

## **Geography, tourism studies and post-communist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe**

It has undoubtedly taken a lot of time and efforts for geographers interested in tourism to overcome the negative image of tourism as a mere fun activity and establish it as a valid topic of research in the discipline (Butler 2004, Hall and Page 2014, Williams 2009). As a result, the geography of tourism (or, it should be said, an array of tourism geographies; Hall and Page 2009) is now an acknowledged component of the wider discipline, spanning many of its various subfields – from social and cultural geography which concentrates on tourist mobilities, perceptions and experiences (e.g. Coles and Hall 2006), though environmental geography which explores the relations between tourism and the natural environment (e.g. Butler 2000), to economic geography which seeks to understand the nuances of the tourism production system (e.g. Ioannides and Debbage 1998). While the key geographical notions of space, place and scale have played a critical role in exploring the highly place-dependent and place-specific nature of tourism, geographical research on tourism has simultaneously proved over the years to be a fruitful (and perhaps unique?) lens through which places and their nature can be understood more comprehensively (Hall and Page 2014, Williams 2009). Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the restructuring which it has been undergoing since the fall of communism in 1989 serves here as a good example.

The collapse of communism and the transition to capitalism on which the countries of CEE decided to embark inevitably opened up the region to foreign tourists and tourism-related investments, thus also inspiring a plethora of geographical research on the role of tourism in fostering post-communist transformations and the growth of tourism in a region where customer services had been previously largely underdeveloped. Although in many instances it might not have been a primary objective, not only did such research enhance the general understanding of tourism development in CEE *per se*, but also, crucially, it helped explore some important aspects of the post-communist restructuring which research on other activities and industries could not always assist with. While examples are multiple, due to the shortage of space only some of them can be acknowledged in this short editorial.

The pioneer work of Derek Hall (e.g. 1991, 1995, 1998) and various other geographers (e.g. Ivy and Copp 1999, Jaakson 1996, Johnson 1997) who focused on the place-specific problems deriving from communism and hampering tourism development in CEE in the 1990s proved to be of enormous help in exposing many of the issues which the intended transition to capitalism was associated with, thus laying solid foundations under further work on the relations between tourism and the variety of post-

communist contexts in which tourism developed. The range of problems identified through this work included various aspects of political instability and economic uncertainty, bureaucracy, corruption, the lack of adequate institutional frameworks to govern the required changes, various legal problems (e.g. confusion over property rights and fiscal disorder), the shortage of local capital and a business culture of risk-taking, the obsolete condition of infrastructure, significant shortages of skilled labour and the lack of customer service standards. While many of these problems were also faced by other sectors undergoing the transition, due to its inherent characteristics (i.e. labour intensiveness, mainly low-tech nature and high levels of reliance on human interaction), tourism proved to be a distinct case through which the post-communist progression from the system based on manufacturing to a more service-orientated economy, which the countries of CEE started pursuing after 1989, could be better explored. Undoubtedly, geographical place-sensitive research on tourism in CEE played a key role in explaining the nature and dynamics of these changes and the difficulties which they were associated with. As such, although not always explicitly, geographical research on tourism in CEE also helped challenge the neoliberal idea of smooth and painless transition from communism to capitalism and unravel the complex, path-dependent and highly contested nature of post-communist restructuring in the CEE region, with the work of Williams and Balaž (2000, 2002) being the best example (see also Niewiadomski 2016).

Connected to the above, geographical research on tourism in the CEE region also contributed to the general understanding of regional change in the post-communist context. Largely neglected under the communist regime for ideological reasons, in the 1990s tourism was re-evaluated by multiple CEE destinations as a valuable source of hard currency and a new, attractive and relatively easy to establish path of development. In this respect, geographical research proved to be of value in accounting for the processes of transformation, growth and decline of various regional tourism spaces across CEE, ranging from urban (e.g. Coles 2003, Ratz et al 2008, Saarinen and Kask 2008) to rural (e.g. Turnock 2002, Unwin 1996) and coastal (e.g. Bachvarov 1999), and explaining the successes and failures of various tourism-related ventures and tourism-based strategies of growth. The role of geographers in analysing the impacts of various tourism sub-sectors on regional growth in CEE (e.g. Niewiadomski 2015) and accounting for the 'value' of communist legacies as regional assets and building blocks for tourism development (e.g. Light 2000) also should not be overlooked.

While many more topics could be invoked here (see e.g. Hall 2017 for a series of essays on tourism and geopolitics in CEE), still a lot remains to be done to explore the nature of tourism in CEE. Despite that, the example of CEE clearly demonstrates that geographical research on tourism not only benefits tourism studies in general, but it also unravels the specific features of different places, thus taking the

discipline of geography forward both in theoretical and empirical terms. The *Tourism Geographies* journal, which since its outset has been a convenient platform for publishing such research (as many of the papers referenced in this editorial clearly imply!), should receive special credits for facilitating this important contribution.

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