

**DIVERSIFICATION OF RURAL TOURISM
THROUGH PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES IN
EASTERN EUROPE DESTINATION**

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Abstract: The societies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) contain many and diverse rural cultures which present myriad opportunities for small-scale, high income, locally controlled tourism generation. The negative impact of political and economic change has often been significant in the region's rural areas. But with spatially and structurally dynamic mix of mass and specialist markets to target, there are increasing opportunities for rural attractions to act as a basic resource for tourism organized and sustained through locally owned small enterprises.

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The volume and significance of tourism clearly shows that it is not enough to develop new forms of "alternative" tourism in order to minimize the negative and maximize the positive impacts of tourism development. The whole sector must be developed and managed in a way that it does not damage the natural and socio-cultural environment and this is the responsibility of the world-wide tourism industry. The inappropriate tourism development results in increasing stress on destinations and also in negative changes in the destinations' physical, economic and socio-cultural characteristics. In order to avoid or minimize unfavorable impacts, decision-makers must be aware of all the factors that play a role in the development process.

Rural tourism is often considered to be intrinsically sustainable, for it attracts small number of visitors, there is no need for extensive infrastructural development, tourists are usually genuinely interested in the local culture and traditions. Rural tourism is one of the main priorities of tourism development in many European countries. The market for rural holidays is growing at the same time as the future of many rural regions is uncertain, due to changes in agricultural practice (including the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy in the EU) or the increasing attractiveness of urban living standards. Rural tourism seems to be an appropriate tool to revitalize the declining rural areas and to ensure their sustainable future by job retention or even job creation, increased job diversity, service retention, farm support, broadened cultural provision, landscape and nature conservation or the maintenance of rural arts and crafts as tourist attractions (Ratz and Puczko, 1998).

The societies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) contain many and diverse rural cultures which present myriad opportunities for small-scale, high income, locally controlled tourism generation. The negative impact of political and economic change has often been significant in the region's rural areas. But with spatially and structurally dynamic mix of mass and specialist markets to target, there are increasing opportunities for rural attractions to act as a basic resource for tourism organized and sustained through locally owned small enterprises. The re-imaging of CEE's rural areas, arising out of a co-modification of the countryside and restructuring process (Gannon, 1994), has witness in the past decade rural and nature tourism receiving substantial promotion, with professional marketing undertaken by local and central government, NGOs and private sectors. For example, Poland moved to promoting itself as a "natural" destination; tourism literature

became notably special interest-oriented (Witak, 1996) and emphasized in a specially redistributive dimension. Croatia, while still dependant on the role of its long coastline has been looking to its interior to promote naturally and culture-based tourism (Meler and Ruzic, 1999). Slovenia explicitly reconfigured its tourism emphasis with "The green piece of Europe" branding in 1996, and subsequently adopted an explicit fivefold product segmentation policy (Hall, 1999). In 1995 the Romanian Ministry of Tourism identified rural tourism as a major growth area (Lowenthal, 1997). In the middle of 90s Bulgaria also declared that its future as tourism destination is the rural tourism, based on the various natural features of the county, which has a very limited use of so far.

In the region with a diversity of cultures and histories, "heritage" tourism can generate income and employment for both rural and urban areas. Of course, the irony, if not paradox, of employing the past as an element of restructuring for the future, particularly for newly independent states drawing on their pre-communist semi-colonial heritage, has being long debated. "Heritage" is clearly far from being a value-free concept: economic power and politics influence what is preserved and how it is interpreted (Chance, 1994; Lowenthal, 1997).

Before 1989 in the most of Central and Eastern European countries, as a part of tourism promotion, rural and urban heritage was presented as an integral element of cultural history. For example, in Bulgaria very popular was the open-air museum "Etara", placed near town of Gabrovo. But it is important to mark that the development of those types' cultural attractions tended not to be primarily for international tourism purposes. They were meant to inculcate a sense of identity and pride among Bulgarian citizens. In contrast, places of pilgrimage as the Hercegovinian village of Medjugorje was often irritants to the authorities and not endorsed as a visitor attraction. At the same time, cultural monuments as Rila monastery in Bulgaria was known as holy places and visited by home and international tourists. In conclusion, the tourism development of CEE till 1990 was simultaneously uniform and divers, dependent of the government policy characteristics and obedience.

Almost conversely, the legacy of communism itself has become an aspect of heritage and has attracted international tourism interest. It is a heritage which is defined and constructed largely outside of CEE. It provokes interest and in the same time there is often little desire among those counties citizens to remember the period. Indeed, the legacy

of this period is seen to be strongly dissonant with post-communist aspirations. This is expressed in the apparent lack of interest to interpret it and in attempts to deny or remove the period from each country's past and to create a new imagery which is consistent with post-communists identity.

With the creation of new states systems CEE counties looked back to their heritage - cultural and natural - with the idea to re-discover the national identity and valuables. They found a strong relationship between heritage, local population, identity, tourism, employment and economic development. That relationship was the ground of re-imagining CEE as tourism destination and became a very important part of national objectives associated with EU accession. One of the aspects of pre-accession requirement insists on the work out of a clear strategic policy for development of rural areas. The further economic restructuring of those areas takes notice to the possibilities offered by tourism industry and its forms, new as alternative (in Bulgaria) or rural (in Europe). Within the EU, national governments in CEE have taken up the theme of partnership working, partly in response to the emphasis within the European Commission's Structural Funding Programmes on alliances, collaboration and stakeholder participation. At local, regional and national levels, the administration of rural development programmes requires new institutional forms and ways of working that have been termed "new rural governance" the nature of which defers from government in its emphasis on the inclusion of groups and individuals from outside the usual political sphere and its focus on the relationship between these various groups. A number of terms exist to describe group integration in the development and policy domains, including partnership, collaboration, alliances, community-based, stakeholder-centred, consultative and participatory actions.

The importance of partnership approaches to development is now well recognized. Such links establish long-term, cross-institutional and international framework for integrated community working. In terms of their main characteristics, partnerships are often formal, based on a willingness of partners to cooperate, and the identification of explicit of common goals (OECD, 2005). They provide a platform for the articulation of needs by a number of groups in the interests of consensus and may promote strategic, long-term planning resulting in flexible and innovative ways of working. The critical mass achieved through collaboration can contribute to more effective lobbying, allowing local issues to be afforded a higher profile in development processes. Although difficult to measure, the importance of links forged through partnership approaches can also be seen in the range of processes that contribute to rural development.

One of the possibilities for development in rural areas has been recognized in tourism activities with recreational character. The pattern of rural recreation viewed as "contemporary" or "new" is a vibrant and growing sector, benefiting from diversification as people seek more adventure and independent forms of travel. It has reinvigorated the appeal of rural destinations, opening in the same time new avenues for commercial opportunities. They depend a great deal on understanding the nature and processes of the social construction of rural areas, and the tensions they may induce.

The rural areas in CEE counties are "unknown or slightly known" and have the potential to attract for leisure purposes, which may be associated with open space, fresh

air and tranquility by also representing something special to visitors.

In the modern (urban) societies life has become faster, more stressful and less "authentic". In opposition, the "rural idyll" becomes "a peninsular blending of nostalgia, nature and culture, becoming the romantic combination of man and nature working in harmony..." (Butler, 1998). Such "construction" may vary from individual to individual, and from country to country, but it may also represent cultural similarities. Specific case is the countries on the Balkan peninsula.

This similarities form the grounding for long-term partnership in the aspects of "alternative tourism". It is possible to suggest such sort of coordination development in tourism between counties as Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, for ex ample. For the moment they are separately offering similar rural tourism product on the world market. These products encompass rural attractions such as traditional crafts and folklore, and accommodation of a number of beds, provided by farmhouses accommodation. For example, Bulgaria offers a nostalgic journey through the countryside by horse with possibility to learn more about the harshness and pleasure of rural life in 19th and 20th century. Visitors being met en route by "bandits", kidnapped and taken to an outlaws' hut where share a meal of locally hunted and freshly cooked game around a camp fire. In Romania the "tourism product" is the place its rustic authenticity providing both the backdrop for a holiday and the holiday itself. The nature of its rurality offers opportunities for activities and adventures. The Romanian "rural idyll" becomes a romantic voyage to the past through the hors fair in Wallachia, for example. Greece offers to tourists the opportunity to spend a holiday in "a peaceful natural environment near the simple villages which continue to be attached to land and tradition until today"¹. That way tailored the rural tourism product gives to visitors the possibility to taste home-made preparations and to buy fresh farm produce to take home; to see local cultural customs and events where traditional dress, dance and music express the regions' cultures.

Nevertheless, rural tourism business suffers financial difficulties. In such circumstances, the need of cooperation is obvious. The establishment of sustainable tourism practices through the territories of the mentioned three countries is really valuable. The development of collaboration relations in long-terms will provide the forming of a joint thematically related tourism product, which will represent in the same time the resemblance and the variety of Balkans' culture and nature.

That is a "working" idea, appropriate for market reposition of Balkan's and CEE counties, which possess a huge tourism potential. In other hand the recognition of a shared problem, opportunities for mutual benefit, strength in number, or the requirement of funding bodies will each provide the impetus for same form of cooperative venture.

It is generally well accepted that "rural tourism" must be integrated with cooperative-based development initiatives. In Balkans' countries tourism's role in integrated rural development is fundamentally an economic one. The question of how tourism and recreation's development may be integrated into wider rural development planning is critical to the success of both businesses and regions in which they thrive. Collaboration and cooperation are

¹ Sources of Ministry of Agriculture of Greece, 1994.

required of business in the development of networks, partnerships and region bodies that can work in collective interest. The aims achieved by collaboration practice are more approachable and qualitative and quantitative measurable.

Certainly, the critical mass required to attract visitors, and generate regional distinctiveness, from which a quality image can be derived, is best achieved through collaborative working practices. More realistic guidelines for Balkans' counties engaging in new forms of rural governance are required if collaboration is to become synonymous with sustainable partnership working.

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