

12 Tourism in the Carpathian area

12.1 Situation and problems

Tourism is one of the most dynamically developing branches of the economy in the Carpathian countries. Before the system change, it presupposed a bureaucratic and humiliating procedure to get a passport and visa to travel abroad. Because of the non-convertibility of Central European currencies, it was also a very expensive decision and only few people could afford it. After the system change, most of these obstacles ceased to exist: visa obligations had been abolished in most relations and Central European currencies became convertible. It became every citizen's right to have a passport. Parallel with international tourism, domestic tourism also increased. Investments in tourism increased as well.

12.1.1 The main indicators of tourism in Carpathian countries are the following

The number of hotels has increased by nearly 60 percent in ten years. The number of beds increased somewhat slower because new hotels were in average smaller. The number of guests increased parallel, so capacity utilisation remained constant. The share of foreign guests (non-residents) increased somewhat from 42 to 46 percent (*Table 11–12*).

From the different types of tourism, here we have to concentrate on those which are most important and most specific to the mountainous areas of the Carpathian region.

Table 11

Number of hotel accommodations in Carpathian countries 1996–2006

Country	Number of hotels		Increase in %	Number of hotel beds		Increase in %
	1996	2006		1996	2006	
Czech Republic	2,737	4,314	157.62	167,058	236,104	141.33
Hungary	1,687	1,921	113.87	127,650	154,060	120.69
Poland	1,247	2,301	184.52	102,272	178,056	174.10
Romania	2,362	4,125	174.64	204,374	226,383	110.77
Slovakia	476	,922	193.70	41,700	57,985	139.05
Total	8,509	13,583	159.63	643,054	852,588	132.58

Source: Eurostat.

Table 12

Nights spent in the hotels 1996–2006

Country	Nights spent in hotels (in 1000s)								
	by residents			by non-residents			together		
	1996	2006	increase in %	1996	2006	increase in %	1996	2006	increase in %
Czech Republic	9,908	8,854	89.36	10,858	17,035	156.89	20,766	25,889	124.67
Hungary	4,135	6,622	160.15	7,449	9,127	122.53	11,584	15,749	135.95
Poland	4,633	13,910	300.24	3,391	7,911	233.29	8,024	21,821	271.95
Romania	16,254	14,929	91.85	2,210	3,169	143.39	18,464	18,098	98.02
Slovakia	3,103	3,142	101.26	3,911	3,650	93.33	7,014	6,792	96.83
Total	38,033	47,454	124.77	27,819	40,892	146.99	65,852	88,346	134.16

Source: Eurostat.

12.1.2 Winter sports tourism

The best winter sport facilities in the Carpathian region are in Slovakia, Poland and Romania. The best Czech skiing resorts are outside of the Carpathian region, the Ukrainian resorts are not yet developed, and Hungary's ski trails are in a rather poor condition.

Slovakia is in a special position from this aspect as here winter sport tourism is the most important kind of tourism for the whole country, while in other countries, this significance is not so outstanding. More than 30 percent of all tourists in Slovakia come here in the winter season.

Three years ago, in 2004–2005, the storm-wind somewhat spoiled the season, in 2006–2007 there was hardly any snow in this part of Europe. For 2007–2008 experts are expecting a long and good season. Domestic financial groups have invested a lot into hotels and residence parks. Nevertheless, they wanted to invest also into ski tracks, pistes and ski-lifts as well. And in this question a new controversy emerged between financial interests and environmentalists. Investors want to establish these new ski-lifts in the place of the perished forests. The representatives of the Tatra National Park (TANAP) are not against sport and tourism, but only for pedestrians, bicycles, in winter only for ski-runners. They insist upon, that at least half of the National Park must remain intact. Today, there is tree felling economic activity in all lower areas of the National Park; only clear-felling is prohibited (that is the consequence of the too large scale, but ambiguously defined NP creation, not only in Slovakia, but in all Carpathian countries). Conflicts concerning the estab-

lishment of new ski-lifts emerged in other Carpathian countries (Poland, Ukraine) as well.

Nowadays, there is a spatial concentration process in winter (ski) sport. Skiers are choosing the best equipped, most fashionable skiing resorts. E.g. Hungarian skiers first abandoned the domestic skiing areas then partly also the Slovakian pistes (earlier it was for most of them the main destination), now they are choosing the Austrian resorts. In the last years, it happened for the first time that domestic tourism in Slovakia surpassed the international one. 42 percent of tourists were Slovaks, 32 percent Czechs, on the third place were with equal 8-8 percent share Hungarians and Poles. Ukraine and Russia would represent a new tourism potential, but visa problems are serious obstacles.

In the future, however, Austrian and Slovak ski resorts have to prepare for facing a larger challenge with much longer duration. It is the climatic change. It is to be expected that the occurrence of winters with insufficient or no snow will be more and more frequent. Mountain resorts have to find other attractions for tourism: new sports, new entertainments. In some countries like Austria, it is not only local but also a national problem.

12.1.3 Rural (village) tourism

Rural (village) tourism is the most dynamic type of tourism in the Carpathian countries. It cannot yet be compared to the Austrian and German ones, but the dynamics is enormous. Especially, if one considers that 20 years ago this kind of tourism practically did not exist in these countries. In Romania, 20 years ago it was still prohibited to put up a foreigner in somebody's home even for one night, and those who violated this rule could expect severe punishment. Today, there are villages – also in Romania – where on every second house there is a small sign that the landlord/landlady is a member of a rural tourism network.

Rural tourism has many advantages and positive impacts:

- It yields additional activity and income for the rural population and in this way it is an instrument against the depopulation of rural areas.
- It enables a closer contact between host and guest and – if the language is not an obstacle – it helps to get more and genuine information about life and customs of the visited county, region and settlement, than in an international standard hotel. But also for hosts: tourists are not any more strange aliens, but human beings who enjoy their company and are interested in their lives.

But, undoubtedly, rural tourism has also some dangers:

- It contributes to the differentiation of villages in a certain area. Not all villages have equal access to tourism possibilities. Villages, having some historic, natural or even literary sights, or closer to tourist routes or highways, have better chance to host rural tourists than others. By the passing of time it can cause substantial welfare differences. It can even sharpen national conflicts (if German tourists are accommodated in German and Hungarians in Hungarian villages, while neighbouring Romanian villages are excluded from this money making opportunity).
- Rural tourism can deform the image of villages. Hosts, in order to meet growing tourist demand, enlarge their houses, or build different buildings for guests, which, though having all comfort, do not fit to the old village image. It can be avoided if the building stock is under protection, but only a few villages can be protected.
- Rural tourism can deform also the people and their customs in the village. Adapting themselves to the tourists' expectations, they can lose the essence of their traditions and customs and are performing a false image of rural life to the tourists and also to themselves.

In spite of these dangers, rural tourism is one of the most promising kind of tourism in the Carpathian area and must be enhanced by several instruments. But – similarly to all other types of tourism – it can have harmful impacts, if it is concentrated in a few places. Therefore it should be extended and distributed in the most equitable way, as far as it is possible.

12.1.4 “Nostalgia” tourism

“Nostalgia” tourism is a kind of tourism, very specific, unique to the Central-European, and even more to the Carpathian area. The name “Nostalgia” does not fully express the essence of this kind of tourism, but other name could not be found. But it must be mentioned here, because it covers a fairly large share of tourism and tourists in the Carpathian area.

During the wars in the 20th century, state borders in Central Europe have changed substantially and large groups – several millions – of people have been resettled from their homes to other areas far away from the original home land. Most of these people are already dead, but their children and grandchildren are alive and the memory of old homelands and changed borders were passed over to them by parents, and they want to see these places. Communist governments wanted to repress this memory, but after the system change, they came again to the surface but not always in the most fortunate way. Anyway, millions of young and old Germans, Hungarians, the Polish people and the Jews wish to see the places,

cities and villages, which were part also of their family's history or of their national history. Poles represent the largest group of tourists in some Ukrainian towns and cities, Germans in some places in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania and Hungarians in some settlements in Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania. And in the recent time even American and Israeli Jewish tourists have visited some towns and regions in growing numbers, searching for the roots of their families.

These "nostalgia" tourists were not always welcomed by the new residents of these places. And also the visitors have not always behaved adequately. But "nostalgia" tourism was and is profitable for both parts and – despite difficulties – it also contributed to the mutual acquaintance and to the overcoming of bad prejudices.

European borders do not represent any more obstacles to tourism and travel. "Nostalgia" tourism will gradually lose its original intention and character. But tourists, by leaving their country and entering another, should be aware that it is another country, with other official language, other official names of cities and places, other customs and regulations, which they have to comply. And the hosts should accept, that the history of their region is partly a common history shared with the visitors, and that their visitors- as every human being – have some right also to "nostalgia". They can even profit from this type of tourism by offering guidance and brochures on the language of their visitors.

12.2 Policy recommendations for tourism in the Carpathian region

12.2.1 To create conditions for sustainable tourism in the Carpathian region

The Carpathian Mountains, with their diverse natural treasures and long preserved traditions, present a lot of ideal sites for tourism development. In some regions there has been no advantage taken of these values so far, while in quite a number of other destinations in the Carpathians even mass tourism development has already begun.

However, if tourism development is to be sustainable in the future, the tourism-related development of the Carpathian Mountains should be based on the same overall goals: Long-term economic prosperity of local communities, the preservation of tourism's basis – sound nature and lively culture – as well as on ensuring visitor satisfaction. These goals perfectly support each other and are applicable to all kinds of (potential) tourist destinations.

Areas where uncontrolled or mass tourism already plays an important role should try to become more conversant with the principles of sustainability. In other regions, which face the typical threats of many rural areas, e.g. high unemployment

rates, poor local economy and migration into cities, starting sustainable tourism development can offer a viable option with benefits for the entire local community.

Moreover, sustainable tourism development can also serve as an alternative economic solution where less environmentally and socially friendly economic activities threaten the local nature and culture.

Benefits of sustainable tourism for areas with many visitors

A beautiful environment and rich cultural heritage may draw the attention of a lot of visitors to an area, even if tourism development there is only fragmentary or non-existent. In these cases, the negative impacts of tourism may be particularly critical, as unplanned development of singular tourist businesses and infrastructure leads to unmanageable threats for nature (e.g. through trails that cut through bio-corridors) and society (e.g. growing inequalities in a region). The consequence thereof can be the irretrievable ruin of the region's treasures and thus of its tourism-related potential. In order to prevent such threats and to allow for a controlled development that benefits the whole local community and its environment in the long-term, comprehensive sustainable tourism development represents a suitable alternatives.

Sustainable tourism has potential in areas where tourism is not yet developed

Development approaches very often focus on the economic sector, not taking into account the impacts of their activities on sensitive local cultures and environments in the Carpathian Mountains. On the other hand, environmentalists who are active in the natural environment of the Carpathians concentrate solely on the conservation of nature without paying attention to the necessity of the local population to make a living. The comprehensive approach of sustainable tourism based on the CBD Guidelines takes into account both important factors: the need to use natural resources for the well-being of the local population and the obligation to maintain the natural environment for both its intrinsic value and as a long-term source for the economic viability of tourism development.

Sustainable tourism as a better alternative

Natural resources represent one of the most important factors for economic development in the Carpathian countries. Very often, these resources are used in a rather short-termed manner, namely by exploitation through logging and mining. Pointing out merely the economic problems which follow from these forms of use, two facts have to be mentioned: firstly, that the resources can be capitalised on only once and secondly, that the benefits derived are not equally shared among the local population. Sustainable tourism development strives to avoid these shortcomings and thus represents a good alternative. It aims at conserving natural re-

sources for the sake of enduring economic viability (continual use of resources) while at the same time using them in order to achieve benefits for the local people.

12.2.2 The Via Carpathica

All Carpathian countries have a network of tourist tracks running through the most picturesque landscapes and cultural and natural heritage sites of the respective countries.

One of the Carpathian Project's actions on the ground is the development of "Via Carpatica", a trail network that runs through all of the Carpathian countries and combines projects and sites with sustainable tourism development. This trail network will not only underline the importance of a joint strategic approach across the Carpathians, but will also support the individual sites in a practical manner through the exchange of best practices and common publicity.

An increasing flow of visitors will benefit from this network. In this respect an increase of accommodation capacities must be taken into account.

Large accommodation facilities (hotels, motels) and car access must be avoided at high altitudes; instead huts and camps have to be built in new key locations.

The mountain huts in the Romanian Carpathians became insufficient in the last decades, as number and capacity, meeting poorly the needs of travellers, as regards the number of places and comfort.

An important number of mountain huts must be created, with adequate capacities and services; this type of accommodation being easier to build, the most environmental friendly and educative for the public.

Mountain culture must be promoted, by the specialized associations, all over this network, in order to inform and guide tourists for better understanding the nature, and limitations imposed by this special environment.

12.2.3 Reconstruction or development of Forest Railways for tourism purposes

For many of our tourist areas, transport infrastructure in one form or another already exists. It may to a greater, or lesser, extent be suitable for use, or for development as part of a Tourist Strategy. An impact assessment of its use for what may be new purposes should be carried out. Thus, many rural areas in the mountain region have narrow gauge forestry or other industry railways whose industrial use is either reducing, or has disappeared. The infrastructure, or the works associated with the line of route may still exist and can be economically reused in one form or another. This can often be an economical option when compared with opening up sensitive rural areas by the development of other modal access, particularly uncontrolled modes such as roads.

In this respect, the term Tourist Railways includes railways of any track gauge and history that can provide a positive benefit to an area's development by the sustainable provision of environmentally friendly access to the area or to the specific attraction concerned.

In most cases, the railway will have been part of the area for many years. The recycling of its assets to serve for a developing tourism industry provides an alternative to use new scarce resources to serve what is in many cases the only potential source of regeneration of an area and to serve for fostering ion of support for a sustainable economy for the local population.

It can be observed in many countries that there is a positive "steam effect" that delivers extra visitor numbers where historic locomotives and rolling stock are used on tourist trains.

For many years, the planned economies of the Carpathian countries have tended to separate public transport from local interest as being one of the services provided by national government. This has prevented changes in local economies being reflected in changes to local railways, or making such reaction slow, resulting in alternative solutions such as road transport being founded by the population. The resulting downward spiral in the economics of operation of local railways has lead to the inevitable decision at national level of closure.

The need, before it is too late, is to follow the example of other countries that faced the same situation and to pass the ownership and control of local railways to local authorities and to local people. By that means, local decisions can be made which reflect the needs of the local community. Whether it is to run trains at different times for market days or special events, or to get the local community and children to help tidy up their local station, or even to sell off redundant buildings to local businesses for conversion for other uses, the best decisions for local and tourist railways are always going to be the local decisions.

This can be seen in practical examples across the world tourist railways already existing in every member-state of the Carpathian Convention carrying varying visitor numbers. Alongside those which operate today there are many potential projects that could contribute to the regeneration of their local communities as part of a robust strategy for sustainable tourism paralleling conservation. To achieve that, there is a need for the recognition of financial support and security to go hand in hand with local community support sites.

Governments are asked to sign up to a recognition that tourist railways, particularly those making use of existing heritage equipment and structures that have been part of their local landscape for many years, can play a vital part in a sustainable Tourism strategy.

As such, policies should be put in place to ensure that such assets are protected against predatory destruction or sale for short-term gain, either privately or by the local or state authorities.

Policies are needed to make it possible to transfer ownership and responsibility for local railways into the care of local communities authorized for making decisions on maximising the contribution of such railways to sustainable regeneration of their areas. Such transfers should be supported by funding agreements to provide financial resources for the initial transition to local control and development of a sustainable business structure in a robust manner.

Positive encouragement is needed to make partnerships of differing organisations working on brightening the long term future of their region. This includes in particular the encouragement of cross-border partnerships of groups with common interests that could make them more eligible for trans-national project funding.

Tourist Railways are a success story in many countries of the world. The Carpathian community of countries, entrusted with one of the few remaining unspoilt mountain areas in Europe, is able to take steps to ensure that their success can be spread through this region in partnership with ecological policies to protect the landscape.