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# Investigations on Some Induced Risks to Tourism Infrastructure within the Resorts of Harghita County

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I considered to investigate two important aspects regarding some risks that are affecting tourism infrastructure as well as the tourism flow in the resorts of Harghita County. The investigations are based on direct field observation and comparison in time of changes induced by human activities. Carrying out these activities, which tend to become risks, can disturb, modify, or have a negative impact on the visitors' experiences in tourism resorts in Harghita County. In what human activities are concerned, in this paper I will focus mainly on two aspects: one of them is based on risks generated by modernization activities on local infrastructure within resorts and the effects that these works generate as they are carried out. These maintenance or development works to the drinking water supply system, or the sewage water system, the maintenance of the electricity or special cable transports like cable television, telephone and internet, or the modernizing of transport infrastructure (roads), disturb tourism flows, affect the general aspect of the landscape and produce discomfort to visitors. The other aspect that I observed refers to human neglecting, resulting in the degradation, partial or total destruction or even total loss of components of tourism infrastructure. Underlining local authorities' carelessness in a certain sector shows that they do not pursue or plan correctly the timeline and the way in which modernisation activities are carried out within resorts.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries, and it has proven that it is one of the most vulnerable economic sectors in our country. Its vulnerability comes from its utmost importance in several settlements in Harghita County, where it represents the main income source of many family run firms. Resorts in Harghita County have been thoroughly studied by several scientists, amongst whom we mention the works of N. Ciangă (1998), who studied all the resorts in the Eastern Carpathians, and laid the foundation of several other studies on this region. He studied them according to their geographic location,

their natural resources, attracting factors, air quality, and according to mineral water springs [1].

Another pioneer in territorial arrangements and planning within Romanian tourism resorts is P. Cocean (1992), who studied and classified resorts and their components according to their use. According to him, the sum of the natural conditions need to be considered as the founding elements of all tourism activities, as their visual beauty triggers the tourism flow [2].

In this paper, in order to be able to present some aspects on the possible risk factors that can influence tourism flow, we need to understand how any work can be carried out. First we need to know how any

work can be implemented. These are regulated by law, and all start from a P.A.T.N. (National Territorial Arrangement Plan) from which the P.A.T.Z. (Zone Territorial Arrangement Plan) is derived. This latter one is reduced and tailor-made into a P.A.T.J. (County Territorial Arrangement Plan). The local development planning than it is derived from the P.U.G. (the General Urbanism Plan), with its regulations, and then it is cut to the P.U.Z. (the Zone Urbanism Plan) and its regulations and then to the P.U.D. (the Detailed Urbanism Plan). All these documents include regulations which refer to the protection of natural resources and of environment, to social and economic development, etc. [3].

## 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

After understanding how development plans are put into action, for the elaboration of the following material I used data obtained during several trips I took to each location, and while collecting data, I came across a series of elements, that I would like to present in the second part of this paper. I have structured my paper into two main chapters. One of them deals with elements that need to be done differently during development and maintenance works on infrastructure within the resorts of Harghita County. Direct observation combined with statistical data on overnight stays (from the National Institute of Statistics) led to a series of results and effects that are shown in chapter 3 [4]. The second aspect refers to presenting the decay of several tourism infrastructure elements within some resorts, which are fighting with serious economic and tourism decay (see chapter 4).

## 3. MODERNIZING WORKS INFLUENCE TOURISTS' LEISURE EXPERIENCE

Development and constant improvement is a goal, which all resorts consider necessary when they set their targets. These targets are set usually for certain periods of time, and they are discussed on a local, regional or county level, depending on their impact and on their financial implications. As we all know, modernizing infrastructure has a peculiar feature in Romania. It tends to extend more than it is usually planned, and usually several new aspects appear, that are not counted for. Carrying out these activities tends to generate risks, considering that they disturb, modify or have a negative impact on visitors' experiences in tourism resorts in Harghita County.

Local authorities, through their modernizing works, influence tourists' leisure experience. Now, in Harghita County, local authorities are the town halls and the mayor's offices which in most cases are not located within the same settlement. This is the case of Băile Harghita, which belongs to Miercurea Ciuc

municipality, Lacu Roșu resort, which belongs administratively to Gheorgheni, and is 35 km eastwards, Izvorul Mureșului is governed by Voșlobeni, and Băile Homorod are governed by Vlăhița. Single governing units are only Băile Tușnad, Borsec resort, and Praid. As it is shown, in four cases the territorial planning and infrastructure development decisions are taken in other towns, then in the resorts themselves.

To ensure constant improvement of services, modernization is a necessity. Depending on the local budget and on entrepreneurs' involvement in the region the dimension and aspect of development projects change. These projects may include infrastructure modernizing (rehabilitating roads and streets, drinking water supply systems, sewage water systems, electricity supply systems, special transport systems – cable television, telephone and internet –, transport on cable or modernizing tourism infrastructure units like swimming pools, housing units, etc.).

As a result we need to see *why* these necessary activities can turn into risks for the visitors. Development works are carried out by the local authorities mostly between the middle of spring and mid autumn. In most if not in all cases this represents the tourism season for those resorts. Considering the landscape and surroundings in which the resorts are located, we can say that most of the resorts are in the mountainous area, and every one of them are all season resorts, while one of their high seasons is during summer.

The companies that win the organized auctions for the execution of the projects carry out their activities in accessible and appropriate weather conditions. All this is fine, regardless of the tasks that they will perform for the benefit of the resort, but we need to know, that in all resorts, soil is mostly frozen between late November and early May and this means that working with frozen soil is very difficult and can present higher wear rate for the equipment that is used. This is why all companies, which deploy modernizing activities, carry out their jobs in the period mentioned above.

The companies that carry out the tasks want to work only in the above mentioned period and their presence together with the visitors will not necessarily benefit the economy of the resort. The presence of the employees, their equipment and noise may and will affect tourist's mood, experience, and health condition (fig. 1).

In another aspect, before we see the how, we need to know *what* kind of activities are included in modernizing infrastructure and which affected in the past four years the resorts in Harghita County. Here we need to see the projects that were made public by the government, referring to the development and rehabilitation of the drinking water supply system and of the waste water system management and a development plan through the program called

“integrated system for rehabilitating water supply and sewage systems, drinking water treatment systems and waste water treatment in settlements with up to 50,000 inhabitants” [6]. This program included Băile Tuşnad, Borsec, Cristuru Secuiesc, Gheorgheni (including Lacu Roşu resort), Miercurea Ciuc (including Băile Harghita resort), and Topliţa. This project was planned to be carried out between 2007 and 2011, but some of the projects are not finished till today. Other modernizing projects included the rehabilitation of transport infrastructure, by asphaltting the main roads and streets, by repairing bridges, maintenance work to tunnels and mountain passes, to the electricity supply system, to the special service system or resort territorial planning activities, which include sidewalks, park management, tourism trails, and tourism infrastructure units like swimming pools [5].

So far we have discussed the reasons, *why* risks may appear in these resorts, and *what* kind of activities may induce risks to tourists and visitors. So, in the next part of my paper I point out *how* these necessary “modernizing the infrastructure” activities are a potential risk to tourists and visitors and how tourists perceive them:

- activities have partial or total effect on transport infrastructure, affecting accessibility to tourism infrastructure within resorts (through main roads, side streets, and paths). If there are road works in or around resorts, for example in Băile Tuşnad or in Lacu Roşu, where the roads are narrow because of the relief, considering the period between spring and autumn, these resorts are mainly visited in these months of the year. In these cases, during daytime work, long queues of vehicles can form, leading to inconveniences, impatience, restlessness, and anger. All these frustrating things could be avoided if the works would be planned at night, when there are fewer cars in transit;

- travelling conditions will get worse. Any road construction or maintenance work includes debris and waste materials or mud, dirt, and dust. Any of these associated with meteorological conditions like rain, wind, or strong sunshine and high temperature conditions may add up in reasonable risk factors that can affect travellers’ health, security, and safety. As we all know, working with land can become massy, and if roads and trails are dusty and muddy, they already represent a major injury factor. If weather turns bad, which may very easily happen in mountain regions, these areas can turn into real challenges and can represent traps for tourists and locals alike;

- time spent on crossing the region takes longer due to waiting time on worksites, leading to restlessness, anger, and loss of patience. All resorts are attractions, where tourists come to visit. The question is how many of them are in transit or stay overnight. For some resorts are points of transit, for others they are

destinations. If tourists are in transit, their time for visiting and sightseeing is planned. If plans are knocked over by unforeseen events, such as road works, queues will generate the above mentioned states of behaviour. All these leave negative prints with the visitors, influencing their final experience. This can be even measured in the amount of time and money spent within resorts, during difficult transit periods;

- phonic disturbance is caused by the noise of the machinery that works during day and sometimes during night, which affects peace, quietness, and time for rest, recovery or treatment processes or tourists and visitors. The noises produced by these works in enclosed environments, between high cliffs, in narrow passes, and small settlements may be amplified and heard over great distances. Like in Lacu Roşu, or in Băile Tuşnad, or in Borsec, Băile Harghita or in Băile Homorod, the distance between the limits of the resort is small and noise can travel greater distance in mountain areas. Most visitors come to these resorts to recover, to rest, and to recharge. And they pay for peace and quietness, as well as for the good air and splendid natural environment. Constant loud noise will leave serious dents on the entrepreneurs’ revenue;

- works can cause failure in providing the basic necessities and supplies like clean drinking water, electricity, sanitation, and silence. Interruptions may disturb or even shorten tourists’ stay;

- if the time of pause in these services extends, especially if they occur without a warning or prior notice, they can shorten the number of overnight stays, having serious effects on the economy of these resorts;

- these causes result in a bad experience and it will negatively affect the following seasons. Most tourists, especially domestic ones tend to return to places where they had several pleasant experiences, but if these risks leave sufficient negative memories, they appear in overnight stay decrease for the seasons to come;

- the unwanted by-products of field-works like excessive dust, noise and in some cases mud may affect tourists’ health by increasing risk of injury and sickness. Inhalation of dust, the presence of deposits of mud, dust on clothing are all unpleasant and for people predisposed for illness represent risks that they might not have already prepared for. As an excuse, local authorities try to explain and motivate these drawbacks by saying that there is no better time for those companies to work, or they need to respect the employed company’s conditions. On the other hand, the employed companies and their employees are not instructed properly, how to behave, work, and live on working sites within resorts. So they do not observe the engagements stipulated in the contract of execution, enforced by the regulations from the P.U.Z., referring to how they should protect natural environment against sound pollution and physical pollution.



Fig. 1. Sign for modernizing local infrastructure in Băile Harghita. Photo taken in August 2011.

Though these criteria and conditions are stipulated in annexed documents, referring to how activities should be carried out, most of these are not taken into account on sites, and most of them are ignored because of lack of enforcement. Most of the employees are not locals, and their presence can lead to conflicts between the local population and them. We believe that a solution would be enforcing better territorial development strategy planning by the local authorities, a better engagement plan between the hired companies and the local administration in order to observe promised timeframes, a better enforcement of the engagement criteria, that were set in the contract referring to the protection of the natural environment and of all residents at the moment of execution, as well as trying to reduce any risk elements during modernizing activities. Teams of supervisors should be created, including representatives of both the mayor's office and of the employed company, to see that works are carried out at a desired pace and that regulations are enforced on the working sites.

Adjoined efforts will speed up processes and motivate residents to support by any means possible completion of all works.

#### 4. DEGRADATION OF TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

The second aspect that I have considered investigating is the status of some of the former tourism infrastructure units that were in use, but because of unclear circumstances, they are no longer in the tourist circuit.

In time, as political parties replace each other in parliament, as corporation interests exceed local community needs and interests, when personal interests and political interests become priorities, in Harghita county tourism suffered along with other sectors of the economy. But in tourism resorts, one of

the most obvious fallback was registered in tourism infrastructure level in traditional resorts like Borsec, Băile Tușnad, Lacu Roșu, Băile Homorod, and Băile Harghita.

Some of the main reasons for the degradation of tourism infrastructure units are political incertitude, ownership and property problems, time, and pride. Most treatment units in Borsec, in Băile Tușnad, in Băile Harghita were affected to the extent that today they are declared dangerous sites, and most probably will be brought down for security reasons.

Many villas, cabins, formerly renowned restaurants in Borsec, in Băile Tușnad, in Băile Harghita, in Băile Homorod, and even in Izvorul Mureșului were abandoned by their owners, because of lack of funds. These are condemned to being sold, but they are in a deplorable state. Their location and landscape are major advantages, but they need huge investments to be rebuilt, modernized and reintroduced in the tourism circuit. In the past four years we can say that there were some changes in a positive way in all resorts.

The former glory and fame of Borsec now seems to be in reconstruction, the town is being modernized, the owners of the main villas in the resort are asked to rehabilitate their villas, according to their original look, the resort is revitalized, slowly but surely (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Hospital in Borsec.

There is a new treatment complex under construction and the resort is showing important signs of serious restart. But the remains of the past 30 years still haunt the image of the landscape. The same can be said about some restaurants, villas, cabins, and other tourism infrastructure units in Băile Tușnad, Lacu Roșu, Izvorul Mureșului, Băile Harghita, and in Băile Homorod. In the former mining town of Băile Harghita, there are several abandoned buildings that belonged to the kaolin mine, which was closed in the 1990's.

I underlined several areas which show the level of degradation in which some tourism infrastructure

elements are at present. Affected tourism infrastructure units show the marks of deep economic regression in these counties, combined with political games and conflicts between disappeared owners and local entrepreneurs. These units were last used in the 1980's and early 90's. Only in the last four years some mayor's offices started to contact and shake up the owners, motivating them to restore infrastructure to their original looks. Still many of these today are sore reminders of a glorious past:

- treatment and recovery centres in Borsec, Băile Tuşnad, Harghita Băi, Băile Homorod, and in Izvorul Mureşului are not cared after, and loosing these units means less visitors for these resorts (fig. 3);



Fig. 3. Villa in Băile Tuşnad.

- accommodation units: Villas (31 in Băile Tuşnad, 21 in Borsec, 11 in Izvorul Mureşului, 8 in Băile Homorod, and 7 in Lacu Roşu). This means that tourists who come for treatment need to seek alternatives (fig. 4);

- skiing in Lacu Roşu, Borsec, and Izvorul Mureşului;

- caves near Lacu Roşu, near Borsec, and near Băile Tuşnad became less visited due to destruction, improper supervision, and unprofessional maintenance;

- tourists trails;

- public baths: in Băile Homorod, in Harghita Băi, in Borsec and since last year the salt pool in Praid;

- public buildings: like the water mill in Băile Tuşnad.

During this analysis I have not mentioned Praid resort, because it received its resort title only recently and is in a dynamic development. But with bad decisions and timing of the operators of the salt-pool from the resort, which represented a major attraction factor, compensating the function of the salt mine, this year, all summer, in high season, the salt-pool was closed for renovation and reconditioning. This decision was reflected in this year's tourism flow. I have come to know from operators that they have registered just half of the usual number of visitors this year, and all this

because the operators and owners of the salt-pool closed their unit in high season for renovation. These kind of decisions can and will influence not just the income of the operators, but all individuals engaged in the tourism industry within a resort.



Fig. 4. Store & Disco in Băile Harghita.

## 5. CONCLUSION

All activities have the purpose of improvement. This improvement is achieved in time; nevertheless it could be better planned, carried out, monitored, and perfected. All activities are approved by the county office, and mayors should monitor the progress of all activities. In the studied county the noise-level, the amount of accumulated dust, dirt and mud, the crippling of accessibility are by-products of the upgrading processes or of the maintenance works. They are not monitored by any specialized purpose created team from the mayor's office, and deadlines are almost never met. For the residents of these resorts, income is based on tourism flow and on private local and national entrepreneurs' involvement. The image of a resort is its magnet today, so if this image is distorted, it is affecting its power of attraction thus influencing revenue [2]. It is clear that better judgment is needed along with better communication between the executing companies and the representatives of local communities. Working together and showing better judgment could lead to long term progress and economic prosperity for these small communities.

The results deduced from the number of overnight stays in the last six years show an increase in the first four years, while during the last two years they showed a steady level, the number of overnight stays remaining the same in all resorts.

This is indicating that road constructions and any other major planned development and maintenance activity is affecting tourism flow while showing that there is still interest for the region, in spite of all risks.

These studies need to be continued so that they may help these communities and they need to be

accessible for all parties involved. Now we can see the importance of attentive planning and conscious execution for development planning. Tourism is gaining its former glory and fame thanks to unique natural environment, although we need to emphasize that sometimes nature recovers faster than people.

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