

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN TIMES OF CRISES – ROMANIAN TOURISM PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The role of tourism in development process is undeniably proved by the continuous growth of its direct and indirect contribution to macroeconomic indicators. Fulfilment the prerequisites for sustainability in the development of tourism industry, raises new challenges that need to be taken into account by planners, practitioners and policy makers in all countries.

Through its specific, tourism industry is exposed to negative influences exerted by various phenomena of crisis : economic or financial, climatic (global warming , extreme weather events), energetic, feed crises, environmental (pollution, degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity etc), political. Statistics show a higher vulnerability of the touristic sector of Romania to the effects of the recent financial crisis, than other sectors of the economy. In these conditions all entities involved in the development of this sector (public authorities or private entities) should promote sustainable business models, leading to increase tourism's contribution to economic and social welfare in the long term .

Based the experiences and studies conducted in countries with developed tourism, this study aims identify ways to decrease the vulnerability of this sector towards various phenomena crisis and to increase the contribution of tourism to economic and social welfare, according of significant potential that tourism has in Romania.

Keywords: sustainable development, tourism, crises

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamic and volatile economic sectors, its contribution to the general process of development registering a substantial increase in all countries, regardless of their stage of development. The importance of tourism for the welfare of mankind is reflected by the continuous increase of tourism industry share in employment and GDP in the interval 1988-2014, as well as by the permanent growth of labour productivity in tourism. If the data related to the evolution of world tourism show a continuous development process without large fluctuations of macroeconomic indicators from one year to another, in the analysis carried out at the level of countries, regions or tourist destinations we may notice a long-term increase of tourism contribution and the manifestation of some fluctuating evolutions for short periods of time. These fluctuations may be attributed to some conjuncture factors and phenomena that have induced periods of crisis for the operators in the tourism industry.

The current world conjuncture characterized by globalization and the liberalization of world markets (of merchandises/services, labour and capitals), the increase of interdependencies between the states of the world, the manifestation of some political instability phenomena and conflict states in different regions, the manifestation of some climatic changes leading to the appearance of more and more frequent extreme climatic phenomena, the proliferation of terrorism acts, accentuates the complexity and instability of tourism environment and results in the increase of vulnerability of the tourism industry to diverse phenomena that may cause crisis situations. The tourism industry, by its particularities, is one of the most sensitive and vulnerable economic sectors in terms of such crisis generating phenomena. Thus, the decision makers have the difficult task to identify solutions for the prevention of manifestation of the crisis situations and to limit their negative effects on tourism operators (Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Salem Hyasat et al., 2010).

The goal of this study is to identify the main risk factors that may generate critical situations for the Romanian tourism, to analyse the vulnerability of tourism towards different types of crises that manifested in the past, to identify solutions for the efficient control thereof and the sustainable development of the Romanian tourism in a more and more stable economic, political, intuitional, social and natural environment.

For this purpose have been used studies on the experiences of other countries that have faced various touristic crises which recorded progresses in tourism crisis management. They

have been used also statistical data on tourism's contribution to macroeconomic indicators provided by the World Tourism Organization, and on international competitiveness of tourism industry provided by World Economic Forum. By studying the evolution of Romanian tourism macroeconomic indicators such as: direct contribution to employment, direct contribution to GDP, GDP/employee, internal T&T Consumption, Outbound Travel & Tourism Expenditure, Domestic Tourism Spending, Investment (Capital investment), Leisure Tourism Spending, Government Individual Expenditures, Visitor Exports (Foreign spending); we intend to identify the periods of touristic crisis, the hazard that generated it and the effects on tourism sector.

2. Sustainable development of tourism in crisis situations – Literature review

More and more papers in literature underline the importance of promoting sustainable tourism and the sustainable development of the tourism industry. Sustainable tourism supposes the adoption of certain practices by all operators in the tourism industry in concordance with the sustainable development principles. Thus, sustainable development of tourism requires the full taking into account of the present and future economic, social and environmental impact, the need to act reasonably, the active involvement and collaboration between all stakeholders interested in the development of tourism phenomenon (UNEP/WTO, 2005; Waligo et al., 2013). We are speaking about the conclusion of some forms of partnership which may promote a type of tourism (one planet tourism), offer advantages to people, the economy and environment and act within the limits of financial, social and natural resources they have (the triple bottom line) (Waligo et al., 2013).

Sustainable development of tourism means the continuous improvement of economic-financial benefits of stakeholders by promoting those practices and types of tourism that comply with different aspects of the concept of sustainability (economic, social, environmental and cultural). Thus, we must identify solutions to neutralize the factors that may result in the occurrence of sectorial crises and adopt practices that may allow a better management of the crisis situations, so that tourism contribution to the welfare of mankind might be amplified on a long term (Janusz, 2013; Harris et al., 2002).

The study of tourism crises, causes, the ways to prevent, control and diminish their negative effects suscite the interest of many theorists and practitioners in the field. Tourism crisis may be defined as an unforeseen event having a disruptive character that effects the trust of a tourist into destination (WTTO, 1998); may affect the capacity of an organization or

destination to function normally (Robertson et al., 2006); may impair the destination image in terms of safety, attractiveness and comfort, may negatively affect visitors' perceptions and result in the reduction of tourist arrivals and expenses (Sonmez, 1998); may require radical management measures (marketing or operational practices) by which they may reestablish stakeholders' trust in the viability of the destination (Beirman, 2003); a unwanted, extraordinary and limited in time process that requires immediate decisions and countermeasures to limit the negative consequences and to ensure the development process (Glaesser, 2005); may alter or disturb the operation of markets, tourism industry or tourism services and may strongly compromise the reputation of a tourism destination or region (Hapenciuc et al., 2005).

Crisis triggers in the tourism sector are numerous. They may come from natural causes or from actions having an anthropogenic character. Most often, crisis situations in tourism originate in the diversity of human actions that hallmark health and balances of the macroeconomic, political, social, legal, institutional and natural environment (Hapenciuc et al., 2009).

Following the globalization, the tourism industry is facing a multitude of phenomena with a disruptive character that have unfavorable effects on its sustainable development (Robertson et al., 2006). To identify solutions to control and attenuate the negative effects of tourism crises, it is important to find out the potential risks that may result in the occurrence of tourism crises, the sources, the predictable and unpredictable character, the controllable or uncontrollable character, their manner of manifestation and consequences.

Vulnerability of tourism towards the action of these phenomena having a disruptive character that may induce crisis situations and their effects on the tourism industry has been the subject matter of many studies. Their effects on tourism manifest in more limited areas, they are complex and materialize into different forms such as the loss of income and jobs, destruction of businesses, specific infrastructures, of some elements on which the life of residential population depends, serious injuries or deaths among tourists and residents (Hapenciuc et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2006; Dorasamy et al., 2010).

Other studies have approached the effects of tourism crises caused by economic risks. Their consequences may manifest at world level (financial crisis and economic recession after 2007) or at national or regional level (the ones induced by the processes of economic restructuring or transition). They have a predictable character, they are controllable and their consequences on tourism industry are purely economic: loss of income and jobs, bankruptcies,

dwindling of tourist flows, investments and tourism expenses etc. (Okumus & Karamustafa, 2005; Hapenciuc et al., 2009; Pizane & Kozmina, 2010).

Another category of risks that may result in tourism crises are the related to the social environment: acts of minor delinquency, violence acts, organized crimes acts, social conflicts and other forms of social instability. They usually have a local, regional national character at most, they are more easily to foresee, their manifestation may be prevented and effects can be diminished by real actions. The negative effects on the tourism sector manifest preponderantly on a social level by the diminishing of tourists' safety and security, their trust in the tourism destination, and on an economic level by the reduction of income following the decrease of tourist flows or the disturbance of the business operations making up the tourism industry (Robertson, 2006; Hapenciuc, 2009).

A category of crises having very serious implications on tourism and economies as a whole are the ones induced by political risks such as terrorist attacks (USA 2001 and the subsequent ones in the west European countries), armed conflicts (Afghanistan, the Arabian world, Ukraine etc.), civil wars (the ones in the Arabian world after 2010). Most of the times, they have a predictable character and their negative effects on tourism are extremely complex manifesting on the economic level by the rerouting of tourist flows to other destinations, destructions of businesses and specific infrastructures, on the social and cultural level: insecurity of population and tourists, serious injuries and deaths, the alteration of life conditions, damages caused to cultural objectives and on an environmental level by the degradation of the natural environment. The negative effects may have repercussions on some vast geographical areas by affecting the tourism from the countries composing the affected region or even the tourist flows at world level (Robertson, 2006; Sönmez, 1998; Sönmez et al., 1999; Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Novelli et al., 2012).

Tourism crises induced by biological risks represent a special category by the fact that they manifest through the reduction of international flows of tourist under the threat of some extremely contagious biological agents, most of the times with a fast evolution and lethal effects: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome from Asia Pacific region (2003), the pandemic foci of avian flu from the SE Asia and swine flu from Mexico (2003-2004), Ebola virus crisis in the African countries (2014) etc. Biological risks may take the shape of contamination of the environment with biological agents or with toxic substances dangerous for the human body. Their negative

effects also manifest on the economic level by the reduction of income as the result of dwindling of tourist flows, and on the social level by the reduction of the tourists' trust in the affected destinations and by the threat they represent for tourists' and residents' health and life.

Among other crisis triggers, some authors mention the technological risks represented by the dangers determined by the development of information and communications technologies, nuclear accidents (Chernobyl 1986, Japan 2011), and the diverse forms of pollution of the environment following the increase of intensity of the economic activities (Bennett, 2012). Their effects manifest by the information insecurity of tourists and tourism businesses, the risk of frauds determined by the use of information systems or economic losses (income, infrastructures), on the social level (deaths, alteration of health of tourists, employees and residents) or on the ecologic level by the irreversible degradation of ecosystems and natural landscapes.

3. Implications of crises for the development of Romanian tourism

In the light of potential, Romania has all the data to become an attractive tourist attraction on the tourism map of the world. To support this affirmation, we may bring the following arguments: the balanced distribution of landforms, with about one third of mountainous landscapes, two thirds (over 60%) from the length of Carpathian chain and about 40% of its surface offering spectacular natural landscapes, many of them unaltered yet; a well represented and evenly distributed hydrographic network (a large part of Danube's course and its Delta, the vicinity of the Black Sea, numerous natural and anthropic lakes etc.); the traditional (patriarchal) rural way of life well preserved in many parts of the country with the traditional cuisine presenting some ecologic valences; the natural environment with a high esthetic and recreational value, rich in flora and fauna elements and less affected by anthropization; the favorable geostrategic position with special relations in the Muslim and Arabic world which has maintained Romania outside the risks of some terrorist attacks (Hapenciuc, 2009); incidence, intensity and more reduced gravity of natural risks; the cultural heritage with numerous and valuable objectives belonging to UNESCO heritage (monasteries, medieval castles, palaces, ruins of other fortresses and mines from the Dacian epoch etc.), traditions and customs etc.

Despite the fact that its tourism potential is an exceptional one, we may affirm that, in the era of globalized tourist destinations, Romania is nowhere on the tourist map of the big operators in the tourism industry. Thus, the interest of foreign tourists for the tourism destinations in Romania is quite low, the interest of foreign entrepreneurs in relation to the privatizations from

the hotel sector from Romania was also very low, and the competitiveness of the Romanian tourism industry in the international markets is a pretty low one, namely the 68th place out of 140 economies in 2013 in terms of the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (World Economic Forum 2014).

The economic importance of the Romanian tourism industry remains a modest one as compared to the medium values registered at world level. Thus, according to WTO, in 2014, the situation of economic contribution of the Romanian tourism industry as compared to the world tourism was as follows: the direct contribution of tourism to world GDP was 3.08%, whereas in Romania it was only 1.56%; total contribution to the world GDP was 9.83%, whereas in Romania it was only 4.85%; the direct contribution to employment was at world level of 3.58%, and in Romanian it was 2.41; the total contribution of tourism to employment at world level was 9.83%, and in Romanian it was only 4.85%; the average work productivity in world tourism was 22,434.44 USD/employed person and in Romania it was 15539.5 USD/employed person.

As for the trend towards the sustainable development of tourism, we may affirm that this is not true for Romania. Thus, the main macroeconomic indicators related to tourism have registered a fluctuating evolution in the period 1988-2015. The growth periods (the longest one was 2000-2005) alternated with numerous decline periods: 1989-1991, 1993, 1996-1999, 2006, 2009-2011.

Taking into account the evolutions presented, we may assert that the Romanian tourism industry is a very vulnerable one to crisis situations and incapable to manage them efficiently. The frequent crisis periods that affected the Romanian tourism may be associated to some external risks of the tourism industry (environment), but they are largely owed to the sectorial risks determined, on one hand, by the incapacity of the authorities governing the destiny of tourism to identify efficacious solutions for the control of crises and to find solutions for the sustainable development thereof, and on the other hand, by the management weaknesses of the companies from the tourism industry or the reduced propensity of stakeholders from the tourism industry for collaboration and cooperation in order to identify some solutions for the management of the crisis situations and some more efficient control methods.

The periods of decline registered by the Romanian tourism in the interval 1989-1991 may be explained by causes related to the environmental risks. Thus, the crisis in the period 1989-1991 may be associated to the political risks: the violent revolution from 1989, the political

instability in all the countries of the region, the Russian-Moldovan war from Transnistria in 1990; the economic risks associated to the long period of transition to the market economy and to a small extent to the risks associated to the instability of the social environment: strikes, demonstrations and protests, miners' rebellions, interethnic conflicts (the one from Târgu Mureş in 1990 between the Romanian and Magyar ethnics).

The crisis periods from 1993 and 1996-1999 may be explained by causes related to the economic context associated the transition period and the attempts to lay all economic sectors on capitalist bases, but also to the instability of the social environment.

The 2006 crisis might be associated to the overlapping of two categories of risks: biological ones – the avian flu from 2005, and natural ones – floods and high floods throughout 2005, which destroyed the specific infrastructures that ensured the connections between the historical regions of Romania in 31 counties of the country.

The latest crisis period that Romanian tourism crossed in 2009-2010 is the result of the global economic crisis that started at the end of 2007 and of the subsequent economic recession. The Romanian tourism sector was more seriously affected than other economic sectors, all tourism indicators registering accentuated decreases (Table 1).

Table 1. Evoluția indicatorilor turistici în România în perioada 2007-2014 (% growth)

Indicators	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Dir. contrib. employ.	-1.1	0.0	-5.5	-4.0	-1.9	-1.0	1.3	4.1
Dir. contrib. GDP	3.4	4.8	-10.5	-4.4	4.3	4.7	2.2	7.0
Internal T&T Cons.	1.9	4.0	-16.1	-4.6	1.9	1.4	-1.4	7.1
Dom. Tour. Spend.	6.9	-0.1	-9.4	-4.1	-2.4	0.9	3.1	7.4
Invest. (Capit. invest.)	26.8	14.5	-19.1	-6.7	2.6	5.1	-6.0	0.2
Leisure Tour. Spend.	-2.9	-0.8	-10.7	-0.3	-6.9	1.5	3.2	5.5
Gov. Individ. Expend.	-0.4	15.9	2.1	-13.4	-8.9	5.5	0.7	0.1
Outbound T&T Expend.	-9.5	23.8	-14.3	5.4	7.1	-0.4	-7.6	8.3
Visitor. Exp.	-4.7	9.6	-25.8	-5.0	9.5	2.1	-7.9	7.0
GDP/tour. empl. (USD)	11,938	14,120	11,448	11,595	13,930	13,597	14,847	15,539

Source: Own work on WTO statistics.

Beyond the negative implications of tourism crises, we may also show some of their positive aspects. Thus, stakeholders may acquire new knowledge in terms of crisis situation management starting from the anticipation and control phase of their manifestation, continuing with the response and control phase for the neutralization or diminution of the negative effects

and closing with the phase of adoption of some solutions so as to eliminate the consequences in the post-crisis period. Moreover, the capacity of collaboration, working together and involvement of companies, authorities, NGOs, inhabitants and tourists may be improved so as to establish some procedures and to jointly initiate some actions that may contribute to the more effective and efficient control of crises.

4. Conclusion

In the period 1990-2014 the Romanian tourism industry experienced a hesitant evolution, with periods of growth and decline, mainly due to exposure at political and economical risks, and, only to a small extent, to other categories of hazards. Judging by the light of exposure to natural, social and political (terrorist attacks) hazards, Romania is among the safest tourist destinations. However, the orientation of Romanian tourism industry towards sustainability is very limited, without notable progress. We can say, without fear of being mistaken, that tourism has gone through a long period of crisis, judging by the fact that the decline of tourism indicators recorded since 1989, was recovered only after 2003. This fact can be explained by lack of knowledge and the limited capacity of tourism industry stakeholders to manage the exogenous and/or endogenous risks they are confronted, and to identify solutions for the transformation of Romania into an attractive tourist destination, with a favorable image.

The frequent crises confronted by the tourism industry in Romania have exogenous causes, but also endogenous:

- Lack of proper knowledge on prevention, behaviour in crisis situations and the methods/procedures to be followed to neutralize their effects;
- Inability, even indolence, of public authorities entrusted with the management of Romanian tourism destinies to adopt measures to better exploitation of the touristic potential, to support the business environment, to attract foreign entrepreneurs or investments (which would bring experience and knowledge on touristic crisis management).
- Lack of coordination between different public authorities involved in management of exogenous and endogenous tourism crisis (environmental, tourism, safety and security, local or regional, financial authorities etc.)

- Tour operators have poor knowledge concerning crisis management. In most of cases they have not established clear procedures about the behaviour in crisis situations, and they have lack of knowledge, experience and capabilities to counteract them.
- Low level of social capital (Romania is characterized by the worst results of European states in this chapter), since effectively combating the effects of tourism crises requires the involvement and collaboration of all stakeholders.

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