

Cultural tourism in Central and Eastern Europe: the views of ‘induced image formation agents’

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Abstract

Countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have emerged from experiences of communist government have had to re-adjust to consequent shifts in tourism flows. Cultural tourism has been seen to have particular importance not only as a new growth market but also, for political reasons, as a means of producing favourable images of these countries. Tourist board representatives in tourist-generating countries are key agents in the image formation process. The views of such agents in the UK were ascertained in this paper in order to determine their perceptions of cultural tourism as part of their country’s product offer, the rationale behind the promotion of this tourism and their awareness of the consequences. This was done by interview with representatives of a number of countries. It was concluded that cultural tourism was seen very positively and it was of importance to all but it was seen in market rather than in political terms. Tourist board interviewees had a particular ‘heritage’ view of cultural tourism and recognised few problems associated with the use of culture for tourism purposes.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have emerged from an environment of one-party communist governments and centralised planning to models closer to Western European ones. This process of transformation occurred at a time when tourism has been characterised by flexibility and segmentation in contrast to the mass standardised market of the mid-20th century (Jansen-Verbeke, 1996). If CEE countries now set out to attract tourists from the main generating countries it would therefore seem fitting to identify and target niche markets. The countries of CEE are not a uniform entity but are diverse in terms of location, topography, climate, history, culture and economic development; each will identify its own comparative advantage in respect of tourism (Hall, 1998a). For some, such as Croatia (ex-Yugoslavia) and to a lesser extent Bulgaria,

beach tourism from Western European markets had been a significant aspect of tourism even during the communist era and is likely to remain so for some time. Nonetheless much pre-1989 tourism was ‘internal’ in that most tourist flows were between the communist countries themselves. With the disruptions post-1989, there has been, in several instances, a realignment of flows with some countries experiencing fewer tourist arrivals from their old (communist) markets and having an opportunity to target western European markets. Despite this, the mass tourist product cycle has been largely rejuvenated from within the region (Hall, 1998b).

There does remain a mass tourism market associated with sun and sea at largely undifferentiated destinations. There is an opportunity for some CEE countries to target and exploit this especially with opening-up as ‘new’ destinations. Not all countries of CEE have coastlines and some have coastlines that would be unsuitable for such mass tourism, though they may be utilised for more niche recreational tourism such as sailing or windsurfing. All however would appear to be targeting the niche markets of rural and city tourism,

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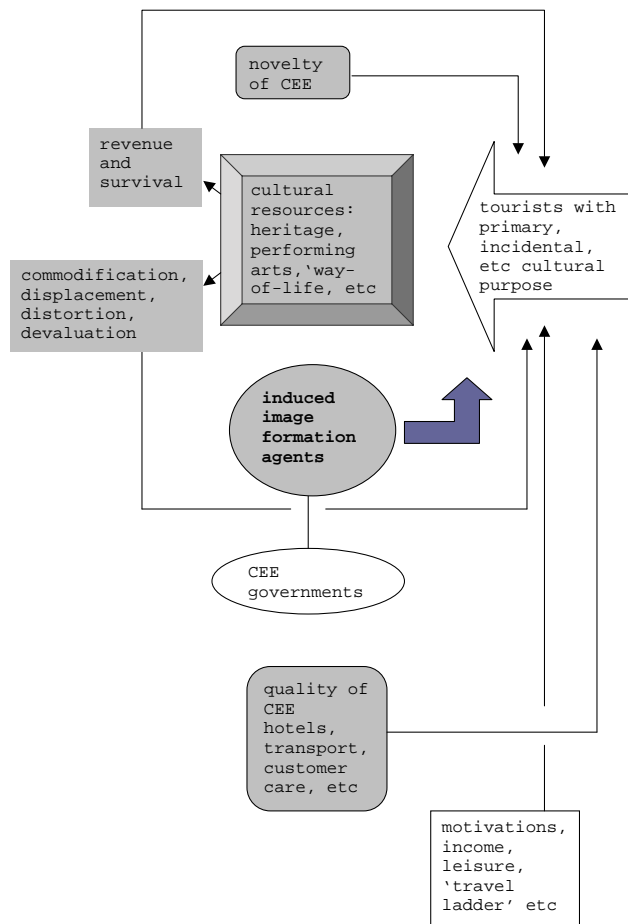


Fig. 1. Some key issues in the development of cultural tourism in ex-communist countries of CEE.

sport and activity tourism, health tourism and cultural tourism.

This paper focuses on the cultural tourism aspect of CEE tourism developments; the purpose of the study reported here was to determine the opinions of CEE tourist board managers about this aspect of tourism and to relate these opinions to certain key issues identified in academic literature. In particular the focus was the view that cultural tourism was favoured by CEE countries for its political ends in generating positive images and good relationships (see below). This study sought to explore this issue further by determining the views of tourist board managers as representing 'official' perspectives on tourism and as having a role in developing and implementing image.

Issues examined in the study are represented in Fig. 1. At the core are the cultural resources, the 'attractiveness' of which are influenced by the new opportunities to visit CEE countries, the quality of the supporting infrastructure (physical and human) as well as marketing efforts of the tourist boards and similar image formation agents (IFAs) which themselves may be subject, however subtly, to political influence. In addition to these

'internal' or 'pull' factors, tourist flows will be influenced by push of motivations and facilitators such as income and leisure. Though the impact of tourists may well be favourable for the cultural resources, if it were to be adverse it could have an undesirable feedback effect on tourists flows.

2. Image formation agents

The image of any destination arises from many and diverse sources (Jenkins, 1999). Gunn's identification of induced and organic agents in the process of image-formation has been extended by Gartner (1993) to the identification of eight 'image formation agents'. Organic images are associated with 'indirect' agents such as films, books and personal advice and recommendations. Other images are induced and are the outcome of agents such as those with a direct association with the destination including tourist boards and hotel associations (overt induced I) and also those with a vested interest but without a direct association with the destination such as tour operators (overt induced II). This paper focuses on a sub-set of overt induced I, namely the tourist board office located in a generating country. Tourist boards typically devote much of their activity to destination-promotion (Hall, 1994; Pearce, 1992; Ashworth & Voogd, 1994) and particularly to product-positioning and the development of favourable images (Alford, 1998; Buhalis, 2000). They are one of the markers (Leiper, 1990) that contribute to the success of a destination as a tourist attraction. Although not usually within the direct distribution channel between supplier and consumer, tourist boards have a role to play in co-ordinating channel activities of hotels, tour operators and transport operators and developing an integrated approach to the marketing of destinations done by them (Pearce, 2002).

Many agents generate image and the nature of image-formation is complex. As a consequence the actual influence of tourist boards will be difficult to isolate and determine and may conceivably be negligible. Nonetheless, given the view that there is an interest of CEE governments in the generation of national image through tourism (see below), the role of the tourist board is significant as it usually has some degree of government involvement. Tourist boards may be perceived as agents (however far removed) of government and the image generated by the tourist board might be expected to reflect, to greater or lesser extent, the views of government.

Tourist board organisations that are located elsewhere than the destination itself are, however, rarely responsible for directly formulating image. Strategic decisions relating to positioning and image are usually undertaken by a central tourist board in the destination

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