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Title:

Sustainability and Coastal Tourism in Transition: A Stakeholders' Perspective (Examples from Bulgaria's Black Sea coast)

Conference Theme: Competitiveness, sustainability and corporate social responsibility

Abstract: [Your extended abstract should be no longer than 1500 words following a research paper structure (e.g., introduction, theoretical foundation/literature review, research methodology, research findings, and conclusions and implications). The reference style for the conference is that of the American Psychological Association (APA). The box will 'expand' over pages as you add text/diagrams into it.]

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Introduction

This study employs the example of Bulgaria's North Black Sea coast to examine the stakeholders' perceptions of sustainability and the degree to which the principles of sustainability have been adopted and implemented in the policies and practices in the past three decades. It contributes to the body of knowledge on coastal tourism development and its problematic relationship with the concept of sustainability in times of rapid changes. A multidisciplinary and holistic approach is adopted to contextualise the study within the wider arena of politics and power and develop an analytical framework for the study of sustainable tourist development, which could be applied in similar contexts.

Review of the Literature

Although there is a growing body of research on the transformation of tourism in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries after 1989, only a few studies focus on the traditional coastal tourism destinations and attempt to critically evaluate the challenges of implementing the principles of sustainability. This is a part of a broader issue relating to the study of mass tourism globally - while the evolution of tourism and the drivers for its development are well documented, there is limited research on the extent to which the historical processes might inform the knowledge and understanding of modern tourism (Shapley and Harrison, 2017). In addition, studies on sustainability and impacts of tourism in traditional CEE destinations are usually concerned only with specific aspects and use different timeframes, thus providing a slightly distorted picture of the processes and underlying factors. More specifically, previous studies on coastal tourism in transition economies attribute failures to achieve sustainability to the political complexity (Alipour and Dizdarevic, 2007), the economic transformations (Jordan 2000), and the socialist legacy and inefficient planning (Bachvarov, 1999, 2006).

In the recent years, there have been attempts to place the emphasis on the positive economic contribution of tourism (Ivanov 2005, Ivanov 2017); however, most scholars share their concerns about the overall sustainability of this phenomenon and the inability of the society to effectively plan and manage tourism development to the sustained benefit of all stakeholders. These are based on the studies of the modern manifestations of tourism, such as prostitution (Hesse and Tutenges, 2011), pub crawls and alcohol abuse (Tutenges, 2015), high staff turnover (Matev and Assenova, 2012), urbanization of the sea coast (Holleran 2015), destruction of sand dunes

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(Stancheva, Ratras, Orviku, Palazov, Ravis, Kont, Peychev, Tonisson and Stanchev, 2011) and deteriorating sea water quality (Moncheva, Racheva, Kamburska and D'Hernoncourt, 2012). Contrary to previous studies, this research takes a holistic approach and aims to establish a link between the outputs (*what* is happening) and the inputs (*why* this is happening).

Research Methodology

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the *path-dependency path-creation approach* and New Institutional Economics in that it acknowledges the existence of a greater variety of structures, procedures and processes and their capacity to interact with one another. Within an analytical framework of interdependencies between the main elements of the political and economic sectors, the *actors'* (decision-makers') behaviour is viewed as influenced by *the institutional framework* (property rights, regulation, institutions and informal rules of the game).

This research focused on the subjective views of stakeholders involved in the decision-making process and on the meanings given to social relations in order to understand past and contemporary policies and practices (Roberts and Simpson, 1999). The adoption of a qualitative approach helped to go beyond the initial conceptions and study 'which events led to which consequences and derive explanation' (Miles and Huberman 1994). A case study strategy was employed to examine and analyse the development processes that took place in the Varna-Balchik destination on Bulgaria's Black Sea Coast after 1989. Research data was collected using a multi-method research approach with a combination of secondary data and primary data gathered using qualitative research techniques including a series of stakeholder interviews. This study involved 38 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 24 research participants, 20 informal conversations with 'gatekeepers' and a large number of conversations with local people. The in-depth interviews were conducted with decision-makers from the stakeholders' groups at a local, regional and national level, who were involved in tourism development at some time over the period studied. The primary data was analysed using a *Framework* thematic analysis based on the *path-dependency path-creation approach*.

Research Findings

Overall, the meanings of *sustainable tourism development* were socially constructed and varied over time and across (and even within) the different stakeholder groups. The study revealed distinctive stages in the process of adopting the principles of sustainability in the policies and practices at the selected destination. Throughout most of the 1990s, *tourism development* was perceived by the study participants as dominated by the transformation of property relations and the establishment of a regulatory framework. By contrast, post 2000 public policy documents present *tourism development* as committed to sustainability and diversification. However, interview data analysis showed that, with some exceptions, the prevailing business practices in the destination studied aimed at a massive expansion of higher-quality accommodation with little (if any) regard for environmental and socio-cultural issues, and even less understanding of the principles of sustainability.

General and tourism-specific policies and actions which aimed at achieving sustainability through diversifying the tourist product and environmental upgrading were not supported by an effective enforcement mechanisms or consistent financing. In the context of lenient enforcement and control frameworks, most tourist businesses pursued policies for expanding their facilities,

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resulting in the urbanisation of some coastal resorts and a ribbon-type development of the villa-zones along the coast. There was an overall consensus among the study participants that the positive impacts of tourism have been greatly exaggerated and the actual costs are still to be seen.

The findings from the primary and secondary data analysis showed that the failure to effectively and consistently implement the principles of sustainability could be best understood when the whole complex interplay of factors is taken into consideration. The factors emerging from the stakeholders' interviews include the extreme '*politicising*' which hampered all business activities through its manifestations: *political influence*, *rent-seeking*, *political culture* and the existence of *illegal capital* under the political umbrella. In the views of the study participants, the new institutional and legislative framework determined the development pathways and specific business practices, and in many cases, led to challenging relationships and tension between the stakeholders. The impact of '*politicising*' and the transformation of *property rights* could be understood when linked to the role of the state (the *involvement of the state*) in the regulation and control. The *human capital* in its turn had an impact on all other factors through the capacity of the decision-makers to develop and implement the policy measures, and take the lead in achieving the sustainability goals. The *mindsets* (mentalities) of the decision-makers were seen as the 'soft' elements of the system that could speed up or slow down the transformations and defined the direction and magnitude of change. The *social networks* channelled the distribution of public property into private hands, thus re-arranging the power relations in decision-making. An important finding was related to one of the symbols of the democratisation of society - *the local empowerment*. The accounts of the interviewees showed that this factor could play a negative role in the tourism development being bestowed in the wrong moment onto those who do not have the appropriate resources to ensure the welfare of the local community.

Conclusion and Implications

The research findings demonstrate that sustainability does not fit well into the rapidly changing transition context. In spite of the increasing empowerment of the local communities and their attempts to achieve balanced development by implementing integrated and long-term planning, the primary data revealed increasing concerns over the ineffectiveness of policy-making, the increasing urbanisation of the coastal strip and the competitiveness of Bulgaria's North Black Sea coast tourism offer.

An analytical framework was developed to explain the specific development pathways and sustainability practices observable in the selected destination. The framework (Fig. 1) takes into account the political (*politicising*), psychological (*mentalities*), institutional dimensions of transition (*property rights*, *social networks* and *local empowerment*), the role of the state (*reduced state intervention*), and the individual (*human capital*). Some of these themes (*politicising* and *mentalities* in particular) are largely absent from previous research on tourism in transition and from the wider tourism studies. This analytical framework can be applied in the study of other tourist destinations undergoing rapid changes and can help avoid the mistakes of the past.

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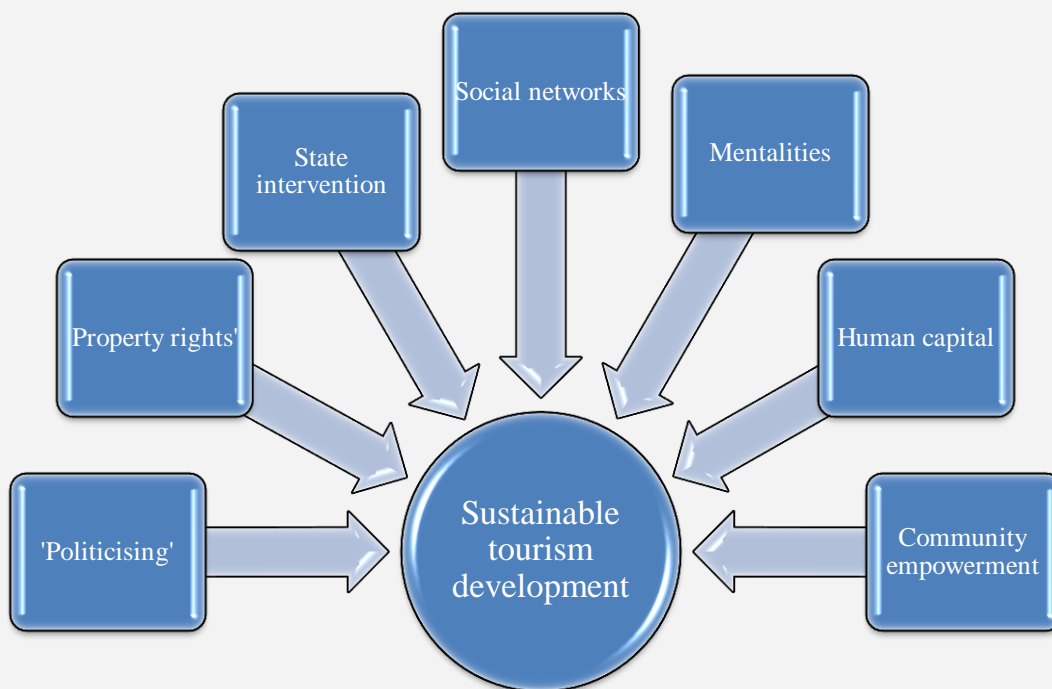


Fig. 1 Factors determining the implementation of the principles of sustainability

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