the people; secondly, the sport-related events should recall the name of the city in the mind of the people.

The *first process* may be achieved by using a great variety of communication tools. For instance, in the *publications* issued by the city for the tourists and economic actors references were made to the very active sports life of the city. It actually had two basic motives: (1) to convince the given target groups about Debrecen being able to meet demands and expectations of this sort, as well as (2) to prove that the city is able to successfully organise a sport event requiring extensive organisation efforts (Photo 3). In case of the *INTERNET* as a tool, the close connection between city and sport is proved by the website of Debrecen, in which sport-link can be seen on the opening page, and it contains further information in more details.

Photo 3: Picture from the brochure of “Debrecen a throbbing city” targeting potential tourists

In connection with the second task related to the communication activity (the creation of the link between sports and the city), several types of tools are available. *Advertisements* may be predominantly used in connection with sports events, and due to the fact that in the majority of cases the name of the city (Debrecen) is also included in these advertisements, they have an advertising value for the city as well: in case of the UEFA Futsal Championship, for example, in *Nemzeti Sport*, the only Hungarian sports daily, a total of 13 advertisements of the event appeared, and the name of Debrecen was mentioned in each of those. As far as the *Internet* is concerned, it is worth noting that, in most cases at least, one could easily navigate from the websites of the sports events to the website of the city with the use of a direct link (Photo 4).

Photo 4: The introduction of Debrecen on the home page of UEFA Futsal Championship 2010

Yet another communication tool, *PR (public relations)* activities encompass several areas. Firstly, in case of both individual and team sports, city names are often used as part of the team names or even in association with individual athletes. Consequently, their appearance and especially their successful performance (e.g. among top three) also directs attention to their settlement. One way to further reinforce this effect is by way of the names of the various teams (e.g. under a sponsorship agreement) to include or reflect some favourable endowments or characteristics of the settlements with respect to various target groups. (e.g. DVSC-Aquaticum – spa and aqua park; DKSE-Airport – the municipal airport).

Secondly, at press conferences held before various sports events, the mayor or deputy mayor usually also appears and this provides an opportunity for them, in their capacity as the president or member of the local organising committee, to emphasise the commitment of the settlement toward sports. (In 2009, at opening of the IIHF U20 Ice Hockey Division II World Championship, for example, Lajos Kósa, the mayor of Debrecen said the following: “Next up again is ice hockey, and together with us everybody knows that Debrecen, with its experienced organising staff, will do everything within its capabilities to ensure the success of the event. I hope that in the little free time they will have, visitors to our city will also take time to take some walks in the streets and squares of Debrecen, get to know our cultural assets and sample some of the exquisite food available in the city.”)

Thirdly, at the closing ceremonies and the press conference following sports events, leaders of the international associations of the given branch of sport also often appear, and in most cases praise the high standard at which the event was organised, which also means recognition for the city itself (for example, Bruno Grandi, president of the International Federation of Gymnastics, called the 36th Artistic Gymnastics World Championships organised in 2002 as the most successful gymnastics championship of all times, while Bartolo Consolo, president of LEN, wrote the following to the local organising committee of the 11th LEN Short Course Swimming European Championships held in 2007: „Please convey our congratulations and thanks to all hard working members of the Organising Committee, and rest assured that we left Debrecen with great memories and the precious friendship of its people”).

Fourthly, these events (particularly high-profile sports events) frequently attract attention from the international media as well, and both the reports of the journalists who come to the event and the short clips that are used on such occasions for the purpose of introducing the city and the venue provide excellent opportunities for communication (Table 2).

Table 2: The number of foreign journalists reporting on each of the sporting events in a breakdown according to countries

	A	B	C		A	B	C
Austria	2	5	1	Germany	39	8	2
Belarus	0	1	-	Norway	0	1	-
Bulgaria	1	0	-	Italy	5	5	4
Denmark	1	0	-	Russia	3	0	-
Finland	3	1	-	Portugal	2	1	9
France	8	11	2	Romania	33	0	5
Greece	1	1	1	Spain	2	0	4
The Netherlands	18	6	-	Switzerland	13	1	-
Croatia	1	2	1	Sweden	3	3	-
Japan	4	0	1	Serbia	0	3	3
Poland	1	5	1	Slovakia	2	3	-
Great-Britain	2	1	1	Slovenia	8	4	5

A - 1st Man and Woman European Gymnastics Championships, B - 11th LEN Short Course Swimming European Championships, C – UEFA Futsal Championship

Source: Debrecen Sport Centre Public Utility Co.

Conclusions

We believe that our study convincingly shows that the local government, having recognised the opportunity at the beginning of the new millennium, took significant steps in order to give sports an important role in the branding activities of Debrecen. In the course of its activities, it concentrated on two platforms (event platform and team platform), and on both of these platforms,

- it clearly formulated the objectives to be reached;
- it performed major infrastructural developments;
- in the course of its communication activities, it strove to emphasise the link between the city and sports.

In the course of the evaluation of the results of the activities so far, both positive and negative findings can be identified. In the former category, we should mention that the city has achieved recognition in the fields of both Hungarian and international sports, which is shown in the high number of events held in the city (15 large international events in 10 years: e.g. 2002 - 36th World Gymnastics Championships, 2004 - 6th Women's Handball European Championships, 2006 - 1st IAAF World Road Running Championships, 2007 - 11th LEN

Short Course Swimming European Championships, 2010 – UEFA Futsal Championships, 2012 – 31st LEN European Swimming Championships), as well as by the fact that several of the Hungarian sports associations have asked the city to serve as the venue for sporting events already won by the country (e.g. this is what happened in case of the U23 Fencing European Championship of 2009 and the IIHF U20 Ice Hockey Division II, Group “A” World Championship in 2009). On the other hand, both the financial support provided by the local government and its assistance in the area of youth athletes played a role in the DVSC-TEVA football team’s qualification into the group stage of UEFA Champions League in 2009 and European League in 2010, which placed the name of the team on the football map of Europe.

Among the failures, three things should be mentioned that in the international context did not strengthen the link between the name of Debrecen and sports. In 2007, Debrecen unsuccessfully bid to host the First Youth Olympic Games (the city did not get past the first round of candidacy), and the worst scores it received (in spite of the developments described above) in the category of facilities (it is also true, however, that the even the bid itself created significant media interest). Secondly, due to the inadequacy of the local football stadium, the DVSC-TEVA football team was forced to play its Champions and European League group stage matches in Budapest, which posed difficulties in terms of connecting the successes of the team with the name of the city (and in addition also had detrimental influences on tourism in the city).

From the point of view of further development it is of fundamental importance, on the one hand, that the local government should also strive in subsequent years, to provide similar support to sports, which is not an easy task due to the economic crisis. On the other hand, it would be of fundamental importance also to build a football stadium meeting the UEFA requirements, which would make it possible for Western European clubs also to come and play in Debrecen.

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