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Tourism And Environmentally Sustainable Regional Development: The Case Of Romania

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**THE 40th CONGRESS OF THE
EUROPEAN REGIONAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION
AUGUST 29 – SEPTEMBER 1, 2000 IN BARCELONA, SPAIN**

**TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF ROMANIA**

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Abstract: This paper proposes an evaluation of the actual state of tourism development in Romania as well as an overview on the favouring and disfavouring factors that must be considered by tourism strategy. The relationship between tourism – regional development – environmental sustainability is analysed starting from the requirements of an integral perspective on regional strategy and policy. At least two basic questions are revealed by such an approach, namely the multiplier effects of tourism expenditures within local/regional economies and the relation between tourism and resources it uses in terms of spatial planning, touristic zoning and consistency with environmental sustainability criteria. The theoretical aspects entailed by these questions are combined with the solutions proposed by the Romanian experts in order to create an environmentally sustainable sectoral structure at regional level in the long run.

1. Introduction

Within the Romanian strategy of transition to the market economy tourism is addressed as a key sector, able to essentially contribute to the general economic recovery. However, owing to the delays and mistakes in implementing the reform mechanisms, this objective is far from being achieved.

This paper proposes an evaluation of the actual state of tourism development in Romania as well as an overview on the favouring and disfavouring factors that must be considered by tourism strategy.

But, as transition is not a purpose on its own, the strategy conceived for this period should take into account not only the objectives specific to this stage but also the long-term goals, expressing the time-continuity of strategic choices. Therefore, according to the requirements of the modern society, this strategy must consider sustainability as a critical challenge. Obviously, the key elements underlying sustainability – “ equity (the achievement of widespread social justice in the distribution and accessibility to resources both in space and time), environment (acknowledgement of nature’s rights and values), development (economic development able to guarantee both quality and quantity of natural resources)” (Barbanente et al., 1994) – have to be approached in the specific context of the Romanian realities, with a particular distribution over time and space of the main objectives.

In the case of tourism the sustainability question is mainly addressed in terms of relationship between tourism and resources it uses. In a broader sense the environmental resources used by tourism include not only the natural resources but also the man-made ones (historical, cultural).

The economic and social benefits of tourism are largely acknowledged. But the costs generated by this activity should not be ignored either. In this context the threat to the quality and even the existence of the resources the tourism depend must be considered as a problem that needs urgent recognition and adequate solutions – both supply and demand-side oriented – within tourism strategies and policies.

The literature dedicated to the environmental issue in tourism tackles it mainly as a problem of resource management and proposes the intervention in the system following a set of principles deriving from sustainable development concept: resource valuation, output equity, carrying capacities and homeostatic systems adjustment (Ashworth, 1994). Particular aspects in implementing these principles appear when space is explicitly taken into consideration. This paper discusses the relationship between

tourism – regional development – environmental sustainability starting from the requirements of an integral perspective on regional strategy and policy. At least two basic questions are revealed by such an approach, namely the multiplier effects of tourism expenditures within local/regional economies and the relation between tourism and the resources it uses in terms of spatial planning, touristic zoning and consistency with environmental sustainability criteria. The theoretic aspects entailed by these questions are combined with the solutions proposed by the Romanian experts in order to create an environmentally sustainable sectoral structure at regional level in the long run.

2. The Strategy of Tourism Development in Romania

Considering its potential contribution to the general economic recovery tourism is approached as one of the priority sectors of the Romanian economy. Nevertheless statistics and economic analyses reveal unsatisfactory results of tourism in the context of the overall economic decline.

Thus, the number of touristic accommodation units decreased from 3213 in 1990 to 2905 in 1995 especially owing to the decrease in the number of touristic chalets (from 226 to 175), campings (from 217 to 141) and touristic villas and bungalows (from 1551 to 1324) whereas the number of hotels and motels raised from 830 to 929. Since 1993 two new accommodation categories have been recorded, namely boarding houses and agro-touristic boarding houses, with an increase from 16 units in 1993 to 128 units in 1995 and 160 units in 1997 for boarding houses and from 61 units in 1996 to 159 in 1997 for agro-touristic boarding houses. Actually these categories had the main contribution to the increase in the number of touristic accommodation units to 3049 in 1997.

By touristic destination the hierarchy is as follows (figures in parentheses indicate the average duration of staying): county residences, including Bucharest (1.8 days), mountains (3.3), seaside (6.7), spas (8.0), the Delta of Danube (2.6).

Among the 817 hotels existing in 1997, 15 were 4-star hotels, 84 – 3-star, 379 – 2-star and 273 – 1-star hotels.

The number of tourists accommodated in the touristic accommodation units decreased from 12,297 thousand persons (of which 1432 thou foreigners) in 1990 to 7070 (of which 766 thou foreigners) in 1995 and 5727 (of which 833 thou foreigners) in 1997.

The general index of using the touristic accommodation capacity in function dropped from 57.8% in 1990 to 45% in 1995 and 37.7% in 1997; the partial indices recorded the following evolution: hotels and motels – from 65.8% to 48.2% and 40.3%, touristic inns – from 46.6% to 11.6% and 11.3%, campings – from 46.5% to 29.7% and 23%.

As regards the international tourism, the arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania diminished from 6.5 millions in 1990 to 5.4 millions in 1995 and 5.1 millions in 1997. The departures of Romanian visitors abroad also diminished, from 8.4 millions in 1990 to 5.7 millions in 1995 but then increased to 6.5 millions in 1997 (especially due to the growth of departures for rest, leisure and holidays) . By the purpose of visit 47.9% of foreigners came for rest, leisure, holidays, 35.3% for transit, 2.7% for business and professional reasons, 0.7% for border traffic, 13.4% as accompanying staff. The departures of Romanians abroad recorded the following distribution: 87.5% for rest, leisure, holidays, 3.4% for business and professional reasons, 2.4% for border traffic, 6.7% as accompanying staff.

In 1995 (respectively 1997), by main origin country, 680 (766) thou arrivals were from the EU, 714 (604) from Bulgaria, 1054 (1080) from the Republic of Moldova, 489 (302) from Turkey, 683 (622) from Ukraine, 639 (796) from Hungary, 66 (81) from America, 113 (125) from Asia. The departures of the Romanians were oriented to the EU --396 (484), Bulgaria 478 (573), Yugoslavia – 1266 (1390), the Republic of Moldova – 113 (118), Turkey – 537 (555), Hungary – 2659 (2782), America – 22 (28), Asia – 67 (88).

Starting from these realities the favouring and disfavouring factors in the transition period have been identified within a comprehensive diagnosis, as a background for conceiving and implementing an effective strategy of tourism development (Neacsu, 1995).

The *favouring factors* mainly refer to: the abundance, beauty and variety of landscapes, situated at less than 200 km far from each other (mountains, hills, plains, the Black Sea, the Delta of Danube and so on); the cultural-historical heritage, with many unica in Europe (the Bucovina's monasteries, the Dacian fortresses in the Orastie Mountains, the masterpieces of Brancusi, Grigorescu, Eminescu, Enescu, the Brancoveanu-styled architectural monuments); the Romanian people's traditions and hospitality; the great variety of natural cure factors (mineral and thermal waters,

therapeutical mud and winds, topoclimate and microclimate, original medicines etc.); the variety and attractiveness of flora and fauna.

The *disfavouring factors* concentrate on the rigidity of tourism administrative structures, limitations to free initiative owing to privatisation delay, the use of wrong criteria for the issuance of leasing contracts and their promotion for short periods (1 to 3 years), the social and, sometimes, political instability, the poverty which the majority of population is confronted with, the deficient supply of food, fuel and other goods absolutely necessary to a proper tourism, the bad state of tourism and road infrastructure, the low managerial competence and tourism personnel' s behaviour, the image of Romania abroad.

The tourism strategy, as a component of the general strategy of economic restructuring and reform proposes the following *objectives* in order to stop the decline and determine tourism development (The Basic Programme, 1996; Romania's Medium Term Economic Strategy, 2000):

- Increasing the volume of touristic activities by stimulating and diversifying a quality touristic supply as well as the domestic and foreign demand of touristic services.
- Addressing tourism as an activity of indirect export, able to double the revenues obtained.
- Organising touristic activities and creating mechanisms so as to ensure their operation in accordance with the exigencies of the market economy.
- Creating the conditions for integrating tourism in Romania into the East European and world development trends.

These objectives may be achieved by:

- A real assessment of tourism potential and resources.
- The rapid privatisation of tourism companies mainly by institutional investors internationally acknowledged. The privatisation of touristic targets once in private ownership will be made after clarifying the property rights (the share of private ownership in tourism is expected to reach 50 – 55 % in 2004).
- The correlation of national, regional and local programmes in various fields, while observing the conditions of efficient use of resources by tourism.
- The development of real public – private - NGO partnership initiatives.

- The creation and development of model touristic centres in various domains and regions, supported by the central and local administration as well as by investments from the international capital market.
- Offering priority support to agrotourism as a complementary form of social tourism.
- Encouraging active promotional policies both domestically and internationally.
- Fostering vocational training programmes as well as retraining programmes.
- Reviewing the existing framework in order to simplify and harmonise it with the rules of the World Tourism organisation and the European Union.

The elaboration of the tourism development strategy as well as the co-ordination of this sector represent the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism. Related to this, an important particularity of tourism should be noted, however, namely its organisational structure, marked by an extreme fragmentation, both horizontally – between suppliers, and vertically – between stages in production and delivery of the final product.

“Simply those responsible for managing the resources, shaping and promoting the product and servicing the consumer are many, diverse and fragmented ... It is unrealistic to imagine that a comprehensive policy for tourism can be developed by a single unified authority” (Ashworth, 1994).

This statement acquires a much complex significance when tourism development is tackled at regional level, in sustainability terms.

3. Tourism – Regional Development – Environmental Sustainability

Apart from the tourism strategy at national level, each Romanian county has elaborated its own strategy for tourism development, as a component of the overall socio-economic development strategy at county level. All of these have been subsequently integrated in the national strategy of regional development, combining the concerns with transition and reform processes at regional level with the actions to be undertaken for the future integration in the European Union’s structures.

The main objectives of this strategy and corresponding policy refer to reducing regional unemployment, attaining an efficient geographical distribution of industry and employment and, last but not the least, providing a more equal geographical distribution of income and living conditions. From *an integral perspective* (Thierstein and Egger, 1995) a regional policy able to carry out these objectives should combine the efforts of all levels involved in promoting regional development, concentrate on actors and their

behaviour, co-ordinate sectoral policies and environmental preservation in accordance with the complex relation between them and spatial organisations, strengthen co-operative problem-solving instruments.

This view creates an appropriate background for addressing tourism development in a complex context, which takes into consideration the multiple links between this industry and the other economic and social activities within a region's economy as well as the environmental constraints. At least two basic questions are revealed by such an approach: one of them refers to the multiplier effects of tourism expenditures within regional/local economies whereas the other one highlights the relation between tourism and resources it uses.

As regards *the multiplier effects*, it is largely acknowledged that tourism has a positive influence on regional employment and income, but *the magnitude* of regional multiplier will vary according to the characteristics of each individual region (and locality). A region's size and touristic attractiveness, its industry mix in terms of specialisation and concentration/diversification degree, its location, especially in relation to other local labour markets are likely to be important factors. Moreover, the multipliers are not simply region-specific but also project-specific: different projects in the same region may have different multiplier consequences (Armstrong and Taylor, 1993). Therefore a special attention must be paid to supporting those tourism projects able to bring about the most important benefits to the region and their correlation with other economic and social activities within *territorialised networks*. Thus, the integration of tourism development within endogenous development programmes seems to be the most appropriate choice: "The success of a region will in the end depend upon its autonomous capacity to take matters in hand, to organise various actors around common goals to adapt and to successfully adjust to outside pressures. Ultimately, the sources of development lie in the region itself, in its people, its institutions, its sense of community and, perhaps, most important of all, in the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship of its population" (Polèse, 1998). Indeed, this view can help to consider the whole variety of hard and soft factors of a region so as to make it possible turning to good account the potential advantages of each local economy. Of course, in an increasing regional competition there will be always winners and losers, but "it is important to recognise the difference between absolute and relative winners (and losers)" (Nijkamp, 1997).

On the other hand the *co-ordination between local authorities* with regard to their development policies is also necessary since the benefits of such policies will spill over into neighbouring counties/localities and “acting independently will lead to under-funding of local development” (Armstrong and Taylor, 1993).

A relevant example refers to the need of co-ordinating the efforts of both regional and national level for developing *large-scale infrastructure projects*. In the transition phase such factors as accessibility to infrastructure facilities, especially in transportation and communication, play a considerable role in business location decision, suggesting that traditionally more developed regions will record relative advantages (in a survey by KPMG, in international accountancy firm, 60% of foreign investors said that poor infrastructure has been a ‘major’ or ‘significant’ problem for business development in Romania). Though, transportation network is only a part of the complex process of reconstruction of the distribution system. Telecommunication, information services, trading facilities are basic dimensions too. A better performance of the economy could encourage the development of the service sector. Distribution, with emphasis on the wholesale function and tourism, is conceived as the core of service improvement in the first stage of the reconstruction process, taking into consideration its capacity to become an important source of new jobs and increasing incomes as well as of changing economic behaviour.

The increasing interregional character of infrastructure projects, the growing size and increasing investments in various kinds of infrastructure generate *conflicts* in terms of land use – transportation, tourism, etc. infrastructure – environmental quality (spatial externalities), suggesting that the regional strategy and policy must be closely related to the *spatial planning*, that attempts to co-ordinate projects with spatial implications and to find solutions to the conflicts generated by these projects.

As far as tourism’s particular situation is concerned, the spatial planning is combined with *the touristic zoning*. The touristic zoning in Romania was first developed in 1975 – 1977 and then periodically up-dated. Considering tourism as a system at national scale it has aimed at establishing a model for evaluating, constructing a hierarchy and proposing the most suitable, effective ways of turning to good account the touristic patrimony. Multiple criteria have been used in order to delimit touristic zones and to propose the priority actions in each specific case. Among the most attractive touristic zones, some of them have a particular importance to the European and world’s natural and cultural heritage, requiring fast and efficient intervention: North Moldova,

the Delta of Danube, the Romanian shore of the Black Sea, the Romanian Carpathians, Bucharest and its surroundings, Maramures-Oas, Oltenia de sub Munte, Transilvania, Central Moldova, the Danube Valley, Banat (The Touristic Yearbook, 1994).

The spatial planning and the policy actions following the touristic zoning must also find solutions to the environmental threats provoked by some kinds of touristic activities or provoked by other industries and having a direct impact on the results of tourism.

According to its own resources and sectoral structure each county has to face specific environmental challenges. In response, the Romanian experts have proposed the concept of *mosaic ecodevelopment* (Manea, 1991), that implies the implementation of sustainability principles at smaller area level; these areas will be gradually enlarged so that they will cover the whole national territory in the long run. In this view the ecological space should look, in its ideal form, like a chess board where large agricultural areas should dovetail with more confined industrial and infrastructural ones, and also with natural parks and reservations. This alternation is entailed by an uneven distribution of natural resources as well as by economic, social and environmental criteria. In such a framework ecology and bioeconomy can bring original solutions for spatial planning, so that corresponding ecological areas will be allocated to agriculture, forestry, manufacturing and service infrastructure, including tourism. This sectoral complementarity is not seen merely as a functional complementarity but also as one in terms of rational land use, higher employment rates and incomes, an effective participation in interregional trade and integration in the European structures as well as consistency with the environmental constraints. Under these circumstances the spatial plan should be very flexible, so as to have the possibility to react faster to changing needs and to better co-ordinate the various groups at all levels in a more co-operative manner.

When tourism's particular situation is addressed in sustainability terms the relation between this industry and resources it uses becomes a central one. In the literature dedicated to this topic it is largely acknowledged that *the environmental issue in tourism is mainly a problem of resource management* (Ashworth, 1994). It entails a number of *difficulties* that tourism policy has to face: i. the competition between tourism and other uses of the resources it uses, making it necessary to carefully consider the competing users (for example the physical land-use conflict between tourism and other urban users); ii. the resources used are situated to a great extent outside the system of tourism accounting, a lot of costs and benefits being external to the tourism production system;

iii. an important part of the external costs provokes much of the opposition to tourism development.

As a response to these difficulties the tourism management strategies can propose the intervention in the system following a set of principles deriving from sustainable development, namely resource valuation, output equity, carrying capacities and homeostatic systems adjustment. According to Ashworth *resource valuation* is addressed in terms of the defence of the world heritage versus current local development plans to use the same resources for tourism. The distinction between renewable and non-renewable resources in exploitation of natural resources and the possibilities offered by renewal, recycling and recuperation are central concerns. A major feature of tourism is its spatial selectivity and concentration, generating an increasing competition for space within restricted areas and, thus, opportunities for an active zoning policy. *Output equity* focuses on intergenerational, intersectoral and interspatial equity. The last one “may seek a balance between the use of resources within tourism products for an export market and the use of the same resources as a major component in local place identity and civic consciousness” (Ashworth, 1994). *Carrying capacities* question is not so much tackled in terms of “how many visitors can the resources bear” but “what do the actors involved want to achieve”. Finally, *homeostatic systems adjustment* principle is related to the nature of tourism which does not encourage the feedback from customers to producers as rapidly as with the other products.

In conclusion sustainable tourism requirements induce specific concerns to regional development programmes, where space is explicitly taken into consideration as well as the problems of the communities living in certain areas. In general terms, given its complexity environmentally sustainable regional development is conceived as a long run objective, gradually addressed. In the beginning only the big challenges of environmental preservation are to be focused on, so that some trade-offs in terms of positive and negative changes in some components will be allowed. This means that in a first stage the emphasis is put on *weak* sustainable development, which implies a rise in the overall welfare function but allows substitution and compensation phenomena in different areas of the spatial system (Nijkamp et al., 1996). A *strong* sustainable development, without allowing a decline in any component is only the final goal. As far as the spatial interactions between the neighbouring areas are considered, *internal/external* sustainability question requires attention as well. Internal refers to

sustainable development (be it weak or strong) inside a given area while external refers to resulting sustainability in the adjacent areas. This makes it necessary a rational combination between the local and national level of regional development and spatial planning administration.

In case of tourism this spatial fragmentation will be added to the extreme fragmentation of its organisational structure, stressing the idea that management strategies for sustainable tourism involve a complex set of choices with regard to the relationship between tourism system and resource system, the latter one being the object of competing uses for a variety of functions at various organisational and spatial levels.

4. Concluding remarks

In order to really contribute to the overall economic recovery in Romania, a comprehensive, dynamic and flexible tourism strategy, in accordance with the market economy principles, must be rapidly implemented.

Apart from the benefits of this industry, the costs it entails should also be considered from various perspectives. In this context the question of environmentally sustainable tourism is a central one, revealing that the environmental issue in tourism is mainly a problem of resource management.

Given the particularities of the relation between tourism and the resources it uses, complex choices must be made at various organisational and spatial levels so as to meet the basic requirements of sustainable development.

As far as the spatial dimension is considered, specific issues refer to the multiplier effects, the emphasis on endogenous development in connection with the tendency to decentralisation, the relation between the local and national level of regional policy, the role of spatial planning and touristic zoning.

The concept of mosaic ecodevelopment is proposed as a means to create an environmentally sustainable sectoral structure at regional level in which tourism can be effectively integrated and play an active role in an increasing regional competition.

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