

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM – A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Dorin Paul Bac^{1*}, Emre Ozan Aksoz²

¹ Department of Economics, Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania

² Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of Tourism, Anadolu University, Eskisehir, Turkey

dbac@uoradea.ro

ozana@anadolu.edu.tr

Abstract: *Sustainable tourism has become a new method of practicing tourism. It has emerged in the last part of the 20th century, from the efforts of academia as a response to the increasing negative effects of mass tourism, noticeable all over the world. At the same time, sustainable tourism is considered by some a utopia, a narrow niche of the tourism market, with limited perspectives. From a theoretical standpoint, it is highly debated with no consensus regarding its definition, features and principles. In recent years, although significant steps have been taken especially by international organizations, like UNEP (The United Nations Environment Programme) and UNWTO (The World Tourism Organization), sustainable tourism still faces numerous challenges. In the present paper, we have collected information from several authors and organizations and have presented some contemporary challenges for sustainable tourism. For our research, we have tried to identify several common challenges for six selected countries in Central and Eastern Europe – The Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, and also go into a more detailed look in the case of Romania. Finally, we consider that if we can identify specific regional challenges, we might find regional solutions and answers. Considering the numerous similarities between the six countries, there might be common solutions for the benefit of the entire region.*

Keywords: sustainable tourism; regional; local community; Central and Eastern Europe.

JEL classification: Z32.

1. Introduction

Since the early 90s, the term “sustainable tourism” has been used more and more in academic circles, but unfortunately, only to a lesser extent, among entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. Even if some incipient forms of the concept were used earlier, we consider that the starting point for the emergence of the concept of “sustainable tourism” was the publication of the first issue of the Journal of Sustainable Tourism in 1993 (Weaver, 2006: 10; Hunter, 2002: 3; Dodds and Butler, 2009: 43).

* Corresponding Author: Dorin Paul Bac

According to some authors, this emergent form of practicing tourism implied – from the supply side – small companies or entrepreneurs, with the declared purpose to: support the community, environmental conservation and protection of the local culture (Petrovic-Randelovic, 2012: 85). One of the most important spokespersons of this alternative form of tourism, David Weaver, from the Griffith Business School, considered that "the main difference between old and new forms of tourism is moving the focus from the well-being of the tourists to the host community" (Weaver, 1998: 31).

During the 1990s, the concept was highly debated, being received with hostility by the tourism industry, dissatisfied by putting any limits to growth. It considered sustainable tourism an "ivory tower", with no relation to the market. Sustainable tourism was also considered "intellectually arrogant, expensive, elitist and useless" (Lane, 2009: 20).

This attitude was not confined only to the tourism industry. Governments and local authorities have not taken seriously the concept either, as classic tourism brought them numerous benefits: jobs, incomes from taxes, investment opportunities etc. Mass-media did not give much attention to the concept of sustainable tourism, mainly because it is much easier to denigrate, than to explain. And academic researchers have found that sustainable tourism was "an impossible dream" (Lane, 2009: 21). This was best explained by Wheeler:

"We have, on the one hand, a problem of mass tourism growing globally, out of control, at an alarming rate. And what is our answer? Small-scale, slow, steady, controlled development. They just do not add up" (Wheeler, cited by Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005: 32).

In the last years, the general attitude towards sustainable tourism has changed, but it is still far from being fully accepted (Badulescu et al, 2014: 1114). It still faces several challenges that range from theoretical debates in academic circles to acceptance in the offices of hospitality companies.

2. Research methodology

The main objective of our paper is to analyze from a theoretical point of view the challenges faced by sustainable tourism in six Central and Eastern European countries, according to authors and researchers, and available data.

According to the World Tourism Organization, Romania is part of Central and Eastern Europe region, along with the other countries, such as: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. We can notice that this region is highly heterogeneous and large in terms of total area and there are significant cultural differences between countries.

In 2015, the region recorded 126.5 million tourists and around 50 billion USD in receipts (UNWTO, 2016). In percentages, the region represents almost 11% of the global tourism market and 20% of the European market (UNWTO, 2016).

For our analysis we have chosen only the countries that are EU members, and have similar profiles, in order to have a more homogenous study group: The Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. The criteria for choosing these countries can be split into five categories. Firstly, from a geographical point of view, all six states are located in the western part of Central and Eastern Europe and each country has various landforms and the climate is relatively similar – temperate continental climate.

Secondly, regarding the political situation, all countries are EU members in different stages of integration (Schengen countries: Poland, Slovakia and Hungary; Eurozone members: Slovakia). All countries are members of NATO (www.nato.int/structure/countries.htm) and all countries are emergent of the former Soviet Bloc.

Thirdly, from a cultural perspective, all six countries were in contact with several empires (Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, the Prussian Empire), which

left their mark on the local culture and the prevailing religion is Christianity (Orthodoxy in Romania and Bulgaria, Catholicism in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary) (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>).

Table 1: Overview of tourism indicators in 2015

Country	Population (Million)	International tourist arrivals (Million)	International tourism receipts (Billion US\$)
Bulgaria	7.1	7.8	3.1
Hungary	9.8	14.3	5.3
Poland	37.9	16.7	9.7
Romania	19.7	2.2	1.7
Slovakia	5.4	7.4	2.3
Czech Republic	10.5	11.1	6.1

Source: UNWTO (2016); Eurostat (2015a).

Fourthly, all six countries have gone through a transition from a planned economy to market economy, after the political changes they made in 1989.

Lastly, from a general tourism perspective, all countries have significant natural and man-made tourism resources, and their capitals (Budapest, Prague) have been major attractions for foreigners (Table 1).

3. Results and findings

International tourism represented an important factor in the region even during the communist regime. Foreign capital brought in by international tourists was used to help “the generation of convertible currency and provide a positive image of the country and region” (Hall, 2002: 112). In recent years, many countries from this region have established themselves as important tourism destinations.

There are many challenges for the sustainable development of tourism in Central and Eastern Europe, in general and in Romania in particular. We have split our findings in two parts. In the first part we have presented a general overview of the challenges common in the region, and in the second part we have shifted our focus on Romania and its specific challenges.

3.1. Regional perspective

Central and Eastern European societies have numerous and diverse cultures that present a wide range of opportunities for new generations of high income tourists.

Firstly, although participation and community involvement in tourism development are important, Hall (2000: 449) identified three factors that hinder its development:

1. The legacy of almost half a century of centralized top-down administration, which allowed few opportunities to experience the real bottom-up development and real involvement in decision-making about the community;
2. The absence of collective action with their own initiative during the communist regimes;
3. The well-known ambivalence of the concept of "community", which had a spatial and social interaction value, but without taking into account the aspirations and values of the people living together.

Secondly, ecological restrictions that have been tried to be implemented in the post-communist period encountered resistance from the local population. It took considerable effort to involve local people in: the conversion of land in protected areas or nature reserves and the concept of sustainable tourism. Especially in the early years of market-economy, protected areas were destroyed or affected by the use of illegal materials (Knorn, et al, 2012: 209; Kroumova, 2011: 39).

Thirdly, sustainable tourism promoters choose packages in less developed regions with poor infrastructure, presenting them as unspoiled and virgin regions to the people interested in sustainable tourism (Badulescu et al., 2015: 73). In many cases, residents will support this kind of travel packages, considering that tourism will lead to improvement of infrastructure and local economy (Ivy and Copp, 1999: 439).

Fourthly, debates on the implementation of small projects, local control that respects tradition and local culture, rarely take into account gender issues. Attempts to involve women in the development process of tourism business were hit by two obstacles: the legacy of a half century in which the woman had a condition of subordination, and Central and Eastern European societies centered on men (Mertus, 1998: 476-478).

Fifthly, private tourism companies in Central and Eastern Europe face significant competition from multinationals which, although important for the integration of these countries into the global economy, "represent possible threats to the integrity and sovereignty, economic, cultural and politics, a time when governments want to reduce their responsibilities" (Hall, 2000: 450).

Sixthly, research in Romania and other Eastern European countries lags due to the fact that they have joined the EU in later years and many processes in the field of environment protection are still in development (Orlikowska, 2016: 223)

Seventhly, according to available data (Figure 1), we can notice that in the case of the selected countries, the surface area of protected areas is higher than in the rest of the EU. This could represent an advantage for ecotourism and rural tourism, as protected areas are an important resource for attracting visitors. The only problem arises from the "protection" component and the way it is put into practice.

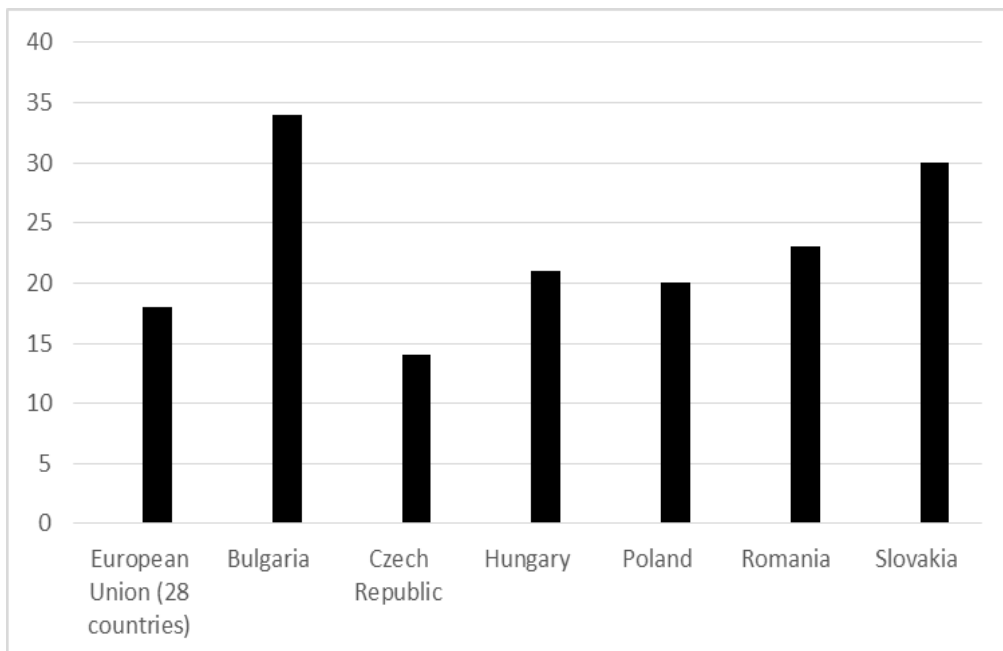


Figure 1: Protected areas as % of the total area of the country
Source: Eurostat (2015b).

3.2. National perspective: the case of Romania

From a national perspective, The National Council for Research in Tourism (INCDT 2009) identified a series of concerns about ecotourism, which can be extrapolated to sustainable tourism in general, issues that are the responsibility of national and / or local authorities.

The administration is not yet organized in many natural and national parks, which is responsible with the effective management of these areas. There are many conflicts between local communities, the park administration and local authorities on the regulation of activities that can take place in the protected park. Also, the parks are facing serious problems of under-funding, which has as a direct consequence an inefficient number of rangers with a low "vigilance". Also regarding financing, we can mention difficult access to refundable and / or non-refundable funds for the initiation of business or investment in infrastructure (Săseanu et al., 2010: 467, Bordanc and Turnock, 1997: 3).

The approach to inspections by state authorities, bureaucracy and fees for issuing permits forces much of the rural small businesses to work illegally. For the issue of classification of tourist accommodation, several criteria must be met and documentation must be made at first seems relatively simple. The problem comes when each item from the list requires documentation in turn. Unfortunately, in Romania, neither the ministry nor city-halls provide entrepreneurs an advisory office that will help those who want to invest in tourism.

Unfortunately, there are many tourists who believe that if you choose a particular destination they are practicing ecotourism, without taking into account related activities such as:

- actions to preserve the environment and biodiversity;
- activities to minimize impacts on the environment;
- limit over-exploitation of tourism resources;
- increasing environmental responsibility through information and knowledge;
- choice of accommodation units of type hostels, cottages, camping (Mihai, 2009: 493).

In addition, in Romania there is no official system of certification of ecotourism destinations. In this regard, the Association of Ecotourism of Romania (2016) created an ecotourism certification system, which will be applied at the national level in the shortest time (Barna et al, 2011: 92). This certification is extremely important because the rural population does not have the ability to get the European Ecolabel. In general, the attitude of entrepreneurs is quite reluctant towards eco-labels, and they are not encouraged, neither the authorities nor by the market, to take steps in this direction.

Sustainable tourism faces a number of challenges at a local level: from tourism resources which are not protected adequately to the mindset of tourists and local people. From the perspective of tourism resources, the major challenges are: inappropriate or excessive grazing, illegal logging, poaching, and last but not least uncontrolled tourism etc. (Susanu, 2007: 1220; Blaj and Stanciu, 2009: 513; Ioja et al, 2010:2475; Badulescu, 2004: 23).

The main challenges observed in protected areas are:

- violation of rules of access - the movement of tourists on unmarked trails in unauthorized places;
- camping and fireplaces in unauthorized places;
- collection or destruction of certain species of spontaneous flora;
- cutting of wood for fuel;
- abandonment of large quantities of waste along communication routes around points of interest;
- maladministration of existing tourist facilities within protected natural areas, generating large amounts of waste;
- vandalizing of signs or information panels, boards and poles on walking trails;
- destruction of geologic and geomorphologic elements;
- degradation of natural or man-made landmarks with inscriptions or drawings;
- degradation through erosion of the waking trails in high traffic areas;
- disturbing the fauna (INCDT, 2009: 1011).

A modern problem is endangering the natural areas by ATV (all-terrain vehicle) and off-road motorcycles, driven in higher numbers especially in mountain regions. In 2008, the Romanian Senate legislated the ban on access to motorcycles, ATVs or motor sledges in protected natural areas, driven off access and forestry roads. The only question remains: who will implement the law, as there are very few rangers in the parks to verify or to stop the extreme sports enthusiasts.

Also in these regions there is an increasing logging activity, and improper disposal of sawdust on the streams - that can lead to environmental degradation in many parks. Lastly, we must take into account the risk of urbanization of the rural population, with direct implications in the loss of the cultural heritage. One cause may be low awareness of local communities on what constitutes national and local natural heritage and its importance for the present but especially for the future.

From the point of view of tourism services suppliers, one can notice a poor education level of tour guides and staff that manages the guest-house, as there is a void in the training system suitable for staff working in tourism, specialized in sustainable tourism (Tane and Thierheimer, 2009: 906).

There are many organizations or institutions dealing with rural and / or sustainable tourism, but few local associations, involving the local community. The aim of these associations is to help the collaboration, cooperation and decision making process that affect the lives of local people (Roberts and Simpson 1999: 321).

The rural infrastructure is not up to the standards that provide pleasant experiences to Romanian and foreign tourists. The main shortcomings are given by: the absence of water, sewer, gas, garbage collection systems and snow removal in winter.

5. Conclusions

We can conclude that sustainable tourism still faces numerous challenges. They have changed during the years, but they still raise problems. Due to the similarities between the selected countries we can argue that sustainable tourism faces several common challenges in the region.

Due to the geographical situation, both climate change and migration – two of the most important challenges faced by the contemporary society – influence all six selected countries. So, solutions should be found and implemented at regional level, not a national one. We consider that there is no miracle solution, but we can still formulate some general directions for the future development of sustainable tourism.

It should all start with education. We include here both specific information about environmental protection, recycling, social equity taught – or explained – in schools and organizing study-camps and trips for pupils and students, which will allow them to experience sustainable tourism first-hand. At the same time, in rural areas, education issues need to be addressed for school children and adults alike in order for them to be prepared for the negative effects of the social, technological and environmental changes that influence their quality of life.

The implication of the government is second, but it is strongly intertwined with education. The government needs to exercise its right to model and chisel the traits of individuals, so urgent and drastic measure need to be taken for the protection of the environment.

The paper has several shortcomings, due to several factors:

- the lack of data on sustainable tourism at national levels. Countries – and European ones make no exception - still consider tourism a source of income and disregard the negative effects it might generate. At the same time the UNWTO is still trying to create a framework for collecting data about sustainable tourism;
- the emergence of global-scale challenges – immigration, terrorist attacks, climate change etc. – which attracted the focus of public opinion and the mass-media.

Based on the findings of this paper, we will try to collect more statistical data in order to analyze and further our research in this field. The main focus points for our future research should be:

- country comparison on the topic of legislation and specific measure to help tourism become more sustainable;
- how does EU membership influence the sustainable development and sustainable tourism at a national level;
- success stories and failures of public and private initiatives in the field of sustainable tourism.

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Bio-note

Bac Dorin Paul is an associate professor and the head of the Department of Economics and Business of the University of Oradea (Romania). His main areas of expertise are tourism, sustainable development, ecotourism and sustainable tourism.

Aksoz Emre Ozan is an associate professor at Faculty of Tourism, Anadolu University (Turkey). His main areas of expertise are urban tourism, destination marketing and accessible tourism.