

KEY POINTS IN DEVELOPING INBOUND TOURISM IN TRANSNISTRIA

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Abstract: This paper target is to open a discussion regarding inbound tourism in Transnistria, identifying four key points (touristic attraction, transport and border crossing, accommodation, communication and safety) for analyzing it, which represents the background for improvement and solutions in attracting more foreign tourists. The paper also mentions the two main trends of inbound tourism development in Transnistria, one based on Soviet heritage and second on historical artifacts, landscape and folklore.

Key words: Transnistria, tourism, development, attractions, heritage, border, landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Transnistria and PMSSR

Transnistria (figure 1) is a breakaway territory, internationally considered part of Republic of Moldavia. The region also known as Trans-Dniester or Transdnestria declared its independence in 1990, under the name Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and is currently functioning as a presidential republic with a multi-party system.

Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) territory is mostly, but not completely, coincident with the geographical region of Transnistria, a narrow valley stretching in the North-South direction along the left bank of the Dniester River, forming a natural boundary along the border with the rest of Moldavia.

PMSSR borders Moldavia to the West (for 411 km) and Ukraine to the East (for 405 km), including 10 cities and 69 communes and being divide in five raions (administrative subdivisions) Camenca, Ribnita, Dubasari, Grigoripol and Slobozia, and one municipality Tiraspol. Six communes from the region of Transnistria, Cocieri, Moldova Noua, Corjova, Pirita, Cosnita and Dorotcaia, situated in the north and south of the city Dubasari are under Moldavian authorities control, with the exception of the village Roghi from Moldova Noua commune, which is controlled by PMSSR authorities.

According to the 2004 Moldavian Census, in the politically delimited region of Transnistria were living 555,347 people, from which 31.99 % Moldavians, 30.37 % Russians, 28.82 % Ukrainians, 2.5 % Bulgarians and 1 % other minorities.

The following paper refers to the whole territory controlled by the PMSSR forces, which will be address as Transnistria, including the area located outside of the geographical region of Transnistria, situated on the right bank of the Dniester River.

Key Points in Developing Inbound Tourism in Transnistria



Figure 1. Map of Transnistria
(Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Naddniestrze.png>)

Cities and towns in Transnistria

Tiraspol is the biggest city from Transnistria, the second largest city of Moldova and the capital city a PMSSR. The city, found by the Russian general Alexander Suvorov in 1792, is located on the eastern bank of the Dniester River and has currently a population of 160,000 inhabitants. The predominant ethnic group is Russian, followed by Ukrainian and Moldavian. Industrially-focus, the city most important monuments are Alexander Suvorov statue from the central square and Lenin statue from in front the PMSSR Government building.

Tighina also known as Bender is an important industrial center and the second largest city controlled by PMSSR forces. Located on the right side of the Dniester River, the city with population of 97,027 inhabitants, is an important border-cross region between Moldavia and Transnistria. The city biggest attraction is its fortress remaining, developed by Turkish after Suleiman the Magnificent conquered the city from Moldavia in 1538.

Ribnita is situated in the northern half of Transnistria and has a population of 56 988 inhabitants. The city is the seat of Ribnita district and the home of Transnistria's largest company, the steel producer MMZ. The city has three places of worship located near to each other: an orthodox church, a catholic church and a synagogue.

Dubasari is one of the oldest settlements in Transnistria region, stone age artifacts being found in the area. The settlement is firstly mention in 16th century as a fair populated by Moldavian peasants and receives city status in 1795, after becoming part of the Russian empire. Currently in the city are living around 23,650 inhabitants, mostly Moldavians, Ukrainians and Russians.

Grigoripol is the seat of Grigoripol district, composed by the city itself and the village Crasnoe. The city has a population of around 11,473 inhabitants, with a majority of Moldavians (5,570 people), Russians (3,275 people) and Ukrainians (2,248 people).

In Grigoripol district is also situated the town Maiac, with around 10,000 inhabitants, home of the Transnistrian Radio and Television Center.

Slobozia is the seat of the Slobozia district, located in the southern part of Transnistria. The city has a population of 18,748 people, with a majority of Moldavians, Russians and Ukrainians. In Slobozia district are located also the small towns Tiraspolul Nou with 11,473 inhabitants and Dnestrovsc with 14,876 inhabitants. Dnestrovsc located near to the border with Ukraine is famous for its power station Moldavskaya GRES.

Camenca is a town with 10,323 inhabitants and the seat of the Camenca district. The town major ethnic groups are Moldavians, Ukrainians and Russians.

Transnistria's particularities and the study research methods

Before speaking about the tourism in Transnistria, it is important to mention this region political and economical specific, with direct impact over the methods of research available for completing the present paper.

The local administration of Transnistria is theoretically functioning as a presidential republic, with a multi-party system and Unicameral Parliament called Supreme Council, with 43 members elected by popular vote. However, since its declaration of independence and its first election, the country had one single president, in the person of Igor Smirnov, always elected with a suspicious majority of over 90 %. In practice, PMSSR is working as a high bureaucratic centralized state, controlled politically and economically by the local elite, centralized around president Smirnov and his family.

Since the War of Transnistria in 1992, the border area between Transnistria and the rest of Moldavia is and open conflict zone, with peacekeeping forces from Russia, Ukraine and Moldavia, present in the area. As the state is unrecognized internationally, in Transnistria, there are no foreign embassies, except for the Russian Embassy (although Russia did not formally recognized PMSSR) and other former USSR unrecognized states. International organizations have no authority in Transnistria, which makes it difficult for

foreign tourists to enter this area and benefit from safety and assurance that their rights are respected.

PMSSR has a mixed economy, based on heavy industry, electricity production and manufacturing. As it does not have a sustainable economy, the country is dependent on export and import activities, mainly directed towards CIS countries, principally to Russia.

Tourism and touristic activities have a very small, almost insignificant impact on the economy, not representing a priority for the local authorities.

These particularities of Transnistria puts in difficulty the conduct of any study in this area, especially one on tourism and touristic activities, which are in generally ignored by the local government and little exploited by population, mostly due to the lack knowledge, money or opportunity.

With some research methods out of reach, like statistical data analysis of foreign tourist entering Transnistria or local government policies to improve inbound tourism, the present paper drawn its conclusions from the literature written on the subject of Transnistria, media articles, information given by tourist agencies or travelers opinions and experiences.

TOURISM CHARACTERISTICS IN TRANSNISTRIA

Touristic activities in Transnistria are mainly focus on domestic or internal tourism, taking place in the whole territory of Republic of Moldavia. The most common form of domestic tourism is visiting family and relatives' tourism, with people living inside of the region of Transnistria visiting each other or receiving visits from their relatives living in other areas of Moldavia.

Other common forms of tourism meet in Transnistria are transit and shopping tourism, mostly focused on alcohol and cigarettes, as their price are much lower than in other parts of Moldavia.

The most common types of inbound tourism present in Transnistria are transit and visiting family and relatives' tourism. Transit tourism centers upon road transport, despite the bad quality of roads in Transnistria, the buses and mini-buses connections from Chisinau to Odessa, with stops in Tiraspol and Tighina being very popular. Visiting family and relatives inbound tourism is practice primarily by Ukrainian and Russian, and in some cases by Moldavian residents in Romania or EU.

From time to time in the area of Transnistria appear some other forms of inbound tourism, motivated by the wish for adventure, curiosity or aid. A small number of Russian tourists, nostalgic for old good times of USSR, accustomed with the area's particular climate, take advantage of Russian language usage and practice a form of entertainment tourism.

Adventure tourism is mainly popular among young curious people, from Europe or America, in search for exciting activities and unexplored places. Most of the adventure tourism trips extend over the period of one day, with tourists traveling from Chisinau or Odessa to Tiraspol, usually accompanied by guides or local friends. In some cases, the tourists stay over the night, but this is more problematic, due to visa limitation time and registration with local authorities.

Journalists, international organizations staff, non-governmental organizations members, students and academicians are practicing research tourism in the area, a form of tourism becoming more popular, with the increase of knowledge on Transnistria's situation and EU approaching.

Volunteers' travelers are coming mainly from Romania, with aid and support for schools in Romanian language, located on the territory of Transnistria. Most volunteers establish cooperation and friendship relations with teachers from schools they help, usually benefiting from privet hosting or preferring to enter Transnistria daily, avoiding staying over the night.

INBOUND TOURISM KEY POINTS

Inbound tourism also known as incoming tourism is a valuable source of revenues, creating jobs and bringing wealth, whilst contributing to a sustainable development in a widely range of areas and regions. With low start-up costs and combined with eco-tourism, could represent a viable option for many people in Transnistria. Developing some area of Transnistria as touristic destinations will bring benefits to local economy and more business and investment in these areas, with minimum of negative impact over people's lives and environment.

The following paper identified four key points that help to analyze the current situation of inbound tourism and touristic activities in Transnistria that in the same time offers the background for improvement solutions. The four key points are touristic attractions, transport and border crossing, accommodation, and communication and safety.

Touristic attractions. For foreigners interested in visiting Transnistria, the recommended and accessible locations are Tiraspol and Tighina. Very near to each other, with good transport connections from Chisinau and Odessa, the cities comprised the most interesting attractions available to tourists.

Tiraspol, as the capital city of the local government of PMSSR, benefits from plenty soviet symbols: streets with communistic names, tall and white buildings in soviet style like the PMSSR Parliament building, soviet monuments like Lenin Statue or soviet tanks and planes.

A popular attraction in Tiraspol is Kvint brandy and vine factory, until recently, unavailable for tourists that had to settle with a visit to Kvint shops and the opportunity of buying good quality brandy at a very low price, however, the policy changed and a factory tour is available through travel agencies from Chisinau and Tiraspol.

Although their capacity is not maximally, explored, religious buildings like orthodox monasteries and churches are available and popular for visit in Transnistria.

Instead of souvenirs, many tourists are attracted to take from Transnistria money, post stamps and envelopes, from a country that does not exist.

In Tighina, the biggest touristic attraction is the remaining of its fortress, which was until recently used as headquarter for the Russian army, located on the territory of Transnistria. The fortress is currently under reconstruction and scheduled to be open for public afterwards.

After visiting Transnistria, many foreign tourists described the area as “not much to see”, their discontent targeting the lack of diversity and the limited area of touristic destinations. However, Transnistria possess a large number of unexplored touristic attractions and destinations that with a minimum of investment and organization can attract many foreigners, satisfying their appetite for adventure and diversification. One of these attraction is the Dniester river, where canoeing and fishing activities could be develop, along with the rural and eco-tourism in the near by settlements. Some interesting destinations are also Dubasari, Ribnita and Slobozia, along with other cities and villages from Transnistria, currently unexplored for touristic purposes and difficult to reach by foreign tourists.

Transport and border crossing. Tourist can arrive in Transnistria traveling from Moldavia or Ukraine. There are no direct flights into the area, because Transnistria has no airport. The most near airports are located in Chisinau (about 55 km from Tiraspol) and Odessa (about 92 km from Tiraspol). Tourists can enter Transnistria by railway or road, using trains, buses, minibuses or cars. Trains connections to Tiraspol and Tighina are available on Chisinau – Moscow and Chisinau – Odessa routes, last one reopen from 1 October 2010.

The most popular means of transport among tourist are the buses and minibuses, easy to find in Chisinau and Odessa. They are cheap and frequent, usually with helpful

drivers to guide tourists through visa procedure, sometimes pushing forward the visa formalities, press by time and the other travelers, which are waiting.

Another cheap way to travel, especially inside Transnistria is taxi, very cheap for both in town and out town trips. Taxi drivers are flexible and sociable, but sometimes try to cheat their foreign customers, especially non-Russian speakers.

Transnistria is also reachable by car, but foreign tourists can meet different difficulties at the border, depending on the car registration plates, ownership or model. Private car with EU registration plates is rather certainly not recommended.

Transnistria borders are unrecognized by the international organizations and Republic of Moldova, being exclusively control by PMSSR forciers, and having a single checking point. Lack of feasible legislation and regulation are specific for these borders, arbitrarily govern by the border control guards. The difficulties that are appearing while crossing the border depends on tourists' nationality, means of transport they are using, border personnel mood, money and objects the tourists are carrying. A bus driver or a guide can be very useful for tourists, by helping them to complete all the necessary formalities and smoothening the border cross process. Knowledge of Russian language might also help.

Border crossing require the obtaining of Transnistrian visa, which can extend from a few hours to a few days. Tourists have to complete a piece of paper that they usually find in the buses or at border crossing points, which the border officer splits in two, one staying for him and another returning to the tourist that is oblige to show it when exiting the country.

Many tourists describe the border crossing into Transnistria as easier to „get in” and harder to „get out”. Getting out can mean sometimes long and unpleasant interrogatories that usually start with emptying the pockets and finish with bribes, depending on the amount of money and objects value the tourists poses.

These border-crossing difficulties along with Transnistria's not-positive reputation are primary factors why tourists avoid this area. Improving border crossing officers behavior and diminishing the bribes phenomena, would considerably increase the tourists traffic.

Accommodation. Transnistria benefits from a large choice of hotels, hostels and private apartments, mostly concentrated around Tiraspol and Tighina, preferable to be book in advance for safety reasons and to avoid visa complications.

Most tourists traveling for the first time prefer to spend the night in hotels or hostels, which are easy to find and more safe. Experienced tourists, that previously visited Transnistria, opt for private apartments, advertised in local newspapers, cheaper and more intimate.

Hotels and hostels in Transnistria are low-priced, usually clean, but of average conditions and sometimes with bitter personnel. Some locations impose hot water and heat limitations and offer the rooms with bathroom only on request.

According to local government rules, foreigners present in Transnistria for longer visits than 24h need to register with local authorities. Although some hotels and hostels offer guidance and help with this procedure, sometimes the registration can be problematic, time consuming and the reason for some tourist to avoid staying overnight.

The key for attracting more tourists and convince them to stay for longer periods, is improving accommodation locations, offering good looking, clean rooms with warm water available 24h and trained personal. Elimination the registration with local authorities for tourists would also represent a big step into convincing people to stay overnight.

Communication and safety. In Transnistria, there are three official languages: Russian, Ukrainian and Moldavian (Romanian written with Cyrillic alphabet). Russian is the most used language, from local government official papers to average citizens of

Russian or non-Russian origins, which prefers to use it in public places. Ukrainian language has a wide spread around the country, being similar to Russian and easily understood by most of society. Moldavian language, although an official language, is rarely spoke in public places and avoided in local government institutions. Local people can refuse to speak it publicly, on the streets, in shops or even in churches.

English language it is rarely spoke, mostly known by young educated people. It is difficult for tourists to manage if they have just English knowledge that is why local guides or translators are recommend.

In the case of Transnistria, safety is more of a psychological matter than a real physical danger. The lack of embassies and international organizations protection, even the lack of Moldavian authority in the area, gives any trip an aura of danger. The reputation of Transnistria, as breakaway country created by mafia for mafia, in which the most profitable activities are guns, drugs and woman traffic, significantly contributes in keeping tourists away. In reality, the biggest treat for tourists in Transnistria are “emptying their pockets” for local authorities bribes. A good marketing campaign on safety issues, double by a wider-spread of English language, can bring great benefits for touristic activities. Cleaning up the reputation, would encourage people to visit Transnistria and enjoy its wonders.

DEVELOPING INBOUND TOURISM IN TRANSNISTRIA

Tourism is developing in Transnistria according to two main trends. The first one is available since 2005, but only recently stronger promoted and exploits the Soviet heritage of the area. The second trend that only now begins to take shape puts the accent on the historical artifacts and landscape of Transnistria.

Aware of the very well preserved Soviet heritage in Transnistria, tourist agencies and tour operators from Chisinau are trying to utilize this particularity, building around it touristic itineraries. Under the motto: „You want to go back in time and visit the USSR? Visit Transnistria and you will not regret it!” (e.g.: Jurnalul, 11.03.2010) the offers propose day-trips from Chisinau to Tighina and Tiraspol. The main attractions are Lenin statute, hammer and sickle coat of arms, streets with communistic names along with soviet tanks and other weapons monuments.

The itineraries usually include the Postal Office from Tiraspol, where tourists can buy stamps and envelopes from a country that does not exists and continue with a visit to the Kvint brandy and vine factory. The offers target mainly tourists from developed countries, appealing to their curiosity and sense of adventure, most frequent customers being Americans, Dutch and Germans.

The possibility of exploring the historical monuments and landscapes of Transnistria, started to interest touristic agencies and tour operators from Chisinau and Tiraspol, which meet in April 2010, within the projects “Common building of the future for the internationally recognized zone of the Lower Dniester”. The project, implemented by the Ecological Society Biotica, targeted the Ramsar “Lower Dniester” region, developing a touristic itinerary in this area that started with Tighina Fortress and continued with landscape architectural monuments in the village of Cioburciu, the Wine Museum Butylka in Ternovka and Bulgarian Estate in Pascani. The project purpose is to consolidate the cooperation between tourist companies from both sides of the Dniester River, that will concretized in an authentic and functional offer, contributing to the flourishing of tourist in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

The current paper is proposing to make an introduction into the problem of inbound tourism in Transnistria, bringing it to the public attention and opening a discussion on this matter.

Tourism and touristic activities in Transnistria, domestic and inbound, are underdeveloped, mainly based on visiting family and relatives. A big contribution to this situation had the lack of implication and ignorance of the local government in supporting touristic activities.

Another big problem represents the crossing border points, bribes and lack of feasible legislation, which cuts off the appetite of many tourists for visiting Transnistria. The short time visas and bureaucracy paper work registration limit tourists stay to a few hours, with minimum of enjoyment for them and benefit for local economy. A widespread of English language, doubled by a good marketing campaign on safety issues, would attract more customers.

Despite all the problems, recent improvements have been notice, with tourism agencies taking steps towards marketing the tourism in Transnistria more aggressively abroad and developing new itineraries, mostly based on historical artifacts, landscape and folklore traditions.

The awareness of economical, social and cultural benefits brought by tourism development in Transnistria can arouse the local government interest to support this important branch of the economy and stimulate people interest in creating small businesses around it.

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