



**Doctoral School of
Sociology**

Ph.D Thesis Summary

Tóth-Batizán Emese Emőke

**The structure of the tourism market and ethnic
tourism in Szeklerland, Romania**

Supervisors:

Dr. Kuczi Tibor Ph.D

Dr. Csata Zsombor Ph.D

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Department of Sociology and Social Policy

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1 Background and overview of the research

The main aim of the current Ph.D thesis is the structural analysis of the tourism market in a historical region in Romania, Transylvania, called Szeklerland, mostly inhabited by Hungarians. The dissertation is the result of an exploratory research leading to the point where we can understand the development and operation of the tourism market in the chosen region.

Different segments of the tourism in Szeklerland have already been discussed and analyzed by transylvanian researchers (Nagy Benedek 2013, Horváth Alpár 2010, 2013, Kiss Tamás – Barna Gergő – Deák Attila, 2013). However, the approach and methodology used by us and offered by the economic sociology is something new, missing from the currently existing work in this field. As Nagy Benedek puts it, an important complementary to the already existing research and research results can be a research conducted among the touristic entrepreneurs (Nagy 2013:178). This dissertation offers to fill in this hiatus.

Beyond the approach provided by the economic sociology to the tourism market in Szeklerland, our aim is to analyse the ethnic embeddedness of this market. Based on our preliminary

assumption the tourism of Szeklerland heavily relies upon ethnic tourism. Results of different researches show us though that tourism cannot be built upon a sole market. Romania is a country of 22 million inhabitants, while Hungary a country of only 10 million inhabitants. This is why it is worth to open up the tourism market in Szeklerland to Romanians as well. (Kiss-Barna-Deák 2013:99). Ethnicity implies thus a double interpretation frame, referring to ethnic Hungarians who travel to Szeklerland in order to find their cultural roots; but also in the same time ethnicity refers to Romanians who travel to Szeklerland in order to find the ethnical different.

2 Research methods

The thesis relies mostly upon qualitative data: semistructured deep interviews were conducted with actors in the tourism market: entrepreneurs in Transylvania, Covasna/Kovászna county who identify themselves Hungarian and run SME-s related to tourism in Szeklerland, mayors and leaders of NGO's active in tourism. We have reached our interview objects through snowball-

effect. Interviews were analysed through the ATLAS.ti scientific software.

In the thesis there are used 32 deep interviews and one focus group interview. The focus group interview and 13 interviews were conducted in the framework of the project Comparative regional study regards the rural tourism and employment in Bihor/Bihar and Covasna/Kovászna counties (led by Csata Zsombor and Pásztor Gyöngyi).

Next to qualitative data analysis we have also used quantitative data – content of four databases.

The first database is „Demography, stratification and language use. Second wave”. This research was conducted by the National Minority Institution, National Bureau for Statistics and Max Weber Research Centre (2008).

The following two databases were EDEMOS, and TEMPO-Online, both databases belonging to the National Bureau for Statistics; data here is collected on monthly basis since 1990. However, unfortunately the communication of relevant data to the National Bureau of Statistics is deficient: those enterprises which are actively participating in shaping the tourism market in

Szeklerland but are working informally are not obliged to provide data to the National Bureau of Statistics.

„Tourism in Szeklerland 2010-2011” is the database also used by us in this thesis. Research was conducted by Kiss Tamás, Barna Gergő and Deák Attila among the tourists who arrived to Transylvania, Szeklerland.

Due to the fact that our aim is the holistic understanding of how the tourism market functions, we did not stop at those information and data which we reached through the semistructured interviews and quantitative data either. We considered important to include complementary methods to our work as well, like methods belonging to the field of visual anthropology. We have analysed thus those online and offline platforms which represented and multiplied the image of the tourism and tourism market in Szeklerland. We have analysed initially those guidebooks which are related to Transylvania, Szeklerland. We are all aware that printed media and platforms are not the sole ones being important, but more and more important roles are played by online platforms. Thus, we have added to our analysis 20 webpages of pensions operating in Szeklerland as well. The analysis of the 20 webpages was proceeded by mapping up the virtual world of pension

webpages. After this exercise we have realised that from the ethnic point of view, pension webpages can be positioned on a scale: there are a few which have an ethnically neutral image and message and then there are those which are heavily loaded by ethnic elements. Due to the fact that we were not able to conduct a representative research in this aspect, we have chosen 20 webpages which can be positioned on different points of this virtual ethnic scale.

We did not analyse only the texts appearing on the webpages but have also tried to interpret the images on the webpages. The consideration in this matter was the type of images appearing on webpages, but from the same approach as in the case of the analysed texts: are they ethnically neutral or have a strong ethnical message (like flags for example).

To sum it up, aiming to reach the triangulation in research methodology, we have used qualitative, quantitative data and data provided by visual anthropology. We are strongly convinced that this multilayer approach of our research will not dissect our analysis of the tourism market in Szeklerland, but on the contrary, it will provide a holistic and tintured understanding of it.

3 Research results, contribution of the thesis

1. Based on our research results we can state that tourism is considered by local inhabitants a very important local economic development factor in Transylvania, Szeklerland.

2. Different online and offline platforms related to the tourism in Szeklerland use many Hungarian ethnic elements. Based on the ethnic embeddedness, we have differentiated four type of touristic entities: the type which relies upon the Transylvanian history and nature related stereotypes; the type which accentuates the hospitality and gastronomy met in Szeklerland; the type which puts into centre the psychical and spiritual Szekler legacy; and the type which builds upon national Hungarian markers.

3. The above written happens in the context where, based on our own research but preliminary research as well, we can highlight that ethnic tourism based upon ethnic Hungarians is in falloff. Unless there is going be a radical change in the tourism market in Szeklerland which will attract new Hungarian tourists to the region, the Hungarian market will not represent a new perspective to the tourism market in the region. The radical change mentioned above could be the balneotourism and medical tourism.

4. The touristic entrepreneurs in Szeklerland recognise the opportunity lying in the Romanian tourists, they realise that the Romanian tourists can bring a new era. The TEMPO-Online database belonging to the National Bureau for Statistics also shows that since 2000 the number of domestic tourists has arisen. Szeklerland has already opened its gates to this new market: Romanians have started to discover the region and become regular guests there. Thus, we can speak though about ethnical tourism being more and more present in Szeklerland but this type of ethnic tourism is not practiced by ethnic Hungarians but by ethnic Romanians who seek the experience relying on the ethnic difference ont he ethnic otherness.

This switch in the population of tourists who visit Szeklerland has found the touristic entrepreneurs unprepared: many of the touristic entrepreneurs in Szeklerland have incomplete Romanian language competence, and most of the employees face the same difficulties: they can hardly communicate with Romanian tourists. In order to be able to host Romanian tourists, the region should definitely prove development regards the Romanian language knowledge of those actors at least who are active in the field of tourism.

The ethnicity of the population visiting Szeklerland will also affect the cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is built for different reasons; it has also political roots with the aim to make community cohesion stronger (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2007). The fact that more and more Romanian tourists visit Szeklerland, affects the role of the cultural heritage which was initially built in order to satisfy Hungarian cultural needs.

5. The tourism market in Szeklerland today is a partially organised and consolidated market. In the last 30 years mostly only small actors have stepped into this market. This market and its development resembles only partially to the type of market described by Laki Mihály. The tourism market had a different reaction compared to the market of foreign language schools to the phenomenon when entrepreneurs who already had previous entrepreneur experience have stepped into the market. In case of the market of foreign language schools, the new actors who started to operate in the field but did not have any previous experience as language teachers or working in language schools have debased the reputation of the language schools. In case of the tourism market the exactly opposite phenomenon has happened: whenever the type of actors have started to operate in the field of tourism who already

had previous entrepreneur experience, they have enhanced the level of services offered to the tourists. They have also facilitated the professionalisation of the whole field. They usually play an important role in the touristic NGO's as well and pay huge attention the quality of the provided services.

6. In the case of the market of foreign language schools, analysed and presented by Laki, whenever the market has become organised, thye type of actors who offered a service below an adequate quality, have vanished from the market (2006). On the market of the tourism we can observe a totally contrary phenomenon: no matter how organised the market will become, there is always place for touristic actors offering a service of poorer quality. The tourist makes a compromise depending on their financial possibilities and chooses a service corresponding to that. In this case it does not matter for the tourists if the chosen service provider operates in the field of formal or informal economy. In the tourism market in Szeklerland there are thus different layers of services from the point of quality and standard and there is demand on the market for services lying on different points of the scale of quality and standard. In this matter, further settlement cannot be expected on the market. If the Romanian state, governmental or

non-governmental organisations started to have a stricter way of regulating the market, further actors would choose to step into the informal field of the market where there are no such type of regulations. Tourism is a market where there is need for the unregulated supply as well. However, the services offered in the informal economy can bring a hidden jeopardy to the tourists from economical, consumer protection or fire protection point of view. To tackle these issues is the responsibility and burden of the tourists.

7. The market of tourism in Szeklerland is a partially professionalised market based on the approach and interpretation frame of Collins and Larson (Larson 2012). Most of the people who cultivate tourism, do it only as a complementary activity. There is no NGO which would guarantee the quality of the offered touristic services, neither would define who can host tourists. The lack of a chamber organisation at which every actor who operates in the field of tourism should obtain membership, brings different consequences: there are no professional codes which should be obligatory followed by every member of the market, and in case these professional standards were not respected, the touristic actors would be excluded from the market; neither are high exit costs in

case if different actors decided that they would step out from this market (Donabedian 1995, Hirschman in Donabedian 1995).

8. In this partially consolidated and partially professionalised market we have defined four layers of market regulation. The first scale is the statal, governmental scale; the second scale is the regulation done by different professional organisations; the third scale is the scale constaining of cooperation, while the last, fourth scale is the scale of informality.

9. Analysing closer the first scale, the governmental scale we can notice that the Romanian state is a hostile actor in the tourism market in Szeklerland and can be characterised with a very chaotic monitoring and controlling activity. The Romanian state, even if unwillingly but sheperds the touristic actors in Szeklerland towards the field of informal economy. We have noticed in the case of quite a few touristic actors that they could not face or it was not worth for them to face the financial costs which came together with the fact of operating in the segment of formal, legal aconomy, regulated by the state. The taxes which need to be paid in the segment of formal economy keep out those entrepreneurs who operate in the informal economy. In their understanding, being in the formal economy does not bring that amount of positive

differentiation to be worth for these actors to pay that often very high amount of taxes and participate in the very bureaucratic structure. The level of institutional trust is very low (Khodyakov 2007). Another reason for the low level of institutional trust is the fact that the Romanian state defines the tourism in Szeklerland an economic question only on theoretical level. In practice Romania relates to the tourism in Szeklerland in the dimension of politics and power (Hall 2011). The Romanian Tourism Agency does not even recognise Szeklerland as an official touristic destination.

12. The cooperation among the touristic entrepreneurs in Szeklerland is attenuated by the lack of trust. Horváth has even called the lack of trust as one very important factor which causes the current underdeveloped stage of the tourism in Szeklerland. (Horváth 2010:79). Our own empirical research also underpins Horváth's conclusion. Moreover, we can state that not only the level of personal trust but also the level of institutional trust is very low.

The position of the tourism in Szeklerland is attenuated also by the fact that specifically Szekler, authentic experience and program elements are still missing from the supply of touristic

services. A canonised system of traditions created and defined by professionals in Transylvania, could significantly brandish the image of the region and increase the number of tourists visiting Transylvania, Szeklerland.

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