THE ROLE OF THE BORDERLAND POSITION IN THE TOURISM OF TRANSCARPATHIA

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Abstract. Both in common knowledge and in some travel books a false image exists about Transcarpathia, which overvalues the touristic importance of the county within Ukraine. Statistical data partly counter this, but the relatively low national touristic share of the region cannot be underestimated either. The tourism of Ukraine is characterized by a strong territorial concentration. There are five touristic centres in the country: Kiev, the Crimean peninsula, the Azov sea-side, the Carpathian region (its main area belongs to Transcarpathia) and Odessa County. The 2-3% national touristic share of Transcarpathia becomes important by looking at the strong dominance of some regions and the low economic potential of Transcarpathia. Based on statistical data Transcarpathian tourism takes the 10th position on the list of territorial units, which is quite good taking all the 27 territorial units into account.

Keywords: borderland position, peripheral area, multiculturalism, intact landscape

1. INTRODUCTION

In Ukraine – more particularly in Transcarpathia (Кăрпăталья, Эакарпатська область) – “real” tourism appeared only about a decade ago. Following the political system change nearly 15 years passed before an economic development in Transcarpathia began. During that time the majority of people living in the area struggled with the most essential problems of subsistence so they had no contact with tourism neither as a tourist nor as a host. A narrow segment of the population – that had a discretionary income – rather travelled abroad where they encountered a broader tourist market of a significantly higher quality. The attractiveness of Transcarpathia existed only potentially mainly because its elementary infrastructure and the lack of touristic traditions hindered the development of Ukraine’s westernmost administrative unit.
The economic condition of the region started to improve after the millennium and the first noteworthy touristic offers appeared. Foreign -mainly Hungarian- interest in Transcarpathia increased. This was aided by the quickening consumer tourism towards Ukraine which somewhat diminished the negative image of the country. The economic changes also brought about an upsurge of inland tourism. Consequently, nowadays there are a number of destinations in Transcarpathia which came to be acknowledged both in the circles of inland- and foreign tourists. Due to the development, the touristic image of the region is now beginning to take shape.

The purpose of our study is to explore the unique features of Transcarpathian tourism and through the analysis of the natural and cultural attributes highlight the particular appeals of the county, which might form the long-term developmental basis for the region’s tourism. On the other hand we examine the impacts of the borderland position and peripheral location on the development up until now, and we also look at the possible advantages of the future European Union border on the unique touristic potentials of the region and the settlements at the border.

2. TOURISTIC ATTRIBUTES OF TRANSCARPATIA

2.1. Natural values as appeals

The geographical location of Transcarpathia is partly disadvantageous – examining Ukraine’s current statistical data on tourism - , and partially advantageous – analyzing future possibilities.

The incoming and outgoing tourism of Ukraine is dually oriented similarly to the political-economic tendencies. Two-thirds of foreigners entering the country come from the area of the former Soviet Union and nearly one-third of tourists arrive from the countries of the European Union. The outbound Ukrainian citizens choose the former Soviet republics as their travel destination in 49 % and the area of the European Union in 44 % (BERGHAUER 2009). Thus Transcarpathia lies far from the main directions (Russia, lesser Moldova and Belarus), which is disadvantageous. However, it is known that the majority of tourists coming from the post-Soviet states arrive at the country with the aim of visiting relatives or having a business trip near the border. Accordingly, these travellers do not cause any income fallout for Transcarpathia. Though for „real” tourists, coming from the European Union and representing a solvent market, Transcarpathia represents Ukraine’s gate. This fact, the geographical proximity of the region and its transit character certainly count as an advantage.

In Ukrainian tourism – based on the comparison of tourist sending regions– the capital city has a massive predominance. 70 % (!) of Ukrainian travellers with the goal of tourism set off from Kiev in 2008 (BERGHAUER 2009). Consequently, the peripheral location of Transcarpathia and its long distance from the capital count as drawbacks in the inland tourism. Yet, the county – apart from its diverse natural attributes – as the westernmost region of the country possesses a kind of allurement for the inhabitants of the capital.

Based on the relief, the county is the most diverse region of Ukraine. Transcarpathia is located southeast from the water-dividing range of the South-eastern Carpathian Mountains, in the north-eastern corner of the Carpathian Basin. It has an area of 12.8 thousand square kilometres and constitutes only 2.1 % of the total land area of Ukraine.
The structural basis of Transcarpathia consists of two units: the Transcarpathian Basin and the Folded-Carpathians (Figure 1). Closely 80% of the county is occupied by a low and mid-high mountainous relief. The relatively high relief and the significant interspersion index are important appealing factors. The mountains, which are built up of volcanic rocks and flysch, display mild but various forms. The mountain ranges covered with pine forests, subalpine meadows do not only contribute to the scenery, but are also suitable for climate therapy and active tourism. It is clearly beneficial, that the highest peak of Ukraine is situated in Transcarpathia (Hoverla 2061 m). Many inland- and foreign tourists are eager to climb the famous peak of the vast country.

**Fig. 1. The Relief map of Transcarpathia**
*Source: GÖNCZY 2009; VAVILIN 2005; Edited by: Berghauer Sándor*

Due to its relief, petrographic and climatic relations, Transcarpathia is rich at surface waters. Alongside several small brooks there are 152 rivers in the county that are longer than 10 kilometres and four of these – Tisza, Borzsa, Latorca and Ung – are longer than 100 kilometres. The entire area of the county belongs to the drainage basin of the river Tisza.

In Transcarpathia – along with the episodic lakes – 137 lakes can be found. Among these, the most well-known ones are the Sós-lakes of Aknaslatina – came into existence as a result of salt mining –, Brebeneskul – appeared in a valley deepened by ice and is Ukraine’s highest located lake (1801 m) – and the Sineveri-lake – developed as a result of a valley blockage – a pride of the Sineveri National Park (SZILÁGYI ET AL. 2006).
The hydrogeological characteristics have not yet been incorporated into tourism, only a few tours are organized on rivers with a high flow rate and the construction of a necessary touristic infrastructure started only on a couple of artificial lakes.

The prominent mineral- and medicinal water reserves of Transcarpathia ensure the most significant volume of the already existing tourism. 32 out of the 36 mineral water types of Ukraine can be found in Transcarpathia. In connection with the geological features, two-thirds of the thermal water reserves are located in the lowland region of Transcarpathia (Beregszász, Gut, Nagyszőlős etc.). The most important mineral water sources are linked to the deep rift system of the Folded-Carpathians (Polena, Saján, Vízkőz, Királyszállás etc.). Due to the different composition of the waters they can be used for a wide range of purposes.

The special, protected natural values of Transcarpathia are contained in two national parks – the Sineveri and Ung NP -, the Carpathian Biosphere Reservation -, 8 landscape protection areas, more than 100 natural relics and 44 culture parks. The Sineveri NP is the target of natural tourism, which attracts guests with its scenic environment and the unique biosphere of the Gorgan Mountains. The Carpathian Biosphere Reservation, comprising of protected areas in 4.5 % of Transcarpathia’s total area, could serve as a basis for ecotourism. Six of these are highly protected, which in 2007 got on the list of the UNESCO natural heritages.

The touristic role of the natural parks and protected areas is extremely promising in the region, since both international and Ukrainian touristic tendencies indicate that the attractiveness of the intact landscape and the demands on ecotourism are continuously increasing.

2.2. Cultural history as an appeal

In the north-eastern corner of the Carpathian Basin different peoples (Hungarian, Rusyn, Ukrainian, Romanian, Slovakian) and religious denominations (Catholic, Protestant, Pravoslav, Orthodox, Jewish) have been living together for centuries. Due to the centralized development of the Soviet era both the natural and cultural-historical values of the isolated borderland areas got well preserved. One of the main tasks of the Transcarpathian tourism is the enforcement of the advantages deriving from multiculturalism.

Castles are the most well-known built heritages. Amongst these, the castle of Munkács is Transcarpathia’s most remarkable sight. Its reputation is mirrored by the fact that it appears in the programs of all tourists visiting Transcarpathia. The touristic improvements of the castle started in the Soviet era, in the 1970s. Concerning its future utilization an angry quarrel broke out because of the idea of the city administration about building a hotel in the inner yard of the castle.

The castle of Ungvar is also a popular destination; its yearly turnover approaches 100 thousand people. Today, the Transcarpathian Museum of Local History and the Art Gallery are to be found in the castle. Next to the castle the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life is situated, which presents multicultural values and significantly increases the appeals of the castle.

Further fortifications: the castle of Nevine, the ruins of the Huszt, Szerednye and Nagyszőlős (Ugocsá) castles – signify strategically important passes and former salt mining
The Transcarpathian castles preserve the memory of leading aristocratic families who lived in earlier centuries. The most noteworthy ones are the Perényi-castle of Nagyszőlős, the Schőnbörm-castle of Bereg vá, the Rákóczi-castle of Munkács, the Telegy-Rákóczi-castle of Szentmiklós, the Bethlen-Rákóczi-castle and the Schőnbörn-hunting castle both of Beregszád (HORVÁTH–KOVÁCS 2002).

The unique embodiments of the religious culture of the land are the churches and monasteries. Most churches of the Roman age are now to be seen in a reconstructed form (Palágykomoróc, Beregdéda) but the rotunda of Gereny, which now functions as a Greek Catholic church, counts as a rarity because of its architecture and frescos (DESCHMANN 1990).

The size and artistic implementation of the gothic catholic churches of Beregszád and Nagyszőlős reflect the contemporary status of the settlements. The protestant fortress churches of Huzst and Visk, just like the churches of Técső and Csetfalva with their coffered and painted ceilings, are also of a great value.

The atmosphere of the Transcarpathian settlements is not only enhanced by the scenic landscape, but also by the variety of wooden churches. These can be distinguished on the basis of their builders, rusyn ethnographic groups living in Transcarpathia (lemkó, bojko, hucul, dolisnyák). The most special ones are the hucul wooden churches located on the eastern part of the county. Amongst these, the most well-known is the Struksyva church of Kőrösimező (HORVÁTH–KOVÁCS 2002.).

Thirty monasteries function in the county. Most of these are Pravoslav, but there are also some Greek Catholic and Catholic ones. The Franciscan monastery of Nagyszőlős can also be visited by tourists.

In addition to the built heritage, traditional farming, gastronomy, handicraft, decorative folk art, intellectual literacy (folk poetry, folk music, etc.) and folk traditions exist only as potential appeals in the region’s tourism. It has to be mentioned that the Treaty of Trianon and the parting of Transcarpathia also meant the tearing apart of the Bereg ethnographic area. Because of political moderation the ethnographic area might serve as a link in the touristic cooperation of both sides of the border.

3. TOURISTIC PRODUCTS OF TRANSCARPATHIA

The various appeals of Transcarpathia enable the manifold development of tourism. The most serious barrier of their utilization is the low quality of the basic and touristic infrastructure, the minimal level of complementary services and the lack of a qualified workforce. This is why the region cannot keep the tourists visiting Transcarpathia entertained. Exceptions are only the health- and medical tourism.

3.1. Health- and medical tourism

After World War II the Soviet power conducted large-scale geological researches in Transcarpathia and discovered several new mineral and thermal water quarries. The construction of sanatoriums and convalescent care facilities – mainly financed by labour unions – began ready for the reception of a large number of people. In the last couple of years there was an improvement that replaced the cutback of the years after the system
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change. Today it can be stated, that health tourism became the most important product of the Transcarpathian tourism (BERGHAUER 2009).

In the nearly 70 convalescent institutes (Table 1) the number of beds decreased with almost 1700 in the last couple of years and now can provide 6400 spaces for visiting convalescent tourists. The reasons for the reduction are partly financial and partly due to the improvement of the quality, which got more important and caused the re-formation of the former multiple-bed rooms.

Table 1. Health resort institutions in Transcarpathia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Sanatoria</th>
<th>Preventive sanatoria</th>
<th>Boarding-houses</th>
<th>Holiday homes</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>51</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>69</td>
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<tr>
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<td>68</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The developmental plans of the county aim the further escalation of health tourism. However, a problem is that this will increase the territorial concentration of the institutes of health tourism. Even today, the most significant convalescent institutions are situated in the recreational zones of Szolyva and Munkács. Foreseeably, in Transcarpathia, corresponding with international tendencies, touristic products targeting health preservation are going to gain more importance (wellness, fitness, aquaparks). Presumably, the arrival of foreigners in a higher ratio will not occur in the near future, but together with the growth of the inner market a further development of services can be expected.

3.2. Rural tourism

The low quality of the commercial accommodations played a role in the rise of the Transcarpathian rural tourism after the system change. Many tourists relied on the rural hosts rather than on the dilapidated commercial quarters with unfavourable prices. Despite the improvement in the services and reliability of the latter, the prosperity of rural tourism still continues due to its favourable prices, hospitality and the hospitality evoking local traditions.

In Transcarpathia rural tourism is only confined to providing accommodation. Most guests are attracted to Transcarpathia not because of the rural lifestyle or traditions but because of the beautiful, intact landscape, historical sights, etc., and tend to spend most of their time taking part in tours instead of staying at the place of accommodation. There are significant differences between the traits of rural tourism developed in highlands (populated mainly by Ukrainian nationalities) and in lowland regions (populated primarily by Hungarian nationalities).
Most guests of the rural tourism of the highlands are inland tourists. Rural tourism in this case is also generally limited to accommodation. Rural lifestyle is part of the attractiveness but it is not its main element. This type of hospitality is usually based on some other appeals (ski runs, sanatoriums, organizations, architectural sights, castles, etc.) This form of rural tourism is preferred by families and companionships (Kárpátaljai Megyei Tanács 2008).

Most guests of the rural tourism in the lowland regions of Transcarpathia are Hungarian tourists. The unique feature is that they usually arrive in groups, mostly travelling by bus. The accommodation and programs are arranged by the travel organizer. Despite the fact that most of them lodge at rural places, only about 10 % come with the purpose of rural tourism. So the Hungarian guests coming to Transcarpathia visit the region’s sights in a chain of tours, among which the historical sights reminiscent of the common past and the intact, scenic natural landscape are the most popular (Szilágyi et al. 2006).

3.3. Ski tourism

The relief and climatic attributes enable the improvement of winter sports. The number of fans visiting Transcarpathia shows a growing tendency. The growth of demand is chiefly caused by the enhancement of inland tourism. Today, there are 60 ski lifts in the county. Ski runs with heavy traffic are located north of Ungvár, in Nagybereczna district (near the settlements Viharos, Csontos), in the Szinyák mountains near Munkács and in the northern part of the county in Rahó district (near the settlements Rahó, Kőröszmező). The length of the runs is usually not up to a kilometre, but there is a run with a slope of 3000 metres and an elevation difference of 550 metres. Most of them have a ski lift and it is also possible to rent equipments nearby. Accomodations of various categories and prices can be found at the runs with heavy traffic. The lack of information about the opportunities and services hinder the development of ski tourism and because of the absence of published statistical data about the traffic of the ski trucks the examination and analysis of their development, problems and tendencies is extremely difficult (www.transcarpathiatour.com.ua).

3.4. Hiking, tracking tourism, ecotourism

The favourable morphological conditions mentioned above and the vast, intact or nearly intact areas provide a great opportunity for the organization of hikes and the improvement of ecotourism. The offer is getting more diverse. Tours lasting for more than a day, consisting of 40-45 km long tracks, family- or thematic (e.g. the source region of Tisza, the Árpád-line) hikes all possible to carry out. The most well-known hikes are targeted at the Sineveri National Park and the Csornohora massif and the climbing of Hoverla (Ukraine’s highest peak) can be considered a pilgrimage.

A great importance was assigned to touring and hiking even back in the Soviet era. Especially due to the low expenses, hiking is listed among Ukraine’s improvable touristic products. The importance of the eco-conscious education is also starting to be rediscovered in schools. It is highly needed because nature harming behaviour is quite common, especially among inland tourists.
3.5. Shopping tourism at the border (From the subsistence tourism to the shopping tourism)

In the years following the system change there was a significant economic setback. The cessation of workplaces, the reduction of salaries and the scarcity of goods revalued the closeness of the border. In the Transcarpathian households subsistence tourism got important, which practically stopped the civilized crossing of the border. To improve the condition, several new border crossings were opened. Border crossings increased more than 5 times so the proximity of the border became an important economic factor. However, the „real” tourist traffic decreased to a minimal level. At this time the visitation of the Hungarian „CMEA markets” became a major goal amongst the Transcarpathian inhabitants and a large number of Ukrainian citizens, with the intention of shopping, strived to go to Yugoslavia and Romania.\(^1\)

The most intensive border traffic could be experienced at the Hungarian-Ukrainian border (137km), which cumulated in 1995. The main driving force was the car importation wave - it became possible to import tax-free Soviet used vehicles. From 1996 the Ukrainian authorities introduced regulations regarding the taxation, which resulted in a decline visible from the border statistical data (BALSCÖK–DANCS 2001).

The economic and political changes gradually terminated subsistence tourism. From this aspect Hungary’s integration into the European Union was an important event. On January 1. 2006. a visa obligation concerning Ukrainian citizens was introduced. This was substituted by the Schengen visa from January 1. 2008. travelling into the EU was paired with strict control. The appearance of the border crossings significantly changed, favouring the unfolding of the „real” touristic activities. For this to happen there was a need for a considerable economic growth within Ukraine. The fairly stable political and economic conditions gave way to a transformation of the local household incomes and eliminated the smuggling activities.

Consequently, there was a noticeable change in border traffic, the number and composition of the incoming and outgoing tourists got balanced. It is characteristic to almost 90% of the border traffic, that most people tend to spend less than 24 hours in the neighbouring country and the majority of their expenditures is spent on shopping. The most intensive border traffic today can still be noticed at the Hungarian-Ukrainian border. Knowing these, it is surprising that Ukrainian citizens in Hungary spend only 41% of their expenses on shopping, while the Hungarians in Ukraine spend 75% (KSH 2005).

So the formerly experienced subsistence tourism was substituted by the „classic”, legal variety of the dually oriented shopping tourism (short stay, frequent return, unique spending structure). This has been generating a significant income for Transcarpathia and contributed to the improvement of the touristic image of the region.

Personal surveys indicate that 72 % of Hungarian people travelling to the borderland settlements (15-20 km belt) of Transcarpathia arrive as tourists in a statistical sense, and leave the country within 24 hours. The frequency of the arrivals denotes that 1/3 of shopping tourists monthly crosses the border, 18 % more frequently (perhaps weekly).

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\(^1\) In the years following the system change the inhabitants living at the border in Transcarpathia completed the low income of their households by smuggling. The majority sold things in Hungary and Romania and from the profit they purchased food and utility goods or products not available in Ukraine in the particulary country. Most of the money earned was spent in smaller commercial units (Csite et al. 1995).
People with purely shopping purposes make up 60% of the traffic, but the short-term visitation of relatives (25%) also combines with purchase. Based on our experiences Hungarian tourists with a recreational or business goal travel a maximal distance of 190-200 km and people visiting, travel an average distance of 130 km. The catchment area of shopping tourism ranges up to 190-200 km, but Hungarians with a shopping goal travel an average distance of 54 km (BERGHAUER 2008). The majority (77%) of shopping tourists travelling to Transcarpathia are motivated by the favourable prices. Among the purchased products the most common are food (29%), clothes (21%), tobacco (17%) and alcohol (17%). The major driving force of shopping tourism, however, is fuel. At least 12.5% of Hungarians crossing the border use more than 50% from their total spending on fuel.

Fig. 2. The division of persons arriving to the frontier settlements of Transcarpathia by the aim of journey and distance covered
Source: Berghauer 2008

Based on the examinations, shopping tourism in Transcarpathia shows decreasing tendencies and the attractiveness of the region is only maintained by the significant differences in fuel prices. Shopping tourism is very sensitive to inflation, currency rate changes so the direction and volume of the travels can change in a short term. But the shopping tourism directed towards Hungary and the Hungarian opportunities of the Ukrainian leisure tourism are drastically decreased since January 1. 2008, when a strict visa processing began to take effect (www.itthon.hu).

4. CONCLUSION

Both in common knowledge and in some travel books a false image exists about Transcarpathia, which overvalues the touristic importance of the county within Ukraine. Statistical data partly counter this, but the relatively low national touristic share of the
region cannot be underestimated either. The tourism of Ukraine is characterized by a strong territorial concentration. There are five touristic centres in the country: Kiev, the Crimean peninsula, the Azov sea-side, the Carpathian region (its main area belongs to Transcarpathia) and Odessa County. The 2-3% national touristic share of Transcarpathia becomes important by looking at the strong dominance of some regions and the low economic potential of Transcarpathia. Based on statistical data Transcarpathian tourism takes the 10th position on the list of territorial units, which is quite good taking all the 27 territorial units into account.

Based on examinations, the region is particularly suitable for the further improvement of tourism, because of the – mostly undisclosed- favourable natural and cultural-historical attributes that are concentrated in a relatively small area and are well preserved due to the peripheral location of the region. Advantages deriving from multiculturalism can also be well utilized next to the current world trends of tourism (GYURICZA L. 2009).

Currently, the most important touristic product of Transcarpathia is health tourism. Unfortunately, this can only serve national demands and popular products serving health preservation are not yet present in the county (fitness, wellness, spa). Aside from medical tourism a special attention is given to the improvement of infrastructure in the mountainous touristic target areas and rural tourism, which is of a key importance in the subsistence for the rural population of the region. It would also be important to follow international trends in giving a bigger emphasis to the improvement of alternative and ecotourism by a reasonable utilization of local attributes. This is the only way to protect current values and preserve the image of the landscape. In addition to this, it looks practical to re-evaluate the borderland position of the region and open up towards international tourism so that not only shopping tourism but also touristic products of real value would find their places on the stage of international tourism.

Despite the Schengen border, efforts have to be made in order to improve the cross-border touristic relations because in both countries it is of local and national interest: tourism can aid the ascension of peripheral areas, it can play an important role in receiving the European Union funds and it can strengthen the relations of Transcarpathian Hungarians to their mother country.

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