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TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY IN POLAND

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SELECTED ISSUES

Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego

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Reviewer
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Foreword

Tourism is as an important driver of economic growth and a multifaceted societal phenomenon. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the tourism industry accounted for approximately 3% of the world's GDP and generated employment for 5% of the global workforce. It follows that tourism, together with travel and hospitality, is a big revenue generator and a vehicle for social development. Indeed, the livelihoods of millions of people depend on tourism activity. At the same time, tourism, being part of the so-called experience economy, allows people to fulfil higher-order human needs. Thus, the importance of the industry cannot be overstated. However, the coronavirus pandemic, which started in China and subsequently spread around the world in 2020, had a devastating effect on the entire industry. With bans on travel in force, aircraft grounded and hotels closed, tourism activity came to a halt in the first half of this *annus horribilis*. Such countries as Greece, Egypt or Spain that, to a large extent, rely on tourism activity for government revenue and personal income were hit particularly hard. Although Poland does not belong to this category, its tourism industry also suffered genuine hardship. This was especially evident in peripheral regions where tourism activity is the mainstay of local economies. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in 2019 – the year prior to the outbreak of the pandemic – the country was visited by a record number of foreign tourists. It is true that, compared to France

or Spain, the 21 million foreigners who visited Poland (Ministry of Economic Development, 2020) then might not look particularly impressive. But the fact remains that, by Polish standards, these numbers were remarkable. Other Eastern European countries also saw visitor numbers reach record levels.

From a certain point of view, it is, therefore, an opportune time to have a look at selected aspects related to the functioning of the tourism industry in Poland. Specifically, it seems particularly instructive to discuss certain matters of concern and dilemmas that are confronting practitioners and policymakers. On the one hand, growing visitor numbers raise the question of the environmental and social sustainability of tourism activity. Although it might be an exaggeration to speak of overtourism in Poland, one needs to remember that tourism experience is, above all, about the local and that foreigners – as well as many domestic holidaymakers – tend to visit a few very popular destinations (usually big cities and fashionable resorts). This means considerable tourist concentrations in a limited number of attractive places, with all the negative consequences for the environment and the quality of life of local residents. Such a situation also occurred in summer 2020, when thousands of Polish tourists, scared off by the spread of the virus, decided to spend their holidays in Poland rather than going abroad. As a result, the most popular destinations were overrun by tourists, which, in turn, affected their own place-based experiences and the lives of local inhabitants.

Thus, this sets up a powerful dilemma: how to benefit from growing numbers of tourists and, at the same time, effectively reduce the negative impacts associated with the consumption of tourism. It does not help that, given the generally poor user-friendliness of public transport in many Polish cities and tourist resorts, foreigners are reluctant to use environmentally friendly modes of transport. Therefore, is a shift of focus from quantitative to qualitative conceptualisations of tourism

(in effect, implying a degrowth in tourism) a viable option in these circumstances?

On the other hand, the difficult realities of hotel work – long and unsocial working hours (and the resulting problems with work-life balance), a high incidence of part-time and temporary employment (and hence relatively low pay and job insecurity) as well as emotional labour (and the resultant stress and frustration) – make it particularly problematic to expect employees to ensure the high quality of service provision. In other words, at issue is the question of how to reconcile the downsides of hotel employment with employer demands for first-rate job performance and customer expectations of excellent service. The pandemic-induced shutdown of all accommodation facilities across the country, which saw thousands of hotel workers being made redundant or furloughed, laid bare the inadequacies that characterise the employer – employee relationship in Polish hospitality. Indeed, this predicament showed many low-skilled hotel workers to belong to the modern precariat. Things were aggravated by the virtual absence of collective representation in Polish hotels, implying that hotel workers are in a weak bargaining position while negotiating over pay and conditions. Should, therefore, Polish hoteliers rethink (and modify) their approach to the employment relationship in general and their human resource management (HRM) style in particular?

At the same time, with environmental concerns taking centre stage in the public debate, hotels – like other businesses – ought to attempt to reduce their negative impacts (after all, accommodation facilities use considerable amounts of electricity and water as well as produce a lot of waste). This is usually done within the framework of a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy, which should also feature such issues as employee fair treatment, respect for human rights and community welfare. The problem is that many Polish firms have a tendency to adopt an instrumental rather than strategic

approach to CSR. It follows that they tend to conceive CSR as a "bolt-on" activity, separated from their day-to-day operations and strategic objectives. As a result, such businesses treat CSR selectively and instrumentally, chiefly for public-relations purposes. That has little to do with genuine commitment to CSR. By contrast, those firms that see CSR in strategic terms put it at the heart of their organisational cultures. In practice, this means that social responsibility determines corporate decision-making and that the wellbeing of *all* stakeholders becomes a top priority. This, inevitably, prompts the question of what Poland-based hotels do in the area of CSR and, critically, whether they belong to the former or the latter group.

These questions are likely to feature prominently in the present monograph. Its overarching aim is to address the above issues and dilemmas. Without doubt, these are of great interest to practitioners and academics alike. Hence the idea is to ground them in theory by providing a detailed conceptual background and then to verify certain claims and to throw light on certain phenomena by means of empirical evidence (gathered in Poland over the last few years). It follows that the present work seeks to combine the theoretical with the empirical, thereby offering an in-depth discussion of an industry whose importance for the Polish economy is likely to grow.

Introduction

It is hardly in dispute that tourism acts as an important driver of socio-economic development. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, tourism, travel and hospitality included, accounted for approximately 3% of the world's GDP and generated employment for 5% of the global workforce. This reflected – and resulted from – constantly rising flows of tourists. According to the UNWTO, in 2019 the number of international tourists who made an overnight stay increased to 1.5 billion, which was more than four times the number in 1980 (UNWTO, 2020b). Crucially, many of those travellers decided to visit the most popular destinations (usually big cities and fashionable resorts), thereby concentrating tourist activity in a relatively small number of places. And with tourists flocking to Paris or Venice in their millions, local residents began to complain about negative environmental and social impacts associated with the consumption of tourism, such as unpleasant overcrowdedness (clogged pavements, traffic congestion, overcrowded recreational amenities) and anti-social behaviour (alcohol-related rowdiness, inconsiderate neighbours partying into the late hours of the night, litter-strewn streets). This, in turn, led to a backlash against tourism in some European cities. For instance, in Barcelona, where tourist buses were attacked by disgruntled locals in 2018, a piece of graffiti read: "Tourists go home, refugees welcome".

Unsurprisingly, some commentators and scholars started to talk about "overtourism", arguing that continuing increases in visitor numbers may, literally, render tourist activity in many destinations unsustainable (Seraphin et al., 2018). At the core of the problem, therefore, lies the tension between the tourism industry in its entirety, on the one hand, and the environment and the community, on the other (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Muler Gonzalez et al., 2018; Rivera et al., 2015). As a consequence, municipal authorities have begun to introduce assorted measures with a view to tackling overtourism. These included: limiting access to certain tourist attractions, restricting the operation of home-sharing websites and ride-hailing services, limiting the number of cruise ships and parking spaces for tourist buses, limiting the number of liquor licenses and increasing special charges paid by tourists (see also Cheung & Li, 2019). For example, in July 2019 the Parisian authorities announced that, from 2024 on, tourist buses will be denied access to the city centre (in the vicinity of the Eiffel tower) so as to decrease congestion and to reduce air pollution.

Of course, the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, which – due to the imposition of lockdowns in the vast majority of countries – wreaked havoc on the tourism industry, put paid to such action. With aircraft grounded and hotels shut down across the world, tourism came to a virtual halt. As a result, millions of people employed in hotels, restaurants, airports and travel agencies were either laid off or furloughed. In this way, the coronavirus crisis exposed the precarious nature of tourism employment, obviating the need for safeguards to protect the most vulnerable workers. Certainly, amongst the hardest-hit countries were those that disproportionately rely on tourism for income and jobs. Thus, the pandemic took a particularly heavy toll on the economies of Spain, Italy or Egypt, where unemployment jumped to double digits in 2020. Poland, which saw visitor numbers reach a record high of 21 million in 2019 (Ministry of Economic De-

velopment, 2020), was not affected so badly. That said, it, too, came to experience negative consequences of the lockdown-induced halt in tourist activity.

After all, tourism has played an increasingly important role in the country's socio-economic development since the collapse of communism in 1989 (Croes et al., 2021). Indeed, since the fall of the Berlin wall, Poland has seen ever-growing foreign visitor numbers. It might, therefore, be argued that the country has of late come to be seen as an attractive touristic destination. Nevertheless, there are things that continue to mar its attractiveness. These include: a relatively unimpressive environmental record (Poland ranked 37th in the 2020 Environmental Performance Index; EPI, 2020), infrastructure that in some regions is still undeveloped, the patchy quality of hospitality services and, last but not least, the incidence of unfair employment practices in hotels and restaurants. What is more, the pandemic-induced shutdown of lodging facilities across the country caused thousands of service workers to lose their jobs (or to be furloughed), thereby exposing the precarious nature of hospitality employment. Abstracting from the consequences of the lockdown, it has to be admitted that, despite noteworthy progress made over the last three decades, a lot remains to be done, especially in the area of environmental and social sustainability. In particular, there is evidence that Polish hotels – which have a vested interest in the state of the environment – are not strongly committed to organisational greening (Zientara & Zamojska, 2018). Not coincidentally, Poland occupies a relatively low place (42nd) in the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (World Economic Forum, 2019). From a certain point of view, therefore, it is an opportune time to have a closer look at certain aspects of the Polish tourism industry.

Accordingly, the principal aim of the present monograph, which comprises four chapters, is to discuss selected aspects of tourism and hospitality in Poland. The overarching idea is to explore certain

theoretical issues and important real-life phenomena through the lens of empirical findings. In other words, this monograph, while being firmly grounded in theory, has a solid empirical base. It follows that its value lies in shedding new light – by means of empirical evidence – on (selected) issues of concern to the Polish tourism industry. Thanks to this, the present monograph makes a number of contributions to the literature of the subject.

The book is structured in the following way. Chapter 1 provides the conceptual background of the study. It starts with discussing relevant notions, ideas and conceptualisations. It subsequently focuses on the debate on the relationship between sustainable tourism and sustainable development. Finally, special attention is paid to the causes and consequences of overtourism. Chapter 2 deals with the development of tourism in Poland after the fall of communism. It explains why the country is increasingly seen as a popular tourist destination and discusses the question of whether tourism should act as a tool for regional development. Given this, it then sets out to empirically ascertain how Polish local authorities understand – and put into practice – the idea of sustainable tourism and, crucially, how they approach ever larger visitor numbers and view suggestions for potential degrowth in tourism. Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the character of the employment relationship in the Polish hotel industry. Specifically, at issue is the absence of collective representation in hotels, with all its potentially negative consequences for employees' welfare and bargaining position. An empirical study that forms the backbone of this chapter aims to find out whether and how an anti-union climate (allegedly present in many Polish lodging establishments) affects a non-unionised worker's intention to join a union. Finally, Chapter 4 is devoted to the question of corporate social reasonability in the hotel industry in Poland. It begins by discussing main concepts and their theoretical underpinnings, at the same time explaining why the practice of social responsibility poses

a challenge to hotel firms. It then presents the findings from analysis of CSR reports (as well as relevant information posted on websites) of hotel companies operating in Poland with a view to ascertaining what hotel managements do in the area of CSR. The monograph concludes by summarising the argument, highlighting theoretical and practical implications, and suggesting future research directions.

CHAPTER 1

Tourism: Conceptual background

Conceptualisations of tourism and the specificity of the tourism industry

The literature of the subject abounds with definitions of tourism. That said, the general consensus is that tourism is a human activity that involves travelling to and staying in places (temporarily) outside one's usual environment, for leisure, business or other purposes. In fact, all definitions of tourism comprise the following components: people, place, mobility, purpose and time. Crucially, tourism, being a global industry *par excellence*, is one of the major drivers of economic growth and one of the most important social phenomena (Theobald, 1998). The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, wreaking havoc on the entire tourism industry, rammed this point home. Indeed, due to its reliance on social contact, tourism was one of the hardest-hit industries. With hotels closed and aircraft grounded, millions of employees working in hotels, restaurants or at airports either lost their jobs or were furloughed. The COVID-19 crisis also painfully exposed the interconnectedness characterising the whole industry. When airplanes are barred from taking off by government fiat and people have to comply with stay-at-home orders, they do not travel. This means that they do not need accommodation, so hotels have no custom, which, ultimately, leads to workers losing their jobs. Certainly, this

interconnectedness is evident not only in times of crisis: after all, governments build or modernise infrastructure as well as maintain museums and (occasionally) subsidise airlines – all with taxpayer money. These are then used by tourists, who stay in private hotels and spend time (also) at privately-run attractions.

Accordingly, tourism in its entirety can figuratively be conceived of as a complex mechanism that comprises (interconnected) elements (such as private-sector companies and publicly-funded governments) and that is nested inside a larger, multifaceted system, where potent forces are at work and unpredictable phenomena occasionally occur. Apart from public-health emergencies, these include terrorist attacks, political instability (e.g., *coups d'état*), environmental disasters (such as oil leaks from ships running aground) and, last but not least, extreme weather (e.g., tornadoes, rainstorms). And these forces exert huge influence over the fortunes of touristic destinations, the bottom lines of tourism companies and the livelihoods of people living off tourist activity. Of course, the COVID-19 crisis is a good case in point. But it is well documented, too, that such countries as Tunisia or Egypt saw considerable decreases in visitor numbers in the wake of bloody terrorist attacks, which, in turn, translated into higher unemployment and poverty rates as well as lower corporate profits and government revenues. By definition, such forces are beyond control of individual tourism firms and, in most cases, national governments. The implication is that tourism is an inherently complex, globe-spanning business that is fraught with risks.

That said, tourism, irrespective of how badly mauled it will emerge from the pandemic, is likely to rebound. Even if actual visitor numbers decrease in the short term, over the long run, people will continue to travel. This is because tourist activity, which encompasses a whole range of recreational and leisure pursuits, satisfies higher-order human needs, such as a need for self-development and mental stimu-

lation as well as a desire to repeat intrinsically gratifying behaviours and to gain recognition. Relatedly, growing incomes and marked improvements in living standards in emerging economies (in particular in China) mean that more and more people will be able to afford a trip abroad (when societies get richer – as is the case in China – people tend to spend a larger proportion of their income on intangibles rather than material goods). It is, therefore, possible to identify several "push" factors that prompt individuals to travel in pursuit of fulfilment of their needs. These encompass escape from the regular routine of one's live, exploration of one's self, bonding with one's friends and relatives, relaxation, prestige or social interaction. It follows that a tourist is a person who is defined by time (days or weeks), choice (voluntary), mobility (away from home) and, last but not least, motivation (fulfilment of needs).

Tourism, in essence, is about experience, which, by definition, is intangible and transient. Understood as an individual mental status stimulated by a specific activity, it is composed of three stages: pre-experience, on-site experience and post-experience. Thus, it is possible to claim that tourism is part of the experience economy, which has four basic elements: entertainment, education, escapism and aesthetics (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Abstracting from the criticisms of this concept, there is little doubt that holidaymakers want to have fun, to learn new things, to escape from daily routine and to feel pleasure. And this is done through direct interaction with local residents, natural environments, man-made streetscapes, historical and cultural artefacts as well as through the use of various amenities in theme parks, hotels and other entrainment venues.

What is more, tourism is an integral part of the service sector and exemplifies socio-economic phenomena typical of the post-Fordist nexus of production and consumption. In the industrial era, when the manufacturing of tangible goods was the most important economic

activity, production and consumption were separate from each other and took place at different points in time. However, when it comes to services (which nowadays dominate in advanced economies), production and consumption happen at the same time. This also means that consumers are increasingly demanding and influential (not least due to the popularity of social media), so producers need to adopt a more consumer-oriented approach. In other words, they have to pay more attention to (volatile) consumer preferences and to the quality of service provision. Crucially, they should realise that consumption has become less functional and more individualised and highly aestheticised. When applied to tourist activity, all this goes some way towards explaining why the last decades have seen the proliferation of assorted kinds of tourism (which aspire to suit individual preferences and tastes). Hence, for instance, the popularity of nature-based tourism and wildlife (which involves personal contact with nature and local communities), of medical tourism (which is about combining relaxation with medical treatment, usually in low-cost touristic destinations) or religious tourism (which involves travelling to shrines and sanctuaries with a view to religious or spiritual experience).

That said, the growing recognition that mass tourism produces also negative impacts has drawn attention to alternative forms of tourism. Generally, alternative tourism is understood as "forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social and community values and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences" (Eadington & Smith, 1992, p. 3). Slow tourism, which refers to the form of tourism wherein tourists take their time on their journey and interact with local residents, is a case in point. Contrasted with mass tourism, alternative tourism takes as its premise that a different (i.e., alternative) approach to the consumption of tourism is called for. In this sense, there is a considerable amount of overlap between alternative forms of tourism and those conceptual-

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