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The transnational hiking trail *via carpatica* - A concept for the sustainable development of the Carpathians

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1 Summary

A traversal on the transnational hiking trail of the Carpathian bend, "via carpatica", is certainly a vision today. Although single sections of the Carpathian mountain bend are more or less well developed, a continuous route with paths and huts along the mountain bend is still lacking. For this reason, the creation of a transnational hiking trail, which runs through the seven European countries of this mountain region, is of far reaching importance. The merging idea behind this transnational hiking trail, *via carpatica*, consists in developing and promoting this European mountain region with a sustainable social and ecologically compatible tourist concept, the core of which is hiking tourism.

The *via carpatica*, according to the vision, will one day connect seven European countries, and it will be a model for sustainable mountain tourism. It creates new jobs, promotes an ecologically compatible landscape and infrastructure development, and enables comprehen-

sive possibilities for arranging leisure time activities, international encounters, natural experiences and the maintenance and further enhancement of the regional cultural heritage.

The current investigations of the Carpathian project presently taking place, in which partners from all the Carpathian countries are involved, refer to very different and disparate regional developments in a variety of areas. In attempt to intensify transregional developments, another important result shows that it still remains difficult to cross national borders. With progressive European integration it can be expected that the borders will be more permeable in the future, primarily between the EU member states Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania. Whether it actually succeeds in getting the transnational exchange to occur and to thus create the bases for transnational regional development will, however, be decisive. For the fulfilment of this aim *via carpatica* can represent a central instrument.

At present, our investigations in the Carpathians project show that there is a strong need for further development in sustainable tourism, in particular for hiking tourism in the individual countries of the Carpathian bend. We therefore, first, want to outline the current state of important areas in regard to sustainable hiking tourism. Following this, the expected effects of the sustainable development of the tourism sector will then be introduced. In conclusion, we want to outline the first steps for implementing such a corresponding concept. In doing so, we refer to experiences from our current work in the Carpathian project.

2 Current state of sustainable tourism with a main emphasis on hiking tourism in the Carpathian bend

The present conditions for hiking tourism are characterised by an exceptionally heterogeneous situation between and within the countries of the Carpathian bend as well as by a high demand for development. This shall be represented briefly for the most important areas.

➤ Different conditions of mountain hiking traditions:

- Regions in which the developing activities (paths and huts) and the founding of the association, which took place 150 years ago (contemporaneous with that which began in the Alps) quickly belonged to every day life culture (e.g. Poland with the PTTK, High Tatra, Siebenbürgischer Karpatenverein);
- Regions, in which times of intensive developments alternated with times of less active development, e.g. in the Ukrainian Carpathians;
- Regions without a remarkable mountain hiking tradition.

In some regions the long tradition of mountaineering organisations as an NGO was temporarily interrupted by a political monopolisation, so e.g. with the Transylvania Carpathian Organisation (*Siebenbürgischen Karpatenverein - SKV*) in Romania.

- Different stage of development of the paths/hut infrastructure:
 - Traversals on marked and secured paths with managed huts located at a day's distance-away (e.g. High Tatra (*Hohe Tatra*): Inner Traversal (*Innere Durchquerung*); Fogarasch Mountains (*Fogaraschgebirge*): Ridge tour after Barcaciú until Podragu hut);
 - Few developed structures, no marked paths, no mountain huts, partial jungles (e.g. parts of the Ukrainian Carpathians);
 - Nationally-oriented approaches and ideas for transnational hiking trails, e.g. the THT, the Transcarpathian *Hiking Trail* in the Ukrainian Carpathians.
- Path maintenance in every country, often regulated differently in every massif: NGOs (small and large), state authorities; with and without governmental support;
- Lacking in transnational networking of hiking routes, only national or single mountain massif related path systems;
- Accommodations (mountain huts, mountain inns) in the individual Carpathian regions are in very different conditions: ranging from mountain inns with comfortable furnishings and vast supplies and care for the hikers, to modest huts with minimal supplies and minimal care, on to the bivouac encampment (*Biwakschachtel*), which barely serves as a shelter.
- Hut possession regulated differently:
 - in the possession of organisations (e.g. PTTK in Poland) with leaseholders or honorary attendants;
 - always as private property;
 - bought from the state (partially with intention to speculate), which had expropriated what was owned earlier by the associations (e.g. in Romania);
 - in a state possession (?)
- Mountain guide: considerable differences between the Carpathian countries:
 - in the levels of qualification and in the main fields of education (oriented rather towards alpine sport skills or towards cultural and natural history knowledge or towards group leadership qualities);
 - in becoming professionalized (both full-time and part-time professional mountain guides as well as honorary active leaders);
 - in the professional recognition (arbitrary title or protected job title);

- in general reservedness towards introducing uniform qualification standards (e.g. in the accreditation of education for mountain guides in Romania).
- There are many local active groups with a high readiness to co-operate and to takeover certain tasks (experiences of the Carpathian project of the ISF Munich).
- Spread scepticism of the local protagonists compared to an offensive know-how transfer from other European regions.

3 Results and consequences that ensue as a result of the development of the transnational hiking trail *via carpatica*

In many areas numerous positive developments will result in the Carpathian region through the development of *via carpatica* on the basis of a sustainable tourism concept. Growth potentials will be developed and promoted as a result of hiking tourism, hereby, creating positive economical and social perspectives for the native population and further preventing migration from the mountain areas. If this is successful, then mountain tourism will make an important political contribution in preventing forced migration throughout Europe with all its related negative consequences for the migrants themselves as well as for the receiving countries to which the migrants flee. This could lead to a model of transnational regional development in which a steady balance would be created between globalisation (here, understood as an external use of the mountain region's resources, among other things, evidenced through tourism) and the economic self-sufficiency produced and along with it, space to produce independent regional development and identities.

Economic and employment trends:

- Strengthening the local economy without dependence on foreign capital
- Employment impacts in the region
- Work and training prospects
- Avoidance of forced migration

Traditional economic sectors in the mountain regions, particularly agriculture (including sheep farming) are frequently, despite the high quality of their products, no longer able to compete. As long as there are no new work perspectives or ways to earn an income, the consequence is the migration of the residents from the Carpathians.

The industrialisation of many regions of the Carpathians (particularly in Romania) following the Second World War was in part forcedly and mercilessly carried out as far as ecological standards are concerned, which has since led to a temporary increase in employment and in population inhabitants. The majority of these industrial plants near to the mountains, however, did not survive the political turn in 1989 or the transition to a market economy; to this day, their dissolution has as a consequence of continual unemployment, emigration and depopulation.

New qualification concepts and the development of new employment fields for those concerned are therefore absolutely necessary.

The basis for the sustainable development of the mountain region is insured with *via carpatica*, with the existing transnational hut and path networks and the herewith associated creation and preservation of job occupations especially in the service sector: maintenance of paths; management of huts; valley accommodations and stores; public traffic; information, advice and support for hikers and mountaineers. New work and training prospects will be created for the local population. They supplement and replace the precarious fields of work, such as farming and skilled crafts, and they also improve and stabilise the economic base of the mountain regions.

The development of *via carpatica* strengthens the local and regional economy without making it dependant on the capital and decision-making power of big investors. It counts on available structures and expands these as required; it enables enterprises (e.g. inns) to be profitable again that would otherwise have no future without this development; and it enables no longer used facilities (such as retired work paths or forest paths) a new usage. The necessary investments can be arranged at the same time, so that foreign dependencies can be avoided considerably.

This procedure makes it possible with the emerging value factor and the creation of employment to impact the region in becoming more effective and beneficial for the native population.

The creation of new jobs, an increased demand for products of presently threatened activities, the chance to pursue an education, higher qualifications and further education in the context of lifelong learning reduces the compulsion to have to look for work somewhere else. This will decidedly contribute to reducing the unintentional and superfluous migration flows. With a consistently positive development, therefore, if the demand for tourist services continuously grows, this can even lead to the return of emigrants to their former countries of origin. (The Carpathian project of the ISF Munich has documented such cases.)

Development of the region and the regional culture:

- Rediscovery of the region
- Further development of traditions
- Reflexive modernisation

A sustainable form of tourism leads to a revaluation of the rural space because with this, not only are new employment opportunities in the service sector being created, which are attributed directly to tourism, but also other activities are being activated or reactivated. The development of *via carpatica* requires the ideas and imagination of the regional stakeholders, as well as the co- design and co-development. The usual services are not being sought-after, rather jobs in planning, in education and cultural work, in the municipal design, etc. Moreover, the residents themselves must get to know their region anew before they can make it approachable for strangers. In contrast to external influences, the "rediscovery" of the natural, cultural, economic and social resources of one's own region, strengthens stakeholders' regional identity and increases their independent ability to act.

The *via carpatica* is thus not to be measured just in terms of economic success, but to also be based on the ability to maintain this success and to resuscitate the local culture in a comprehensive sense.

As to be expected, the decline in migration from rural regions has further impacts: on the basis of a secure existence, the remaining residents can further manage traditionally cultivated landscapes (e.g. Alpine pastures in the mountains), or practice traditional trades developed and cultivated over time as a job on the side. Since many of these activities are frequently only possible to carry out on the side or as a hobby, they tend to die out (unintentionally) when they are not performed as the main occupation or when the residents move. With these changes, typical regional offers can be preserved or further develop in order to increase the tourist appeal again.

This also applies to existing customs, celebrations, and cultural traditions. If they are included in the changes of the region, they can further develop as well. However, this occurs only under the premise of a functioning economy. If this liveliness is lacking, customs and traditions on ritual and antiquated memory from the past, instead freeze.

In the end: large-scale tourist projects that serve the satisfaction of modern leisure needs dominate the rural space externally and detract from its peculiarity and uniqueness. A transnational hiking trail - extending throughout the entire Carpathians - designed in co-operation with local protagonists and bringing the well hiked regions home to the users, however, enables a reflexive modernisation of the regional space.

Nature design and nature experience

- Understanding nature by experiencing nature
- Experiencing the nature of one's own

The Carpathians, which quickly and often respond directly to human intervention, are characterised by high instabilities as a mountainous region. If ecological conformity with natural law is disregarded when nature is being “consumed”, then it takes "revenge" faster than in the lowland. The often gruff relief, the great temperature differences between day and night, between summer and winter, the climatic and unusual features of vegetation that are caused by the high elevation - all of this - create a sensitive natural balance. These unusual features of nature have to be understood and taken into account in order for its use to be sustainable, meaning they have to be ecologically compatible.

This also applies to the hikers who traverse *via carpatica* and especially those who are negotiating their way along the high mountain passage: they experience nature in its full dynamic, more directly than in their towns at home or among highly civilised villages. Their entire life-long, they would never be able to forget a summer storm on the ridge of the Fagaras Mountains!

A person can only develop his understanding of nature when he is confronted with it, when he feels it by being one with it. In the context of the EU programme NATURA 2000, numerous other nature reserves with different levels of protection, also in the Carpathians, have been identified. The *via carpatica* will pass through a large portion of these and develop many possibilities for the user to draw comparisons between entirely different mountain regions: intact and declining lands developed and cultivated landscapes, high mountain regions without cultural interventions; national parks, nature reserves, national parks and biosphere reservations. This will enrich the person's experience with nature, deepen his understanding for nature and strengthen his engagement for nature.

The hikers and mountaineers on *via carpatica* will not succumb to the danger of viewing the mountain as just a stage for their sports or merely as a playground for their modern leisure activities (e.g. downhill skiing, four-wheel driving). While they are seeking in nature something they can not find in the regions in which they live, they are also able to be conscious of nature through its many folds and by being in direct relation with it, being aware of its diversity and becoming active in ensuring that this diversity remains unchanged.

The experience of the surrounding nature is completed by the experience of the individual. Getting to know one self better also belongs to the hiking experience.

Networking

- international
- national
- regional

Until now, there have hardly been any all encompassing, common state approaches towards regional development in the Carpathian region. The reason for this is essentially attributed to the isolation of the countries of this region, which emerged historically from the political situation of the past, but also stopped with the political upheaval that began in the 1990s. As such, it was forbidden up to the 1990s to hike up the High Tatra on the Slovakian side and descend on the Polish side; a crossing from the Ukrainian Carpathian Forest to the neighbour states is still only possible today for smugglers. The accession of PL, CZ and SK to the EU in 2004 has led to further leniency and co-operation between these countries. However, it has also fortified the isolation to other aligning Carpathian countries. This can be observed, for instance, with the introduction of the visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens.

The Carpathian Convention is a first and politically powerful intended attempt to create the framework for a close co-operation among all the Carpathian countries. With this protocol - which currently still needs to be worked out - the agreement under international law depicts an important basis for supranational activities for the future.

With a transnational hiking trail through the Carpathians, international networks can already be developed at this stage and even implemented. Planning and carrying out a European project for the creation of *via carpatica* would mark the beginning of necessary networking among the project partners involved and also signify the co-operative efforts of the local and regional stakeholders.

The exchange of experiences and the know-how transfer from and in the other areas, among other things, with the initiatives for transnational hiking trails in other European mountains (GTA, gta via alpina, Sentiero Italia and others) will also expand the networking to those countries outside the Carpathian bend and as such, will initiate the co-operation between the European mountain regions.

Thus, *via carpatica* will become the main path towards exchange between countries and regions. International encounters between groups from different Carpathian regions and between organisations and initiatives from the Carpathians and other European mountains can be an important factor in the development of mutual understanding and for testing whether practical examples are successful ("best practices"), extending beyond national borders. It could become – in all modesty - a model for fostering political understanding in Europe.

4 Proceeding in the construction of a *via carpatica*

Based on the present work in the Carpathian project, it can clearly be shown that the wide interest in transnational hiking trails is evident and is a basic prerequisite for the success of the future *via carpatica* project. Transnational hikers from the respective rim and aligning states and from other countries, primarily from CZ, PL, DE, FR will traverse the developed regions of the Carpathian bend. Since the interest in transnational hiking trails is steadily growing, a specific information policy for the transnational hikers, active in large numbers in other regions (European transnational hiking trails, Jacob paths, routes through the Alps) could also orientate them towards the Carpathians.

With the construction of *via carpatica*, the paths and huts as well as the partners in the regions concerned should be completely reliant on the structures available in accordance with sustainable development. Available structures will be further developed and new necessities will be adapted (bottom-up-approach):

- Marking paths, perhaps improving them;
- Renovating huts, raising the ecological quality (supply, disposal);
- Supporting organisations and initiatives in their idea and networking, including honorary work.

These procedures create identification with *via carpatica* and trigger synergy effects. They convey the experience

- that such projects have to be put into force based on internal ambition (even if there is external support),
- that the local and regional responsibility and decision competencies are strengthened in the region,
- that by strengthening the local and regional circulations, the economic yield in the region shall remain.

All of these aspects are important prerequisites for the protection of local and regional stakeholders against the presumptions of foreign investors' large-scale projects.

The following steps should be followed for the concrete implementation:

- First, an assessment of the situation and what should be further developed in the countries of the Carpathian bend is to be carried out in order to identify and define the individual sections with the available structures (paths, accommodations, possible stakeholders).
- The evaluation of this assessment forms the basis for further plans. Hence, if possible, no new accommodations shall be created; rather, the available, extended or empty accommo-

dition no longer in use, shall be renovated. The focus of these activities shall be placed on the villages in order to manage income sources there and to reduce the emigration flows from the land. In the high mountain sections (Tatra, Piatra Craiului, Fagaras Mountains, Cindrel Mountains, and others), and in isolated parts of the Carpathians (e.g. Swidowets Mountains) settlement transnational accommodations as well as pure mountain huts must also exist in order to avoid vast climbs and descents along paths that cross the ridge.

- The *via carpatica* will emerge bit by bit, depending on the stage of development of current structures in the individual regions. Numerous sections will be created with individual institutions responsible (NGOs, communes, regional administrations). This will also lead to an independent character of the individual sections (variety in unity).
- Besides this, central planning and control units will make sense, whereas the experiences of other transnational hiking trails can be referred back to. A proximity to the Carpathian Convention or the secretary's office might offer its services.
- A standardisation of *via carpatica* should only be striven towards there, where it is needed and helpful to the tourists:
 - In marking paths,
 - In the characterisation of the huts (the current names in the individual regions are confusing: the Ukrainian *turbasa*, the Romanian *cabana*, the Slovakian *chata*, the Polish *schronisko*, etc.),
 - Informative material as well as guides and maps.
- Development of informative material, guides, and maps. Materials that describe not only the paths, but also provide the hiker with socioeconomic information, cultural tips and environmental data shall result in this regard. This would achieve the aim that the mountains are not only used as a setting for hiking, but are also perceived as a lively region with traditions, customs, and problems. Language: English (!?)
- Access to information must be possible everywhere. Therefore, access should be acquired via the internet, where it should be possible to order guides and maps.
- Uniform qualification standards for educating the guides should be developed with different specialisations and corresponding certifications. For employment in this field, their mobility would increase remarkably due to the fact that they could work across borders (transnationally) in the Carpathian bend. By setting the criterion of qualification contents and standards, an exchange with other European mountain regions would, furthermore, be wise in order to achieve comparable qualification profiles.

- An ongoing international exchange with the responsible stakeholders of other transnational hiking paths in mountain regions would be worthwhile (via alte, gta and GTA, via alpine, etc.).

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