

Nógrád county: rural tourism?

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The share of the Hungarian rural tourism within the tourism in Europe, is still insignificant, but the interest is increasing. More people realize that after overworking everyday, a metropolis or the beach are not necessarily suitable for recreation because they are contaminated and crowded. If we look at the other side, it is difficult to make a decision whether the villages, which start to organize, enhance the profitability of rural tourism. Tourism as a source of income has some contradictions; one of these is the seasonality. The earning potential runs for a few months, this fact is so stimulating, therefore, the hosts meet the real and putative needs of the guests. A few-day-long event that moves large masses and makes the name of the town known has a positive impact on visits for the rest of the year, as well. The nearly fifty towns, where Palóc people live, are located at the foot of the North Hungarian Mountains. The popularity of the still living traditions encourages the residents to preserve and care for their traditions. We see countless examples of this in Nógrád county. Some of these settlements are Hollókő, Kazár, Bánk, Mihálygerge among others. Strengthening the tourism may boost the economy of the county, as seen in other regions, sub-regions and other counties of the Hungary. The support of the local governments and entrepreneurs is essential. Nógrád, although in size the second smallest county Hungary, yet is full of amazing natural formations, historic monuments, and attractive events for visitors. We intended to demonstrate the positive and negative sides of rural tourism. We used the example of Nógrád county.

Keywords: rural tourism, opportunity, Nógrád county, gastronomy, gastro-tourism

1. Introduction

In the past the power of a rural community had more important role in the life of bigger cities, as well. Villages have social and biological space that provide the livelihood for the communities who live there and for the natural environment, as well. It provides food safety. Influencing factors are in the life of the villages: historical heritage and influence of the regime (Ángyán 2010).

After the changes of the Regime people have more possibilities for leisure, there have been more demands for travelling. The reason of this included the freedom of visa applications. It helped the current trends, such as an increase in leisure time and that of the discretionary income, demographic changes and the search for authenticity, etc.

Recently the infolded crisis had an impact on the service sector and on tourism, as well, (traffic loss, revenue loss, job loss). Then we observed a long term regeneration process which is predicted to continue. It would be, that more and more people are admitted to the fact that the key to the development of high quality tourism to build. The share of the Hungarian rural tourism within the tourism in Europe is still insignificant, but there is no question that the interest is increasing. More people realize that after overworking everyday, a metropolis or the beach are not necessarily suitable for recreation because they are contaminated and crowded. Nowadays the natural and cultural values of villages are more popular. Many people are looking for romance and rarity of an idealized countryside; others are attracted by the beauty of the landscape, the silence and clean air, as well. In Hungary there was an organized form of recreation before the Transition, this kind of recreation disappeared, then many families had no other option only rural tourism.

If we look at the other side, it is difficult to make a decision whether the villages, which start to organize, enhance the profitability of rural tourism. Tourism as a source of income has some contradictions; one of these is the seasonality. The earning potential runs for a few months, this fact is so stimulating, therefore, the hosts meet the real and putative needs of their guests. The pizzerias, tennis courts, guest houses are harm to the landscape, the cultural attractions and the unique features. A few-day-long event that moves large masses and makes the name of the town known has a positive impact on the visits for the rest of the year, as well. The appearance of large masses is a serious burden on the village (pollution, noise, crime).

2. Nógrád county

Nógrád county is located in Northern Hungary and it is also the member of this tourist area. Nógrád has more neighbours: Pest county is from the West and Southwest direction, and Heves county is from east. Nógrád has a foreign neighbour also, Slovakia. The county is divided further into six sub-regions¹:

- Balassagyarmat sub-region
- Bátorfyerénye sub-region
- Pásztó sub-region
- Rétság sub-region
- Salgótarján sub-region
- Szécsény sub-region

Almost 150 settlements are resided by Palóc people, mainly at the foot of the North Hungarian Mountain Range, the sharp and rangy mountains of Cserhát, Mátra and Bükk which can be found in the territory of Borsod, Heves and Nógrád, primarily.

Nógrád consisted of 131 settlements at the beginning of 2008, six of them were cities. (Salgótarján is the county town). This is the smallest county of Hungary with the territory of 2,546 km² and the population of 210.2 thousands, the 2.1% of the whole country. Population density is 83 person/km², that is smaller than the country average (108 person/km²). In 2010, the population was 204,917 people; this was probably decreased with 2000 people during 2011. Regarding the population of Salgótarján, it is the second smallest county town, and there can also be found only 10 more towns as big as Rétság in the country (*Szalainé* 2009). It is a favourable destination, beside the touring options there is a list of historical memories in calm environment waiting for tourists who want to relax, hunters, fishermen, lovers of special wines and admirers of water and winter sports. The prehistoric findings of Ipolytarnóc have international fame, the hive rocks in the Southern edge of Bükk and also the Plateau of Bükk. In these mountains there are mammals, birds and plants that have an increased protection.

On the operational territories of the National Parks, there are 11 landscape protected districts and 17 environmental districts that are under nationwide protection. In 1995, the European Council donated the European Diploma to the territory of the prehistoric findings of Ipolytarnóc.

3. Palóc people

It is very important to mention the Palóc population in this topic. The Hungarian peasants understood as Palóc people live in the Mátra, in the Nógrád Basin and in the Ipoly Valley, North from the Bükk Mountain.

¹ <http://www.nograd.hu/>

The common features of folklore, the extended family system and the settlement structure that reflects it remained during the first half of the 20th century, the Roman Catholic religion and also the dialect that uses two types of “a” sounds mostly connect the inhabitants of “Palóc Land” (Highlands). The ethnographic collections outcropped a very rich and strong folklore in this area. The world of myths, the customs connected to the nuptials and to the high days are extremely rich.

The gastronomy of the ethnical group is said to be unique within the county, as well (*Selmeczi* 2008). Food made from a variety of pulp and flour had/ has a major role in the nutrition of the Palóc. One of their favourite dishes is baked pulp also known as ‘görho’ or ‘málé’. In the theme of traditions we have to mention the settlement, Hollókő. The present state of the village was established after the fire in 1909, thatch was replaced by burned clay, but the ancient architectural forms were preserved. Later a porch, made of board, was built with a balustrade to the house. In most places grapes are grown on the porches, called “hambitus”, In 1987 the village was added to the list of the World Heritage Committee of the UNESCO². The small community that lives here wears folk costumes and keeps the forgotten, popular customs alive. They do it during the confines of different events such as Easter, when they await the tourists with “sprinkling”, egg painting and other traditional activities.

4. Crisis and recovery

The future of the rural lifestyle may be diverse and it is necessary to plan it (*Szilágyiné* 2008). In this planning, organization and realisation are crucial factors of the regional development. The regional development policy is one of the six pillars of rural, city and village development. While it was thought earlier that the only key to the rural development was the development of agriculture, we know it already today that this alone is not enough, if there are not any additional alternative sources of income beside it (*Verbole* 2000, *Fleischer–Tchtechik* 2005).

The role of tourism is more than just economic recovery, job creation and land development. Hungary is rich in tourist attractions. The range is only a very small part of the offer of tourism. The capital reason is that we do not know the attractions of whole areas. There are a lot of natural conditions, cultural values and modern supplies of touristic products in Hungary.

Tourism based on the natural conditions and historical, cultural values in the touristic region of Northern Hungary, as well. This area has modern offers for tourists, which are acting on the needs of the visitors. The conductors are the health- and culture tourism, cultural tourism, the wine and gastronomic, active-, eco and rural tourism which has defining destinations: Eger and its surroundings, Miskolc-Bükk, Gyöngyös-Mátra, as the part of the world heritage, Hollókő-Szécsény-Ipolytarnóc, Aggtelek-Cserehát and Tokaj-Zemplén.

The Northern Hungarian region received the fifth place in the range of the Hungarian touristic regions according to the guests in 2007. In the region, the number of nights spent by domestic guests has been increasing continuously in the recent years; it exceeded to 1.2 million nights in 2006–2007. It shows the importance of domestic guests as the number of nights spent by domestic travellers is 86 out of 100.

The tourism of Nógrád county lost its significance in recent years. The commercial accommodation is visited by fewer guests every year, even the proportion of foreign guests is low.

Nógrád county and the situation of its area is positive, which cannot be said, despite the numerous nights spent by guests. 7, 6 million foreign tourists visited Hungary in the first quarters of 2011. This value is a small portion of those who aimed the region of Northern

² <http://www.unesco.hu/kultura/vilagorokseg-www/cikk-cime-100107-2>

Hungary. We may say that the sub-regions of Nógrád county do not count as the centre of holiday destinations within the country. The fact that in the service sector the number of employees was decreasing between 2008 and 2010 also supports this statement. However, the tourism is an integrated part of the national economy sector. As we told earlier the Nógrád area could excel in the rural tourism mostly according to our ideas. It is probable that a diversified rural tourism would reduce the number of the unemployed. This would be important because of the number of unemployed decreased over the past two years, and it is still observed at a significant level in the county. Moreover, this region provided the majority of the unemployed in the recent years.

Despite all of this a lot of rural development program started in Nógrád micro-regions in the recent years, each of these objectives include the development of local tourism, increasing the income from tourism and this is supposed to be done by creating jobs.

5. Festivals

In the last few years, the number of festivals organized directly for tourists grew exponentially on the international market³. Studies show that the more of the average net income of the household is, the higher chance there is that they choose a destination where a festival is held (*Sulyok* 2010). But what kind of outing could we call a festival? There have been so many phrases and point of views.

“Every series of events – cultural, art, gastronomic, sports or other, that is organized around one or more themes, set up in one or more locations and has an announced program – whose aim is to offer accentuated high-standards, transmitting and expanding values, quality at the same time entertaining, spare-time, public experience for its audience.” (Hungarian Festival League) (*Smidt* 2009).

Festivals could be categorized according to numerous factors. By the length of festivals, we can speak about one- and more day-long, a week long or a month-long duration, as well. We could differentiate local, regional, national or international festivals according to their area of attraction.

The frequency of organization is also an important criterion: there are one-off outings and periodic ones, as well. The significance of the latter is that periodic programs have serious brand-erector effects, even a one-time thing (jubilee) can be set up regularly later as a hallmark event, being a starting point of series of events with similar themes. By the Hungarian Festival League, festivals are categorized by genres:

- Artistic festivals (music, theatre, dance, literature, graphic art and handcrafts, movie, video, photo, multimedia, folklore, circus and others), pure amateur, artistic and “lineage competitions” (reader of poetry, shot, firemen’s orchestra and others).
- Gastronomic festivals (food, drink, crops, gastronomic tradition-promoting).
- Other, not artistic festivals (landscape or natural value-specific, traditional, historical field-specific programs, castle games, feast-related, ecclesiastical or profane traditions, carnival, merry-making, fiesta, nature, environmental protection, promotions related to a brand).

In the course of thematic grouping, the international scientific literature treats festivals as collective concepts and grand programs completed by festivals. The latter consists the next categories: carnivals, artistic festivals (dance, theatre), religious festivals, circus, sport events, mega-events (Olympic Games, cultural olympics and related festivals), cultural grand programs (for example: European Capital of Culture) (*Sulyok–Sziva* 2009).

³ <http://www.gsztujsag.com/index.php/turisztika/29-fesztivalok-es-turizmus>

According to the European tendency the growing role of festivals can be found in the following fields:

- mediation of culture,
- intensifying national identity,
- the development of regions and settlements,
- the rising of tourism.

The significance of festivals is running through three threads:

- artistic: training of the audience, expansion of offers, protection of values,
- social: community-building, reaching the disadvantaged, presentation and maintenance of local spiritual and built-up heredity, intensifying tolerance, educating environment-consciousness,
- economic: tax incomes, employment (artists, collaborators, suppliers, etc.), expansion of the settlements, touristic value-enlargement, creating images.

Festivals are varicoloured and diverse; all together with local public events, there are several thousands of programs, series of events like them annually. In 2010, the number of festivals attracting bigger audience was 300–400 in Hungary. In this period the number of the audience of registered festivals reached 4.8 million people. The total cost of registered festivals almost reached 8 billion HUF (*Elekes et al 2010*).

6. Festivals of Nógrád

There are many festivals in Nógrád, primarily linked to gastronomy but at least associated with the appearance of traditional food and drinks.

Such events among others are:

- Louis Armstrong International Jazz Festival
- Nógrád International Folklore and Gastronomy Festival
- Gödör (Hole) Festival
- Tóparty (Shore) Festival
- Palacsinta (Pancake) Festival
- World Heritage Day
- Dió (Walnut) Festival
- ÉTER Festival 2011
- Somoskői Vár Festival/Castle Festival of Somoskő
- Szent István napi várjáték/Castle Tournaments of Saint Steven's Day
- Szüreti Fesztivál(ok)/Vintage Festival(s)
- Kőleves Fesztivál/Stone Soup Festival
- Salgótarjáni Bányaréms Fesztivál/Snag Festival of Salgótarján
- Málna (Raspberry) Festival

“Recall the tails of our childhood! Prepare the famous and magical soup from stone of the cave that hide the fabulous treasures of Kis-kő and from some of the secret flavoring.” The appeal this year says this about the Kőleves (stone soup) Festival that is held in Szilasgöny in the last 5 years⁴. This gastronomic event, inspired by a folk tale, won in the “Most popular program in the County” category in 2007. The major step in the cooking

⁴ <http://www.kis-koleves.hu/content/k2010.htm>

competition is: Kőleves (Stone soup) can be made from anything, the only compulsory rule at the beginning of the cooking is to plunge the volcanic stone from the Kis-Kő Mountain, the soup is named after this mountain, into the cold water of the soup.

In 1996 at the open-air stage of Rárós the first Nógrád Folklore Festival was opened, since then it hits the road every year and visits the cities and villages of Nógrád County.

In 2000, the festival crossed the border of the country as a herald of common Europe and found friendly welcome in Nagykürtös, Losonc, Füleke, Ragyolc, Vidina and also in Divény. Since then the event has the right to wear the name of Nógrád International Folklore Festival, that presents the folklore culture of the Hungarians and the Slovaks up to now in more and more settlements – Szügy, Mihálygerge, Pásztó, Palotás, Egyházasgerge, Salgótarján, Hollókő, Bánk, Balassagyarmat, Szécsény, Somoskő, Kazár, Ipolytarnóc – on both banks of the Ipoly.

Ten years is not a long time but enough to build a tradition of an event which has achieved appreciation in Hungary and also abroad⁵. In 2011 the event widened with a gastronomic day and got the name Nógrád International Folklore and Gastronomic Festival.

Today the event is held in ten locations within the confines of Hungary-Slovakia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2007–2013, with Ukrainian, Georgian, Slovak, Italian, Serbian, Romanian, German and Polish participants and visitors.

The program supports the mutual development of Hungarian-Slovak border region and also the integration of the Hungarian-Slovak border region in economic, humane, environmental and transport aspects. The cross-border programs by the INTERREG IIIA program were financed by the Structural Fundamentals resources⁶.

7. The market features of the rural gastronomic tourism

A national market potential for increasing gastronomy is among the instruments of culinary events, like the typical touristic products. The elements of folklore can become specific products linked to gastronomic products and the diversity of rurality. The diversification gets realized inside the product, stepping over the touristic frameworks.

The same and also different traditions provide the diversity of gastro-tourism in the region. The gastro-tourism is the tourism in which the guests and the residents find their way and it is the closest to each other's.

The variety of gastro-tourism can be categorized as gastronomic events, gastronomic museums and attractions of thematic tours (road Horseradish, Plum). The grouping of gastro-touristic events shows clearly the diversification (*Fehér-Kóródi* 2006):

- Hungarian food-related events
- a food prepared in more variants
- based on one stock, using more technology
- applying a technology on more stock

During programs like this the most typical way of making meals is cooking in a cauldron, also the event of pig killing, the festivals of cereals and pastas, dairy products, vegetables and fruits.

We may talk about the above mentioned gastronomic program types according to another grouping (*Fehér-Kóródi* 2008):

- programs being attached to illustrious days (Harvest festival, Márton-day)

⁵ <http://www.nogradfolklor.hu/index.php?page=21>

⁶ http://www.husk-cbc.eu/hu/a_programrol

- folk gastronomic events (Palóc Days)
- programs being attached to the past of the Hungarian nationalities (Renaissance feasts)
- professional events (“Wonders of flavors” Gastronomic Competition and Festival)
- Hungarian food-related events (cauldron-food festivals)

The events are not only culinary demonstrations. They take place in their natural environment; the cookers, the household utensils and the furniture recall the past. Some events are like a living museum where the old exhibited objects are present in use, meanwhile their function becomes clear in front of the ones being interested.

8. The future of rural gastronomy

Abroad it has already been recognized that staying in the rural areas contributes to the conservation of health on a large scale (*Anderson–Getz 2009*), and they deny the view that these holiday places have sights for the elderly and they are only village areas. They emphasize the individuality of the authentic and the importance of returning to the folk culture beside this.

The traditional flavors are not always present in the urban kitchens as a result of modernisation which affects food and drinks, especially wine (*Mak et al 2011*).

We can say that the opportunities are given. In this section of rural tourism it would be worth laying the emphasis on additional ones and the organization of gastronomic roads, museums and presentations are necessary to be in the spotlight.

9. Negatives and positives of local, rural festivals

Festivals often serve as the reinforcement of the local culture and the costumes, and they also give opportunities to the public for enhancing their cultural identity beside these, helping and promoting local artists to reach higher; in addition opportunities are created for a short term and also high-level artistic, creative work is being done. Primarily gastronomic and folklore festivals are usual in smaller towns and in villages.

Until music festivals could be described often as “global” events (for example mostly internationally admitted performers), gastronomic festivals could help with presenting and selling local products. Considering the socio-cultural effects of the festivals, they play an important role in the development of the local communities because if we compare them with other forms of culture they are socially more inclusive. Furthermore, the organizers and the population consider the festivals as a tool of utterance of diversity and identity. It is worth mentioning that festivals have a positive impact in terms of renewal which may include the democratization of culture, the celebration of differences, the revitalization and strengthening of the community and also the improvement of the quality of life. Festivals are usually temporary, fleeting and elusive experiences and if they are not repeated they are unable to maintain cultural continuity. Therefore, it is ideal that they are organized annually. Also it is a problem that festivals become more and more international and they lose their roots and relationships with the given location. The characteristics of smaller community festivals is that they are more attractive for the local population than the mega-programs. However, generally they fail to attract tourists and less likely they are economically viable long-term, unless they receive a comprehensive local financial support. Another problem may be the loss of authenticity, giving up the artistic integrity or the depreciation of culture. Many authors talk about the fundamental differences between community-oriented and tourist-oriented events and raise the questions about the sustainability of the latter one.

10. Discussion

The potentials of tourism in the region of Nógrád are immature. The sought of them was stagnant and had little interest. It has less popularity than the major targets of tourism, such as Budapest and its surroundings and the Balaton Uplands, etc. By contrast, regarding tourism, it has all the potentials to build traditional holiday opportunities filled with folklore.

11. Conclusion

Festival tourism may have outstanding benefits in Nógrád county connecting it with village tourism, but the touristic destinations have to avoid the oversupply of these programmes. In such a little location, like the area with the Palóc, inhabitants definitely are worth staging unique, traditional based festivals to emphasis the exclusivity. The tourists, who visit the country would like to step out of the uniformity of the globalized world, having the comfort and the usual things present. They want to know the diverse, the unique, the unknown things, landscapes, flavors, activities. (Pakurar–Olah 2008). The tourists considering travelling as a pleasant form of learning, they make acquaintances with the people with pleasure fast and they also easily get to know unknown things. This applies during the journey where eating a great variety of food can also be found. In the future it would be important to focus on the role of culinary tourism in this region which could be a breakout opportunity.

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