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## Trigger events, moments, and destination evolution in a post-socialist context

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### ABSTRACT

For over three decades the states of East-Central Europe have negotiated the transition from state socialism in a way that reshaped every aspect of politics, economy and society. However, the impacts of post-socialist restructuring on the evolution of tourism places have received limited attention. We contribute to this debate by examining how processes of post-socialist reform have unfolded in Băile Herculane (Romania), radically disrupting its development path. Drawing on insights from evolutionary economic geography we conceptualise post-socialist restructuring as a 'moment' of change which produced impacts and new conditions which, in turn, dramatically reshaped the destination's evolution. Twenty interviews were undertaken with tourism stakeholders in the town. The impacts of the moment of post-socialist restructuring included a rapid decline in demand for domestic tourism, leaving the town dependent on state-sponsored social tourism. In a context of falling wages, many skilled hospitality workers left the town. A flawed privatisation process failed to inject the capital and expertise necessary to reinvigorate the accommodation sector. Tourism policy-makers (both national and local) did little to address the decline in tourism, while local economic actors had limited scope for innovation or entrepreneurship. The post-moment conditions of the town were characterised by a significant reduction in traditional tourism activities and under-investment in tourism infrastructure. However, there was some development of new tourism products, which shifted the geography of tourism activity within the town. Băile Herculane therefore demonstrates a range of pathway trajectories including path dependence, path contraction/downgrading, but also limited path renewal. This case demonstrates the impact of post-socialism in (re)shaping destination trajectories and affirms the value of evolutionary economic geography for understanding local-scale and place-dependent processes and outcomes that shape destination evolution.

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## Introduction

Tourism geographers have long been concerned with the evolution and development of tourist places. Perhaps the most influential contribution is the Tourist Area Lifecycle (TALC) (Butler, 1980, 2024) which has generated considerable academic commentary and debate. More recently, some tourism researchers have looked to other perspectives to understand the development of tourism places. One of the most important within tourism geographies is evolutionary economic geography (EEG) (James et al., 2023). Like the TALC, EEG focuses on development over time but focuses on how 'past conditions both enable and constrain future courses of economic change' (Brouder, 2014a; Brouder & Eriksson, 2013, p.372). EEG emphasises the agency of economic actors, along with the importance of social, economic, and political contexts in enabling or constraining the opportunities for actors (Gill & Williams, 2014; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014). This approach is particularly suited to micro-scale analysis of the historical development of economic activity in places and regions (Brouder & Eriksson, 2013) and has proved particularly useful for examining the evolution of tourism destinations (Belay & Adu-Ampong, 2023; Bohn et al., 2023; Butler, 2024; Gill & Williams, 2014; James et al., 2023; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014).

Recent research from an EEG perspective has also focused on events which radically disrupt destination evolution (James et al., 2023). In the original formulation of the TALC, Butler (1980, p.11) argued that 'catastrophic events' could have a significant impact on destination trajectories. EEG scholars have used similar terminology such as 'external shocks' (Brouder & Eriksson, 2013, p.378), 'triggering events' (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016, p.81), or 'turning points' (James et al., 2023, p.1819). Such events have the potential to dramatically reshape a destination's development. Some trigger events (such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or the Covid-19 pandemic) have received considerable attention (James et al., 2023) while others have been neglected or are less well understood (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). As such, James et al. (2023) call for attention to a wider range of trigger events.

This paper addresses this issue by focusing on a trigger event which has hitherto received little attention: a dramatic change in political order. In particular, we focus on the radical political, economic and social upheaval associated with the collapse of state socialist regimes in East-Central Europe between 1989 and 1991, and the subsequent processes of post-socialist restructuring. Although tourism geographers have dedicated considerable attention to tourism restructuring in East-Central Europe (Niewiadomski, 2023) there has, with a few exceptions (Bachvarov, 1999; Petrevska & Collins-Kreiner, 2017; Saarinen & Kask, 2008), been little attention to how post-socialist change has reshaped the trajectories of tourism destinations. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how processes of post-socialist restructuring have disrupted destination evolution. To do so we employ three key explanatory concepts from EEG: 'paths' of development; trigger events (the collapse of socialist regimes); and 'moments', defined as 'given points in time (and space) signalling shifts in the development pathways of tourism places' (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016, p.85). This approach provides a theoretical perspective for understanding the nuanced, contingent, and place-dependent evolution of destinations (Chu & Hassink, 2023; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014).

This paper examines these issues with reference to Băile Herculane (hereafter Herculane) in Romania. This small town developed as a spa resort in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries based on balneotherapy (the medicinal properties of its thermal spring waters). Grand and elegant hotels, baths and pavilions were constructed, and the resort was popular among a leisured elite. Herculane continued to be successful during the socialist era. However, in the post-socialist period the town has experienced protracted decline. Many buildings in the historic centre are neglected, some are close to dereliction, others appear to have been abandoned (see [Figure 1](#)), while visitor numbers have also declined. Therefore, Herculane illustrates the 'dark side' of path development (Blažek et al., 2020). Our analysis focuses on explaining Herculane's trajectory of decline with reference to the broader processes of post-socialist restructuring. In particular, we conceptualise the collapse of the socialist regime in 1989 as a trigger event which, in turn, brought about a 'moment' of change (the implementation of post-socialist economic restructuring). The impact of this moment was a dramatic reshaping of the destination's evolutionary path.

## Literature review

### *Evolutionary economic geography and destination evolution*

A central concept within EEG is the metaphor of development 'paths' for explaining economic change (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). Path development is conceptualised as



**Figure 1.** Derelict building in Băile Herculane (courtesy of Ana Ianas).

an open process in which various outcomes are possible (James et al., 2023). The most-researched scenario (Brouder, 2014a, 2014b; Flood Chavez et al., 2023) is path dependence where structures and institutions from the past shape and constrain future developments (Saarinen & Kask, 2008; Williams & Baláž, 2000). In turn, this can lead to 'lock in' which constrains economic change (Brouder & Eriksson, 2013; Ma & Hassink, 2013; Niewiadomski, 2015). While path dependence is sometimes portrayed as a passive response to change, it can also be a deliberate and strategic choice (Wilkinson et al., 2023). An alternative scenario is path creation in which the agency of economic actors can bring about change, moving from existing development paths to create new forms of economic activity (Niewiadomski, 2015). An intermediate position is path plasticity (Gill & Williams, 2014; James et al., 2023; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016) which is characterised by incremental change and innovation within a context still shaped by the past (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). However, path development may also take a negative trajectory, although such scenarios have received less attention (Berard-Chenu et al., 2023; Blažek et al., 2020). Examples include path contraction (where a particular industry declines in volume); path downgrading (where specialist activities within an industry are closed or removed) and path delocalisation (where economic activity is relocated to more favourable locations) (see also James et al., 2023). An extreme trajectory is path dissolution (Flood Chavez et al., 2023) where an economic activity ceases altogether. Central to all path trajectories is a recognition of the importance of place in shaping development trajectories, since path development is place dependent (Brouder, 2014a; Chu & Hassink, 2023).

When applied to tourism, EEG shares with the TALC a concern with the evolution of tourism places (Butler, 2024; Ma & Hassink, 2013) but focuses on understanding the 'motors' of such change (Brouder, 2014b; Brouder & Eriksson, 2013, p.377). This approach allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of how and why destinations change over time, with reference to place-specific influences and actors that shape destination trajectories. In particular, an EEG approach enables analysis 'of the evolution of tourism destination *as places*, rather than focusing on the evolution of tourism *in destinations*' (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016, p.97). In this context, recent studies have adopted EEG perspectives to analyse destination evolution and path trajectories in a range of contexts (Belay & Adu-Ampong, 2023; Flood Chavez et al., 2023; Gill & Williams, 2014; Halkier & James, 2016; Ma & Hassink, 2013; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2023). This work has established that destination evolution is a non-linear, open-ended and emergent process (Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014).

There is widespread recognition that destination path development can be disrupted by incidents or decisions which are termed 'triggering' or 'trigger' events (James et al., 2023, p.1819; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016, p.84). These can arise from exogenous factors, often in the form of spontaneous shocks (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016) which may be entirely unrelated to tourism (Flood Chavez et al., 2023). Alternatively, they can be selective, often resulting from the actions of key actors or the planned impacts of policy. Furthermore, such actions may be derived from consensus or imposed in a top-down manner (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). Whatever their nature, trigger events can create opportunities for new path creation by enabling the agency of entrepreneurs and institutions to develop new products or seek new markets (James et al., 2023). However, trigger events are not inevitably catalysts for change and new path

creation, nor are their impacts on destination development invariably negative (*ibid*; Wilkinson et al., 2023).

Some recent research has moved beyond focussing on individual trigger events, instead conceptualising such events as one component of broader ‘moments’ of change (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). The concept of moments—defined as points at which a destination’s trajectory shifts in direction and focus - was developed by EEG researchers working in a tourism context and is specifically concerned with theorising changes in path development within destinations. Before a trigger event the context and circumstances of a destination will constitute a ‘pre-moment scape’ (*ibid*, p.87) which is characterised by a certain set of conditions. A trigger event will bring about a moment of change which unfolds within this context. This moment may be instantaneous or prolonged; it may unfold at a macro or micro scale; its effects may be rapid or gradual; and it may be permanent or reversible. During this moment a destination’s development path is in flux (James et al., 2023) and the intensity of the moment will determine whether its effects are path creating or path plastic (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). This moment will have impacts which may be stabilising or destabilising for a destination’s path. After these impacts have been worked out, a ‘post-moment scape’ (characterised by a new set of conditions) is produced (*ibid* p.90). This may be relatively stable, or be subject to further disruption. It will, over time, form the pre-moment scape for future trigger events and change moments. Sanz-Ibáñez et al. (2016, p.90) argue that this model allows for a ‘more nuanced and complex manner of understanding the evolution of (tourism) places’. It is an approach which treats moments as being unique in their characteristics and the ways in which they unfold. It therefore prioritises understanding the specific local context of individual destinations (*ibid*).

Analysis of trigger events has tended to focus on natural disasters or major economic crises but has overlooked other factors (James et al., 2023; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). In particular, the impact of political change on destination trajectories is rarely considered, since discussions of destination evolution often assume a stable political context (Saarinen & Kask, 2008). However, Belay and Adu-Ampong (2023) argue that political transitions have the potential to reshape a destination’s development path. In this analysis we argue that the collapse of socialist regimes in East-Central Europe can be conceptualised as a trigger event, and subsequent post-socialist restructuring represents a moment that dramatically impacted the evolution of a particular tourist destination. To understand the potential significance of post-socialist political and economic restructuring for destinations it is first necessary to examine the nature of post-socialism itself.

### ***The shift from socialism to post-socialism***

State socialism was a political and economic system that attempted to eliminate the inequalities caused by capitalism. Socialist regimes were underpinned by extensive state intervention in politics, the economy and society. Private property was virtually abolished, and almost all industries and businesses taken into state ownership. Economic activity was carefully planned by a large bureaucracy to ensure economic growth which minimised inequalities. Such states were also characterised by single-party

rule (the Communist Party or equivalent), ostensibly in the interests of the people. Socialist regimes used tourism to contribute to economic development and the well-being of workers (Hall, 1991) but like all economic sectors tourism was carefully planned and regulated.

The state socialist regimes of East-Central Europe collapsed between 1989 and 1991 and each country embarked on the challenging project of political and economic reform intended to establish a multi-party democracy and functioning market economy (Niewiadomski, 2016). This was a moment of change characterised by restructuring on an unprecedented scale. Different countries pursued reform at different paces: some favoured rapid reform ('shock therapy'), while others opted for an incremental approach ('gradualism') (Marangos, 2013). Romania has experienced alternative episodes of gradualism and shock therapy, depending on the government at the time.

Post-socialist reforms were intended to drastically reduce the state's intervention in economic and social life (Hare & Turley, 2013; Nuti, 2013; Williams & Baláž, 2000). Central economic planning was abandoned, allowing market forces to shape economic activity. Socialist models of taxation and government spending were reformed to bring about macroeconomic stability. Key policies included the liberalisation of prices formerly fixed by the state (which, in turn, caused inflation and reduced the purchasing power of local populations). Foreign trade was liberalised, allowing foreign investment but also exposing domestic businesses to unprecedented competition. A central aspect of restructuring was privatisation of assets in state ownership, which was intended to quickly create a functioning private sector (Dumbrăveanu, 2001). However, preparing companies for privatisation frequently involved rationalisation and some companies that were unviable within a market economy closed altogether. Other actions included legal and institutional reforms, redefinition of property rights, and dismantling the socialist-era welfare state. The impacts on ordinary people were traumatic as the stable environment of socialism was replaced by an entirely new dynamic shaped by market forces. Furthermore, almost all post-socialist states experienced a transformation recession during the 1990s (and sometimes multiple recessions) resulting in a collapse in living standards and considerable hardship (Nuti, 2013; Williams & Baláž, 2000).

An EEG perspective has considerable value for understanding the nature of post-socialist change in East-Central Europe, and the impacts for tourism. First, the collapse of socialist regimes can be conceptualised as a spontaneous, macro-level, trigger event (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016) which brought about a radical change in the political, economic and social path of these countries. This in turn stimulated a moment of change as post-socialist governments introduced (usually in a top-down manner) restructuring policies to dismantle the political, economic and social structures of socialism. This had an initially destabilising effect (which persisted into the longer term in some states). This moment of post-socialist restructuring had numerous impacts as specific policies were implemented. Since each post-socialist state implemented reforms in different ways, there were distinct national differences in the unfolding of this moment of change. Furthermore, within each state, the impacts of this moment of post-socialist restructuring were geographically differentiated in a place-dependent manner (Brouder, 2014a). Over time, the implementation of post-socialist restructuring created a more stable (but spatially differentiated)

post-moment economic, political and social landscape. This moment of post-socialist restructuring impacted all forms of economic activity including tourism, and powerfully reshaped the evolution of individual destinations.

Second, the path metaphor which is central to EEG has also proved particularly apposite in understanding the moment of post-socialist restructuring and its impacts. There is widespread recognition that post-socialist reform was not constructed on a *tabula rasa*. Instead, the pre-moment scape of socialism shaped the moment of post-socialist restructuring, in a path dependent manner. As a result, the pre-conditions of socialism constrained post-socialist development, forcing incremental change (path plasticity). However, post-socialist restructuring also created opportunities for path creation among entrepreneurs and those with connections to those in power. Consequently, the path metaphor has been widely used to understand various aspects of post-socialist reform (e.g. Bálint & Bálint, 2019; Robinson, 2004; Stark, 1991). It has also been employed in the specific context of tourism to understand the restructuring of the tourism industry (Niewiadomski, 2015, 2016; Saarinen & Kask, 2008; Williams & Baláž, 2000). However, apart from Saarinen and Kask (2008) it has rarely been employed to understand the evolution of tourism destinations. Therefore, this analysis seeks to utilise the concepts of trigger events, moments of change, and development paths to examine the post-socialist evolution of Herculane.

## Methodology

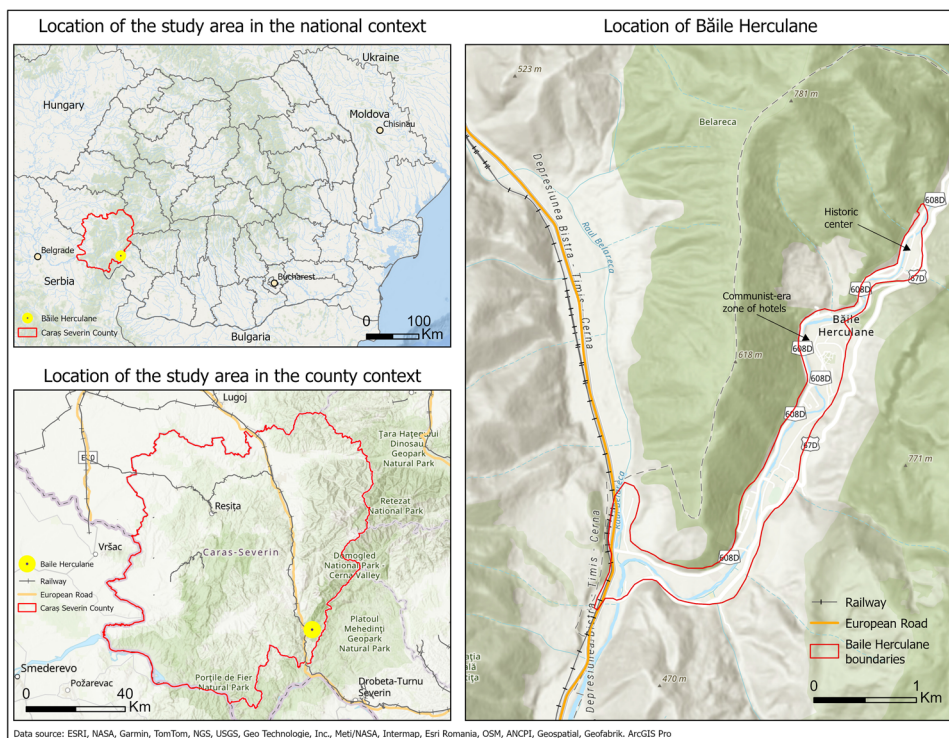
### Study area

Herculane is located at an altitude of 168m in the county of Caraş-Severin in south-west Romania (Figure 2). The town is renowned for its thermal mineral waters and hot, sulphurous springs. From the eighteenth century the town developed into a fashionable resort for health and medical tourism. After the socialist regime took power in 1947 balneotherapy was 'democratised' and opened to all working people. Herculane became a centre for health tourism among workers and pensioners, and visits were extensively subsidised by the state. All hotels were nationalised and administered within a centralised system led by the National Tourist Office (*Oficiul național de turism 'Carpați'*). The resort experienced a second wave of growth in the 1970s and 1980s when new tower-block hotels were constructed on the edge of the historic centre, also offering balneotherapy treatment. Consequently, visitor numbers to the town increased.

### Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with a range of tourism stakeholders were used to explore the impact of post-socialist restructuring on the trajectory of Herculane. Purposive sampling was employed in which interviewees were selected based on their knowledge of the research issue and their willingness to participate (Oliver, 2006). Participants were selected based on having an interest in, or expertise of, the state of tourism in Herculane, whether from a local, regional or national perspective. In response to the call by James et al. (2023) to consider a wider range of stakeholders (beyond only





**Figure 2.** The geographical location of Băile Herculane (after Harambașa, 2022): Data source: Geofabrik, Land Copernicus, ANCP Portal).

tourism firms), the stakeholders were selected to represent the views of the public, private and voluntary/NGO sectors. The final sample comprised 20 stakeholders (Table 1).

Interviews were undertaken by three of the authors between June 2022 and January 2023. The interviews focused on the reasons for the current state of Herculane; how processes of post-socialist restructuring (including privatisation) had shaped the resort; the nature of demand for balneotherapy in Romania; and the prospects for regeneration of the town. Interviews were predominantly undertaken face-to-face, but some were undertaken by telephone or online. The research study was approved by the ethics commission of *Universitate de Vest din Timișoara*, Romania. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and all gave verbal or written consent to participate. Interviews were recorded except in a few cases where the interviewer made hand-written notes.

All interviews were transcribed in Romanian and translated into English. Thematic analysis was undertaken, following the procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved close readings of the transcripts, followed by coding which produced a detailed list of items of interest or significance in the data. Codes were subsequently grouped into 'candidate' themes, which were tested for their accuracy against the whole data set. Once the analysts were satisfied that the themes were appropriate, the themes were named. The derivation of initial codes and broader themes was undertaken independently by two of the authors. Once the analysis was complete,

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the interviewees.

Interview code	Position of stakeholder	Sector Represented	Experience of tourism in Herculane (years)
I1	Regional cultural manager responsible for festivals	Public (regional level)	10
I2	Hotel manager, resident of Herculane	Private	22
I3	NGO member and tourism activist/guide, resident of Herculane	NGO	24
I4	Tourist guide, resident of Herculane	Private	42
I5	Government civil servant (national level) with responsibility for tourism	Public (national level)	5
I6	Guest house manager, resident of Herculane	Private	22
I7	County councillor (Caras-Severin County), with responsibility for tourism	Public (regional level)	21
I8	Local councillor (Herculane town council), resident of Herculane	Public (local level)	16
I9	NGO leader (heritage protection), resident of Herculane	NGO	25
I10	Regional NGO leader (festival organisation), resident of Herculane	NGO	18
I11	Guest house owner, resident of Herculane	Private	20
I12	Guest house owner, resident of Herculane	Private	22
I13	Tourist guide, resident of Herculane	Private	35
I14	Local councillor (Herculane town council), resident of Herculane	Public (local level)	25
I15	Guest house owner, resident of Herculane	Private	32
I16	Restaurant owner, resident of Herculane	Private	30
I17	Retired senior tourism manager in Herculane during both socialist and post-socialist periods, resident of Herculane	Public (local level)	60
I18	Guest house owner, resident of Herculane	Private	16
I19	Guest house owner, resident of Herculane	Private	33
I20	National Park representative/representative of regional tourism association	Public (regional level)	27

the analysts discussed their findings and negotiated a final set of themes. Three themes were identified: 1) the post-socialist decline of the resort; 2) the unfolding of hotel privatisation; 3) the lack of leadership from national and local actors.

## Research findings

### *Post-socialist destination decline (and limited revival)*

The collapse of Romania's socialist regime in 1989 represented a macro-level trigger event that had significant implications for Herculane's development trajectory. Under socialism (the pre-moment scape) domestic tourism was an ordered (but rigid) system in which demand was stable, highly organised, and coordinated by *ONT Carpați* at a national level. Furthermore, all hotels, restaurants and other facilities were in state ownership, this vertical integration allowing for an efficient tourism system. This ordered way of working under a 'single administrator' (I4) was vulnerable during the moment of post-socialist restructuring, since tourism was locked-in (Ma & Hassink, 2013) to a now-obsolete organisational model. As I8 noted:

When the whole [socialist] system collapsed, there were no big companies, no big unions, the Romanian people became poorer and international tourists stopped coming. Nor was there a Romanian operator like *ONT Carpați*. And Romanian tourism did not adapt to the new conditions.

The moment of post-socialist restructuring by the national government had local-level impacts on Herculane leading to path contraction (Blažek et al., 2020). Government implementation of macro-economic reforms (including price liberalisation) in the 1990s resulted in two periods (1990–1993 and 1996–1999) of severe recession and falling living standards (Smith, 2001). One of the impacts of this moment in Herculane was to significantly reduce tourism demand (Cooper et al., 1995; Light & Dumbrăveanu, 1999). Furthermore, many organisations that had funded balneotherapy holidays (such as workers' unions) could not continue to do so (or ceased to exist). Consequently, Herculane became increasingly dependent on pensioners whose visits were subsidised by the state (Erdeli et al., 2011). I3 explained:

The state comes to the aid of hoteliers, so to speak, through those treatment tickets offered through the *Casa de Sănătate* [a public sector institution which coordinates health care in Romania], which is not only happening in Herculane, but nationwide. If it wasn't for those tickets, the situation would probably be even worse for some hotels.

This demonstrates a form of path dependence in which tourism in Herculane was locked-in to the pre-moment model of state-subsidised tourism. However, one element of post-socialist restructuring was efforts by government to reduce public spending. The impact of this strategy was a steady reduction in the number of vouchers issued for balneotherapy treatment in Herculane during the 2000s (Aluculesei & Nistoreanu, 2014).

In the post-moment scape, characterised by declining visitor numbers, some hotels could no longer remain profitable and, since the state was unable or unprepared to cover their losses (see Williams & Baláž, 2000), some closed entirely (Stoica, 2011). Those which remained open in the context of falling demand struggled to generate profits to invest in refurbishment and modernisation. In a situation where their agency was seriously constrained, hotel managers opted to maintain existing practices (see Bækkelund, 2021), seeking to keep prices competitive to attract visitors but choosing not to invest in upgrading bedrooms, bathrooms and treatment centres (Cooper et al., 1995). In the town centre, hotels were unable to invest in the upkeep of historic buildings or in updating balneotherapy facilities and consequently these buildings deteriorated and some were closed. The poor quality of the accommodation stock became a deterrent to domestic and international tourists and, as living standards increased during the 2000s, many Romanians chose other destinations for their holidays.

In this new set of post-socialist conditions, hotels, as their incomes declined, were unable to pay their staff an attractive wage. Consequently, many hospitality staff left the sector altogether. As I3 argued:

The locals don't want to work on minimum wage anymore, especially since they are educated...there are people who have a certain experience in the restaurant, in the kitchen, and you can't come to a man with 20–30 years of experience...and say, well, from tomorrow I'll give you the minimum wage, whether you like it or not.

The loss of hospitality staff was exacerbated by Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 (which can itself be conceptualised as a further impact of the moment of post-socialist restructuring). It created new conditions which had local-level impacts

for tourism in Herculane. Taking advantage of their new freedom of movement, many balneotherapy workers left Romania to work in other EU countries. The result was an acute shortage of skilled labour in Herculane (see Erdeli et al., 2011; Niewiadomski, 2016). As I6 noted: 'There used to be 30 balneologists in Herculane. Now there are four, three of them on the verge of retirement'. Within the broader context of path contraction, this loss of higher value functions (in this case, skilled labour and knowledge) represents a form of path downgrading, which exacerbated the decline of the resort (Blažek et al., 2020; Berard-Chenu et al., 2023).

Overall, the post-moment scape of Herculane illustrates both path dependence and path contraction/downgrading. Local actors had limited agency to adapt a socialist model of tourism to the new conditions of post-socialism (see Brouder, 2014b). There was a deliberate (although implicit) local preference for maintaining the *status quo* (Bækkelund, 2021) which preserved balneotherapy as the town's principal tourism product. This illustrates how agency is not always directed towards transformative change (James et al., 2023) and continuation with an existing development path can be a conscious choice (Wilkinson et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, during the 2000s and 2010s there was some limited evidence of path plasticity, characterised by incremental innovations within an established broader context (James et al., 2023; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). Individual entrepreneurs in Herculane invested in building new guest houses on the periphery of the town (Aluculesei & Nistoreanu, 2014) which catered for new forms of tourism (particularly outdoor recreation in the surrounding national park) rather than balneotherapy. As I3 stated:

In recent years, the majority of the hotels have developed all sorts of adventure programmes and excursions...if you come to Herculane you can take excursions into the whole region...tourists can also benefit from adventure tourism, or take a walk in nature, especially since the whole area is surrounded by a national park.

These entrepreneurial activities illustrate how local actors have sought to escape from lock-in and dependence on balneotherapy. In Herculane's post-moment scape, the geographical focus of tourism activity shifted from the historic centre (where very limited balneotherapy remains) to the periphery of the town. Thus, the moment of post-socialist restructuring has produced an economic landscape which is spatially distinct from that of the socialist era.

### ***The unfolding of hotel privatisation***

The introduction of legislation to privatise the tourism industry was a further (planned) impact of the post-socialist moment of change in Herculane. The intent of this legislation was new path creation by generating a thriving private sector to spur economic growth. In Herculane privatisation took place through the creation in March 1991 of a single joint-stock company called 'SC Hercules' (Stoica, 2011) which owned all accommodation units. Under privatisation legislation, the adult Romanian population were given certificates (and later coupons) which they could exchange for shares in a commercial society of their choice (see Dumbrăveanu, 2001). Many hotel employees and local people exchanged their certificates/coupons for shares in SC Hercules and

became small shareholders (eventually accounting for almost 60% of ownership). The remaining shares were offered for sale to larger investors. However, such investors showed little interest in SC Hercules since many of its assets required substantial refurbishment after a long period of under-investment. Furthermore, the resort was offered for privatisation as a single unit meaning investors could not 'cherry-pick' the most profitable hotels.

Consequently, in 2001, a Romanian company (ARGIROM) purchased the remaining 41% of shares in SC Hercules. The outcome of this privatisation process was a new set of conditions which created multiple problems. First, due to lock-in to the organisational model of the socialist era, Herculane's hotels had suffered more than a decade of underinvestment before privatisation was completed. Second, the numerous private shareholders had little money to invest in SC Hercules (Dumbrăveanu, 2001). Third, the practical difficulties in assembling all the shareholders gave the owner of ARGIROM a dominant position in the running of the resort. I8 noted:

there were several thousand people who were 60% shareholders. And 40% was the big stake that was privatised in ARGIROM. You realise that the General Meeting of Shareholders never got together, 50%+1. It was impossible to get thousands of people together. So the guy with 40% ran the resort as he wanted.

Furthermore, throughout Romania hotels were regarded by domestic investors as a source of quick profit and were purchased without any plans for future investment (Light & Dumbrăveanu, 1999). The owner of ARGIROM appeared to adopt this approach. As I5 argued:

they privatised cheaply on condition that they [the buyer] invest large sums...which didn't happen. They took out loans that were used for other purposes and in the end those loans were no longer paid and the banks recovered (or the Treasury or whoever), had to recover from this company; they recovered by seizing or...by selling some assets.

Furthermore, in the post-moment scape, privatisation in Romania (as in other post-socialist countries) created new conditions in which corruption was rife (Dumbrăveanu, 2001; Niewiadomski, 2016; Williams & Baláž, 2000). Members of the former communist elite (many of whom were active in business and politics) used their influence and contacts to secure state-owned assets at prices well below their market value (Light & Dumbrăveanu, 1999). Several interviewees suggested that the owner of ARGIROM had benefitted from political connections to secure SC Hercules at a deflated price. This issue has been under investigation by the Directorate for the Investigation of Organised Crime and Terrorism for over 20 years and remains unresolved.

The impact in Herculane of the privatisation process was that there was little investment by SC Hercules in refurbishing hotels and balneotherapy facilities in the town's historic centre. Ultimately, SC Hercules became bankrupt, owing considerable sums to creditors (including the state). This did, however, create new conditions for development in the town. Certain assets were sold, including three socialist-era hotels which were purchased by private entrepreneurs who invested in upgrading them. This represents a form of path renewal (Berard-Chenu et al., 2023; Flood Chavez et al., 2023) where the balneotherapy product of the resort was revived. Again, the effect was to shift tourism activity to the periphery of the town. The remaining hotels in

the historic centre either closed or continued to operate on shoestring budgets. The situation was further complicated by issues of property ownership (Erdeli et al., 2011; Niewiadomski, 2016). The socialist state had nationalised all hotels, but post-socialist legislation allowed for property restitution whereby the descendants of former owners can claim back buildings originally owned by their families. This uncertainty about ownership makes it difficult to sell or dispose of assets, and deters potential investors. As I14 noted:

there are many buildings in the city centre whose ownership is unclear and the [legal] process has been going on for decades and has only just begun...there are investors who want to buy, but cannot do so because the buildings are under legal seizure.

Furthermore, when hotels are returned to former owners, such people often lack the funds to invest in them and the business experience to run them as tourism enterprises.

Hotel privatisation was intended to be a path-shaping development for the tourism industry. It was intended to create new conditions in the post-moment scape through establishing a flourishing private sector, and enabling flows of capital, knowledge, and expertise from international hotel companies (Niewiadomski, 2015; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). However, its implementation in Herculane was entirely different from what was planned, creating new conditions which were destabilising, protracted and irreversible (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). The outcome was an acceleration of the trajectory of path contraction (Blažek et al., 2020), particularly in the historic centre of Herculane where balneotherapy almost ceased entirely. As I9 argued: ‘without doubt, if privatisation had been thought out and later implemented in a different way, Băile Herculane wouldn’t have arrived in its current state of decline’.

### ***The lack of national and local leadership***

A further impact of the moment of post-socialist restructuring was prolonged inaction in the state’s planning and management of tourism, both nationally and locally. This had a destabilising impact on Herculane’s destination path trajectory (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). Faced with the need to bring about massive economic restructuring and achieve macro-economic stability, Romania, like other post-socialist countries (Hall, 2001; Williams & Baláz, 2000), gave little priority to tourism. In this context, the Ministry of Tourism was underfunded (Light & Dumbraveanu, 1999; see Hall, 2001), and policy-makers were unable to provide leadership or vision for the development of tourism in a post-socialist context. Instead, tourism officials were accustomed to tourism being a successful component of Herculane’s economy and seem to have assumed that it would recover from the initial period of decline.

Consequently, many interviewees highlighted how the new conditions of the post-moment scape led to state-level inaction which had contributed to the decline of Herculane. One argued that ‘the Ministry of Tourism always had no money...[it] was only in charge of classification and verification [of accommodation]’ (I6). This lack of funding meant that there were limited resources for policy development and implementation. As I3 argued: ‘We have no tourism policy. Every year or every few years the Minister of Tourism or the Secretary of State comes and announces a

master-plan...but everything remains at the level of [national] strategies'. For example, a Master Plan for the Development of Spa Tourism was produced in 2009 (Erdeli et al., 2011), but was not supported by funding and consequently achieved little. The marginalisation of tourism by central government meant that there was no strong voice to stand up for the tourism sector or fund regeneration projects.

Other interviewees pointed to failings in local government in Herculane. Power was decentralised in the post-socialist period but local politicians and civil servants were often poorly prepared for managing local issues and resources within a neoliberal capitalist context. Furthermore, during the recessions of the 1990s, the local authority needed to prioritise the provision of local services. Consequently, while the local state understood the importance of tourism for the town's economy it was unable or unwilling to intervene to address the town's declining tourism industry (see Niewiadomski, 2015, 2016). As I5 argued:

I think the problem is starting from the town hall. They are the ones who should be in better charge of everything there...given the specificity of the locality (so touristy), the town hall should give more importance to this activity [tourism]...the town hall should set the tone for everything that happens there.

Similarly, I3 claimed: 'It all depends on the town hall...to have people specialised in tourism...There must be people who know how to *do* tourism'. The impact of inaction by the local authority was that there was no attempt to develop a strategic or entrepreneurial vision that could have simulated new economic activities. As I6 argued: 'I was a local councillor, they have no business, they have no vision. They're not people with vision or care'. Again, the situation was dominated by institutional lock-in to the tourism model of the socialist era, and an implicit preference for continuity with previous path development (Bækkelund, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2023) based on balneotherapy. Knowledge flows regarding tourism development were also characterised by continuity rather than innovation (see Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). For example, there was limited understanding of changing trends in consumer demand such as the opportunity for path upgrading (James et al., 2023) by reorientating towards wellness tourism (as happened in balneotherapy resorts elsewhere in East-Central Europe). During the crucial post-moment phase, Herculane lacked place-based leadership (see Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020) that might have created opportunities for entrepreneurs to engage in new path creation.

The lack of national and local government support for tourism development is therefore a further prolonged impact of the moment in which Romania shifted to post-socialism. This 'institutional inertia' (Brouder, 2017, p.443) resulted in new conditions for Herculane which exacerbated the situation of lock-in and constrained innovation and opportunity within the town (Niewiadomski, 2015; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014). Local actors and entrepreneurs knew that they could expect limited support from the public sector, and that their agency to shape the path of tourism evolution in Herculane was limited (Halkier & James, 2016). Consequently, many were unwilling to go beyond relatively small-scale investments (such as new guest houses). While new tourism products (particularly outdoor recreation) have emerged in Herculane, this was due more to uncoordinated actions among local actors rather than the implementation of a deliberate policy.

## Conclusion

This paper has contributed to recent debates within tourism geography about the evolution of tourism places. In particular, it has used perspectives from EEG to examine how post-socialist political and economic restructuring in East-Central Europe can dramatically reshape destination evolution. Using the case of Băile Herculane, this analysis has conceptualised the collapse of Romania’s socialist regime as a radical trigger event which brought about a prolonged moment of post-socialist restructuring that decisively reshaped the town’s trajectory as a destination (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016). The post-moment impacts resulted in new conditions which shaped Herculane’s evolution. Visitor numbers declined, and skilled employees left the tourism industry. Furthermore, a flawed privatisation process accentuated the decline of the town’s tourist accommodation. Consequently, little financial capital was injected into the resort (whether from visitors’ spending or through outside investors) to allow investment and upgrading of facilities. A shortage of expertise and knowledge among local actors and entrepreneurs also hindered rejuvenation of the destination. Crucially, institutional inertia (Brouder, 2017) among national/local tourism policy-makers failed to arrest the town’s decline or facilitate the emergence of new tourism products. Figure 3 presents a conceptual model which summarises the components of the moments framework and the post-moment impacts and conditions specific to Herculane.

Consequently, Herculane demonstrates a number of path trajectories (see Figure 3). The town’s development has been circumscribed by path dependence due to lock-in to pre-moment organisational systems and funding models (Niewiadomski, 2015; Saarinen & Kask, 2008; Williams & Baláž, 2000). Simultaneously, the town experienced path contraction and path downgrading as balneotherapy tourism has declined (Blažek et al., 2020). Interventions such as privatisation - which could potentially

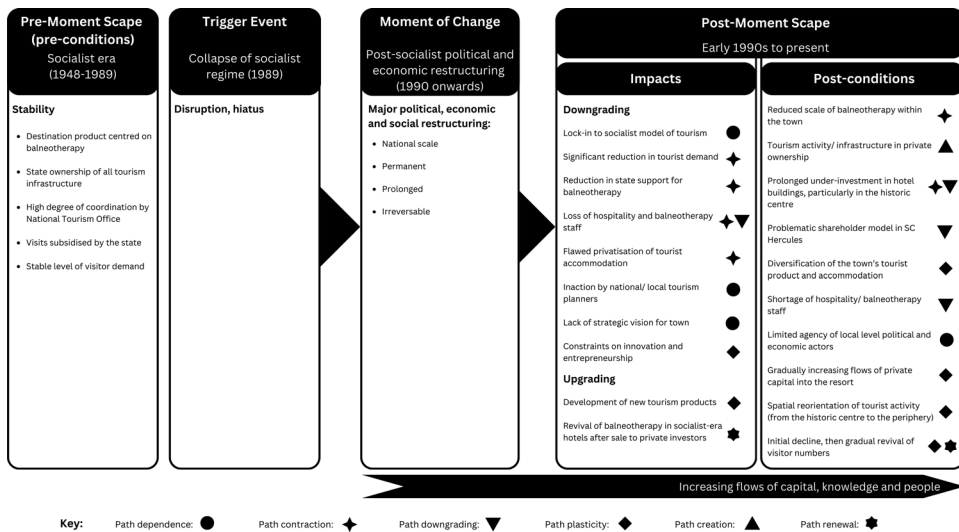


Figure 3. Conceptual model of the moments framework applied to destination evolution in post-socialist Herculane (after Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016).



stimulate delocking and new path creation (Niewiadomski, 2015) - unfolded in a way which accentuated path contraction. The establishment of a market economy created opportunities for local entrepreneurs (although the legacy of the past constrained their ability to effect change). Their attempts to develop new products catering for new markets represents a form of path plasticity. In the new conditions of the post-moment scape, investment in refurbishing and upgrading some hotels led to limited path renewal of the balneotherapy product. This happened in a context where there was a strong local preference to maintain path development based on balneotherapy (see Bækkelund, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2023). However, Herculane has not experienced path dissolution (Flood Chavez et al. (2023) in that balneotherapy remains a part of the town's tourist product but in a much-reduced form. Overall, then, Herculane illustrates the 'dark side' of path development characterised by a trajectory of decline (Blažek et al., 2020).

This paper has demonstrated the value of an EEG perspective in understanding destination development in post-socialist East-Central Europe. It has expanded our understanding of trigger events (James et al., 2023), demonstrating how the hitherto little researched issue of radical political and economic change can impact on individual destinations. This analysis has also demonstrated the utility of the concept of 'moments' of change (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016) in understanding destination evolution. This approach is particularly relevant in a post-socialist context since it emphasises how pre-moment conditions (the socialist model of tourism in Herculane) create the context in which post-moment impacts unfold. The moments framework also allows for identification of the specific impacts which change the direction and/or focus of a destination's path development. Since post-socialist restructuring is a multifaceted (and often prolonged) process, a focus on moments enables the impacts of specific processes of reform to be distinguished. Each impact of restructuring unfolds within the post-moment economic landscape characterised by a new set of conditions. Furthermore, the moments approach emphasises the importance of flows. Such flows (of capital, knowledge and people) are of particular importance within post-socialist restructuring but the limited scope of such flows proved catastrophic for Herculane. Finally, this analysis establishes that trigger events and moments of change do not necessarily lead to innovation and renewal of a destination's tourism product or markets, but instead can directly stimulate the destination's decline.

One of the tenets of EEG is that path development is also place dependent (Chu & Hassink, 2023; Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016; Sanz-Ibáñez & Anton Clavé, 2014). In particular, the moments framework focuses on 'analysis of individual places according to their own specific trajectories and key moments therein' (Sanz-Ibáñez et al., 2016, p.97). Consequently, these findings are specific to Herculane and may not be generalisable to other places. It is the place-bound configuration and impacts of post-socialist reform that have shaped Herculane's destination evolution. However, these processes have worked out differently in other places. For example, other balneotherapy destinations—both in Romania and more widely in East-Central Europe—have experienced similar post-socialist processes (establishing a market economy, macro-economic reform, recession, and privatisation of state-owned assets), but have not experienced the same decline trajectory as Herculane. Instead, the ways in which post-socialist

restructuring unfolded (at both macro and micro scales) along with the responses of local actors have produced spatially different outcomes. Put another way, the impacts of restructuring and new post-conditions in Herculane produced a place-specific set of outcomes.

A limitation of this study is that the controversy about the current state of Herculane is such that some stakeholders were unwilling to participate in interviews, while others would only speak in the most general terms about the reasons for the town's decline. It is therefore possible that a larger sample of stakeholders may have provided a fuller account of how post-socialist restructuring had impacted the town. Future research could utilise the moments framework for understanding destination evolution in a range of other contexts. This would both elucidate the wider applicability of the moments framework for understanding destination change, and allow for refining of the framework for specific situations. In terms of understanding tourism development in post-socialist states, further research could explore how the moment of post-socialist restructuring has shaped impacts and created new conditions in a range of other destinations. This would allow for a fuller understanding of how place and local context shape destination path development under post-socialism. It would also enable the identification of the individual and institutional factors that both inhibit and facilitate destination development in conditions of radical political, economic and social restructuring.

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## Author contribution

All authors contributed equally to writing this paper.

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