

Green and/or pleasant countryside? Possibilities and barriers of the mountain tourism in Transylvania, Romania

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Abstract — One of the main changes in the mentality of both the local people and the representatives of the regional and central governments is that the economy of rural areas must not be exclusively based on agriculture. This has been a great gain for those marginal areas that did not have nor the economic nor the natural resources that could help them in developing a sustainable agriculture. Another change of the mentality came from the urban (and not only urban) people who started to appreciate the possibilities of recreation in the rural areas and especially in those ones where the landscape did not change significantly. In literature this change of mentality is most often connected to the postmodern conception of nature and environment. These two elements have led to the elaboration of projects in order to develop alternatives for sustainable rural development. As a consequence, tourism in the remote mountain areas has developed. But the old problem of poor infrastructure can still be considered as being a barrier in the evolution of this type of services. And this seriously affects the number (and quality) of tourists who would come by car or by bus. This attracts another type of tourists (usually younger ones and with less money) who are more attracted to the wilderness of the landscape. The paper intends to present the evolution of mountain tourism through a case-study from a mountain village (Zetea/Zetelaka) from the Eastern part of Transylvania.

Index Terms — Cultural and natural heritage, mountain tourism, representation of nature, Zetea/Zetelaka.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The last 17 years in the history of Romania had been marked by an inconsistency in the top-bottom and also up bottom policies of sustainable rural and regional development. The post 1989 political and economical structural changes had many losers; most of them were the rural and mainly the peripheral rural areas. In most cases after 1989 the rural has played the role of the “social buffer”, meaning that after 1989 the population in rural areas has not decreased

and the people who have moved in lived before in the urban areas. This out-migration to villages was not due to counter-urbanisation, but was a forced step made by the new rural dwellers that could not pay the urban housing costs. The discussion of the complex causes and consequences of these phenomena would need a paper that deals only with them, so this is why I am mentioning them only tangentially for a better understanding of the premises of the development of rural tourism in Romania.

The positive aspect of this migration was that this afflux of former urban dwellers has led partly to an “infusion” of new mentalities, the popularisation of new social representations of the rural and the natural environment.

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Even if there were problems of (re)integration in the first period, the “new-comers” (who were mostly people born in the village) came with new ideas, especially local enterprises which have used not only the economical resources, but mostly the alternative forms of capital (cultural and natural heritage), human and social capital.

This has been an impulse in the development of services, including tourism. This has given a chance of outburst from backwardness in more remote rural areas with little chances of re-vigoration after 1989.

The paper would like to present the success-story of a village from Eastern-Transylvania where the re-evaluation of natural resources as well as the cultural capital has been used as resources for a sustainable development strategy. The backwardness, that has intrinsically led to a more romantic, idyllic natural landscape has attracted tourists, so even if in the history of development of mountain tourism the poor infrastructure has been a barrier there is a specific social category (especially younger and well-educated urban people) mostly from abroad (mostly the Western societies) that is interested in experiencing exactly this type of services.

The village community of Zetea/Zetelaka has realised though that in order to have a sustainable form of tourism they should use not only the natural resource but other types as well, as the cultural heritage.

2 CONCEPTUAL BRIEFING

In the last twenty years the re-evaluation of the relation between society and nature has received several critics by academics as well as human (and rural) geographers. Nature has entered in the academic limelight; a whole body of literature has shown a growing interest in the study of this complex relationship between nature, society and rurality. H. Newby (1979) was the first author who has dedicated a larger space to the study of this new type of social representation of the natural landscape along the centuries, revealing

the main attitudes towards nature. I consider his book on the social change in rural England as a basic one in the study of the new social representation of nature and its relation to society [1]. Post-modern society which negates modern society and its values has re-evaluated its connections to nature and has shown mainly a more positive attitude of “back-to-nature” (see the environmentalist or the “green” movement). It would take too much to make a thorough analysis of all the theoretical approaches within environmental sociology and geography regarding the position of nature within broader rural, social, cultural, economic and governance contexts.

So I will only mention the main idea expressed by all the theoretical approaches, that is the increased importance given to nature, the re-evaluation (in the sense of a greater importance given) of nature, landscape, environment and rurality.

Another concept I am using in the paper is that of the “culture economy”. The concept was developed by Christopher Ray [2], and in my opinion it is very useful in a proper description of the way local (and in cases extra-local) actors can make use of the different cultural markers which can include from traditional foods through crafts and historical and prehistoric sites, landscape and the flora and fauna.

Even if some social scientists (especially economists) contest this concept which has been introduced in the literature it seems to be the most efficient in theorizing rural development which includes non-agricultural resources. An important source of the idea of culture economy is the EU rural development policy which has realised that in order to obtain a much more efficient use of the EU funds it has to make a shift from a sectoral (or horizontal) to a territorial (or vertical) approach. Of course, the industrial agriculture and forestry has been an important impediment in the way of restoring the idyllic landscape from the 18th and 19th century as the original landscape cannot be restored.

The remote rural areas in Romania can say that their gain in the competition for mod-

ernisation was actually the positioning as losers, the project of forced modernisation during the communist regime has not “touched” them, so in many places, especially in the mountain areas the natural landscape and the shape of community has remained fairly intact. But even if not totally, in the great bulk of mountain villages the original landscape has not changed.

3 TOURISM IN ZETEA/ZETELAKA

3.1 Presentation of the village

Zetea, Zetelaka is situated in the county of Harghita in the Eastern part of Transylvania, Romania. The municipality includes six villages (Subcetate/Zeteváralja, Ivó, Deság, Sikaszó and Poiana Târnavei/Küküllőmező) and can be considered as one of the large municipalities from the county of Harghita. Almost 60% of the surface of the county is covered by hills and mountains, and in the border of the village there is one of the most important points of attraction for the fans of mountain and winter sports. The highest mountain-peak in the county is the Harghita-Madarasi peak (1801 m.), situated at the outskirts of the village of Zetea. The municipality of Zetea lies on 206,76 sqkms with a population density of 27,82 inhabitants/sqkms. According to the last census in 2002 the municipality has a population of 5753 inhabitants [3].

The municipality is situated in the nearing of Odorheiu Secuiesc at 11 kilometres in the valley of the Tarnava Mare river. The village has an impressive history, its first documentary attestation dates from 1332, and has been constantly inhabited [4].

One of the specificities (or cultural markers) of the municipality is its confessional and ethnical structure. The last census has revealed that 93% of the population of the municipality is Hungarian and 95% is Roman-Catholic. Before 1920 Zetea as well as the whole of Transylvania belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and this now constitutes an extra

resource for the locals as the great bulk of tourists and visitors from abroad come from Hungary and Austria.

Zetea, as all the other villages has gone through the process of forced modernisation and urbanisation under the communist regime. For the rural area, this has meant a slow but steady process of annihilation of the rural specificity, the *couleur locale*, the plans of systematisation of the Romanian communist rule intended to wipe the specificity of the rural areas, the demolishing of the villages as it is well known has led to a great political contestation from the Western countries which have initiated then the project of salvation for the Romanian villages (*Operation villages roumaines*). Besides the humanitarian help, this connection between Romania and other Western countries has been of real help after 1989, as in most cases the networking was very important in the establishment of economical and social contacts with the “new world”.

After 1989, Zetea as almost all the other Romanian villages has gone through the transitional period marked by the economical and political structural changes. The de-industrialisation as well as the de-collectivisation has led to an economic involution as the economy of Zetea was strongly related to that of the urban Odorheiu Secuiesc, the village being in the attraction of the town. The period between 1990-97 can be considered a period of economic recession, followed by a massive out-migration of the younger active population, mainly to Hungary

The only industry which traditionally had existed in the region is that of forest industry. In the 17th century the village of Zetea had received privileges from the Transylvanian king of Bethlen Gábor because the locals were not only exploiting the forest, but also were carving wood and there were many good craftsmen at that time [5].

This industry has been revitalised after 1989, and the nearby forests have been industrially exploited. Besides the benefits for some people it seems that on long-term this has proved to have negative effects as those

tourists who traditionally came for the wilderness of the forests went to other villages.

3.2 Development of tourism in Zetea

As I have mentioned in the introduction I would like to present a success-story of a locally-based tourism service. As in every other market-based economic activity, we might speak about the supply and demand aspect. But before speaking of the development of that supply (the offered services "to be sold" by the locals) and the demand (the expectations of the potential tourists) side I will briefly speak about the Butler's curve [6] and the temporal distribution of this curve in Zetea. Butler has elaborated a theory of the way tourism develops along the time, starting with the:

1. *The spontaneous phase:*

- In the first years (mainly in the early nineties) practising tourism was not a conscious choice for the rural people, it was more of a non-authorized (invisible) form of rural tourism(1991-97);
- Target-groups and guests were in this period people with a lower income-status or those who staid only for a few nights
- At policy level: lack of supporting institutions and financial measures

2. *The transitory phase:*

- The number of guests and hosts has grown, in the economic activity of the household/host the incomes from tourism begin to be more significant;
- Hosts invest much more to increase of the quality of services and develop a specific strategy in attracting different types of tourists (marketing-phase has started before);
 - On policy level there is a growing interest in investing in the improvement of local infrastructure; favourable credits for rural tourism enterprisers;
 - For local and central authorities the development of rural tourism has turned into a priority of rural and regional development (1995-2000);

3. *Developed phase:*

- From 2000 there is a more compact strategy where we can see institutions- the local and central associations for the rights and interests of enterprisers (the Romanian Agency for the Development of Rural Tourism) which have a greater influence in the tracing of economic and political measures;
- This agency on a regular basis organises courses/training for those enterprisers who are in the business or want to start one;
- Local hosts have associations which permit to make a common strategy-leaflets are redacted presenting all of the hosts: competition is replaced by cooperation;
- Infrastructure and the quality of services is much better, there is a more specific supply regarding the demands of the target-groups (mainly lined out in the transitory phase).

What seems to be specific for the tourism in the village is the way the culture economy has developed. The local entrepreneurs who run a business in tourism have realised that they have to make supplies for all (or almost all) types of potential tourists and can exploit the "traditional" barriers and also possibilities in the "production of their services" [7].

So most of them have included in their offers the mountain tours in the remained or untouched forests, and in the villages of the municipality that are situated far away from the road they organise the transportation. Still there are tourists who mostly in summertime come and walk by foot sometimes 15 or more kilometres with their backpacks. This category can be labelled as the "low-benefit" tourists, mostly young people (students and young intellectuals) who come in groups and are not so pretentious but who are more interested in the maintenance of the original landscape. They do not consume too much but if we look on long-term they are the ones who make the less impact of the natural environment.

For the other categories the local entrepreneurs have made a more variate offer: besides

the lovely landscape they can enjoy the local foods and see the local craftsmen (some of them have re-learned crafts as blacksmiths, gate-carvers, etc.) working. The distribution of these tourists by categories and province is much more varied: they come from abroad (mainly from Hungary or from Western Europe) and they are the ones who are the “buyers” for higher quality of services (meaning the level of comfort) and who spend more money during their stay.

There would be much to be said about the local network of entrepreneurs who are very well organised, but I would like to stop at the types of barriers and possibilities of tourism, even though the role of the local community in their development is crucial. I would like to enumerate the classical barriers which in the case of the locals is turned into a possibility, and this recalls especially to physical infrastructure. The poor quality of roads and communication networks might be a barrier to many tourists but as the last decades have shown, there is a category which is a “buyer” for those “idyllic”, unchanged landscapes that have “escaped” modernisation.

4 CONCLUSION

The development of tourism and the distinction between the possible barriers and possibilities must be handled with care. What seems to be a barrier to some types of services (poor infrastructure) as was shown in the example of Zetea is a possibility for the more remote areas, where tourists come exactly to enjoy the unaltered rural landscape and the flora and fauna.

So when elaborating different development strategies for the upbringing of the mountain tourism we might handle carefully the categories of barriers and possibilities, because destroying the “classical barriers” by modernising the landscape and improving the quality of roads could also lead to a loss in the supply of the local tourism offers and what seems possibility for some categories as mentioned above can turn into barriers

for others. A possible solution should be the inventory that should be made in the phase of production of local tourism services to be sold: what can be attractive to a type of category will not be agreed by other categories of tourists.

And as I have mentioned above, the last twenty years have shown that the social representation of nature has changed, and the complex relation between society and nature has been re-evaluated. So academics as well as the political actors should re-consider the way we relate to nature, meaning we should not try by all means to transform the natural environment purely because for some of us this would be more comfortable but try to maintain the unchanged landscape. And as the above example has shown this can also be a resource for development.

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