



# The Czech and Slovak Republics: conceptual issues in the economic analysis of tourism in transition

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Received 31 July 2000; accepted 01 December 2000

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## Abstract

Research on tourism in the transition economies of Central and Eastern Europe has tended to be fragmented and atheoretical. This paper explores five main conceptual issues related to production and consumption issues in tourism in the former Czechoslovakia in the course of transition: path dependency, property rights and privatisation, the nature of markets and regulation, re-internationalisation and globalisation, and the polarisation of consumption. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Tourism; Transition economies; Markets; Globalisation; Property rights; Consumption; Path-dependency

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## 1. Introduction

The post 1989 transition in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) has had a major impact on tourism in the region. The central issue was, and remains, how tourism is influenced by the transition from a system of central planning (involving various degrees of decentralisation and proto privatisation in different countries) to a market economy. Papers on the early stages commented on the impact of border openings and incipient privatisation (Hall, 1991; Harrison, 1993) but the changes in tourism have been complex and difficult to unravel. There has been a steady growth of research in response to this challenge (Hall, 1998) but our understanding of the processes of change remains, at best, fragmented and highly empirical. This paper seeks to add to research in this field through an examination of the economic aspects of the transition in tourism in the former Czechoslovakia.

To some extent the over-empirical concerns of much of the literature reflect the lack of a theoretical framework for unravelling the complex processes that constitute tourism in transition. Jaakson (1996), amongst others, rightly dismisses the utility of develop-

ment stages models, derived from Rostow, as a theoretical framework, not least because of its implicit determinism. In Czechoslovakia—as elsewhere in CEE—a highly-organised tourism industry existed before 1989 and is now in transformation rather than evolving from a low base through distinctive stages. The conspicuous failure to provide an alternative theoretical framework for the economic analysis of tourism partly reflects the isolation of much tourism research from wider discourses on the transition. Yet, tourism can both benefit from and contribute to these discourses, having been prominent in post 1989 economic changes in CEE.

This paper provides some building blocks for conceptualising the economic dimensions of tourism in transition. It does not aim to provide a single integrated theory, but instead focuses on five main related themes: path dependency, globalisation and re-internationalisation, property rights, markets and regulation, and the polarisation of consumption. It synthesises some of the existing literature, but mainly draws on the experiences of the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Williams & Baláž, 2000a). Given the diverse economic trajectories in post-1989 CEE, this case study illustrates the place and time contingent nature of the transition in tourism, rather than an attempt to generalise about the changes in CEE, let alone all post state socialist societies.

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## 2. Path-dependency and path-creation

The oversimplified view that economic transition involves the unproblematic imposition of a western-inspired blueprint for replacing central planning with a market economy has long been challenged (Gowan, 1995). No blueprint could be imposed because the shape, timing and content of the transition were contested, being shaped by existing social relationships and social conflicts (Smith & Pickles, 1998). In the case of the former Czechoslovakia, the transition occurred in one of the most centralised economic systems in the former eastern block. There were struggles not only between different social groups intent on controlling the tourism industry, but also territorially, leading to the partition of the country in 1993 into the independent Slovak and Czech republics.

There is now general acceptance that, conceptually, the transition is most usefully viewed from a path-dependent (Stark, 1996) or path-dependent path-creation perspective (Nielsen, Jessop, & Hausner, 1995). Path dependency does not imply determinism but rather that actors and actions are constrained by existing institutional resources, which favour some pathways over others (Stark, 1994). This contrasts with the path creation perspective which argues that 'within specific, limits, social forces can redesign the 'board' on which they are moving and reformulate the rules of the game' (Nielsen et al., 1995, p. 7). These are not polar opposites, and path-dependency and path-creation are more usefully conceptualised as lying on a continuum. This was recognised by Nielsen et al. (1995, p. 6) who argued for a 'path-dependent path-creating' perspective. Similarly, Grabher and Stark (1998) argue, that 'institutional legacies embody not only the persistence of the past but also resources for the future. The transition involves not the imposition of a blueprint on a 'blank' social and economic space, but a reworking of the institutions and practices of central planning (some of which predate even this period). While constraining some pathways, this also creates opportunities and resources for new pathways. The institutional legacy shapes expectations and patterns of tourism, through the existence, survival and adaptation of values, routinised behaviour and organisational forms for the provision of tourism services. Memorably Stark (1996, p. 995, italics added for emphasis) considers that transition is a process which involves '... rebuilding organisations and institutions not on the ruins but *with* the ruins of communism'. In the case of tourism in Czechoslovakia, these were the ruins of once well-organised systems of state and 'commercial' provision of tourism services and facilities for domestic and international visitors.

Path-dependency path-creation is particularly useful as a conceptual framework for studying tourism in the transition in the former Czechoslovakia. For example,

consumption was shaped by culturally-informed tourist motivations: Czechs placed greater value than Slovaks on tourism, but both groups had become accustomed to, and expected, regular collective provision of holidays as well as visits to health spas (Williams & Baláž, 2000a). There was also a vast legacy of fixed capital in accommodation and other tourism facilities. Inevitably, these conditioned post 1989 tourism provision, and became the object of a contest over property rights in the course of privatisation (discussed later). However, there was sufficient dynamism in the tourism sector, and in the wider economy and society, to facilitate new pathways. Many firms passed through a succession of, and while—arguably—some of the earlier ones could have been predicted from the distribution of economic power in state socialism, this did not apply to subsequent changes. For example, the *Borová Sihoř* hotel and camping site (Liptovský Mikuláš district, Slovakia) was privatised in 1992 and initially acquired by owners whose main objective was asset stripping. After being bankrupted, the facility remained vacant and decayed for two years. Several divergent pathways were possible at that stage, including irreversible decline. In fact, a new owner was found, with local roots, who was willing and able to use capital from his other (non-tourism) businesses to renovate the hotel (Williams & Baláž, 2000b).

The possibilities for the emergence of new pathways are evident in high business failure rates during the transition, which is hardly surprising given the owners' inexperience of markets. In path-dependency path-creation theory, this can be conceptualised in terms of a 'fitness test'. Grabher and Stark (1998, p. 57) argue 'that some developmental paths produce ineffective solutions and sub-optimal outcome is not an indication of evolutionary failure but a precondition for evolutionary selection: no variety, no evolution. Hence, the evolutionary process necessarily entails development through failure'. In Czechoslovakia, as elsewhere in CEE, there were high failure rates due to 'over-reach' in the competitive and recessionary markets of the early 1990s. But these were a necessary precondition for the emergence of appropriate owners—in terms of access to resources and motivations—for the new firms (Williams & Baláž, 2000a).

It should be emphasised, that path-dependency did not imply uniform forms or rates of change, even in the early transition period. Instead, evolution is characterised by compartmentalisation, a form of segmentation in the economy that serves to retard 'selection through competition'. Drawing on evolutionary economics, Grabher and Stark (1998, p. 59) argue that this is important because 'reproduction of diversity depends on the ability of different levels of efficiency to co-exist'. Compartmentalisation of the economy had been a feature of late central planning, when limited

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