Research Paper

The role of history and identity discourses in cross-border tourism destination development: A Vogtland case study

Arie Stoffelen*, Dominique Vanneste

Division of Geography and Tourism, KU Leuven – University of Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border tourism governance processes have remained complex despite increasing permeability of European borders in the last decades. While it has been suggested that the presence of cross-border socio-cultural connections may alleviate border-related tourism management complexities, no detailed studies have been conducted yet to explore this assumption. This paper analyses the role of socio-cultural relations and history and identity discourses in destination development of the cross-border Vogtland region between the federal states of Saxony and Thuringia (Germany). Results of the mixed-method case study indicate that even though financial incentives remain central for cooperation, mobilising an identity discourse facilitates cross-border tourism governance in three ways: through (i) reducing the perception among stakeholders that administrative borders pose barriers for cooperation; (ii) internal stimulation of discussion of socio-economic and identity futures, and (iii) external presentation of a univocal destination image, thereby reducing marketing ambiguity and re-fuelling internal regional identity performativity. These effects are critically dependent on political decisions and the integrative institutionalisation of diverse stakeholders' voices in the destination development and management process. Capitalising on place identities may facilitate cross-border destination development but may also create pitfalls to safeguard the regional integration of stakeholders in this process.

1. Introduction

Despite globalisation tendencies that have resulted in the increased crossing of international borders in European contexts, the barrier effect of borders to inclusively manage borderland tourism destinations has remained present to various degrees. Both cross-border institutional 'under-mobilisation' resulting from multi-scalar incompatibility of national tourism systems, and institutional 'over-mobilisation' due to parallel and uncoordinated development of a multitude of cross-border cooperation platforms, have been identified as possible obstacles to establish structural cross-border tourism dynamics (García-Álvarez & Trillo-Santamaría, 2013; Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; Stoffelen, Ioannides, & Vanneste, 2017; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). Accordingly, the tourism literature 'reveals a lack of success in the many attempts to create cross-border governance structures' (Blasco, Guia, & Prats, 2014, p. 160), and best-practice case studies of structural cross-border destination management are scarce. Nevertheless, the development of tourism remains a central strategy of many transnational and within-country borderlands to boost their socio-economic structures (Blasco et al., 2014; Timothy, 2001), and inter-destination collaboration is increasingly seen as an important driver for destination competitiveness

(Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012; Zemła, 2014).

The persisting complexity of cross-border governance, combined with the socio-economic potentials that could be uncovered, reflect the necessity to find ways to facilitate inclusive cross-border destination development and management practices. One possible factor that has been argued to enable cross-border contact is the presence of socio-cultural similarities between borderland communities. Cultural connections and shared sense of place have been noted in previous research to facilitate interaction and the effectiveness of cross-border governance practices (Björkman, Stahl, & Vaara, 2007; Blasco et al., 2014; Boman & Berg, 2007; Chaderopa, 2013), even though some scholars found that socio-economic and cultural differences in borderlands are also imperative for cross-border cooperation (Klatt & Herrmann, 2011). Additionally, history and identity can function as strategic policy tools to foster the creation of an extra-regional consciousness among communities, and to discursively justify cross-border development plans (Paasi & Zimmerbauer, 2016; Scott, 2013). Tourism is regularly seen as a catalyst for this process through the sector's tendency to strategically shape and standardise identity narratives as well as the tangible (spatial) and intangible (symbolic) organisation of border landscapes (Gelbman & Timothy, 2010; Stoffelen et al., 2017). In other words,

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tourism has a direct but complex role in processes of bordering through which borders and borderland histories are discursively (re)constructed, confirmed and institutionalised (Brambilla, 2015; Laine, 2016; Timothy, Saarinen, & Viken, 2016). This way, the tourism sector actively contributes to the functional and imaginary organisation of border(land)s, thereby acting in both practical cross-border connectivity and symbolic identity construction (Prokkola, 2011).Considering this context perhaps surprisingly, the multifaceted role of cross-border history and identity connections in tourism destination development has received limited attention so far (Blasco et al., 2014). Insights in the temporal and socio-cultural features of cross-border tourism cooperation could provide a first step towards overcoming border-related obstacles for region-building and, by extension, regional development through tourism in borderlands. Building on this proposition, we pose two questions in this paper:

- How do socio-cultural connections and shared history facilitate the structural character of cross-border tourism destination development processes?

- How does the political mobilisation of cross-border historical and socio-cultural aspects of place safeguard or undermine the stakeholder integration in cross-border tourism development?

This paper aims to answer these questions through a mixed-method case study in Vogtland, which constitutes a cross-border region between the German federal states of Saxony and Thuringia (see Fig. 1). Previous research has shown that also within-country borders can pose significant, although sometimes less recognised, hindrances for tourism governance in terms of planning and financing (Lovelock & Boyd, 2006; Timothy, 2001). For this reason, Stoffelen et al. (2017, p. 137) critique 'the often taken-for-granted transnational region-to-region unit of analysis in most cross-border tourism research'. Bordering processes through tourism development, hence, situate across a range of scales and territories, and are also significant though relatively under-researched in within-country settings. Vogtland provides an interesting study area in this regard. A shared history and regional identity is central in the tourism discourse in this region, supporting the intensifying inter-destination collaboration dynamics of the last decade. This process has culminated in the establishment of a cross-border Vogtland destination management organisation (DMO) in 2015 that spans two German federal states. Interestingly, other cross-border tourism practices in the direct surroundings of Vogtland have remained relatively marginal and purely project-based, raising questions about the success factors of the Saxonian-Thuringian Vogtland destination development process. Through this case study, the paper aims to analyse how the presence and political performativity of cross-border socio-cultural connections impact the establishment of integrative cross-border destination development and management.

2. The use of identity in (borderlands) tourism development

Research on the functioning of history and identity in regional cooperation processes has recently picked up steam, partly fuelled by the assumption that acting upon regional identity could lead to regional socio-economic benefits (Paasi, 2013). One focal point on this issue has been the importance of safeguarding the representation of stakeholders and their place identities – the socio-cultural construction of meaning of people in interaction with the spatial settings of an area (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000) – in regional development or sustainability governance. Governance, in its most general form defined as a 'system of governing' and the 'basis of collective action' (Bramwell, 2011, p. 459), has a range of conceptualizations including market-led, state-led, community and network foci (Hall, 2011). It is operationalised in the context of regional identity in tourism cooperation mostly from a perspective of stakeholder integration in decision-making processes. These relational approaches stress that the creation of inclusive networks respecting the diversity of stakeholders' place identities functions as a precondition for the socially and spatially balanced dispersal of tourism impacts throughout destinations, thereby countering rather neoliberal, growth-oriented development policies (Adiyia, 2017; Oliver & Jenkins, 2003; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2015). For example, Kerstetter and Bricker (2009) argue that the incorporation of diverse place meanings in management processes fosters the conservation of the elements of place that are important to both residents and tourists, thereby providing an important basis to reach sustainability aims. Moreover, insights in contrasting visions could highlight potential management bottlenecks. Consensus building in this process centres on understanding why differences exist, which influence they may have on resource management, and which strategies could be developed to bridge them (Yung, Freimund, & Belsky, 2003).
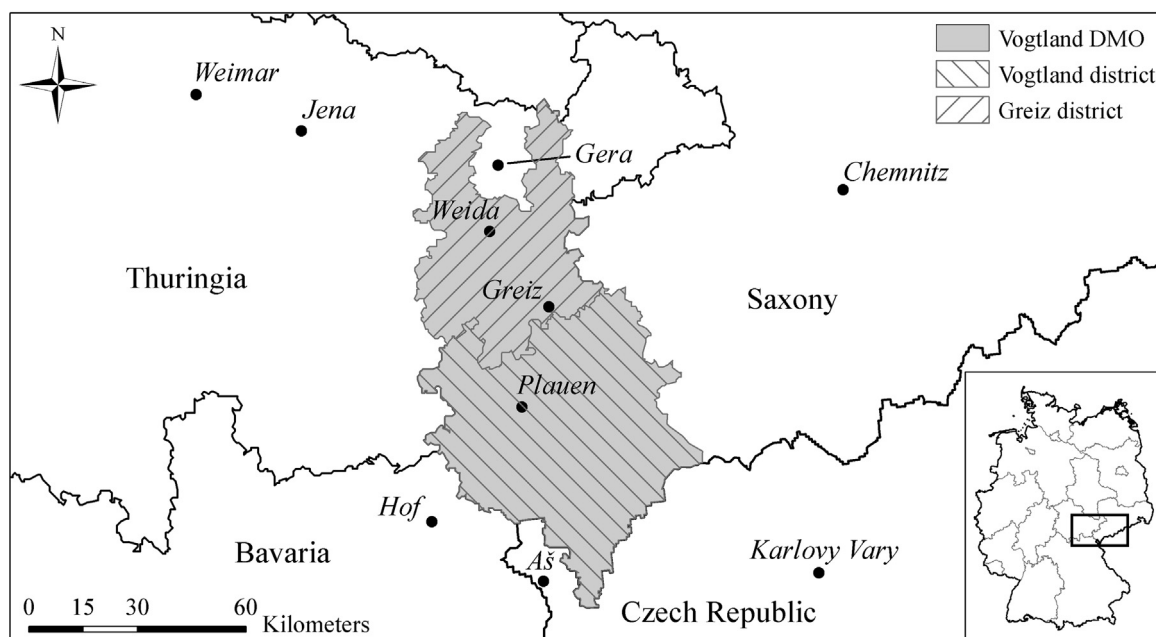

Fig. 1. The administrative delineation of Vogtland.