

## Quality and Competitiveness in the Tourist Sector: Relations, Evaluation Methods and Development Strategies

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### Candidate's background

In June 2013 Ștefan Constantin graduated the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies' master program *Business Administration in Tourism* with a general average of 9.13. Prior to starting this master program he was a student of the same university's Faculty of Commerce from 2008 to 2011. His professional experience consists of several jobs and internships in fields such as e-commerce, the tour operating business and the hospitality industry. His academic interests include tourism management, tourist spatial planning, geopolitics, geography, history, cultural studies and linguistics. Given his interest in foreign languages, in February 2014 he is to start a three month intensive Russian language course at the Pushkin State Russian language Institute in Moscow, to which he has been accepted.

### Brief presentation of the research project

The main purpose of this project is to explore new methods of measuring quality and competitiveness in tourism, as well as other areas of the economy and society and their applications (e.g.: *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index – TTCI*, *The Democracy Index*, *The Failed States Index* etc). Although most of these methods have a tradition of several years, up until now they have received little attention in the local science literature. Capitalizing on this, the project's five main objectives are:

1. Writing detailed descriptions of several quality-measuring methods.
2. Examining the evolution of the tourist sector's competitiveness in countries all over the world.
3. Analyzing the relation between the TTCI and the other quality indicators on a world scale.
4. Adapting the TTCI for the evaluation of national divisions, applying it to Romania's subdivisions and drawing up a development strategy based on the results.
5. Adapting the TTCI for the evaluation of hotels and other accommodation establishments.

The relation between quality and competitiveness in tourism can be summed up in one sentence: competitiveness is a consequence of quality (Gavrilă 2009). This is clearly illustrated by the fact that many of the TTCI's components are directly related to quality. The main focus of the research will be the analysis of the tourism competitiveness of Romania's subdivisions. The *2013 Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report* includes data for 140 countries on all continents (Blake & Chiesa 2013). Recently the World Economic Forum has published some reports focusing on the tourism competitiveness of specific nations, like Peru. This report however (and others like it) is essentially a comparison with other Latin American countries, without going into details such as the tourism competitiveness of Peruvian regions or cities (Brende et al 2013).

Obviously, one of the most prominent elements of the research will be the TTCI itself, which will mainly be used to compare the state of development of the tourist industries of 15 countries from five of the world's regions: The Balkans, The Middle East, The Former USSR, Eastern Africa and South

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America. Some of these countries have certain tourist and economic similarities with Romania and examining them will be helpful when it will come to achieving the objective of proposing a development strategy for Romania because at that point we will have studied a series of successful or unsuccessful development models. Such a strategy will have to touch numerous of the economy's and society's spheres, such as marketing, human/labor resources, policy rules and regulations, the environment, safety and security, the infrastructure etc (Ionciã et al 2004).

Given the fact that the candidate has only recently acquired the status of PhD candidate, most of the research is still in the planning stage.

**Keywords:** *tourist competitiveness, quality evaluation methods, tourism geography, destination management*

### **Research methods**

As it was mentioned in the previous section, the main focus of the research will be the study of the tourist competitiveness of Romania's subdivisions. This will be done by adapting the TTCI for the analysis of national subdivisions. Data collection will be done by consulting Romanian statistical reports which may contain the required information and by applying a slightly modified version of what is called the *executive opinion survey*, which is a vital component of the World Economic Forum's tourist competitiveness reports. This survey is normally applied to company managers, as they are considered to be the best evaluators of a nation's infrastructure and business environment.

Taking this into consideration, the main challenge in adapting the TTCI method for the analysis of Romania's subdivisions will not be developing the methodology, but locating a sufficient number of respondents for the executive opinion survey. Depending on the potential respondents' willingness to cooperate, we will decide whether we will analyze the tourism competitiveness of all of Romania's 41 counties or whether we will just go with the country's historical regions. Based on the results of this evaluation and on the conclusions drawn from analyzing the tourist industries of other nations around the world, a strategy for increasing Romania's tourism competitiveness will be drawn. The aspects relevant to tourism of the countries that will be subject to analysis will be presented from the perspective of the TTCI and other quality indicators as well, all of which will be incorporated into the five main components of the PESTE analysis. When it will come to completing the objective of analyzing the relation between the travel & tourist competitiveness and other quality indicators, the method of choice will be the correlation index, which will be applied to the extent of the availability of the data.

The last objective is the adaptation of the TTCI for the evaluation of hotels. We wish to point out the fact that this adaptation it will have to be based exclusively on objective evaluation criteria as we assume that in the future it may be used by the hotel managers themselves, who most often cannot be impartial. This also means that putting it into practice will most probably not require contacting people from inside the hotels on which the evaluation method will be tested.

### **Research outputs and their implementation**

Because of the fact that the candidate is a first year PhD candidate, no ISI publications with his signature currently exist, nor has he participated in any conferences yet. However advancements towards improving these points are under way. A paper has recently been submitted for a conference which will be held in Leeds in September 2014 (*Taking Responsibility for the Visitor Economy*) and a response is expected in the near future. Another paper destined for submission to another conference is also under development, as is an article about the tourism competitiveness of some Middle Eastern states which will be submitted to an ISI publication.

Regarding the results of the research project, as far as the anticipated results of the evaluation of the tourism competitiveness of our country's regions go, we can be almost certain of one thing: the highest levels of competitiveness will be in Transylvania, Romania's most culturally and geographically diverse region. But other than this, it is difficult to make any sort of predictions, as this particular analysis method has a very high number of components (97, according to the 2013 version of the TTCI). Given the complexity of this method and the wide variety of its components, we can

expect several surprises. Only by actually putting it into practice will we be able to get some clear results and a clear view of each Romanian region's potential. This will be one of the first attempts to analyze the tourism competitiveness of a nation's subdivisions. As stated earlier, the existing World Economic Forum competitiveness reports do not tackle such details. There have been some attempts to evaluate the tourism competitiveness of destinations, such as that of Croes & Kubickova (2013), but none quite as detailed or on a scale quite as large as the one described in the earlier paragraphs.

It has already been proven that there is a strong link between a country's TTCI and its international tourist arrivals and international tourist receipts (Blake & Chiesa 2013). In the case of the adaptation of the TTCI method for the evaluation of hotel competitiveness, we anticipate the existence of such a link with the annual profit and/or the annual occupancy rate. The main difference between this adaptation of the TTCI and the numerous existing hotel classification standards will be that this method takes into account several elements outside the hotel, without focusing only on inside elements, as the vast majority of such classification standards do.

#### **Auxiliary elements that may support the research**

So far, the main contacts the candidate has had with the field of quality and competitiveness in tourism were while writing his bachelor paper and his dissertation paper. The titles of these two were *The Tourism Competitiveness Analysis of Some States of the Western Balkans* and *The Tourist Competitiveness and Attractiveness of the Countries of the Middle East*. The first of these was based on a paper presented at the university's 2011 student's scientific session entitled *The Economic and Institutional Parameters of Tourism in South-Eastern Europe*. Another element which will prove to be useful in the future is the small but valuable publication experience gained with the acceptance of an article for the December 2013 issue of CACTUS Journal of Tourism entitled *Gastronomic Traditions and Eating Habits in the Far East*.

A participation of the candidate to a scientific seminar has already been approved for the end of January 2014. The paper presented will be centered on explaining the way the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index functions and describing its components.

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