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POSSIBILITIES OF STRATEGIC RURAL TOURISM PLANNING IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSCARPATHIAN REGION OF UKRAINE

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Abstract: *Upon analyzing the theory behind sustainable tourism and rural tourism development, and exploring the case of Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, this research focuses on discovering the possibilities of strategic rural tourism planning as an instrument for developing sustainable tourism practices in a predominantly rural area*

Keywords: *rural tourism, sustainable tourism, strategic planning, Transcarpathia*

While most of the people in the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe may not understand the meaning of the French phrase *laissez-faire*, it can decently describe the way tourism have been developing here in the last two decades. The fall of communism led to a change in the system that influenced all fields of economic life, including tourism, - from a planned economy to market conditions that were relatively new both to the local populations and the emerging entrepreneurs. Thus development in the 1990s was often happening chaotically, without a clear plan, with all its implications. This time has also coincided with the period when the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism development became highly popular in the world. While attempting to join the global endeavour to achieve sustainability, policy makers in the former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, have been facing challenges in providing strategies for development. The latter ones often ended up either being simply declarative and unachievable, or were implemented only on paper without actual practical and especially long-term effects.

On the other hand, similarly for many Central and Eastern European countries, rural tourism has become one of the activities that emerged without a direct governmental intervention and started developing as a response to ailing economic conditions, especially in the countryside. Rural tourism and especially farm-based tourism provided a way of quickly achieving income from tourism with relatively small infrastructural expenses. Local governments have also started to consider rural tourism as a tool for economic regeneration of rural areas and redevelopment of the agricultural sector.

In research, much attention was directed to the subject of securing sustainability for the development of rural tourism. At the same time, there are not many studies that deal with the potential possibilities that rural tourism can have on moving in the direction of sustainable tourism development of a region. Therefore, instead of considering tourism simply as a tool for rural development, this study focuses on the potential that rural tourism can have in achieving sustainable tourism development in a certain predominantly rural area, specifically through strategic planning.

For this specific study the following **research question** is formulated: what are the possibilities of strategic rural tourism planning in achieving sustainable tourism development in Transcarpathian Region of Ukraine?

In accordance with a **constructivist paradigm**, qualitative **methods** are used to answer the research question: primarily literature review on the chosen subject and review of current development plans. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with Alisa Smyrna – a rural tourism practitioner in Transcarpathia, Ukraine; Stepan Pop – Dean of Geography at Uzhhorod National University, Transcarpathia, Ukraine; and Bohdan Prannyuk – manager of the Regional Branch of the Association for the Development of Rural Tourism in Ukraine.



Sustainable Development and Tourism. The 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development report entitled “Our Common Future” [1] articulated the definition for sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Following the path of evolution of the concept of sustainable development, the issue of sustainable tourism development has also elaborated from focusing on the impacts of tourism on the natural resources to building an “environment of social equity and community involvement” [10, p. 6]. Another important change has occurred in classifying sustainable tourism: the approach of contrasting sustainable tourism to other forms of unsustainable (for example, mass) tourism was switched to defining sustainability in tourism as an “idealised global target to which all forms of tourism must necessarily aspire” [10].

Rural Tourism and Regional Development. In the conditions of stagnating economy, high unemployment, and decline of agriculture that struck rural areas across the world in the last decades, rural tourism acquired a notion of panacea to these problems. It has started to enjoy encouragement and support from local and central governments that saw it as a source of income for rural economies [9].

As it is expressed by Fagence [4], based on the extensive research of Bernard Lane, both terms “rural” and “rural tourism” lack clarity, the latter one being especially difficult to define because of the wide range of activities carried out in rural areas. And while acknowledging these difficulties and all the challenges in defining rural tourism, mentioned by Lane, the following definition seems to be the most comprehensive and appropriate: “rural tourism is tourism which takes place in the countryside” [7, p. 9].

Rural tourism have been considered as a part of regional and rural development across the globe for the several potential benefits that it can bring: economic growth through new employment and creation of new businesses; socio-cultural development through repopulation of the areas, improvement of public services, revitalization of cultural identities; protection and improvement of both the natural environment and the infrastructure [9]. And while rural tourism faces many challenges and considerable critique is expressed in tourism literature that concerns its development, international organizations, including the UN and UNWTO generally support planning initiatives that at the same time improve the quality of life of local communities, provide valuable experiences for its visitors, and maintain the quality of the environment [4].

Strategic Planning as a Framework of Sustainable Tourism Development. According to Richard Butler, as cited by Simpson [10], “the pursuit of appropriately sustainable tourism development goals is inevitably linked to a formal planning process through consideration of a circular model of causality”. This approach supports a notion of long-term focus and, thus, formalized tourism planning for achieving sustainable tourism development. Simpson [10] also argues that over the years the “desirability of a strategic orientation has been progressively accepted” in tourism planning.

Lane [6] mentions ten attributes that a sustainable tourism strategy should have. These include encouragement of stakeholder dialogue, an infrastructural investment plan, natural and cultural conservation, encouragement of new entrants to the tourism industry, education, marketing and public sector investment programmes.

Discussion and Analysis. There has been substantial discussion in scholarly tourism and development literature on ways of ensuring sustainable development for rural tourism. Below, it will be attempted to analyze whether the essence of rural tourism is sustainable on its own and how it can contribute to comprehensive sustainable tourism development in a predominantly rural area, especially with the tool of strategic planning. The case of Transcarpathian Region of Ukraine will be used for this purpose, thus the resulting conclusions will concern this particular example and may or may not be applicable to other regions due to local specificities. Since little quantitative and qualitative data is available on the development of rural tourism in Transcarpathia, interviews were used to get insights in this field.



According to the data of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, Transcarpathian region it is the least urbanized administrative region in the country with 62.8 per cent of its actual population living in rural areas in 2011, compared to 31.3 per cent in Ukraine overall [11]. Rural tourism, in the form of farm-based tourism, appeared in the area in the early 1990s, when the first farm houses opened their doors for tourists [5]. The primary reason for the development of rural tourism in Transcarpathia is the fact that a substantial part of population lives in mountainous areas with low levels of employment, while at the same time, homes that are owned by the locals can be used for accommodating tourists [8]. Local authorities consider rural tourism as a solution to the social-economic problems in rural areas of Transcarpathia [15].

Tourism planning in Transcarpathia in the last two decades has been a task of the local regional government. Unlike many other regions of Central Europe, professional associations, NGOs, and other non-for-profit organizations in Transcarpathia have not been coming up with their strategies of development, mainly due to their weak influence on the overall economic and social situation. As mentioned by Stepan Pop, Dean of Geography of Uzhhorod National University, during the interview, there is a considerable amount of land that can be used for tourism or is already used for tourism purposes (directly or indirectly) that is still in state or communal property. And while local municipalities due to Ukrainian laws have limited governance possibilities, it is the state represented by the Regional State Administration with its departments that is able to produce development programmes. In 2012, the development of tourism in Transcarpathia is covered by the Programme of Development of Tourism and Resorts in Transcarpathian Region for 2011-2015. This document consists of nineteen pages and is made up of six parts: General Provisions, Aim of the Programme, Main Tasks and Directions, Main Measures of Programme Implementation, Expected Results and Effects of the Programme, Amounts and Sources of Funding. However, the whole programme is characterized by vague targets and directions of development. For example, the aim of the programme is characterized as the improvement of [...] regional and national tourist product, optimization of the use of tourism resources, strengthening of the competitiveness in the domestic and international tourism markets, provision of returns to the budgets of all levels, promotion of social and economic development of the region and [...] improvement of the quality of life [15].

The programme does not contain a strategic analysis of current state of tourism development and it does not list potential opportunities and threats for tourism development.

A programme of development for rural tourism has existed for 2004-2008, however it was terminated by the decision of the Transcarpathian Regional Council for the reason of “duplication of the general programme of tourism development” [13]. If analyzing the Programme of Development of Tourism and Resorts in Transcarpathian Region for 2011-2015 on the subject of rural tourism or sustainable tourism, the following points can be found: “support for small and medium enterprises (particularly in rural and depressed areas) in tourism and resort activities”, “support for the development of rural and agro-tourism in the region as a prerequisite of complex socio-economic development of the countryside”, and “support and development of handicrafts as part of the program of tourism service, the inclusion of workshops on crafts in local tourism products” are foreseen. However, no more details are given on how this support and development will be implemented.

Green tourism is merely just mentioned in the Concept of the State Programme for Sustainable Development of the Ukrainian Carpathians as a constituent part of the European Union “Carpathian Space” Programme [14]. The Concept of Sustainable Development of Transcarpathian Region [12] also includes a point on “providing microloans for owners of green tourism households”, however a concept by its essence is only a declaration and no practical instruments for implementation are foreseen.

Therefore, as it can be seen from a short analysis of strategic planning for tourism in Transcarpathia, there is little effort taken to provide a specific direction to achieving sustainable development. Thus considerable changes and sometimes even rethinking of strategic approaches should be done in order to achieve better results measured by levels of sustainability. A possible outline for a strategic planning approach for rural tourism in Transcarpathia is presented below.



An outline for rural tourism planning in Transcarpathia. All three interviewees (Alisa Smyrna, Stepan Pop, and Bohdan Prannychuk) have agreed that the state represented by the Transcarpathian Regional State Administration should be responsible for conducting strategic planning for rural tourism in the area. As Alisa Smyrna, a rural tourism practitioner from Transcarpathia, pointed out, “the state and the travel operators are the most interested stakeholders in sustainable tourism development, since the local population is still not ready to understand what sustainable development can bring for them.” Therefore, it becomes obvious that the regional government should be the organization that has to draft the plan. However, a greater involvement of all stakeholders should be introduced during the drafting process. Keeping in mind the cultural implications of stakeholder participation, ways of stimulating stakeholders should be considered. “The third way” planning approach, introduced by Burns [4] can be of a particular interest in this case, as it gives directions on how to involve local people when they do not express interest in the subject of planning. All the stakeholders should agree on the purpose of rural tourism planning and make it an achievable and desirable target.

Following the theoretical findings of Tribe [16], a thorough strategic analysis should precede actual strategic choices and strategy implementation. Compared to previous works of researchers on tourism development in Transcarpathia, most of which are based on secondary data or are considerably outdated, a more comprehensive analysis of the area’s resources, market conditions, threats and opportunities, should be conducted in order to get a clear view on how sustainable tourism development can be achieved. All three interviewees also agreed that scholars with the help of rural tourism practitioners have to come up with indicators of sustainable tourism development that can be used for the strategy.

In order to move in a direction of sustainability the programme of development for rural tourism must tackle economic, environmental and sociocultural perspectives.

For achieving *economic* sustainability the programme of rural tourism for Transcarpathia should cover the following areas:

- Marketing of rural tourism in order to maintain optimal occupancy rates with focus on optimal revenue management (through targeting the ‘right’ markets);
- Product development in rural tourism in order to provide attractions and activities for long stays, for returning visitors, and in order to solve the issue of seasonality;
- Social entrepreneurship encouragement for rural tourism practitioners that can lead to job creation and local budget replenishment;
- Organization of training for rural tourism practitioners on sustainable business practices;
- Putting rural tourism in the framework with other industries in order to assure that the economy of the region is diversified and it does not fully depend on tourism.

Based on the interviews with rural tourism stakeholders, *environmental* sustainability can be addressed within the following scope:

- Developing environmental culture of the local population and especially rural tourism practitioners through special training, events and propaganda; ensuring that rural tourism practitioners can share their environmental culture with the visitors;
- Introduction of zoning and clusters in rural tourism development in order to ensure even tourism development in different areas and to monitor recreational pressure on natural resources.

With regards to sustainability in *social and cultural* context, a rural tourism programme for Transcarpathia can include the following:

- Ensuring that infrastructure development for tourism becomes also a part of social infrastructure that benefits the local communities (i.e. transportation links and hubs, public services, healthcare, pump rooms, attractions, museums, wilderness centres, etc.);
- Popularization of handicrafts among local people through workshops, seminars and propaganda;
- The use of neglected cultural facilities inherited from the Soviet Union (such as rural libraries, village halls, culture centres), secondary schools and art schools for promoting local lore, customs and traditions that can be used for tourism purposes.



Conclusions and Future Research. The current research paper attempted to mark out the potential possibilities of rural tourism in achieving sustainable tourism development, specifically through the prism of strategic planning.

It was stated that concepts of sustainable tourism, rural tourism and strategic planning are connected. While rural tourism is seen to be as a response to declining economic activity in the countryside across the globe, the fragility of the environments of rural areas implies that a sustainability approach has to be taken for its development, which is usually implemented through strategic tourism planning.

The case of Transcarpathian Region of Ukraine was used to illustrate the strategic opportunities of rural tourism for sustainable tourism development. Several directions were mentioned where rural tourism can provide its contribution. A review of current development strategies for Transcarpathia proved that they are not sufficient in their current form. Therefore, a general outline for a development plan for rural tourism in Transcarpathia was presented that is based on previous research findings, on interviews with several stakeholder groups, and that lists suggestions for using the potential of rural tourism.

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Анотація: Шляхом аналізу теорії сталого туризму та розвитку сільського туризму, а також шляхом вивчення прикладу Закарпатської області України, дане дослідження зосереджується на виявленні можливостей стратегічного планування сільського туризму в якості інструменту для розвитку сталого туризму в переважно сільській місцевості

Ключові слова: сільський туризм, сталий туризм, стратегічне планування, Закарпаття