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Regional Development of Szatmar-Bereg based on tourism

Summary of PhD Dissertation

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I. Introduction

As a long term of regional development the EU..... this is how some papers with similar subjects and various articles start nowadays; but the villages in Szatmar-Bereg are still situated too far away from Brussels for people to believe in these different projects. Their aim is not to comply with the various slogans of the EU communities, but simply to survive. Their aim is to preserve the uniqueness of this small region and to prevent the young population from moving to towns.

The spatial frame of this dissertation is a small natural region: the Szatmar - Bereg Plain is a beautiful area with longstanding and interesting history, lying in the northeastern part of the county. Its judgement has recently been varied. Cultural heritage in abundance, pleasant and liveable, past preserving settlements. Accompanying these are economic underdevelopment, poverty, high levels of unemployment, reduction in natural births and ageing population. Tourism plays an outstanding role in politics of regional development; this does contribute – at least in some of the villages of Szatmar – Bereg – to a reliable income.

Going back to the main question: The European Union Regional Prospective identifies three priorities as long-term aims:

- Economic and social cohesion,
- Preservation of natural resources and cultural heritage,
- More balanced competition in the European region.

These aims do comply with the traditional basic principles of regional development; i.e. with fairness, sustainable development and efficiency.

There is very little we can do locally to solve the problems in agriculture, in infrastructure development or in employment issues. This area is traditionally agricultural; a lot of experts say that only by resolving issues around agriculture can we make a more significant change in the area.

Professional opinions about the nature of connection between regional development and tourism are divided. If we start our argument with the intersectional feature of tourism and we also keep in mind the requirement of environment, nature preservation, cultural and economic efficiency, then the function of regional development is not in question. Tourism is part of the National Development Plan II for the period of 2002-2013.

Tourism geography has been accepted in Hungary too; although not as much as in Germany. The importance of tourism geography in terms of its representation in geography is still very much on the periphery (AUBERT A. 2006).

The most fundamental aim of this PhD dissertation is to prove that even in a peripheral area that tourism can help increase their income, or possibly provide their daily living, even short term. Some experts – and originally a small number of – entrepreneurs in Szatmar – Bereg can prove and make us believe that besides providing accommodation, other new products/services may significantly increase the number of visitors and therefore, generate some development.

The scientific aim of this dissertation is to provide a complex tourism - geographic evaluation of the areas and based on this to put forward some suggestions for further development of the smaller regions. The four small regions on the Szatmar – Bereg Plain (Vasarosnameny, Fehergyarmat, Mateszalka and Csenger) are situated on 2,140 km² with the population of 153,000. The successful development and more and more significant role of tourism in our area are also supported by some extra features, which cannot be shown in statistical figures, and these are: the visitors' good opinion, well-known villages, atmosphere of the villages. I have also tried to incorporate these into my work; however, it is impossible not to be biased about this subject.

The practical aim of the dissertation is to help improve heritage tourism in the area and also to contribute to the regional development by strengthening active tourism. As the area lies on the border of Hungary I also examine the relevant questions of regional development policies and also discuss problems of micro villages, rural areas. I also investigate the issue of tourist products, attractions, routes and destination management in detail.

II. Analysis of the situation

Some data/information about the social situation in Szatmar-Bereg

Our region is situated in the North- East part of the northern part of the Great Hungarian Plain. The situation of this region is not a very positive one. As it was 230th of the 249 NUTS region of EU in 2005, based on GDP and other social indicators. Within the country Szabolcs – Szatmar – Bereg is also one of the last ones (19th and 20th).

In the smaller regions the employment rate is between 21 and 24%. This is a higher rate than the county (27%) or the national rate (36%). The distribution of active population between the economic sectors is as follows: 8% in agriculture, 32% in industries and 60% in the service sector.

Within the regions 31 labour market units there are three where the rate of young jobseekers exceeds the national average. Two of these smaller areas are among the ones I have looked at: Mateszalka 15% and Vasarosnameny 16%. The unemployment rate significantly decreased between the end of the 90s and 2003; but for the last few years it has increased again (in 2006 11%); looking at the data we can say these four small areas are among the worst situated ones.

This permanent disadvantage of Szabolcs – Szatmar – Bereg is well known; but within the county there are significant variations. The 84. /193. parliament resolution was aiming to balance the disadvantageous regional effects of the transition to the competitive market situation. The settlements categorised in this received a normative government fund determined in the budget; based on their population. These are regularly reviewed. According to the 64/2004 government regulations out of the 168 small areas 95 have been limited. Based on a complex indicator 48 of them were

considered most underdeveloped; one sixth of these can be found in our county.

After the transition of the political system in the geopolitical situation of the area changed quite significantly; being closely situated to the Eastern-European markets became a disadvantage. Our area is one of the furthest away from the core area of the EU. This change also meant that the area once again became peripheral. This factor contributes to the crisis caused by the transition to the competitive market and to the preservation of economic underdevelopment. It was marked even more obvious by the fact that both the region and the county are struggling with serious socio-economic problems. The central areas bringing economic growth (Budapest and North-West Hungary) are too far away to have a dynamic effect on the economy of our area. Tourism can – because of its extra income – help overcome this disadvantageous situation, even short term.

The situation of tourism in Szatmar-Bereg.

The main attractions of rural tourism are the closeness of nature and the recreational opportunities provided by being a rural area. From the statistical point of view one of the characteristics of a rural region is that the main attraction is nature or being rural (hotels should not be a determining factor). The turnover of rural tourism is provided guests from Hungary, the average of guest nights is also lower than the national average. There is no international attraction.

Locations of attractions of North – Hungarian Plain Tourism Region



Own edition

Around Vasárosnamény in the Bereg and around Fehérgyarmat in Szatmar the role of tourism has increased; people can feel its regional developmental

influence. To this increase of popularity of the villages in Szatmar – Bereg some factors do contribute: water tourism on Tisza, rural tourism, revival of architectural and ethnographic features, also some new products/services, festivals and the 'plum route'. The number of guest nights spent in commercial and private accommodation has increased; and so has the processing and marketability of traditional agricultural products, which is the most important increment of tourism. The revival of traditional values is a unique feature of our region, as the natural resources and rural accommodation themselves do not mean enough attraction.

Among the villages of Szatmar – Bereg – in the Upper – Tisza Recreational Area – there are some with balanced levels of tourism (e.g. Beregdaroc, Jand, Kolcse, Szatmarcseke, Tarpa, Tivadar, Turistvandi) and some in an unstable situation (Csaroda, Nagyar, Tiszavid, Vamosatya). Reasons for this are complex; primarily human resources, presence or lack of experts, and the variations on views are the determining factors.

Types of products:

- Active tourism: water tourism, bike tourism, and eco tourism
- Cultural tourism, heritage tourism
- Rural tourism, gastronomy

Tourist products, attractions:

- Szatmar Festival
- Illustrious Days (Jeles Napok) in Bereg
- Szatmar – Bereg plum route
- 'Plum' Thermal and Wellness Spa
- Szatmar – Bereg Nature Park

III. Results

In Szatmar Bereg we can differentiate three areas in respect of tourism: Northern part of Szatmar, Fehergyarmat and Bereg area.

This year we had the 10th Szatmar Festival. Rural tourism has great experiences in the area, there are gastronomical events for guests. Beside the villages with traditional attractions there are new ones: Penyige, Panyola. In the eastern and southern parts of Szatmar tourism is still very young.

The Mateszalka small region, Nagyecséd, Vaja, Vallaj and some others are determined to increase their tourism. Csenger and surroundings would like to take a step forward, too; here building on the architectural characteristics they also plan to organise special 'raft' tours, even crossing borders.

The third area being the Bereg; villages there build on more traditional values (13th Century nice small churches, wooden bell towers, mills), also there are other attractions (Illustrious Days in Bereg).

In Bereg the outstanding event is the Beregdaroc Hemen Weekend. Vasarosnameny is isolated; it has got its own events (Tisza Party, Plum Spa). The relationships between the centres of the micro region and

villages are again varied; although they could only be a determining force in the competition of destinations if they united their forces.

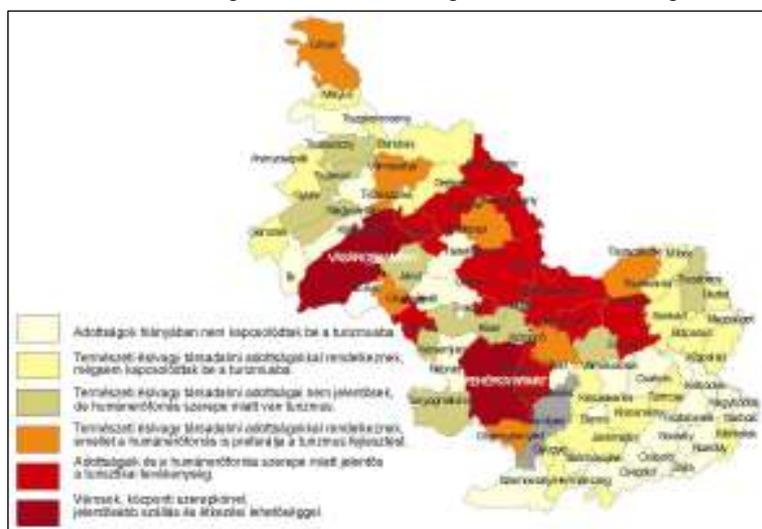
The attractions of Szatmar - Bereg are attached to one tourist product by the plum route and the nature park. Our gastronomy specialities are presented to our guests all over the area.

Tourist categorisation of the villages in Szatmar-Bereg

I examined 76 various settlements in detail. I have come to the conclusion that from the tourist point –of-view there is not relation between the size, the socio-geographical indicators and the rate of tourism in villages provided a basic infrastructure has been in place. The well-known-ness and marketing activities have just as active role in determining the level of tourism as the attractions. There are a few other factors contributing as well. The role of the Tisza is generally highlighted, but the effect of water tourism is not as significant as one would like to believe.

The most significant one is human resources. The database used can be found in the appendices of the dissertation; personal knowledge, experiences and interviews have modified the results drawn from statistical data; therefore being biased could not be avoided. After summarising all the information I have devised six basic types of villages/settlements:

Tourist categorisation of the villages in Szatmar-Bereg



Own edition

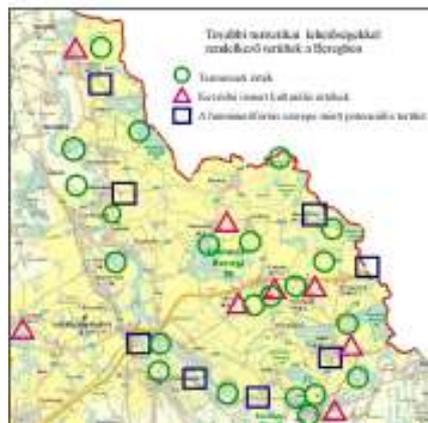
1. Villages not having any attractions have just not embraced tourism: 26 villages.

2. Villages that do have natural and/or social features, but do not take advantage of their opportunities. There are 17 villages in this category.
3. Villages where natural and/or social features are not significant but due to their human resources in 13 villages tourism has increased; their attitude is a main factor, tourism is encouraged due to the lack of other opportunities in regional development
4. Villages that do have natural and/or social features and their human resources do encourage tourism: 5 settlements started their own events during the past 5 years.
5. Due to their features/givens and human resources there is well-established tourism in some 13 villages. The local population and management of these villages have experienced the positive effect of tourism since the middle 90s.
6. Towns with a central role: cannot be compared to the villages, therefore they are a category themselves; but they do encourage and support tourism.

Development of opportunities/conditions of Szatmar-Bereg

Research and planning programmes I have taken part in

Further areas with tourist opportunities in Bereg



(own edition)

1. Society to develop the Bereg Area – Regional Development Strategy
 Four sections of the programme/package were identified; tourism as a priority titled 'Development of tourism based on natural and cultural values'. The only advantage of the closeness of the area was the preservation of traditions and the relatively untouched natural environment. This gives the area such a uniqueness that could be built on with the help of architecture and other values. The disadvantage is the lack of tourist experts, the lack of

languages. The primary aim to develop local tourism further. The attractive natural area, the bike routes/tracks can be very attractive for the young; targeted may also be the families and third generation. The one thing the package does not contain is building on long weekends, second holidays and it does not emphasize the importance of marketing.

2. Development concepts and strategy of Mateszalka Micro Region

The concept describes middle and long - term developmental objectives and the requirements for them to be carried out; also enlists the actions for the middle term. This documents was meant to prepare the decisions of Mateszalka Szatmar Micro Region Society.

In the detailed descriptions all the settlements appear next to some tourist product/ package wherever any of those seem viable. It may make it possible for the more disadvantageous villages, and also the whole area may survive/live up to the opportunities given by tourism.

We suggested establishing tourist micro districts. Considering the situation and the features of small micro regions can be identified that are very similar in nature. Primary tourist functions – corresponding to the façade of these – can also be identified, relevant events can be built upon these. From the bigger centres to the smaller ones a complex tourist package can be developed and devised.

Tourist micro districts of Mateszalka Region



(Edition: E. Pristyak, J. Szepesi, L. Suto)

IV. Summary

The most significant result of tourism development – apart from stabilising or even increasing the turnover of guests – is the production and distribution of regionally specific, organic foods, and a few 'Hungarikums'. The boom of local export means some extra income for the population of Szatmar - Bereg, in more and more cases also their living. A kind of living that they have cultivated for hundred of years, i.e. production and processing of agricultural produces.

A given destination – in our case Szatmar- Bereg's tourist capacity contributes and influences the region's infrastructure and economic development. Hopefully the effect already in motion will continue and find an advantageous balance and keep functioning as part of this region's development. Tourism plays a serious economic role in 15 settlements, i.e. 23 % of Szatmar – Bereg. These may not seem to be big numbers but I do consider this development very significant; as (these settlements) at the time of differentiation of these villages- when creating new vacancies is still not happening – tourism is the one factor that has been able to – short term – and hopefully will be able to contribute to raising the standard of living.

During the research it has been proven that even with the help of local initiatives, various forms of regional development the population of Szatmar – Bereg cannot turn the disadvantages around to a great extent. Although local people do try to do a lot; but to turn the situation around these settlements need to be part of an efficient regional development managed from higher levels. In my opinion it is an achievable target to make a living here, to keep the young and families here.

Some results of tourism

- During the past ten years tourism in our region has increased manifold; thus contributing to supplementary incomes. Enterprises in tourism have increased, thus creating new jobs and vacancies; with stretching the season and organising spring and autumn events the number of guest nights is increasing, too.
- Agricultural produces, especially plum, have regained their value. As well as producing its ingredients, people also see the benefits of new jobs and income while processing plum.
- Guests require and are happy to spend their money on organic products: jams, dried fruits; these can now be purchased in houses of Szatmar and shops in Bereg.
- The new products/services (plum route, festivals, spas, nature park) could only be established with the co-operation of people, which may have a significant socio-cultural effect.
- Appearances of villages have also changed; nice, organised villages welcome our guests nowadays.

- The co-operation between charities/civil organisations and tourism experts/organisations seems to be becoming stronger; this needs to be maintained even more efficiently in the future.
- Concerning tourist services there has been a change in quality that also need to be kept; both domestic and foreign guests' requirements change and increase; demands of well-developed societies and the demographic structure of travellers all require this.

In order to belong to the core tourist areas of North-Great Plain our region needs further quality improvement in infra- and superstructure. Training of experts has already been established in the county; again their number is on the increase. To change the nature of supplementary income would mean the 'real' regional development in our area.

Results of my research

1. The experiences of my research, the conclusions with regards to tourism and settlements in the region:

- Examination of the levels in various parts of the region has proved that opportunities for further development are there; but its basis – that differentiates villages – is human resources. Presence, or lack of human resources determines the extent of development in a village
- The aim of categorising based on tourism in to prove the significance of Human resources.
- During my research my assumption has been proven; i.e. neither agricultural, nor tourist statistical data show the extent of extra income of the population regarding/coming from tourism.
- Based on national, regional or county level results we cannot show well the regional developmental effects of tourism. The results suggested by data and personal experiences cannot be corresponded to each other appropriately.
- The development concepts are important for the local governments and other organisations; at least they have to think them over, but the effectiveness of realisation is very low. Human resources play a significant role in this, too. Good individual ideas cannot be acted upon due to lack of equity. Their ideas are adjusted to suit the applications; this is why it would be important to have a more efficient co-operation between local and regional levels.
- I have shown in some good examples that tourism experts or people involved in tourism have become mayors of their villages: Tivadar, Csaroda, Tarpa, Turistvandi, Penyige, Panyola; in which cases the development of the villages has greatly improved. Examples for successful individuals but not tourist enterprises – the interest of which is to generate tourism; Tarpa Natura KFT, Tarpa Manufaktura Kft. Panyola Szilvorium Kft, all process local products. They all show that a lot depends on individuals' motivation.

- In the micro region it is the co-operation of individual enterprises and the local population that makes them well known. That forms the basis of marketing and further development.
- In a quarter of the villages the effects of tourism are evident; personally I think this is a very high rate. Indirectly another quarter of the villages are involved, but Tourism is not the 'Cure' in every village.

2. Research results mentioned in my objectives:

- in the area of tourism it seems obvious in our region as well, that initiatives, developmental activities coming from the bottom and the tools of regional development from the top together make it possible for a region to improve.
- It is imperative that we publicise the positive effect of tourism, the surveys, the researches in an accessible way. In that way we could prove to the population of Szatmar- Bereg that this initiatives take us in a 'good direction'. The change in their views – that it is possible to make one's living other than from agriculture – has to carry on.
- Co-operation over the borders is also absolutely necessary in further development of the area. One of the desirable requirements is to continue the bike tracks on the riverbanks out in Romania and Ukraine.
- In my view tourism contributes to decreasing the 'mental distance' between the other regions of our country and ourselves. Szatmar – Bereg now has its own atmosphere and everything is given to build a positive image on, that could stabilise and balance tourism in the area.
- I have also taken part in devising development strategies to utilise the opportunities.

Further possible directions on research of tourism in the region:

1. Research- planning activities:
 - To develop a system to measure the results that cannot be shown in statistical figures at the moment; the usual figures are not elaborate enough to show to what extent tourism contributes to improving standard of living.
 - More detailed analysis of agricultural figures; this way we can be certain the production of fruits is on the increase.
 - Tracking local highly qualified young people, in at least a representative way.
2. Suggestions for further development:
 - The micro regions in Hungary can utilise the opportunities provided by their heritage, their cultural and rural tourism. Further comparative studies in the area or even a potential exemplary area identified may be the way forward.
 - Unique development of active tourism and eco tourism. We cannot compete with the canoe tours at Tisza – to, or the showrooms of Koros - Maros National Park or the water tourism of Duna - Drava. However, we can provide bike tracks and routes on the riverbanks, pleasant forest paths and fruit tree parks.

- Further special attractions (e.g. embroidery houses, pentathlon in swamps, special raft tours) may promote them better.

In my opinion tourism cannot in itself bring complex regional development and this is not the solution for all the villages, However, it may work in Szatmar – Bereg; here it strengthens their identity, provides further opportunities for agricultural produces and their processing, encourages production of end- products, and therefore the area may keep its population from migrating. It also improves the quality of life in the country, creating self-employment and last, but not least co-operation.

Based on a source in our local library, in September 1406 one person from Hete in Bereg went to the Courthouse in Beregszasz to accuse one of his neighbours to have shaken off pears of his tree and have taken them away. In the case the judges decided that the neighbour had to clarify his name by swearing he was innocent. I have chosen this seemingly insignificant case to show that the relations have not changed for the past 600 years a lot; but thanks to the technical and economical developments we can show our loved region to others, and both parties may gain something by this. One of the increments of tourism for Szatmar - Bereg does not necessarily need to be globalisation. We offer a unique, individual area to our guests – in the competition of destinations – and besides being the perfect recreational area our guests may also learn about us; the hospitality of the locals may provide the with a living. The other increment – looking at the above example – has to be that this area is populated by frail but very happy people.

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