

REPRESENTATIONS OF CHERNOBYL

*A research on the shift in the representation of Chernobyl after the
mini-series “Chernobyl” aired*



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ABSTRACT

The Chernobyl accident in 1986 not only caused the contamination of the atmosphere with the release of substantial amounts of radioactive elements, but also the contamination of its international reputation, as the nuclear tragedy marked the site eternally with negative connotations in the average tourist's perception. Or so we thought; Recently, there has been increasingly noticed that the interest in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone peaked after the HBO mini-series "Chernobyl", airing on the 6th of May 2019. This research proposal aims to determine how media can engineer change in the city's branding. The subject of this thesis revolves around the role the interplay of dark and media-induced tourism played in the recent increase in visitations in the city of Chernobyl with regards to the HBO documentary "Chernobyl". Based on existing theories related to the concept of tourism gaze, it asks: How has the representation of the dark heritage site Chernobyl shifted after the launch of the 2019 theme-related mini-series 'Chernobyl'? For the focus of this analysis, the selection of case study materials was based on the comparative analysis of information related to the branding strategies of tourism companies promoting Chernobyl and governmental decisions made before and after the airing of the 2019 HBO series. Based on theories related to tourist motivation, an extensive observation of reviews and comments on Trip Advisor, as well as of Facebook and Instagram posts under the hashtag #ChernobylHBO, which has inspired a wave of tourism to the Zone of Exclusion, took place. The results indicated that the representation of Chernobyl did shift after the launch of the 2019 theme-related mini-series 'Chernobyl'. Under this scope, it is recommended that a series that is theme-related to the destination that it broadcasts can overturn the situation for this destination and transform its popularity rates drastically and in a short amount of time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The topic I chose to analyze in my Master Thesis revolved around the exploration of how tourism rates in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone were affected with regards to the HBO mini series called “Chernobyl” that aired on May 2019. This subject “radiated” within me since the very beginning of the second semester of my master studies when we were first asked to reflect on our potential research question. The series “Chernobyl” had a long-lasting impact on my perception with reference to the 1986 accident and had awakened my personal wish to visit the site as a tourist myself. My evolution though as a tourism expert and my academic engagement with various tourism-related concepts, such as the tourism gaze, made me want to analyze this personal urge from the opposite side of the same coin. My curiosity was further sparked as I was wondering whether other viewers of the series had also developed a similar fascination about visiting the Chernobyl exclusion zone and if they had, what underlying motivations did they have and to which extent did this fascination influence the growth of tourism in the area. As my research question was starting to develop, I was further pleased to realize that the underlying literary theories that would drive my research, were intertwined with the tourism categories of dark tourism and media induced tourism. In my perspective, especially dark tourism is the most intriguing branch of tourism, revealing a lot about the underlying complex processes of the human psyche and their projection on our dark tourism destination preferences. The dark story surrounding the story of Chernobyl and the negative connotations it had acquired in combination with the recent tourist growth and its transformation into a major tourist hotspot, was the ideal breeding ground for my research to unfold.

This piece of work holds a special place among my other academic writing productions, since it was the most time-consuming and long -in terms of the amount of words produced- I have ever written. I also got to experiment with the format of a thesis proposal for the first time, since my bachelor studies didn’t include the writing of one. Yet, above all it was mostly mentally challenging since I acquired for the first time the role of the researcher and I was expected to examine and interpret parameters based on my theoretical academic knowledge. This enabled me to develop analytical skills in tourism specific contexts and become functional in the framework of tourism discourses. In this way, I had the opportunity to reflect on my already acquired knowledge by viewing it from an enriched perspective and test my critical skills. Thanks to this writing challenge my organizational, observation and management skills

have also been drastically reinforced due to the plethora of information I had to interpret.

This writing challenge would have been unmet of course if I didn't have the mental and ethical support of my professors and supervisor, who were a source of inspiration and recurrent, enlightening feedback along the way. It was extremely encouraging and reassuring to know that every step of the process I was holistically guided in writing my academic research proposal, since any arising difficulties regarding the procedure of writing my Master Thesis were always resolved in a very productive manner. I am especially appreciative of the fact that no one imposed me their personal theories and interpretations of the topic I had chosen, but simply and democratically offered me alternative ways of thinking by letting me be the one who will decide in the end what to include, change or omit. In addition, I owe my family, partner and friends the unconditional support and patience they showed me in the uncertain times of the coronavirus pandemic, which added to this writing experience another layer of challenge.

Have a good reading.

Radioactively yours,

Athanasia Polyzogopoulou

INTRODUCTION

The city of Chernobyl in Ukraine is considered to be the site of the worst nuclear accident in history and a landmark of disaster tourism, since on Saturday 26 April 1986 the No. 4 reactor in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant near the city of Pripyat in the north of the Ukrainian SSR exploded. Nowadays, it has been increasingly noticed that the interest in the Chernobyl power plant peaked after the HBO mini-series “Chernobyl”, airing on the 6th of May 2019. According to figures from the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, tourism to Chernobyl has been growing quickly over the past five years. In 2014, a spokeswoman said, the site had 8,404 visitors; in 2018, that number was 71,862. In May 2019 alone, she added, the site had 12,591. The success of the series in attracting tourists was so vast that the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, signed a decree designating Chernobyl an official tourist attraction in July 2019¹. Consequently, what arises from this is the conundrum of how a negatively charged and notorious exclusion zone such as Chernobyl turned into a location of mainstream appeal, since it is remarkable that most Chernobyl tour agencies have reported a 40% rise in trip bookings after the release of the series.

While there is a long tradition of people visiting recent and ancient settings that have been subjected to man-made or natural environmental disasters, the term “disaster tourism” has been only coined in the last three decades. As it has been rightly argued, “disaster tourism, which falls into the pillar of dark tourism, denotes situations where the tourism product is generated within, and from, the aftermath of a major disaster or traumatic event”². Numerous discussions have been ignited with regards to which parameters contribute in sparking fascination towards the dark aspects of humanity and history. Although tourist motivation has a complex and multi-faceted dimension and its formation can be attributed to a variety of reasons, it is generally accepted that media representations of a setting can play a fundamental role in the way its viewers perceive it.

Movie induced tourism is a growing phenomenon worldwide which has been associated with alterations in tourist gaze with tourists visiting destinations or attractions as a result of the destinations being featured on cinema, television and video

¹ Lianne Kolirin. “Chernobyl to become official tourist attraction, Ukraine says.” *CNN Travel*, 11 July 2019, <edition.cnn.com/travel/article/chernobyl-tourist-attraction-intl-scli/index.html> Date Accessed: 16.01.2020.

² Hayley Stainton. “Disaster tourism explained: What, why and where.” *Tourism Teacher*, 05 Apr. 2020, <tourismteacher.com/disaster-tourism-what-why-and-where/> Date accessed: 15.01.2020.

screens. In the tourism industry, many tourist boards and tourist offices have taken into account the influence of film upon tourists both because of its promotional strength and of its economic impact and boost in tourist numbers. In this way, tourist stakeholders are promoting film location holidays, film destination holidays, movie walks and movie tours, which transform filming locations into commercialized tourist attractions. It has been also extensively argued that social media, and more specifically Instagram, have evolved as medium of promotion and tourism destination branding through photography³. The contribution of Instagram to create tourism destination brand can be attributed to both tourist offices who hire influencers to promote a destination and visitors who make destination-related posts telling of their experiences there.

Under this scope, it often becomes the case that media lead to the reformulation of the image of the destination by attaching new connotations to it. Furthermore, the image of a “dark” destination through theme-related series can be aptly manipulated by the stakeholders involved in the city’s promotion. In this case, it wouldn’t be exaggerated to say that media can engineer change in the city’s branding.

The topic of Chernobyl as a dark heritage site has been extensively explored in the course of the last decades. The Chernobyl zone has been synonymous to the darker aspects of scientific advancement and human experience and its ability to lure increasing number of tourists, as explained above, has raised numerous questions. Recent academic work has analyzed photographic representations of Chernobyl in terms of the anxieties that these may suggest in terms of its symbolism for industrial decline⁴, the postmodern sublime⁵ or as a heterotopian space (Stone 2013)⁶. As it has been rightly argued (Stone 2013, 91), “Chernobyl is a heterotopia that allows us to gaze upon a post-apocalyptic world, in which the familiar and uncanny collide”. Nevertheless, these studies are more concerned with what Chernobyl stands for as a symbol of postmodernity and lack a pragmatic tangible engagement with Chernobyl’s shifts in its branding representations.

The autoethnographic study of Nicholas Hryhorczuk⁷ exposes why Chernobyl is widely thought to be one of the most important heritage sites currently enlisted as

³ M.N Fatantia. “Beyond User Gaze: How Instagram Creates Tourism Destination Brand?” 1089-1094, 2015.

⁴ Paul Dobraszczyk. “Petrified ruin: Chernobyl, Pripjat and the death of the city”, pp 370-389, 2010.

⁵ Jeff Goatcher and Viv Brunnsden. “Chernobyl and the Sublime Tourist”, 2011.

⁶ P.R. Stone. “Dark Tourism, Heterotopias and Post-Apocalyptic Places: The Case of Chernobyl.” *L.White & E.Frew (Eds) Dark Tourism and Place Identity*. Melbourne: Routledge, 2013.

⁷ Nicholas Hryhorczuk. “Radioactive Heritage: The Universal Value of Chernobyl as a Dark Heritage Site.” pp. 1047-1055, 2018.

man's greatest technological failure and a reminder of the threat of our increasing reliance on dangerous technology. In this study, significant arguments are offered which could render Chernobyl a potential UNESCO dark heritage site. Thus, this study suggests and supports the potential of Chernobyl be considered a major tourist attraction. Nonetheless, this study doesn't touch upon the role the Chernobyl-related series played as a catalyst for Chernobyl to be declared by the Ukrainian president an official tourist attraction in July 2019 and with which underlying strategies these series contributed in shaping a universal understanding of Chernobyl's radioactive heritage.

The Tourism Gaze⁸ deepens the reader's understanding of how the tourist gaze orders and regulates the relationship with the tourist environment by examining the concept of tourism from a sociological perspective. The particular study, therefore, offers significant insight in the dynamics associated with the construction of tourist experience and ways of seeing. One can claim, however, that it does not delve in detail into the ways the tourist gaze is formed in relation to the influence of social media (Instagram posts).

The subject of this thesis revolves around the role of the interplay of disaster and media-induced tourism in the recent increase in visitations in the city of Chernobyl with regards to the HBO documentary "Chernobyl". The thematic core of the research question is further based on theories related to the concept of tourism gaze. Under this theoretical prism, it aspires to pinpoint the conditions under which the deliberate shift in the city's narrative by the Ukrainian tourism companies and government occurred. By means of a qualitative approach, this research aims to answer the following question:

“How has the representation of the dark heritage site Chernobyl shifted by the Ukrainian government and tourism companies in order to attract its international audience after the launch of the 2019 theme-related mini-series ‘Chernobyl’?”

The sub-questions tied to the main research question, can be listed as follows:

- How is the tourist experience defined and framed by the destination's portrayal on tv-series and social-media (Instagram)?
- To which extent can the shift in the tourism gaze sparked by the "Chernobyl" series trigger Ukrainian governmental debates and decisions related to the access in the exclusion zone?

⁸J. Urry. "The Tourist Gaze." *Sage*, London, 1990.

- Which are the transformation processes Chernobyl currently undergoes to support the media-induced image change?

- How does the government and the tourism companies of Ukraine manipulate this change?

The selection of this topic was largely based on my inclination that further studies on this subject can offer a more solid understanding of tourists' susceptibility to influencing input and of which external parameters contribute in the formation of new destination imagery. More complex aspects of how tourism companies and governmental instruments manipulate the media influence will be evoked and presented. Analyzing branding reconstruction through a comparison-based approach of the representation of Chernobyl before and after the theme-related series, aims to give a deep understanding of what marketing techniques turn a negatively charged and notorious exclusion zone into a location of mainstream appeal. In combination with the recent launch of the theme-related HBO series and the transformation of the tourism landscape of Ukraine it has caused with its popularity, the choice of Chernobyl as the case study was also based on the fact that it provides a relation to current events.

The theoretical framework which will constitute the basis of the thesis will be derived from various branches of tourism studies. The main driving theory will be related to the tourist gaze formation, analyzed by J. Urry, with an emphasis on the series and Instagram role on a destination's representation in the potential visitor's mind, as well as in the place's promotion. Other related underlying concepts will be closely linked to dark tourism, analyzed primarily by Seaton⁹ and Robinson¹⁰, as well as series-induced tourism, explored by S. Beeton¹¹. Other theoretical frameworks that this thesis will engage with include the marketing techniques of advertising and promotion on behalf of tourism companies and the local government for the effective product (referring to Chernobyl tours) distribution, which emerge from the rapid shift in the location's representation, as well as the potential strategy developments to cater for the visitors' needs and expectations.

⁹ P. Robinson, S. Heitmann and P. Dieke. "Research Themes for Tourism." *CAB International*, Wallingford, UK, 2011.

¹⁰ A.V. Seaton. "War and Thanatourism: Waterloo 1815–1914." *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 1, 130-58, 1999.

¹¹ Sue Beeton. "Film-Induced Tourism." 2nd ed., *Channel View Publications*, 2016.

The source material will be selected from official tourist companies' data (Chernobyl Tour Operator Association (CHTOA) which is a nonprofit professional association representing the Chernobyl tour operator industry, / with "Chernobyl Welcome" and "Chernobyl trips" being tourist guide organization members of it) and official museum records (National Museum "Chernobyl" in Kiev), publications in newspapers (e.g. The Guardian) and magazines (print or digital) -from the period Chernobyl started being considered a tourist destination (2011) up to its peak after the launch of the series (2019), as well as from social media (Instagram, Facebook) and travel platforms (Trip Advisor) used either for promotional reasons ("Chernobyling festivals") or telling of tourist experiences.

By introducing a case study this thesis aims to conceptualize the understanding of the topic. The focus of the case study will be laid upon the city of Chernobyl in Ukraine and how the area surrounding Chernobyl nuclear power station has grown in popularity as a "dark tourism" destination with interest peaking after a 2019 HBO series about the tragedy. Moreover, it will delve into the promotional and travel pattern changes the tourist companies underwent, as well as the governmental initiatives aiming at the reconstruction of the touristic landscape with regards to the city of Chernobyl since the launch of the show "Chernobyl." Visiting the actual Chernobyl exclusion zone to conduct research and identify changing patterns in the tourism influx in the form of participant observation or by conducting surveys, is not possible both due to the health risks from the high levels of radiation and due to travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 outbreak. By conducting a qualitative case study, I aim to pinpoint the shift in the tourism behavior and explore the tourist motivation after the HBO series with regards to the city of Chernobyl, as well as in its representations by official tourism and political institutions. This research is primarily of an exploratory nature. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations.

For the focus of this analysis, the selection of case study materials will be based on information related to the branding strategies of tourism companies promoting Chernobyl and governmental decisions made before and after the airing of the 2019 HBO series, as well as on observation of Facebook and Instagram posts under the hashtag #ChernobylHBO and travel platforms such as TripAdvisor.

In chapter one I will analyze in depth the state of the art of the topic and will provide an elaborate listing of the current literature knowledge in the research field related to the research question. The main body of the thesis structure will provide a comparative context between the representation of Chernobyl before and after its depiction in the HBO series which will be strongly related to the concepts and theories mentioned. More specifically, in chapter two, I will mention in detail the methodology I have applied and the steps I have followed to obtain my results. In chapter three, I will offer an accurate description of the results I have acquired and in chapter four I will extensively discuss and interpret them with regards to the research question. Finally, in the conclusion I will reflect on and sum up the main findings of my research and judge whether the research was fruitful, based on whether it revealed a plethora of facts which confirm the initial hypothesis that Chernobyl series played a vital role in the shift of Chernobyl's representation and prioritized it into a mass tourist's must-list.

CHAPTER ONE

To be able to effectively address the research question, one has to first delve into the specific branch of the tourism sector into which Chernobyl tourism falls: dark tourism. Numerous discussions have been ignited with regards to which parameters contribute in sparking fascination towards the dark aspects of a place such as Chernobyl. Although tourist motivations are complex and multi-faceted and their formation can be attributed to a variety of causes, it is generally accepted that media representations of a setting can play a fundamental role in the way its viewers – namely potential visitors to the site- perceive it. In this chapter, an understanding of the dark tourists' urge is attempted, as well as of the impact of television series on tourists' perception of a destination with reference to Chernobyl tourists and the theme-related series.

1.1 Chernobyl visitations under the filter of dark tourism

Until 2011, the Chernobyl Zone, namely the area of approximately 2,600 km² in Ukraine surrounding the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant where radioactive contamination from nuclear explosion is at its highest levels, while public access and inhabitation are restricted, was accessible to only a limited number of outside visitors, primarily scientists, who needed to have a special permission to enter. It was also common that some visitors entered the area illegally. On November 18, 2011, the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine approved a procedure proposed by the Ministry of Emergencies for visiting the exclusion zone and other evacuations zones -determined by the 1992-1993 law "On The Legal Status of the Territory Exposed to the Radioactive Contamination resulting from the ChNPP Accident"- such as the zone of unconditional resettlement, that opened the Exclusion Zone to tourism. The procedure was requiring the individual submission and approval of a written request by each tourist, while strict rules were to be observed during staying within the Exclusion Zone. Many tour companies were established that provided 1 -up to 3- day supervised visits with costs of the group bus tours on 2012, shortly after Ukraine announced that tourists would be allowed to pay short and highly regulated visits to the 30-mile exclusion zone around the exploded reactor, ranging from \$100 to \$300 per person, a price dependent on the amount of people in the group¹². The itinerary of one such tour, which took place in the

¹² Marc, Bennets. "A day trip to Chernobyl." *BBC Travel*, 04 Mar. 2011, < bbc.com/travel/story/20110228-a-day-trip-to-chernobyl > Date accessed: 05.04.2020.

nuclear plant and even in the remains of the number four reactor, contained elements such as lunch (food that is delivered from outside of the Chernobyl zone), passage through the Dytyatky control point and measuring of radiation¹³.

The series "Chernobyl" came to turn the tables in the tourism conditions characterizing the Chernobyl exclusion area up to the chronological point of their broadcast. The Chernobyl series had an audience of eight million viewers by the 13th June 2019, approximately one month after the airing of the series on 6th May 2019, while the series has been rated the highest on IMDB (exceeding even the show "Game of Thrones) with total rating 9.4¹⁴. This popularity inspired a huge wave of tourists wishing to visit the nuclear accident's location. As a result, Chernobyl tours had already become fully booked until January 2020, shortly after the airing of the theme-related series, and the plant was working to double visitor capacity to handle the demand from Europe and beyond.

If one is encountered with the conundrum of what exactly allures tourists to dark places like Chernobyl where tragedy had happened, they will probably face numerous questions. Unveiling dark tourism motivations can be challenging, as "they can emerge as a mixture of veneration and thrill of coming into close contact with death"¹⁵. A framework was set for understanding the complicated essence of tourists' motivations¹⁶. In particular, visiting sites such as graveyards and cemeteries was seen as a means for deep thought and spiritual purposes, while a solemn declaration of events that may have occurred such as crime or disaster, were also viewed as motives. In addition, the need to verify the truth of the tangible existence of a person or place, as well as self-introspection and knowledge acquisition purposes are stated as further motivations. Lastly, wanting to visit sites that have been landmarks of historic events, such as a location where an assassination happened, and interest in sites where disaster has only happened lately are also significant motivators.

¹³ Peter, Walker. "Chernobyl now open to tourists." *The Hindu*, 15 Dec. 2019, <thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Chernobyl-now-open-to-tourists/article15593060.ece> Date accessed: 06.04.2020.

¹⁴ Dominic Patten. "Chernobyl' Explodes 'Game of Thrones' Digital Record For HBO; Miniseries Nears 'True Detective' Viewership." *Deadline*, 12 June 2019, <deadline.com/2019/06/chernobyl-record-breaking-digital-viewership-game-of-thrones-true-detective-craig-mezin-hbo-emmys-1202631705/> Date accessed: 17.04.2020.

¹⁵ J. Ntunda. "Investigating the Challenges of Promoting Dark Tourism in Rwanda." *Anchor Academic Publishing*, Germany, 2014.

¹⁶ P. Robinson, S. Heitmann and P. Dieke. "Research Themes for Tourism." *CAB International*, Wallingford, UK, 2011.

Several authors have worked to this day on pinpointing the factors standing behind dark tourists' motivations. A set of likely reasons such as the "fear of phantoms", the "pursuit for distinction/oddity or an elemental bloodlust" was provided. Additionally, "nostalgia, the celebration of crime or deviance (...) and "dicing with death– that is undertaking journeys, or 'holiday in hell', that challenge tourists or heightens their sense of mortality" were also identified¹⁷. Personal experiences have been described while being a dark tourist and it has been often stated that "it was not the sadness that emerged from visiting something extremely moving but the turmoil of not knowing how to react that made this an attractive/interesting experience"¹⁸. However, "all categories relate to exact places, attractions and activities and are primarily descriptive"¹⁹.

Curiosity and the innate magnetism towards death, have indeed become core drivers for dark tourism. It is often stated that this argument, due to its implication that some people are enticed by horror, might appear less acceptable. The fact that people retrieve pleasure by tragedy of others may appear loathsome. Nevertheless, we would be mistaken to consider horror tourism as a new occurrence. If one considers fights between gladiators in ancient Rome, Madame Tussaud's 'chamber of horror' or even simple ghost rides for children at amusement parks, will readily realize that they are all instances of normalized horror entertainment. This link between representations of brutality and pleasure in tourism, may be an instance of a more socially acceptable attraction to the tragic presented.

¹⁷ G.M.S Dann. "The Dark Side of Tourism." *CIRET-International Center for Research and Studies in Tourism*, 1998.

¹⁸ E. Willis. "Theatrically, dark tourism and ethical spectatorship." *Palgrave Macmillan*, New York, 2014.

¹⁹ P.R. Stone. "Consuming Dark Tourism: a call for research." *Review of Tourism Research (eRTR)*, Vol.3, No.5, 2005.

The deliberate extraction of feelings of captivation and fear by wearisome contact with tragedy not only is a predominant output of numerous tourist attractions, but it is also dominant in many literary works, folktales, art and lately present in film and television screenings. This motivation, indeed, is strongly affected by the media that transfers suffering directly into our living rooms. Media becomes a modern breeding ground for the public's appeal towards violence that gradually increases its longing towards the macabre. Up to nowadays the drivers for being involved in dark tourism "vary from a simple morbid curiosity or a malicious indulgence in another person's suffering, through *schadenfreude*²⁰, to a collective sense of identity or survival 'in the face of violent disruptions of collective life routines'²¹. People, and thus tourists, are attracted to the atypical, unknown and peculiar, which leads to the conclusion that at least part of the curiosity for dark tourism attractions comes from the same motivations that lead people to recall the sublime. The astonishment that accompanies it satisfies curiosity, which although not uncommon for the tourist, is not experienced usually because of restrictions in their everyday life. "Curiosity comes to show at events such as a car accident or scenes of natural disasters, where some might consider it inappropriate to stop and stare"²². It is also often stated that no one has ever come back from the afterlife state to share with the living what death is like²³. For these reasons, the wish to come in contact with the place where death has happened can be correlated the desire to familiarize and gain knowledge over the unknown. Since death is the inevitable fate of every living individual and nobody is aware of what will happen afterwards, every situation that suggests death arises horror and fear. The visitation of dark sites acts as the tourists' stepping stone to getting an idea of what death feels like.

At this point, it is crucial that the relation of dark tourism with thanatourism is defined. Dark tourism tends to be used as an umbrella term for any form of tourism that is somehow related to death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy or crime. As originally formulated, it is a phenomenon rooted in the circumstances of the late twentieth century.

²⁰ J. J. Lennon & A.V Seaton. "Thanatourism in the early 21st century: moral panics, ulterior motives and alterior desires." *New Horizons in Tourism: Strange Experiences and Stranger Practices in T. V. Singh (Ed.)*, pp. 63-82, 2004.

²¹ P.R. Stone. "A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and Macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions." Vol.54, No.2, 2006.

²² G.J. Ashworth. "Tourism and the heritage of atrocity: Managing the heritage of South African apartheid for entertainment." *New horizons in tourism: Strange experiences and stranger practices by T.V. Singh*, CAB International, Wallingford, pp.85-109, 2004.

²³ P. Robinson, S. Heitmann and P. Dieke. "Research Themes for Tourism." *CAB International*, Wallingford, UK, 2011.

Thanatourism is a more specific concept and is about long-standing practices of travel motivated by a specific desire for an encounter with death. This review treats dark tourism and thanatourism as “distinct, but parallel (and closely-related) ways of considering the relationship between tourism/tourists and places of death or suffering. Since the two concepts are so closely linked, it is not possible to review one without also considering the other”²⁴. Although the terms thanatourism and dark tourism are often used interchangeably, the connections between thanatourism and the religious sacred to the beginning of secular sacred, and between dark tourism and the secular sacred have been solidified by many authors^{25,26}.

It has been further suggested that thanatourism is the “travel dimension of thanatopsis”, established as “travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death”^{27,28}. It has been also indicated that thanatourism is a paradox of human behavior, which is defined by the motivations of tourists^{27,28}. Additionally, it is claimed that a ‘continuum of intensity’ exists according to the different reasons for seeking out a site and the degree to which the fascination of the tourists in death is general or related to an individual²⁷. Although it has been acknowledged that not in all cases death would be the only motivation for visiting such sites, it is strictly claimed that all of the previously mentioned activities are part of thanatourism and tourists are essentially compelled by the eagerness to confront death²⁶.

However, it is remarkable that while dark tourism theory suggests that the primary motivation for tourists visiting dark tourism sites is to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, further empirical evidence reveals that the motivations are much more complex. In more detail, visitors to Auschwitz, which is considered to be the epitome of European dark heritage sites, were surveyed, with regards to the motivations behind their visit²⁹.

²⁴ Duncan, Light. “Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism.” *Tourism Management*, Volume 61, pp. 275-301, 2017.

²⁵ P.R. Stone. “A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and Macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions.” Vol.54, No.2, 2006.

²⁶ A.V. Seaton. “War and Thanatourism: Waterloo 1815–1914.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 1, 130-58, 1999.

²⁷ P.R Stone and R. Sharpley “Consuming Dark Tourism: a thanatological perspective.” *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol.35, No.2, pp.574–595, 2008.

²⁸ A. V. Seaton. “Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2, pp.234–244, 1996.

²⁹ A. Biran, Y. Poria., and G. Oren. “Sought Experiences at Dark Heritage Sites.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 38(3), pp. 820–841, 2011.

Surprisingly, an “interest in death” was ranked as the least important reason for their visit. Tourists’ motives were abundant and included “a desire to learn and understand the history presented, a sense of ‘see it to believe it,’ and interest in having an emotional heritage experience.” The findings suggest that visits to dark tourism sites, whose history is explicitly linked and exhibited in the region’s present situation, should be viewed more through the lens of heritage experience than through thanatourism. Dark tourism is often correlated with heritage tourism as numerous attractions, characterized as a part of the dark tourism phenomenon, originated several years or decades ago. For that reason, they often carry a significant historical value which greatly characterizes them apart from just being well known for a tragic event per se. Since heritage tourism comes also with the term ‘roots’ tourism, suggesting that tourists are in a search for their past in an effort to comprehend their identity and their history. This has been seen as quest for understanding and self-identity and it has been claimed that “since much history has been unpleasant for many, it is not surprising that such a search almost inescapably reveals past atrocity with which the searcher can identify”³⁰. The triggers for this self-introspection may have a spiritual and reflective essence, as a spiritual pilgrimage to honor those who the visitor feels attached to.

Dark tourism becomes a means for contemporary tourists to satisfy their zeal for authentic travel experiences. Dark tourist sites are intertwined with heritage and involve authentic disaster, which makes them impossible to fabricate. Furthermore, the emotional experience for tourists visiting such sites is a trigger for introspection and self-discovery. Since motivations also cover an emotional spectrum, there are four primary emotions that are part of “the dark tourist’s psychological state”³¹, when visiting dark attractions or engaging in dark activities. The sense of insecurity, sense of gratitude, feelings of humility and feelings of superiority comprise this emotional facet. “By experiencing these emotional responses, the traveler has become a searcher. This search includes finding new emotional aspects of oneself, willingness to know different cultures and to get to know an area’s or country’s psychological aura, fauna and flora”³².

³⁰ G.J. Ashworth. “Tourism and the heritage of atrocity: Managing the heritage of South African apartheid for entertainment.” *New horizons in tourism: Strange experiences and stranger practices* by T.V. Singh, CAB International, Wallingford, 2004, pp.85-109, 2004.

³¹ P.E. Tarlow. “Dark Tourism: the appealing ‘dark’ side of tourism and more.” *M.Novelli (ed) Niche Tourism – Contemporary Issues, Trends and Cases*, Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 47-58, 2005.

³² T. Niemella. “Motivation Factors in Dark Tourism. Case: House of Terror.” Bachelor thesis, Lahti University of Applied Sciences, 2010, <bartleby.com/essay/Motivation-Factors-in-Dark-Tourism-F3VWKCYEKRYZS> Accessed 23.02.2020.

This can be described as “a pilgrimage, search for identity, quest of knowledge, and a sense of social responsibility (“Lest we forget,” “Never again”)”³³. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the motives behind the visitations of dark attractions are linked to a feeling of socio-cultural solidarity. Most authors have, as a result, started to argue wider “socio-cultural, emotional and psychological concerns within dark tourism consumption”³⁴.

Considering the facets of the phenomenon of dark tourism consumption, one can rightly argue that studies must be continued and existing work should be substantially extended. Hardly can a single theory enclose all individual travel motivations. This, along with the miscellaneous nature of tourism behavior and the presumption that multiple motivations can be experienced simultaneously, makes it a challenging area to investigate. Evidently though, this thesis is going to be an attempt to offer an outlook to further shed light on tourists’ reasons behind dark tourism, which will contribute to answering the fundamental question of why tourists are drawn to visiting and engaging in dark attractions, places and activities with reference to the city of Chernobyl.

1.2 Series-Induced Chernobyl

Under this scope, since it is generally accepted that, in the case of Chernobyl tourists’ dark motivation has been drastically triggered through the city’s projection in the documentary series, it becomes vital that one also pinpoints the impact of television series on tourists’ perception. Therefore, the fact that the launch of the Chernobyl-related documentary was a decisive part in the transformation of Chernobyl’s representation, renders the examination of related underlying concepts, such as the tourist gaze, essential.

Tourism has been characterized as “a predominately visual practice”³⁵. Tourism is a “way of seeing” where business determines visual experiences and tourists are the ones who consume them visually with their gazes being categorized and systematized. Thus, the tourist gaze in its essence is a matter of socially and technologically patterned and learned “ways of seeing.” “Different kinds of gazes are authorized by various discourses.

³³ G.J. Ashworth. “Tourism and the heritage of atrocity: Managing the heritage of South African apartheid for entertainment.” *New horizons in tourism: Strange experiences and stranger practices* by T.V. Singh, 2004, CAB International, Wallingford, 2004, pp.85-109.

³⁴ P.R Stone. “Consuming Dark Tourism: a call for research.” *Review of Tourism Research (eRTR)*, Vol.3, No.5, 2005.

³⁵ J. Urry. “The Tourist Gaze.” *Sage*, London, 1990.

These different discourses include health, group solidarity, pleasure and play, heritage and memory, education, and nation³⁶. “While not authorized by a single knowledge-generating institution (like the gaze of the medic) the varied gazes of tourists are discursively organized by many professionals over time: romantic poets and painters, photographers, writers, bloggers, guides, local councils, experts in the “heritage industry,” travel agents, hotel owners, designers, tour operators, TV travel programs, Hollywood, the photography industry, tourism development, architects, planners, tourism academics, and so forth³⁷. A “vicious hermeneutic circle³⁸ has been used to capture this discursive framing or choreographed nature of gazing³⁹. Therefore, it becomes obvious that, tourists gaze upon places that they have already consumed in image form. “Gazing is about consuming and photographing signs or markers and tourists are framed and fixed rather than framing and exploring³⁷.”

As it has been explained in scholarly literature, postmodernism also undermines the distinction between “representations” and “reality.” We are said to “live in an image culture where representations are everywhere and often more exciting than reality. What we increasingly consume are signs or representations³⁷. It has been argued that the tourist gaze, even in the past, prefigures postmodernism “because of its particular fusion of the visual, the aesthetic, the themed, the commercial and the popular³⁶. “The gaze is not least postmodern because it implies that tourists are folded into a world of texts, images, and representational technologies when gazing upon landscapes. It has been further stated that much of what is appreciated is not directly experienced reality but representations, particularly through the medium of photography³⁷. “What people ‘gaze upon’ are ideal representations of the view in question they internalize from various media³⁶. The notion of the tourist gaze captures both the consumption of places through mobile images and the actual travel to and embodied appreciation of specific places. “The tourist gaze is always bound up with the pleasure of gazing upon places that have been marked as extraordinary³⁷. Indeed, tourists often travel to places that are made “special” through the media. Picturing places through television films or television series, has created a new development in place imaging through television and has ultimately affected tourist choices.

³⁶ J. Urry. “The Tourist Gaze.” *Sage*, London, 1990.

³⁷ J. Larsen., J. Urry. “Tourism Gaze 3.0”, *SAGE Publications*, 2011.

³⁸ J. Urry. “The Tourism Gaze”, *SAGE Publications*, 2002.

³⁹ P. Osborne. “Travelling Light. Photography, Travel and Visual Culture.” *Manchester University Press*, Manchester, 2000.

The tourist offices in Kiev, namely the Chernobyl Tour Agency, seems to be well aware of that since most of the organized tours are labelled as “HBO series tour” including routes in the places appearing in the Chernobyl documentary. The following list shows the most frequently-appeared locations in the mini-series “Chernobyl”⁴⁰. Consequently, these are the locations that are most exploited as a tourist attraction.

- *The Checkpoint Dityatki*: most of the organized tours start from this location. The tour includes a route through the forest where the dosimeter normally starts to detecting various levels of radiation.

- *Ghost-city Pripyat*: the main setting of the series.

- *Fire station in Pripjat*: the place where Leonid Telyatnikov, the head of the fire department at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, led the team of firefighters to the fire at reactor number 4 which became the Chernobyl disaster.

- *Firefighters’ dormitory ChNPP. Lyudmila and Vasily Ignatenko*: visiting inside their home. One can view old photographs and books, as well as other personal belongings scattered on the floor after the explosion took place.

- *Death Bridge*: the bridge where people stood and viewed the accident (featured on the 1st episode of the series). The reactor is normally visible, unless dense foliage of the trees blocks the view.

- *Pripjat. The medical unit №126*: the hospital that received the first victims of the explosion.

- *Hotel “Polesie”*: its bar is feature in the series, where the main actor made an official announcement that “everything is fine”.

- *Pripjat hospital - Institute of Hydrobiology in Kyiv*: its façade is repetitively featured in the series.

- *Moscow of ‘80s years - Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street*: the scene in Moscow of March 1987 was filmed in this street.

- *Scientific Library of Moscow State University - Vernadsky library*: shots of administrative nature used this building as a backdrop.

- *Bus station in Pripjat*: from here the workers were returning to their homes.

⁴⁰ Anton, Tararenko. “Chernobyl. Exclusive tour of the HBO filming locations.” *Youtube*. uploaded by Visit Kyiv, 05 July 2019. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OYxCwpcfXtI&t=605s> consulted on 19.04.2020.

- *Secret bunker ChNPP*: the shelter of Chernobyl, the safest place where radiation could not reach. The secret bunker where only the government authorities knew about and where the managers of the station discussed their plan of action.

- *Dyatlov's apartment No39*: the place where Anatoli Dyatlov lived.

- *Amusement park Pripyat*: shots of the famous amusement park are featured often in the series.

- *ChNPP Technique*: The place where the machine tried to clean graffite and radioactive residues from the rooftop.

Based on the above, it is important to note that film location tourists may also visit locations even if those simply imitated/ were visual representations of the authentic location for the sake of the film or television series. For instance, while many scenes of the Chernobyl series supposedly take place in Moscow, all of the actual scenes were shot in Kiev. Nevertheless, the series made the people flock not to Moscow, but to the Bogdan Khmel'nitsky Street that was used as a representation of Moscow. It becomes obvious that, for many tourists, knowing that a region or landscape has been the filming location of certain a film/TV series is simply part of the pleasure of travelling through that area. However, it is worth-noting that not all scenes of the Chernobyl series took place in Ukraine. In reality, many scenes were captured in various places in Lithuania and mostly in the capital Vilnius, as sixty out of the eighty-eight days were spent there in an effort to recreate the Soviet era ambience. Tours inspired by the Chernobyl series also take place in Fabijoniskes, a district of Vilnius in Lithuania where scenes set in the town of Pripyat, which housed Chernobyl workers and later fell within the exclusion zone, were filmed. In 1987 a second reactor that was very similar in constructive terms to the reactor 4 in Chernobyl, was set in operation in the nuclear power plant in Lithuania. This reactor is being slowly dismantled and its decommission is expected to be complete by 2038. Its core remains highly radioactive and stands 7 meters below tourists' feet, shielded by protective layers. For these reasons, it was easily determined that an ideal choice for shooting the series would be the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (INPP). More specifically, some of the most important locations featuring the HBO series were⁴¹:

⁴¹ "Vilnius: Where the Chernobyl HBO Miniseries Came to Life." *The Official Development Agency of the City of Vilnius*, < govilnius.lt/visit-vilnius/routes/vilnius-where-the-chernobyl-hbo-miniseries-came-to-life> Date accessed: 20.06.2020

- *The Fabijoniškės district in Vilnius* was used for the recreation of the notorious Pripyat. Fabijoniškės in terms of symmetry, architecture and age (was built around the same period the accident occurred) was decided that serves as an accurate image of Pripyat.

- *The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights* was used to represent the KGB prison. This building, which is one of the most popular museums in Lithuania, was a real KGB prison with KGB cells in it still being preserved. For that reason, the original pieces of prison furniture were included in the shooting of the series.

- *The Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Faculty of Architecture* served as the backdrop for the Courtroom. The 18th-century building with the style of its halls being strongly influenced by the Soviet era. As it is known, after World War II, it was turned into a part of the university's buildings. In reality the trial in Chernobyl took place in a school hall.

- *The former government guesthouse* located in the district of Žvėrynas was used as the Pripyat hotel. This building was used to host high-class Soviet officials who visited Lithuania. Even the US President resident Richard Nixon stayed there during his visit to Lithuania.

- *The former cultural and sports center of the Ministry of the Interior* was used as a representative of the Pripyat hotel restaurant. This center was built in 1982 and is highly characterized by Soviet architecture, as well as contains original furniture and the wall embellishments which add to the cinematographic atmosphere.

Since summer 2019, groups of foreign visitors could tour the Ignalina Power Plant. With this piece of information in mind, one also comes to the realization that in an opposite, than what was mentioned a few lines above, strain of thinking, some film location tourists opt for travelling to locations that are exclusively the authentic location where the event depicted actually happened, even if these locations are represented in the series by a different location. This can indeed be confirmed by the fact that although there was also a sharp rise in tourist numbers in the series-setting in Vilnius⁴² (4,025 people visited the Ignalina plant in 2019 according to Natalija Survila-Glebova, head of communications at INPP in comparison to in 2018), this cannot exceed the rise in numbers in Chernobyl and Pripyat after the airing of the Chernobyl series, as it will be shown in the next chapters.

⁴² Madeline, Roache. "HBO's Chernobyl Has Led to a Surge in Tourism for This Forgotten Nuclear Town." *Time*, 27 Dec. 2019, <time.com/5754581/visaginas-nuclear-town-chernobyl/> Accessed on 27.04.2020.

This tendency can also be attributed to the fact that the average tourist whose decision to travel to a specific location has been influenced by its projection in a tv series, is not often aware of the actual filming locations where the series was shot.

The interplay between the influence of film (in our case television series) as a motivational and image-making tool and the appeal of tourism destinations has been extensively analyzed in the course of the last decades. In the light of this relationship, an emphasis has to be given on the phenomenon of film-induced tourism, so as to effectively bring into the surface the reasons for the rapid shift in Chernobyl's appeal among the contemporary tourism audience after the launch of the theme-related documentary.

Movies are one of the most important factors of the contemporary popular culture and admittedly have an important influence on the members of a society. As many pieces of tourism literature enlighten us, destination image can extremely affect tourist destination choice. It has been argued that "the more favorable the image of the destination, the more increased the awareness of the host city and the greater the likelihood of being selected as a destination choice"⁴³. Film can extensively and explicitly present certain aspects of a place such as its flora and fauna, its cultural characteristics and the mentality of the people comprising it, which inevitably result in the predisposition of the viewers' attitudes towards this place. Therefore, movies by visually placing the product take the role of an important communication tool. Destination placement as a product into the movies can "help destinations to create a positive image, to be placed as differentiated through the competitors and create an interest for a long-running time"⁴⁴. As previous research⁴⁵ has shown, those who are exposed to the film develop a more positive destination image towards destinations depicted through films than those who are not exposed to films. As it has been rightly argued, television series are highly more influential since they can consistently stress the appeal of the destination that develops top-of the mind awareness. In this way, by familiarizing the audience with the destination placed as a product, movies inspire and persuade the potential market to travel to those destinations which are shown in movies. Such a case may lead to the creation of a destination brand.

⁴³ P. Nistoreanu P. and C. Tuclea. "How film and television programs can promote tourism and increase the competitiveness of tourist destinations." *Cactus Tourism Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 2/2011, pp. 25-30, 2011.

⁴⁴ I.A Saltik. "Film-induced tourism: Benefits and challenges for destination marketing." *European Journal of Tourism Research* 4(1):44-54, 2011.

⁴⁵ H. Kim., & S.L Richardson. "Motion picture impacts on destination images." *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30(1), pp: 216-23, 2003.

Opposed to the traditional means of advertisement, the screening of a destination creates a prospect for destinations to attract more visitors who have a favorable destination image established in their mind with the help of implicit marketing. For instance, it has been claimed that “serving a movie map in a screened destination leads to an increase in the number of visitors and their spending patterns”⁴⁶.

Even if it is intricate to determine exactly how film-induced tourism movement has influenced the circulation of tourism demand, it becomes hard to deny that “film-induced tourism has an important role in destination marketing by creating an experience for people even prior to their own experience or presence within the destination”⁴⁷. Nowadays, marketers have noticed and taken advantage of the major impact of film-induced tourism on experiential marketing while at the same time it becomes essential that the traditional means of marketing be broadened and varied. More specifically, “experiential marketing focuses on customer experience more than the benefit sought from the product consumption and its three modules (sensual, emotional and ideational) could be achieved easily through the films while marketing destinations”⁴⁸.

As far as the motivators for film location tourists are concerned, those are linked to the “three factors of ‘place’ (location, attributes, landscapes, scenery), ‘personality’ (cast, characters, celebrity) and ‘performance’ (plot, theme, genre)”⁵⁰. According to scholars, tourism motivation can be further analyzed through a hissocial-psychological model, which is comprised of two motivational dimensions, those of ‘escaping’ and ‘seeking’, with both affecting the tourist at the same time⁵¹. Moreover, “that one’s travel behavior is influenced by the desire to ‘escape’ from his personal routine or interpersonal environment”, meaning that this aspect is referent to an individual that wishes to leave their personal issues behind⁵². On the other hand, ‘seeking’ honors the personal or interpersonal experiences and is comprised of learning, exploring and relaxing, with social interaction being the external prize.

⁴⁶ A.C. Pratt. “Material geographies of filmmaking and the rural.” *Cinematic Countrysides*, Fish, R. ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

⁴⁷ J. Connell. “What’s the Story in Balamory?” *The Impacts of a Children’s TV Programme on Small Tourism Enterprises on the Isle of Mull*. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 13(3), Scotland pp. 228-255, 2005.

⁴⁸ J. Pine, J. B. II and J. Gilmore. "The Experience Economy." *MA: Harvard Business School Press*, Cambridge, 1999.

⁵⁰ N. Macionis. "Understanding the film-induced tourist." *Harper Collins*, Melbourne, 2004.

⁵¹ S.E Iso-Ahola. “Toward a Social Psychological Theory of Tourism Motivation: A Rejoinder.” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9: 256-262, 1982.

⁵² S.E Iso-Ahola. “Towards a Social Psychology of Recreational Travel.” *Leisure Studies*, 2: 45-56, 1983.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Case Study: Chernobyl, Ukraine

The Chernobyl disaster caused by the nuclear accident that occurred on Saturday 26 April 1986, at the No. 4 reactor in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, near the city of Pripyat is considered to be the worst nuclear disaster that has ever happened. The Chernobyl accident due to which the Exclusion Zone emerged and surrounds the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, has been inevitably intertwined with the concepts of "radiation" and "death". The introduction of Chernobyl as a case study in this thesis serves the goal of efficiently conceptualizing the understanding of the topic, namely investigating the research question of what forces interplayed and resulted in a notorious "dark tourism" destination having public interest peaking after a 2019 HBO series about the tragedy.

More specifically, the goal was to systematically pinpoint the role of the interplay of disaster and media-induced tourism in the recent increase in visitations in the city of Chernobyl with regards to the HBO documentary "Chernobyl", as well as explore the conditions under which the deliberate shift in the city's narrative by the Ukrainian tourism companies and government occurred. Under this scope, a cause-and-effect relationship between media and tourism was aspired to be established.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

2.2.1 The Research method

The overall methodological approach that was followed to achieve the above stated goals was mainly based on qualitative data, with some quantitative data also adding to the general research. A collection of primary data based on personal research occurred, while the use of secondary data collected by scholars was also necessary. For the purpose of answering the research question, no experimental data was gathered, since I neither controlled nor manipulated any extraneous variables, yet the data collected were of descriptive nature as they were solely based on personal observations with no personal intervention or alteration of existing parameters.

The research method that has been used can be characterized as qualitative, since my goal was to produce contextual and generalized, real-world knowledge about the attitudes and behavioral tendencies of a specific group of people, namely tourists visiting the city of Chernobyl. With this type of research this paper aspires to disclose the underlying triggers of tourist behavior and in the shifts in the tourism gaze sparked by the “Chernobyl” series, as well as explore changes in the representations of the city by official tourism and political institutions. Moreover, it will delve into the promotional and travel pattern changes the tourist companies underwent, as well as the governmental initiatives aiming at the reconstruction of the touristic landscape with regards to the city of Chernobyl since the launch of the show "Chernobyl. The nature of this research is primarily exploratory, as it is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. Since admittedly this methodology can be characterized as interpretive and extensively contains the subjective element, I recognize that it becomes highly essential to often reflect on my viewpoint as researcher, as well as take into consideration how my perception might have affected the results and the conclusions made.

For the focus of this analysis, the selection of case study materials will be based on information retrieved by the comparative study of branding strategies of tourism companies promoting Chernobyl and governmental decisions made before and after the airing of the 2019 HBO series with regards to the tourist aspect in the city of Chernobyl. To further unveil and analyze the different motivational tourist aspects, the observation of Instagram posts, posted either by visitors, tourism operators or fans of the tv series, under the hashtag #ChernobylHBO which has inspired a wave of tourism to the Zone of Exclusion, has been found to be one of the most adequate methods that can be followed. It can be also said that the observation was non-participant, since as the researcher conducting it, I avoided any direct contact with the group of tourists, the motivations of whom I have been studying. In addition, since the observation I conducted was based on Instagram posts and article publications which are available and accessible to anyone, one can argue that the observation can be easily replicated by other researchers, thus its reliability rates can be readily tested.

Furthermore, the data obtained from the observation of this research are easy and fast to analyze as they are numerical, something which renders this observation method much less time-consuming. Another added value of the specific research method is undoubtedly that it is relatively quick to conduct, meaning that a lot of observations can take place within a short timeframe. This equals to the fact that a large sample can be obtained resulting in the findings being representative, therefore having the ability to be effectively generalized and applied to a large population. It is also important to clear out that visiting the actual Chernobyl exclusion zone to conduct research and identify changing patterns in the tourism influx in the form of participant observation or by conducting surveys, was not possible both due to the health risks from the high levels of radiation and due to travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

2.2.2 The Data Collection

The source material was selected from a number of various sources and was solely based on data from the period Chernobyl started being considered a tourist destination (2011) up to its peak after the launch of the Chernobyl series (2019-). Several numeric data were largely collected from official tourist companies which are located in Chernobyl, Ukraine such as: “Chernobyl Tour Operator Association (CHTOA)”, with “Chernobyl Welcome” and “Chernobyl trips” being tourist guide organization members of it.

In addition, a large sample of data was gathered from official museum records, such as from the National Museum “Chernobyl” in Kiev. The official website page of the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management also worked as an extensive source of information, as multiple data were retrieved from related posts, especially from publications made between 2018 and early 2020.

Another essential data source were publications in newspapers and international news organizations, namely articles in the newspaper “The Guardian” and magazines (which were found in digital form) as well as related news from Reuters and CNBC, which shed light onto the changes that occurred in the Ukrainian political landscape, which were triggered to a great extent by the Chernobyl series. Further data was also collected from posts and comments retrieved from social media platforms, mainly Instagram and Facebook, which were posted either for promotional reasons (such as the event “Chernobyling festivals” or the Facebook page of the Chernobyl Explorer agency called

“Chernobyl Urbex Tour” or posts on the Instagram accounts “@Chernobylexclusivetours/ @planetchernobyl”/ @chernobylinsider/ @chernobyltour) or were telling of tourist experiences and depicted the motivations of tourists behind their visitation. Other data were retrieved from observation of reviews on travel platforms such as the Trip Advisor or Google Reviews.

2.2.3 The implementation

|Observation of the political/ social changes in the site’s identity|

A close observation of the governmental decisions made for Chernobyl Exclusion Zone took place, with a focus on the analysis of the pre- and post-series political situation, in order to pinpoint the contrast in the decisions generated by the Chernobyl series. For that reason, a careful selection of related articles and interviews took place and a categorization of information based on chronological order was made.

Under the same scope, an analysis of events/ incidents that further fostered the transformation of the representation of Chernobyl, without being characterized by the political element, took place. These events encompass the social identity of the Chernobyl site and represent its changing and dynamic nature after the broadcast of the Chernobyl series.

|Social Media and Travel Platform Observation|

Instagram:

Instagram observation was based on the systematic selection of a sample of 28.3k posts under the hashtag #chernobylhbo made by tourists willing to share their experiences in Chernobyl with a starting chronological point the airing of the Chernobyl series (May 2019) until today (August 2020). The ultimate goal of this observation is delving into the visitors’ motivations behind their visitation to Chernobyl and the extent to which their trip was prompted by the Chernobyl series. The observation also concerns posts made by tourist

agencies related to the promotion of Chernobyl with a reference to the Chernobyl series as a means of appeal. As far as tourists as concerned, the vast majority of the visitors have visited the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone or places related to the series (various

locations, with the top-visited locations added above posts being the” city Pripyat/Pripyat ghost town”, the “Nuclear power plant”, “Kyiv Ukraine”, “Vilnius”, “Reactor 4”, the “Duga Radar System” and the “Café Pripyat”) with a minority expressing its wish to do so in the near future. They are either natives (Ukrainians) or of different nationalities (American, French, Norwegian, Polish, German), as well as of different age groups (20-60+ years old, yet mostly millennials). These diverse attributes add a variety in the observation process and in the obtained results, since those overarch a broad set of representative groups and offer the advantage that a wide spectrum of opinions is analyzed. As far as the tourist agencies are concerned, they all organize tours in the Exclusion Zone and are mostly located in Kiev, with only two being based in the United Kingdom and France.

Facebook:

The Facebook page of the Chernobyl Explorer agency called “Chernobyl Urbex Tour” and the one of “Chernobyl welcome” agency called “Chernobylwel” were observed and analyzed. An emphasis was given on both the direct and implicit promotional techniques employed on every post in an effort to attract visitors to the site.

Trip Advisor and Google Reviews:

The reviews resulting from the search “Chernobyl visit” on Trip advisor were observed and discussed in a comparative analysis of the results given in 2018 and 2019 (before and after the series).

In addition, a close comparative observation in the rates of the Chernobyl National Museum in Kiev before and after the Chernobyl series took place on Trip Advisor and Google Reviews, in order to effectively pinpoint any increase in the numbers of Chernobyl atomic tourists the series might have caused.

Based on the acquired information, a two-axes graph was created to represent the progress in tourist numbers before and after the Chernobyl series. A large number of sources collected was written in the English language, however, most information gathered (pages of Ukrainian tourism companies, articles of the SAUZM, many posts on social media) was initially in Ukrainian. For that reason, I had to use translating online tools for my better understanding. Despite the language barrier, focusing on Ukrainian- written sources was preferable, since, undoubtedly, they enhance the element of authenticity and offer more bluntly the Ukrainian perspective and energy on the topic of Chernobyl.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

3.1 Presentation of findings

3.1.1 Governmental decisions made for Chernobyl Exclusion Zone

Pre-series political situation

As it is shown in the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management website, efforts for the simplification of the process of visiting the Exclusion Zone, and in particular the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, were made on the condition that visitors are strictly observing the rules of radiation safety (they must not, for example pick mushrooms, as they concentrate radionuclides, or risk absorb the contaminants by eating or smoking outdoors) and the whole visit is conducted in accordance with the Law of Ukraine «On the Use of Nuclear Energy and Radiation Safety», in other words, for the purpose of staying safe at the site, all visitors were provided with personal protective equipment and underwent obligatory dosimetric examination. According to the Chornobyl NPP, more than one hundred and fifty people had visited the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant under the simplified procedures in April 2018, an amount comprised of both Ukrainian citizens and foreigners. All visitors had the chance to view how the process of decommissioning and metamorphosis of the Shelter Object into an environmentally safe system occurs, as well as walk through the «golden» corridor (the one connecting all of the power stations and was used to lead to the fourth reactor), engage with numerous technological principles, see the integrated automated control panels (with which scientists monitored the reactor core), security systems, as well as other objects of the territory. The general principle was that the visitors submit their applications on the website of the ChNPP and on an arranged day get familiarized with the project. In the long-term future it was anticipated that the expansion of the schedule of routes would take place, by including the route in the central hall of one of the power units, in the block control panel of reactor No. 4 (inside the «Sarcophagus») and access

to space below the arch of a New Safe Confinement. It had been reported from ChNPP experts that in less than one month since the launch of the system of automatic filing of applications on the Exclusion Zone site, applications of more than one hundred international visitors had been submitted for the ChNPP basic route. The numbers were considered very positive if one bears into consideration the fact that the limit for visitors per day was fifteen people and for order only three working days per week were available⁵³.

In more detail, as far as the expansion of the list of routes is concerned, new routes had been developed for the visitors of the Exclusion Zone in accordance to the visitors' desires, even if as history showed, the required actions for their opening were accelerated and eventually taken after the airing of the Chernobyl series, as we will notice further on. In particular, during the fall 2018 the Exclusion Zone four new routes appeared in places which have become landmarks such as locations where historical monuments were maintained, the territory where archaeological excavations in Chernobyl took place and sites of the Chernobyl Radiation and Ecological Biosphere Reserve:

- Route No.12 "Checkpoint Dytiatky – Bychky – Zamoshnia" crossed five villages, where the traditional Polish houses and industrial buildings of the 19th century were retained. The route included the viewing of the active Chernobyl Desert St. Nicholas Monastery, the remains of the old believers' churches and cemeteries (village of Zamoshnia and Bychky village), a place of ancient production of iron from the marsh ore (village Rudnia – Veresnya), as well as be exposed to the natural scenery of Chernobyl Reserve.

- Route No.13 "ChNPP – Yaniv Station – Novoshepelychi-Lubianka" was designed for visitors to explore a well-known abandoned train on the borders of the Yaniv station, as well as a ritual cross-figure on the sideroad and a historic pine-tree in the shape of a trident, which was carried from the Rudyi Forest. It is also doable that the visitors can go to the mansion of the last inhabitant of the 10-kilometer zone of Sava Obrazhei and other log buildings constructed in the middle of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

- Route No.14 "Chornobyl – the left bank of the Prypiat River – Ladyzhychi – Teremtsi" was designed to serve a more river related experience. Visitors will see the former ferry crossing through the Prypiat river, the place where the River Brahinka flows into the

⁵³ "The first 150 people have already used the simplified procedure for visiting the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant." *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 17 Apr 2018 </dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/the-first-150-people-have-already-used-the-simplified-procedure-for-visiting-the-chornobyl-nuclear-power-plant.html> Accessed 17 June 2020.

Prypiat, the borders of the Dnipro River and Chernobyl, and the traditional Polissian farm buildings and barns.

- Route No.15 narrates the Chernobyl of ten to eighteenth centuries, the Chernobyl castle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the ancient cemetery and the Dominican monastery of the seventeenth century. Visitors will also have the opportunity to see the historical downward slopes of Chernobyl, which end up to Podil, and the territory of archaeological excavations⁵⁴.

Because of the growing demand from visitors, the provision of quality services for anyone deciding to visit Chernobyl was set high in the priority list of the Agency shortly before the Chernobyl series aired. On September 2018 the new system of Chernobyl E-tickets for tourist visiting Chernobyl Zone was established. The Chernobyl Electronic Ticket System, was said to admittedly enhance the two-way communication with visitors through the creation of visiting programs, as well as seal the efficiency and transparency of the procedures revolving around the application for visiting the exclusion zone and the zone of unconditional (mandatory) resettlement. It was also considered a guarantee for the provision of radiation safety while staying in the site. According to Andrii Naumov, Director of the State Enterprise «Center for Information and Technical Support», thanks to the automatic nature characterizing the processes of the new ticket system, the procedure of filing applications for the purpose of visiting the Exclusion Zone was accelerated and the timeframes for their processing were shortened. A further ecological advantage of such processes was the fact that the introduction of electronic tickets was estimated to save more than four hundred thousand sheets of paper per year.

All Electronic Ticket checkpoints of the Exclusion Zone were equipped with this innovative operation and was planned that, in the upcoming months, at the checkpoint «Dyiatky» an Information Center of the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management would be established, whose work would be concentrated at the quality of information and technical support for the visitors of the Exclusion Zone⁵⁵.

Sustained efforts had further been made to present the Exclusion Zone of Chernobyl as a tourist budding location also in Fall 2018. For instance, during an exhibition in Paris,

⁵⁴ “New routes have been developed for the visitors of the Exclusion Zone.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 11 Sept 2018, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/new-routes-have-been-developed-for-the-visitors-of-the-exclusion-zone.html> Accessed 29 June 2020.

⁵⁵ “In the Exclusion Zone, the introduction of e-tickets for visitors has begun.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 07 Sept 2018 <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/in-the-exclusion-zone-the-introduction-of-e-tickets-for-visitors-has-begun.html> Accessed 19 June 2020.

Chernobyl was presented as the territory of change and a memorandum of cooperation with the French agency was signed.

The State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management (SAUEZM), at the invitation of the Embassy of Ukraine in France, upon its participation in the international exhibition «The Travel Market Rendez-Vous - France & International» which took place in Paris, presented a part of the exhibition «Chornobyl: the territory of change». As the exhibition was taking place, the staff in the stands informed visitors about the growing development of the Exclusion Zone, its current radiation status and its tourism potential.

As Vitalii Petruk, Head of SAUEZM, explained, the goal is to modernize the zone and disseminate valid information. International exhibitions as the one in Paris serve the role of establishing an international cooperation abroad and bringing knowledge to the general public about the current situation of Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. According to Anastasiia Nechytailo, Chief of the Department of International Cooperation of the KCO of SE «COTIS», expanding the possibilities of visiting the Exclusion Zone through international collaborations will raise awareness with regards to the Chernobyl nuclear accident aftermath, as well as the development of the Exclusion Zone⁵⁶.

Post-series political situation

The success of the Chernobyl series admittedly caused a wave of political decisions related to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and particularly with regards to the Nuclear Power Plant location. The growing interest in the nuclear site and the consequent urgent necessity for safety measures further prompted the completion of activities of outmost importance in the Exclusion Zone that had been in progress in the course of the last decade. In the end of June 2019, meaning shortly after the airing of the series (May 2019), the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, in the context of the Chernobyl Shelter Implementation Plan, had a new protective roof installed called “The New Safe Confinement (NSC)”, in order to contain radioactive waste emitted thirty-three years after the 1986 accident. The construction of the roof has been in progress since 2010, while it was moved into position in 2016 with the system operation taking place for the first time in February 2019. The original sarcophagus was meant to last thirty years, thus, maintenance was conducted up to 2011. However, eventually it was

⁵⁶ “During the exhibition in Paris, Chornobyl was presented as the territory of change and a memorandum of cooperation with the French agency was signed.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 03 Oct 2018 <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/during-the-exhibition-in-paris-chornobyl-was-presented-as-the-territory-of-change-and-a-memorandum-of-cooperation-with-the-french-agency-was-signed.html> Accessed on 02 July 2020.

determined that a second sarcophagus would be needed. Under these circumstances, the immense structure was positioned over the initial sarcophagus, which was rapidly placed in 1986 after the Reactor 4 explosion, but was severely damaged due to the overexposure to radiation. The New Safe Confinement (NSC) has been designed to last for the next century and prevent the release of radioactive particles. The Shelter Implementation Plan, with the 162-meter long roof being its central component, has cost almost two billion euro, with the roof only costing the half of the whole amount. It is funded by financial contributions from more than forty countries, the European Commission and the EBRD. The NSC is specially designed to endure temperatures varying from -43C to 45C, a class-three tornado and an earthquake with a magnitude of 6 on the Richter scale. The new safe confinement is expected to operate at least for the next century. Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky symbolically handed the keys to the new safe confinement shelter, with the ceremony marking the transformation of Chernobyl into an environmentally safe place⁵⁷.

According to the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, the experts of the SAUEZM enterprises shortly after the airing of the Chernobyl series decided to expand its work with Norwegian tour operators, in order to develop international tourism. In particular, the SAUEZM with the support of the Norwegian-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, analyzed the growing tourism potential of the exclusion zone to Norwegian tour operators by presenting the available visit routes, as well as plans to enhance the tourist infrastructure and expand the access system to the exclusion zone. The director of SE «COTIS» Volodymyr Kukharev stressed that since the vast majority of visitors in the exclusion zone are foreigners, it becomes urgent that the SAUEZM expand its collaboration with the foreign tourist operators so as to establish a more inclusive and foreign-friendly atmosphere for visitors. This approach elicited a positive response from Norwegian tour operators and the willingness to cooperate⁵⁸.

⁵⁷“Chernobyl's New Safe Confinement”, *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development* <ebrd.com/what-we-do/sectors/nuclear-safety/chernobyl-new-safe-confinement.html> Accessed 09 Jul 2020.

⁵⁸“SAUEZM expands its work with Norwegian tour operators to develop international tourism” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 20 Aug 2019 <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/sauezm-expands-its-work-with-norwegian-tour-operators-to-develop-international-tourism.html> Accessed 06 July 2020.

Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky signed a decree on Wednesday 10 July 2019 with which he lifted a number of existing bans with regards to visiting the Chernobyl exclusion zone that surrounds the site of the nuclear reactor tragedy. He further shared his vision of creating a "green corridor" for tourists. In his words "We have to show this place to the world: to scientists, ecologists, historians and tourists." The popularity of the series and the creation of increased tourism prospects has also sparked the government's will to eliminate any sign of corruption, as it is widely known in the area that security forces are paid bribes from tourists, as well as illegally ship metal and deploy natural resources⁵⁹.

In an effort to make the zone more tourist-friendly, as it became known in July 2019, those in charge of the nuclear plant, meaning the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, planned on designing and launching twenty-one new tourist routes for visitors so as to allow inspection where the disaster occurred. One of the new routes includes a tour in the control room in Unit 4 where the explosion began. Visitors taking the tours are obliged to wear protective clothing and footwear, meaning that masks, helmets and special suits are essential. Among others, visitors must hand in their cellphones, cameras and personal belongings upon their entrance in the spot, while touching surfaces is strictly not recommended. According to measurements made by Ukrainian scientists, the radiation in the room exceeded normal levels by forty thousand times, since as it was estimated around two hundred tones radioactive fuel has been still contained in the interior of the plant. To ensure visitors' protection and prevent overexposure, it was prohibited that visitors stayed in the room for more than five minutes⁶⁰. This was a huge step in the tourism sector of Chernobyl, if somebody considers that before the recent reformulation of the location's image and the prospects created for it to become a tourist attraction, visitors could only view the exterior of the power plant, as well as visit the ghosted town of Pripyat with its gloomy buildings and abandoned Ferris wheel.

⁵⁹ "Zelensky signs decree on opening access to Chernobyl exclusion zone." *Tass Russian News Agency*, 10 Jul 2019, <tass.com/world/1067946> Accessed 23 June 2020.

⁶⁰ Roksana, Panaschuk. "Chernobyl control room where radiation is 40,000 times the norm will open for tourists." *Mailonline*, 30 Sep. 2019, <dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7520185/Chernobyl-control-room-radiation-40-000-TIMES-norm-open-TOURISTS.html> Accessed 30 June 2020.

Efforts announced by President Volodymyr Zelensky in July include new walking trails and waterways and improved mobile phone reception for visitors. Indeed, on August 2019 media representatives visited the Exclusion zone and got familiarized for the first time with the locations of future water routes, a tour organized by the “Association of Chernobyl Tour Operators”. The goal behind the creation of these routes was to depict the Exclusion zone from the vantage point of its unparalleled nature. An official order by SAUEZM was yet to be developed, which would give the green light to the procedure for visiting the Exclusion zone along these routes, and would create the infrastructure needed. It had been made clear that only after all security works were finished, routes would welcome visitors.

On September 2019 it was finally announced that water routes in the Exclusion zone are ready to receive visitors, as the routes were finally characterized by a high safety value, with the checkpoints being ready, as well as the dosimetric control, piers and support to be provided. Radiation status charts were established along the routes and it was shown that the dose of human external exposure during the stay on the route would be 0.001 mSv, meaning that it does not surpass the allowed levels for the average person. A meeting chaired by the Head of State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion zone management Vitalii Petruk was held in Chernobyl with experts from SSE «Ecocenter», Chernobyl Reserve, SE «COTIS» and the police joining for the purpose of discussing organizational issues while visiting the Exclusion zone by water. After the meeting a trip along one of the recently approved water routes took place with direction from city of Chernobyl to Otashiv village. The Head of SAUEZM Vitalii Petruk checked himself and confirmed the appropriateness of recently opened routes of visit. The visitation of the Exclusion Zone through this route renders the apt application and provision of a water transport to the visitors by the organizer highly essential. The route is solely available while water navigation is open. It is important to note that the SAUEZM authorized water routes to visit the Exclusion Zone with the Presidential Decree No.512 / 2019 «On Some Issues on the Development of Territories contaminated as a result of the Chernobyl Catastrophe», which predict the activity along the rivers Pripjat and Uzh⁶¹.

⁶¹ “Water routes in the Exclusion zone are ready to welcome visitors and the routes meet all safety standards.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion zone management* 27 Sep. 2019, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/water-routes-in-the-exclusion-zone-are-ready-to-welcome-visitors-and-the-routes-meet-all-safety-standards.html> Accessed 23 July 2020.

The tourist prospects of Exclusion zone were extensively presented and discussed at the WTM 2019 International Exhibition in London in December 2019 by the experts of the SAUEZM enterprises, along with the help of the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine, the public association «Association of Chernobyl Tour Operators» and other international travel companies. As it was stated by the Head of SAUEZM, Volodymyr Feshchenko, in the course of 2019 more than 100,000 visitors went to the Exclusion zone, which only proves a newfound and growing interest from the general tourist audience. It was further specified that the mission of the Agency and the enterprises of the SAUEZM management sphere is to make sure that access to the Exclusion zone occurs under safe circumstances and that the health of the people involved is not at risk. In the words of the Head of SAUEZM, the Decree of the President related to some developmental issues of in the territories that have been aggravated by radioactive contamination generated from the Chernobyl disaster, triggered the of the Agency on setting transparent mechanisms for tourist organizations and individuals who wish to provide services for organization of visits to the Exclusion Zone, as well as committed the Agency to design plans that will enhance the location's infrastructure and form new routes.

In addition, the extent to which potential new forms of tourism should be taken into consideration for the future visitors, namely for instance “scientific tourism”, was discussed. In particular, today the Chernobyl Reserve is a breeding ground for scientists and young researchers to study in depth the impact of ionizing radiation on flora and fauna. Furthermore, the locations of the Reserve can be useful to ornithologists who want to watch seasonal migrations of birds from the Red Book. Under the same spectrum, young experts of technical specialties could be trained in radiation and ecological monitoring, as well as characterization of radioactive waste at the base of the SSE «Ecocenter», as Maria Tsybulnyk, Head of Marketing and Development Department of KCR SE «COTIS», and Tamara Danylchenko, an expert for International Cooperation Department said⁶².

Sergii Kalashnyk, Head of SAUEZM, during the INUDECO International Conference announced the plans related to a GPS installation system in the exclusion zone, for the purpose of controlling vehicles and people in the Chernobyl zone area. To meet the goal of this control, it is essential that a single control center be established.

⁶² “Tourist potential of Exclusion zone was presented at the WTM 2019 International Exhibition in London.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 11 Dec. 2019, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/tourist-potential-of-exclusion-zone-was-presented-at-the-wtm-2019-international-exhibition-in-london.html Accessed 29 June 2020.

To effectively regulate people's stay in the exclusion zone, the introduction of a single system «Smart City» was described to be a potential successful method, as the Head of SAUEZM further stated. In addition, the Head of SAUEZM mentioned the recently adopted amendments to the legislation which concern the stay in exclusion zones and the mandatory resettlement. In particular, there was an increase of the minimum fines for illegal entry into the exclusion zone from 17 to 51 thousand hryvnias, as well as an introduction of criminal liability for such an offense⁶³. On a video conference, he further added that together with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Agency is currently developing a roadmap for Chernobyl. It will be the stepping stone for underpinning common approaches and designing a plan for future collaboration between Ukraine and the broader international community for the development of an integrated radioactive waste management system under the scope of decommissioning the Chernobyl NPP and of the shift of the Shelter object into an environmentally friendly system⁶⁴.

Another incident proving the major impact the Chernobyl series had on the transformation of the cultural and historical aspect of the site, is the fact that in the course of the last year the Chernobyl Reserve and the Non-Governmental Organization «Freedom Can Not be Stopped» have signed a Cooperation Agreement, a cooperation whose main goal is the creation of a museum in the village of Otashiv (which is located less than thirty kilometers from the city of Chernobyl in the south-eastern part of the Exclusion Zone), where many settlements used to live. The content of the museum will be based on household items, tools and equipment that the Poleshuks (people that inhabited Polesia, which constitutes the historical and traditional center of the Chernobyl Reserve) used in their daily life. According to the Chernobyl Reserve, the idea behind this initiative is to underline the historical character of the exclusion zone, which with the erection of the museum will render it a holistic cultural, educational and tourist attraction. Nowadays, many “self-settlers” who returned back to their properties after evacuation live in the village and are engaged with activities such as gardening

⁶³ “Sergii Kalashnyk, Head of SAUEZM, during the INUDECO International Conference told about the main prospects for the development of the exclusion zone.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 29 Apr 2020, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/sergii-kalashnyk-head-of-sauezm-during-the-inudeco-international-conference-told-about-the-main-prospects-for-the-development-of-the-exclusion-zone.html> Accessed 30 June 2020.

⁶⁴ “SAUEZM and the EBRD have discussed the implementation of international projects under quarantine.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 29 Apr 2020, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/sauezm-and-the-ebrd-have-discussed-the-implementation-of-international-projects-under-quarantine.html> Accessed 01 July 2020.

and fishing. The cultural contribution of these people to the site of the Exclusion Zone is a subject that deserves to be analyzed and become known to the general audience⁶⁵.

During a meeting on March 2020 between the Acting Head of SAUEZM Kateryna Pavlova and the mayor of Slavutych Yuri Fomichev, the main topics discussed revolved around the development of common infrastructure, scientific and tourist potential. The goal is that SAUEZM will support the increase of human activity of neighboring regions to the Exclusion Zone, like Slavutich. The development of a shared scientific and tourist area and infrastructure will affect the creation of new employment positions and boost the local budget, as the Acting Head of SAUEZM, Kateryna Pavlova, stated⁶⁶.

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3.1.2 Events/ Incidents fostering the transformation of the representation of Chernobyl

(Shortly) Before the Chernobyl series

Chernobyling Festival:

In an effort to effectively accommodate, educate and entertain the emerging wave of tourists in Chernobyl, art director, tour guides and volunteers had organized the “Chernobyling Festival” twice (in 2017/2018), the “World’s first Urbex, Art, Post-apo and Geocaching Festival” by bringing together artists, celebrities, experts and liquidators in the Pit Underground location in the Chernobyl exclusion zone⁶⁷. Former workers of the chNPP also participated and enlightened the audience about the conditions inside the atomic station, while experienced urbex specialists shared the differences between a stalker and a tourist. The programme offered daily underground and roof tours to abandoned military and historical buildings in or around Kiev, street art workshops, concerts, geocaching challenges. In an effort to dispel myths about mutations and monstrous creatures in the Chernobyl zone it further organized anti-

⁶⁵ “It is planned to create a museum-estate on the territory of the Chornobyl Reserv.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 11 June 2020, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/it-is-planned-to-create-a-museum-estate-on-the-territory-of-the-chornobyl-reserv.html> Accessed 03 July 2020.

⁶⁶ “Heads of SAUEZM and Slavutych have outlined joint plans for development of scientific and tourist destinations.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 27 Mar 2020, <dazv.gov.ua/en/news-and-media/heads-of-sauezm-and-slavutych-have-outlined-joint-plans-for-development-of-scientific-and-tourist-destinations.html>, Accessed 07 Jul 2020

⁶⁷ *CHERNOBYLING 2018* <chernobyling.com/en> Accessed 23 June 2020.

conspiracy tours. In the course of the programme another marketing strategy for the promotion of the site was by introducing the game “Chernobylitis” for the first time to the public, directly at DUGA radar in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The festival was wrapped up with success and went sold out, while it collected a positive response from its audience, with approximately 1.584 subscribers on its Facebook page. For unknown reason, the festival did not repeat in 2019, despite the big prospect it would have, if one considers the rising numbers of tourists in Chernobyl in summer 2019.

Zirka Polyn Museum:

As it was reported, from March 15 2018, those who visit the exclusion zone will also have the chance to visit the museum Zirka Polyn ("Star Wormwood"), created for the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident. The museum is located in Chernobyl and there are collected photos, which aptly depict the changes the exclusion zone underwent through history and its passage from the site of a worst nuclear disaster in the mankind history to the zone of introduction of one of the most up to date technological advances. Moreover, the museum will very often project film material which will portray the most popular places to visit, such as the cities of Chernobyl and Pripyat, as well as the object "Arc" (namely the “New Safe Confinement (NSC or New Shelter)”, an engineering project built to confine the contamination “leftovers” of the number 4 reactor unit at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant).

The museum foundations had been reconstructed since 2011, and even before the accident, the Ukraine cinema was still in function inside the building, however, the museum had not operated until 2018, when, thanks to the coordination of the SES, DAZV and COTIZ, the museum finally opened its doors to visitors. The Chairman of DAZV Vitaliy Petruk stated that the goal of the museum is to add educational value to the experience of visiting the exclusion zone by providing visitors with an enriched knowledge about the Chernobyl accident and its aftermath. In this museum, visitors will be able to view themselves how the exclusion zone was transformed into a "territory of change". According to Andriy Naumov, Director of COTIZ, the museum is committed in improving the quality of visitation and introduce electronic passes, create an information center at the checkpoint "Children", as well as new routes to visit the exclusion zone. The museum serves as a memorial to the victims of the Chernobyl

disaster with the most widely known monument being the Trumpeting Angel monument. It also contains signs with the names of the cities that were evacuated after the explosion and are still abandoned. The museum is extensively embellished with allegorical objects and pictures, and the ultimate function of every inch of the building (walls, floor, ceiling) is to emotionally charge the visitor and help him/ her spiritually experience and reflect on the accident. For example, the symbolic frame of the dosimetric control in the platform under which the glass of the reactor is placed, awakens memories of the explosion, while the images of storks stand as a symbol for the tragedy of Polissia. At the same time, children's cradles are used to represent the souls of the children that diseased and passed away⁶⁸.

After the Chernobyl series

Chernobyl Hub

The increased interest in the exclusion zone of Chernobyl due to the HBO series led also to the Opening of Chernobyl Hub (“Chornobyl’ Khab”), a community center in the heart of Kiev on 12 August 2019 in an effort to add a more touristic tone to the zone. The goal was to actively bring together the local community in order to make discussions about the cultural heritage issues surrounding ancient Kiev and the topic of the Chernobyl disaster, two parameters that seem to characterize the identity of the city.

Music productions

The Chernobyl mini-series even sparked the creation of artistic tracks by fans who were inspired by the nuclear accident. On 26th April 2020, Melody Records released on You tube and Spotify the song “Chernobyl Hero” performed by ANB ft. Biana Šutičová. During the intro of the official video clip there is an inscription stating that: “After the release of Chernobyl miniseries, Chernobyl received a lot of attention, both good and bad. Everyone is criticizing people responsible for the accident and forgetting the real heroes. This is for them.” The video clip contains appealing shots in the most well-known locations in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, thus, predisposes the viewer/ potential visitor with a stance of admiration towards the site and contributes to its positive representation.

⁶⁸ “Zirka Polyn” Museum is open to the visitors of the Exclusion Zone.” *State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management*, 13 Mar 2018, <dazv.gov.ua/novini-ta-media/vsi-novyny/u-chornobili-dlya-vidviduvachiv-vidkriyut-muzej-zirka-polin.html> Accessed 25 July 2020.

Atomik craft vodka

With Chernobyl being under the spotlight of European tourism and the topic of Chernobyl trending due to the recent success of the Chernobyl series, a team of British scientists (from the University of Salford and the Center for Ecology and Hydrology), was inspired to produce the “Atomik Vodka” in collaboration with Ukrainian colleagues (a cooperation between the Government of Ukraine, the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, the State Specialized Enterprise "Ecocenter", the Ukrainian Hydrometeorological Institute, the Ukrainian Institute for Agricultural Radiology and the Institute of Geological Sciences of NASU), shortly after the episodes aired (on July 2019). The beverage was made with grain and water extracted from Chernobyl’s exclusion zone, specifically on a farm close to the site where the 1986 accident took place. The product was thoroughly examined and put through intense testing in radio-analytical laboratories with the scientists confirming that is radioactivity-free. The value of this drink does not stop only in its essence but extends to what it represents. In the official site of the “Chernobyl Spirit Company”, which aims to produce the high quality artisan vodka and will begin selling the spirit once all legal duties have been settled, it is firmly stated that “At least 75% of profits from sales of ATOMIK will go to supporting communities in the affected areas and wildlife conservation”. Once again it becomes prominent, therefore, the massive domino effect the Chernobyl series caused in generating new marketing ideas with regards to the Chernobyl exclusion zone, as well as how local companies manipulate its media-induced image change for the support of the local community and the betterment of the Chernobyl setting⁶⁹.

Urbex Identity under threat

The Chernobyl exclusion zone, except for being the number one tourist destination in Ukraine, is also considered to be one of the most visited Urbex destinations worldwide with thousands of visitors annually. Namely, the term urbex or urban exploring is used to describe the exploration of desolated/ uninhabited and non-public urban settings. The exploration occurs as a general rule in locations that almost no one or only a few are interested in, which also justifies their abandonment in the first place. The forgotten nature of these locations, however, often captures the attention of thrill seekers who value the abandoned aesthetic and have a zest for discovering the undiscovered. The historical political scandal surrounding the

⁶⁹ Jennifer, Hassan. “Yes, scientists have created Chernobyl vodka. No, it’s not radioactive.” *Washington Post*, 08 Aug. 2019, <[washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/08/yes-scientists-have-created-chernobyl-vodka-no-its-not-radioactive/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/08/yes-scientists-have-created-chernobyl-vodka-no-its-not-radioactive/)> Accessed 30 June 2020.

case of the Chernobyl accident in combination with the Soviet scientific installations and control room of the infamous Reactor 4, acts as a trigger for the contemporary urbex tourist to delve into the city's deserted surroundings. With wildlife characterizing the site, with animals such as wolves, deer, wild horses etc coexisting and wild green plantation reviving gradually, Chernobyl exclusion zone offers one of the most atmospheric exploration-backdrop for its visitors. Due to its fragility and unique historical value, there have been some discussions from time to time examining whether Chernobyl could meet the UNESCO criteria in order to be considered a Natural or even Cultural World Heritage Site. This has further caused Chernobyl to grow to be not a sealed governmental site, but a site assertive of the potential for future historical preservation. This is a further reason why, apart from its high radiation, touching/ taking objects or vandalizing the site at any form is considered to be a severe offence. Under this scope, Chernobyl urbex tour guides often employ the widespread urbex slogan in the course of their tour "Take only photographs, leave only footprints, and avoid the latter if you can." The most popular sites visited by the Chernobyl urbex explorers, as stated in their official website "chernobylexplorer.com"⁷⁰, are the anti-aircraft missile system "Volkhov", the oblique ionospheric sounding station called "Krug", the Russian DUGA radar and, of course, the ghost city of Pripyat. Due to the successful HBO series "Chernobyl", the "ghost-city" vibe that characterized the site has been largely taken away during the last year, as mass tourism has marked the Exclusion Zone. As a direct result of the changes in the representation of the site from an abandoned paradise for the Chernobyl stalker to a thriving hotspot for the average tourist, urbex explorers have rescheduled their expeditions for the winter period, when mass tourists tend to visit the site less densely⁷¹.

⁷⁰chernobylexplorer.com/?fbclid=IwAR3WPIBsvWcyUP533LdAVx32gs7jqv5mJb3Q3Txa3_KTuisJc_OFf2a71U> Accessed 25 July 2020 .

⁷¹ "Chernobyl After HBO: Exploring the Hidden Places Tourists Don't See." *Peta Pixel*, 20 Feb 2020, <petapixel.com/2020/02/20/chernobyl-after-hbo-exploring-the-hidden-places-tourists-dont-see/> Accessed 09 July 2020.

New “Chernobyl series-inspired” routes

The tremendous success of the Chernobyl series caused numerous tourist agencies and organizations to develop new tours in Kiev, which would pass on to tourists the series’ gloomy ambiance. More specifically, the members of “Tourism and Promotions Department of Kyiv City State Administration”, as well as other local tourism operators presented a new route called "Across the shooting locations of Chornobyl mini-series in Kyiv", as it was reported by the press office of Kyiv City State Administration on the 12th of July 2019. The tour, which lasted at least four hours, included various Kiev-based locations. Among these locations were Khreschatyk and Bohdana Khmelnytskoho Streets, as well as Chornobyl National Museum and the Arch of Nations' Friendship⁷².

3.1.3 Social media and travel platform Analysis

[Instagram posts Analysis]

The analysis concerns Instagram posts made from 2019 to today (August 2020) related to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and the HBO Chernobyl series. It was found that the top five most popular Chernobyl-related Instagram Hashtags (on August 2020) using the Instagram Tags search tool were the following (in order of popularity) with the corresponding posts using them being noted in the parenthesis: #chernobyl (467.600 posts) #chernobylzone (43.712 posts) / #hbochernobyl (27.902 posts) #chernobylseries (2.154 posts) #chernobyl1986 (1.142 posts). The accounts that mostly use “HBO Chernobyl” as hashtag are: @Chernobyl_exclusive_tours, @planetchernobyl, @Chernobyl_gamer, @guidemeua, @ Chernobylwelcome.

Remarkable points generated after careful observation of Instagram posts can be stated as follows:

- Eighteen posts made by tourists/visitors/ viewers of the series have only the description of their post (the linguistic part) being relatable to the Chernobyl series, meaning that people often expressed their wish to visit the destination after watching the series but the visual part of their post was irrelevant to Chernobyl series or to the actual site (for example by posting a self-portrait of themselves).

⁷² “Kyiv tourist operators present new tourist route dedicated to locations of Chernobyl TV series.” *112 Ukraine*, 12 July 2019, <112.international/society/kyiv-tourist-operators-present-new-tourist-route-dedicated-to-locations-of-chernobyl-tv-series-41658.html> Accessed 24 July 2020.

-Many users reported their curiosity in visiting the real place to figure out whether the series is accurate in its depictions.

-Most users posted “throwback photos” of their visit to Chernobyl and established a correlation to the series in the description of their post or by using a hashtag. For instance, a tourist on his account posted a personal photo in Chernobyl location on 3 June 2019 and wrote: “If you have been following HBO’s Chernobyl, then this photo will ring a bell.” Additionally, @the_vespa_rider wrote: “This photo is from my visit of March 2019. Just realized it got quite popular thanks to @hbo recently. Quite sure the number of tourists willing to visit the site will dramatically increase in the next few months” (posted on 1/6/2019). Others posted photos from their tours in which after one swipes left can view a characteristic photo from the Chernobyl series.

-Many Instagram accounts of tourist agencies and organizations became drastically active after the Chernobyl series aired. For example, the Instagram “@guidemeua” account became more active in posting pictures from its private Kiev tours by posting 2-5 more pictures per day than it did before the airing of the series (when it normally posted only 1 per day). The @chernobyl_insider (official Instagram account of the Chernobyl Insider tour company with almost 10K followers on August 2020) on a post on 13/7/2019 wrote in a caption of a photo it posted that “talk about the series from HBO does not stop until now. Has your series changed your opinion about Chernobyl, was it useful, and exactly which places you want to visit?” showing that the tourism company recognizes the impact the series had on the viewpoint of the fans and wants probably to direct its routes in accordance to their preferences- which have been formed to a great extent by what has been featured in the series-.

In the same wavelength, the @chernobyltour (official Instagram account of the Chernobyl tour agency in Kiev with 57K followers on August 2020) posted the trailer of the series and added as a location of the post the “Chernobyl tour” so as the viewer subconsciously makes an interrelation between what they are going to watch in the series with what is the content of the Chernobyl tour. Similarly, the @chernobylwelcome account (official Instagram account of Chernobyl Welcome Tours with 47.7k followers on August 2020) posted a series of posts from the airing of the Chernobyl series to September 2019 with shots from the series in order to inform about historical facts concerning the site.

The @planetchernobyl (Instagram account of a French travel agency hosting visits to Chernobyl since 2017) had not posted anything since April 2017 while shortly after the series aired it tripled the amount of posts on its feed.

The “Deep adventure tours Chernobyl”, a UK based travel agency, created its Instagram account on August 2019, right after the airing of the series, with very often featuring the hashtag #hbochernobyl in its posts.

These facts indicate an increased effort in advertising the Chernobyl attraction, and in extent Kiev, as well as a revitalization in the marketing techniques employed by the tour offices, by taking advantage of the location’s increased popularity after the airing of the Chernobyl series.

|Facebook posts Analysis|

“Chernobyl Urbex Tour” Page

The motivations and experiences of the urbex adventurers who explore Chernobyl exclusion zone are aptly expressed in various online communities, as for instance in the Facebook page of the Chernobyl Explorer agency called “Chernobyl Urbex Tour” with 10.641 subscribers (as displayed on August 2020). There, one can draw various insights with regards to illegal solo hikes, drones’ shots and stalkers’ favorite abandoned spots in the so-called “post-apocalyptic Wonderland”. Every post, which is normally made on a weekly basis, collects on average a total of 100 likes and 20 shares, while the positive comments reveal a dedicated and enthusiastic Chernobyl urbex audience.

“Chernobylwel” Page

Chernobylwel page (website page: www.chernobylwel.com),

one of the most popular tourist guide organizations in Chernobyl, with 65.587 subscribers on Facebook (as on August 2020), makes daily Facebook posts that promote Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to its large audience, in an effort to transform the radiation-hostile reputation that has marked the site into a more tourist-friendly one. To meet this

goal, on every post's description the link to the article "6 reasons why you need to visit Chernobyl & Ukraine" is added. On May 2019 (shortly after the airing of the mini-series Chernobyl), they announced on their Facebook page that redesigned their retro website, in an effort to recreate our most popular tour from all of their Chernobyl trips, introducing the POSTAPO tour. It also included photo challenges in its posts, by encouraging visitors to upload their latest pictures in the site on the comments. In this way, it spread the message that Chernobyl is often visited by bonding visitors over their shared experiences. It also posts photographs with enhancing filters shot by professional photographers to add a postapocalyptic, romantic dimension to the Chernobyl ambiance and lure the visitor or praises the vintage beauty of Soviet Control Rooms. It also shares any new form of art (like graffiti) that occurs within the area, to highlight its modern aspect as well.

The organization further posts information regarding its tours with theme «exploration in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone/ Pripjat» or in the well-known reactor 4., while it organizes events with enlightening interviews along with experts and scientists related to the field, called the "Chernobyl Talks", in order to provide useful insight into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone related questions that have been raised from time to time, concerning for instance the rise and spread of Chernobyl conspiracy theories.

It further seeks to reassure the audience about the site's safety by casting away common myths concerning Geiger counters and offering information about how to precisely measure radiation. Additionally, it informs about the steel "sarcophagus" which contains the radioactive elements inside by posting a step-by-step guide which analyzes the NSC project. The agency also provides info about the daily life of women living in Chernobyl, the so-called babushkas, to underline the fact that life thrives in the Exclusion Zone. Another technique it uses to capture the attention of the viewer, is by making use of the popularity of the series: "If you loved #ChernobylHBO series and wonder what the site looks like now, then do not miss the...". In some events it organizes it even uses characteristic scenes from the series as a background photo. The marketing of Chernobyl is even extended to the design and giveaway of "CHERNOwear" T-shirt, cups, magnets, etc, in an effort to establish a cult that popularizes the site and creates positive, "cool" connotations to the mainstream tourist.

[Trip Advisor and Google Review Analysis]

“Chernobyl Visit”

On Trip Advisor the search “Chernobyl Visit” gives 38 reviews in the period starting roughly the same date with the airing of the series (May 2019) to December 2019 (before implications in the museum visitations started due to the coronavirus pandemic) from visitors commenting on their experience while in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. From those, 20 reviews (almost the half) were posted during the months June-July 2019, when the Chernobyl series was at its peak. For the same timeframe the exact previous year (May-December 2018), one comes across only 19 reviews from Chernobyl visitors, from which only 2 were posted during the months June-July 2018. The increase in the amount of reviews may be just due to coincidence, since posting a review is not compulsory for every visitor after their visitation but depends on their will to do so. Yet, the increased number of reviews during the months when the series became popular could be indicative of the growth in the number of tourists visiting the site, which can be correlated with their heightened curiosity sparked by the Chernobyl series.

Chernobyl Museum and Atomic Tourism

It would not be exaggerated to claim that the Chernobyl series, with reference to the rise in tourist numbers in the desolate cities of Chernobyl and Pripyat, gave a new push to the modern form of tourism characterized as “atomic” or “nuclear” tourism. In a general sense, atomic tourists travel to sites that have been landmarks in the atomic history, meaning locations correlated with nuclear technology/ sites where a nuclear explosion or nuclear accident has occurred) with a zest for learning about the Atomic Age. Museums with atomic history, which display atomic weapons or vehicles which used to carry those, are considered to be the breeding ground of education for atomic tourists.

Taking this into consideration, a close comparative observation in the rates of the Chernobyl National Museum in Kiev before and after the Chernobyl series took place, in order to effectively pinpoint any increase in the numbers of Chernobyl atomic tourists the series might have caused. More specifically, on the “Chernobyl Museum in Kiev” search on Trip Advisor 46 reviews were made in the period starting on 18 May 2019 (roughly the same date with the airing of the Chernobyl series) to 29 December 2019 (before implications in the museum visitations started due to the coronavirus pandemic) with tourists commenting on their Chernobyl National Museum visitation.

If we compare this amount of reviews to the amount of reviews made during the same time period in 2018 (May-December 2018), one will realize that there has been a 270% increase in 2019, since in 2018 there had been posted only 17 reviews related to the content of the museum. This perceptible increase in the reviews posted by visitors in the time span after the series is very likely to imply an analogous increase in the number of visitors that actually went to the Chernobyl Museum.

Similarly, with regards to the Chernobyl Museum in Google Reviews out of the total 2.929 reviews (as displayed on 14th of August 2020), 1.863 reviews were posted in the timeframe that has as a starting point the airing of the series (May 2019) and continues until today. The remaining were posted before the series, more specifically from March 2015 to the date on which the series aired. This translates into a more than 50% increase in posted reviews, which reveals a larger engagement in visitors' responses. The negative comments of many tourists with reference to the absence of the English version in the texts of the placards, as everything is written in Ukrainian/Russian, reveals a large audience being internationals, since foreign language speakers are those who encounter linguistic barriers that native language-placards impose. It is also remarkable to note that many visitors went as far as reporting even that a visit in the specific museum is superfluous if one has watched the Chernobyl series, since the museum recreates all the details that have been depicted in the series. Others mentioned that their visit to the museum can be mostly attributed to their desire to expand the knowledge they had recently acquired with the Chernobyl series. This vast rise in the amount of reviews, apart from suggesting a highly possible increase in the number of visitors, further portrays the benevolent effect of the Chernobyl series in the solidification and expansion of atomic tourism in the city of Chernobyl, as not only did it become a source of atomic history itself, but also with its impact subconsciously urged atomic tourists to further search and indulge into other forms of carriers of atomic history, namely the National Chernobyl Museum.

3.1.4 Tourist numbers before and after Chernobyl series

As the popularity of the Chernobyl series brought Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to the foreground of publicity, a vast increase in tourist visitations was noted. Below, some of the most remarkable facts telling of this increase are being mentioned.

Up to 10,000 visitors have been estimated to have visited the Exclusion Zone in 2012, largely spurred by the influx of tourists for the Euro Cup football game which Ukraine was co-hosting with Poland⁷³. After 2013, visits to the nuclear explosion site have increased exponentially with an additional number of 8,000 tourists visiting the Chernobyl exclusion zone. According to the Head of State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, in 2018 the number of tourists had increased by 30% in comparison to 2017, as it was shown in the reflection of its activities for the year 2018. This number rose to 65,000 by 2018, according to Gamma Travel tour guide Alexandra Chalenko⁷⁴.

According to an announcement made by the “Chernobyl helicopter tour” guide Pavel Korsun, who organizes tours in Ukraine since 2011, the Chernobyl helicopter tour video on Youtube reached more than 1 million views on July 2019, a fact that reveals the booming interest on behalf of the tourist audience in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Chernobyl Helicopter Tour by helicopter Robinson R44 from Kiev Helipad followed the route Mezhyhirya Residence - Zoo 12 Months - Chernobyl Exclusion Zone - Over-the-Horizon Radar Duga-1 (Russian Woodpecker) - Pripyat Ghost Town - Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant - Cooling Pond and back to Kiev Helipad via Kiev Sea⁷⁵.

It is further remarkable that the travel application “Kayak” found that flight search demand to Kiev, the city to which many Chernobyl visitors land, grew by 18% from the first week of May 2019 to the last, while the application “Hopper” noted an 8% increase at the same period⁷⁶.

⁷³ Marc, Bennetts. “A day trip to Chernobyl.” *BBC*, 4 Mar 2011, <www.bbc.com/travel/story/20110228-a-day-trip-to-chernobyl> Accessed on 04 July 2020.

⁷⁴ Abbie, Lewelyn. “Chernobyl: The incredible number of tourists that visit nuclear disaster site revealed.” *Express UK*, 03 July 2019, <express.co.uk/news/world/1148593/chernobyl-nuclear-disaster-tourism-tourist-ukraine-hbo-drama-series-sky-atlantic-spt> consulted on 12 May 2020.

⁷⁵ Pavel, Korsun. “Ukraine and Kiev Tour Guide Pavel Korsun | Attentive Travel Care.” *Special Ukraine Tours Kiev Tours | Tour Guide*, <ukraine-kiev-tour.com/tour-guide-pavel-korsun.html> Accessed 29 July 2020.

⁷⁶ Mallika, Mitra. “Pop culture is changing the tourism industry – the proof is in Chernobyl.” *CNBC*, 15 June 2019, <cnbc.com/2019/06/14/chernobyl-sees-a-spike-in-visitors-as-pop-culture-influences-tourism.html> Accessed 29 July 2020.

Sergiy Ivanchuk, director of “Solo East” tour agency (which is one of the most well-known tour agencies in Kiev with 7.5K followers on Facebook and a 4.8 generated by 230 positive reviews on Trip Advisor as on August 2020), said the agency had a 30% increase in tourists visiting the site in May 2019 compared to the same month in 2018. As he further mentioned, bookings for all summer months of 2019 had risen by approximately 40% since HBO aired the show. In 2016 the agency received 7,500 Chernobyl visitors, while in 2018 approximately 11,450, making the tour agents confident that this was only the beginning in the site’s growing popularity due to the Chernobyl series, as the interest in the Exclusion Zone was gradually growing⁷⁷.

Numerous other tourism agencies in Ukraine recently further stated that requests for Chernobyl visitations climbed between 30%-40% after the premiere of the HBO miniseries, as Reuters news agency mentioned. Yaroslav Yemelianenko, director of “Chernobyl Tour”, also noticed a similar increase of 30-40% in the summer months 2019 due to the miniseries.

As it was said by the UK based tour operator “Explore”, which has been offering tours to Chernobyl since 2016, the passenger numbers in Chernobyl have increased by four times on the fifth day of the tour ‘Discover Chernobyl’ since the miniseries Chernobyl aired on May 2019. It is worthy to mention that ‘Discover Chernobyl’ tour has been Explore’s most popular and fastest selling trip and that the agency doubled the number of departures for 2018 and then again further increased it by 23% for 2019. Kiev’s tourism and promotion board expects estimated a number of 100,000 visitors to Chernobyl by the end of 2019, compared to the 70,000 in 2018⁷⁸.

Taking all the above information into consideration, one can draw some conclusions with regards to the in the visitations to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The data can be visualized then in the following two-axes line graph, which depicts the increase in the number of visitors in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in the course of the years 2012-2019. Overall, the vertical axe shows the totals of tourist numbers visiting the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone for the timeline 2012-2019 depicted in the horizontal axe.

⁷⁷ Max, Hunder. “HBO show success drives Chernobyl tourism boom.” *Reuters*, 04 June 2019, <[reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-chernobyl-tourism/hbo-show-success-drives-chernobyl-tourism-boom-idUSKCN1T51MF?fbclid=IwAR0O5Oo-qbi_KHxSHZ-RtqqMw5Vb3W79TYkcQdN7yvVkeu_gXtNOMsJsN7Y](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-chernobyl-tourism/hbo-show-success-drives-chernobyl-tourism-boom-idUSKCN1T51MF?fbclid=IwAR0O5Oo-qbi_KHxSHZ-RtqqMw5Vb3W79TYkcQdN7yvVkeu_gXtNOMsJsN7Y)> Accessed 30 July 2020.

⁷⁸ Mallika, Mitra. “Pop culture is changing the tourism industry – the proof is in Chernobyl.” *CNBC*, 15 June 2019, <[cnbc.com/2019/06/14/chernobyl-sees-a-spike-in-visitors-as-pop-culture-influences-tourism.html](https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/14/chernobyl-sees-a-spike-in-visitors-as-pop-culture-influences-tourism.html)> Date accessed 28 July 2020.

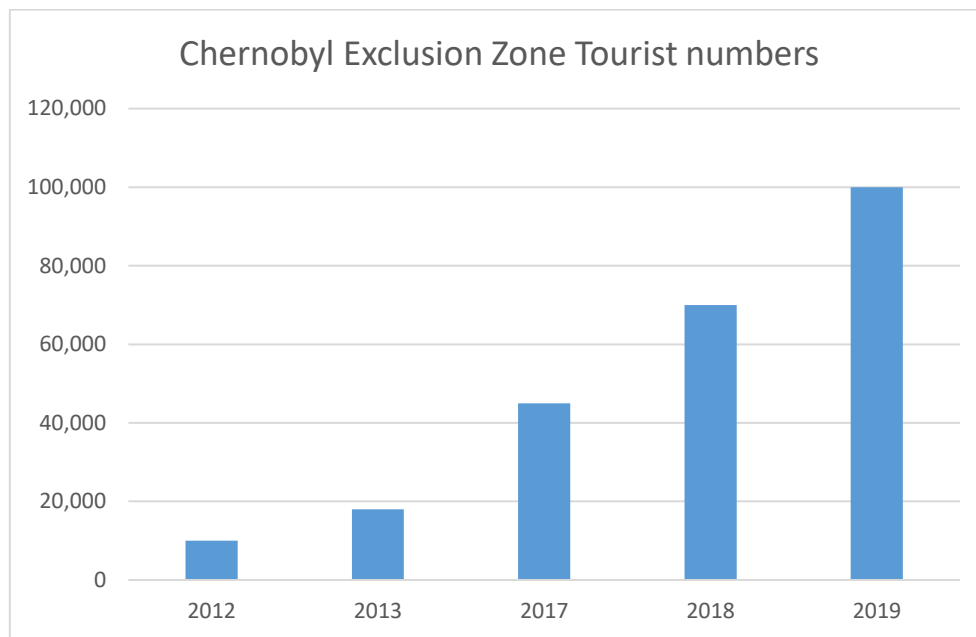


Figure 1. Graph showing tourist visitations in Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in the course of 2012-2019.

The data range as it is formed, highlights the gradual increase in tourist visits, from ten thousand in 2012 to one hundred thousand in 2019. Firstly, a remarkable fact is that with regards to the Euro Cup arranged in 2012, with Ukraine hosting it along with Poland, tourist traffic reach a number of 10.000 visitors. In 2013 it fluctuated up to 18.000 visitors, with a steady increase during the years 2014-2017, by finally reaching 45.500 visitors in 2017. The vast increase during the last two years can be attributed to the efforts of the government improving the safety of the site and designing new routes for the tourists since 2018, as well as the new governmental measures that Ukraine finally took in 2019, triggered by the popularity of the site due to the miniseries. It becomes prominent that the numbers of tourists visiting Chernobyl were interestingly doubled during this two-year course, if one compares with the numbers in 2017. The vast increase in 2019 undoubtedly captures one's interest, as it suggests the determining role the Chernobyl series played in the visitors' increased preference towards the site.

CHAPTER FOUR

Discussion

The above-mentioned findings will now be discussed and interpreted with regards to the research question.

The motivations behind the tourists' visitation to Chernobyl are more directly communicated and more aptly displayed in their posts' description (with related captions) and in comments either made under their posts or under a theme-related post made by a tourist organization/ agency on social media, especially on Instagram and Facebook. The fact that most of the users communicated their awe generated by the series or by their actual visit to the site in their comments, confirms that a major motivation to dark tourists is the preoccupying curiosity towards death and tragedy. The quest of knowledge and the sense of social responsibility can also be shown as major motivations in their expression of pinpointing historical facts surrounding the Chernobyl case and their desire not to repeat the injustices and lies that characterize it. The fact that most users established a correlation between their (anticipated) visit to the site and the Chernobyl series, either in the description of their post or by using a related hashtag, reveals the fact that the tourism gaze is drastically framed by the visual representations of the destination in television. The finding that many Instagram accounts of tourist agencies and organizations became drastically active after the Chernobyl series aired, further shows that the tourism companies recognize the impact the series had on the viewpoint of the fans and wish to direct their routes in accordance to their preferences to manipulate - which have been formed to a great extent by what has been featured in the series-. It is then proved that by familiarizing the audience with the destination as a product, tv series cause the potential market to visit those destinations which are screened in television.

The fact that a large number of Facebook posts were made shortly after the broadcast of the series by tourist agencies to promote Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to its large audience, show the efforts made to transform the radiation-hostile reputation that has marked the site into a more tourist-friendly one. The photo challenges in their posts, the giveaways of products related to the site and the marketing of the Chernobyl series, are

all techniques used to popularize Chernobyl and create positive, “cool” connotations to the mainstream tourist.

The fact that a museum in the village of Otashiv is set to be created in order to underline the historical character of the exclusion zone, suggests that visits to dark tourism sites, whose history is explicitly linked and exhibited in the region’s present situation, should be viewed more through the lens of heritage experience than merely through thanatourism. The erection of the museum aims at rendering the exclusion zone as a holistic cultural, educational and tourist attraction and proves that dark tourism can be often related to heritage tourism since a great number of dark attractions, such as Chernobyl, date back several years. Chernobyl therefore is recognized to have a considerable historical significance other than just being popular for a tragic event itself.

With reference to the rise in tourist numbers in the desolate cities of Chernobyl and Pripyat after the broadcast of the Chernobyl series, it is also suggested that a new push to the recent form of tourism characterized as “atomic” or “nuclear” tourism was given thanks to the Chernobyl series. The vast rise in the amount of reviews for the National Chernobyl Museum in 2019, apart from suggesting a highly possible increase in the number of visitors, further portrays the benevolent effect of the Chernobyl series in the solidification and expansion of atomic tourism in the city of Chernobyl, as not only did it become a source of atomic history itself, but also with its impact subconsciously urged atomic tourists to further search and indulge into other forms of carriers of atomic history, namely the National Chernobyl Museum.

Although the positive effect the tv series had on Chernobyl’s identity as an atomic tourist destination cannot be denied, it is also interesting that one cannot say the same about Chernobyl’s urbex identity. Due to the successful HBO series “Chernobyl”, the “ghost-city” vibe that characterized the site has been largely taken away since 2019 as mass tourism has marked the Exclusion Zone. As a direct result of the changes in the representation of the site, as it was found, urbex explorers have rescheduled their expeditions for the winter period, when mass tourists tend to visit the site less often. An alternative side-effect of over-tourism came, therefore, to surface.

As it was further shown, the increased interest in the exclusion zone of Chernobyl due to the HBO series indeed led to the transformation of the social aspect of the city in an effort to add a more touristic tone to the zone, such as for example with

the Opening of Chernobyl Hub. The goal was to combine the cultural heritage issues surrounding ancient Kiev and the topic of the Chernobyl disaster, two parameters that seem to characterize the identity of the city. This kind of transformation incidents reveal the city's effort to adjust to the media-induced image change, an effort triggered to a large extent thanks the HBO series which with their popularity placed the spotlight on Chernobyl and brought its identity issues to the foreground.

The extent to which the shift in the tourism gaze sparked by the "Chernobyl" series can trigger Ukrainian governmental debates and decisions related to the access in the exclusion zone, was also indicated by the series of new measures taken after the broadcast of the series. The acceleration of the simplification of the process of visiting the Exclusion Zone, and in particular the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the introduction of rules of radiation safety, the new tourist routes, the online electronic ticket system and the new visitor regulation systems reveal the will of the Ukrainian government to support the site's induced tourist change. The large amount of international conferences and exhibitions organized or attended by the Ukrainian governors in relation to the Exclusion Zone further reveal their effort to modernize the site and establish long lasting international co-operations. Especially, the final implementation of the plans regarding the new safe confinement shelter after the Chernobyl series, cannot but stand as a proof of the drastic changes in the Ukrainian political sphere.

CONCLUSION

Taking all the above into consideration, one can easily argue that in the course of the last year, the interest in the Chernobyl power plant has been progressively growing after the HBO mini-series “Chernobyl”, airing on the 6th of May 2019. The conditions under which a negatively charged and notorious exclusion zone such as Chernobyl turned into a location of mainstream appeal, have been extensively explored in this thesis.

Initially, pinpointing the underlying motivations that triggered the mass Chernobyl tourists to visit the dark nuclear site was attempted based on previous studies and related conclusions. As several authors have pointed out, curiosity and the attraction to death, have been extensively considered to be key driver for dark tourism. Under this scope and for the better understanding of the topic, the relation of dark tourism with thanatourism was defined and key convergences between the two terms were identified. It was argued based on previous works that thanatourists are essentially compelled by the eagerness to confront death, while visits to dark tourism sites, whose history is explicitly linked and exhibited in the region’s present situation, should be viewed more through the lens of heritage experience. Since motivational aspects also encompass an emotional facet, four primary emotional responses that characterize a dark tourist when visiting dark attractions or engaging in dark activities were identified, namely the sense of insecurity, sense of gratitude, feelings of humility and feelings of superiority.

On a second phase, the influence Chernobyl series had on the decisions of its viewers/ Chernobyl tourists to visit the site was explored through the prism of media-induced tourism. The impact of television series on tourists’ perception became a vital element of this thesis, as Chernobyl’s projection in the documentary series was the fact that largely triggered the transformation of its representation. For that reason, tourism in Chernobyl was viewed as a new “way of seeing” and the tourist gazing of destinations was linked to consuming and photographing signs or markers with tourists being framed and fixed rather than framing and exploring. It was further admitted that, as previous analyses have shown, picturing places through television films or television series has created a newfound development in place imaging through television and has had a significant influence in tourist choices. Based on the fact that most tourist offices in Kiev take advantage of this premise, since most of the organized tours are labelled

as “HBO series tour” and include routes in the places appearing in the Chernobyl documentary, a list with the most frequently-appeared locations in the mini-series “Chernobyl” (and, consequently, with the locations that are most exploited as a tourist attraction) was designed. Furthermore, because of the fact that multiple scenes of the Chernobyl series were shot in Vilnius, it was concluded that film location tourists opt for travelling to locations that are exclusively the authentic location where the event depicted actually happened, even if these locations are represented in the series by a different location. It was also claimed that what is essential in making a film-induced destination popular, apart from the motivators for film location tourists -which are linked to the three factors of ‘place’, ‘personality’ and ‘performance’- is the fact that when a destination is presented on the screen it attracts more visitors who have an enhanced destination image in their mind by the aid of indirect marketing.

Based on the literature review that was employed and the numerous concepts that were used for the explanation of the phenomenon of the rapid increase in visitation in Chernobyl Exclusion Zone after the airing of the Chernobyl series, an extensive and detailed observation took place in order to effectively answer the research question of this thesis. Instagram observation was focused on posts made by tourists willing to share their experiences in Chernobyl with a starting chronological point the airing of the Chernobyl series (May 2019) until today (August 2020). Facebook observation was focused on posts made by tourist agencies organizing tours in Chernobyl to enlighten the ways tourist agencies manipulated this change the series caused in Chernobyl’s imaging and how designed their tours accordingly. The observation of Trip Advisor comments and reviews offered an extra insight into the visitors’ motivations behind their visitation to Chernobyl and the extent to which their trip was prompted by the Chernobyl series. In addition, the study of various articles released after the series aired revealed the extent to which the success of the Chernobyl series has caused a wave of political decisions related to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and the Nuclear Power Plant location.

After careful selection and evaluation of related to the topic information which was found online, the research could be fairly characterized as fruitful, since it disclosed a plethora of facts which confirm the initial hypothesis that Chernobyl series played a vital role in the shift of Chernobyl’s representation and prioritized it into a mass tourist’s must-list. The vast contrast between tourist visitations in 2019 and the previous years, stands as a confirmation of this claim.

The numerous political decisions triggered by the popularity of the site in 2019, such as the improvement of the regulation/ protection system and infrastructure, the erection of the Otashiv museum, as well as the design and opening of new routes in an effort to make the zone more tourist-friendly and accessible, can't but stand as a proof of the fact that the Chernobyl miniseries was a catalyst to the transformation of the site. After having thoroughly presented and discussed the findings of this research, one can conclude that the representation of the dark heritage site Chernobyl shifted after the launch of the 2019 theme-related mini-series 'Chernobyl' has drastically changed. The technological gazing upon landscapes achieved through the medium of television ultimately affects tourist choices. If this place imaging satisfies the complex underlying motivations of the average tourist/viewer, a sparked interest towards the projected destination is inevitable, no matter how notorious and dangerous. It does not take long before this influence circulates and becomes noticeable by tourist agencies and political figures, who proceed in the necessary steps in order to successfully accommodate changes in the city's newfound image.

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