



54ème colloque
ASRDLF

5-7 juillet 2017, Athènes, Grèce



15th conference
ERSA-GR



Les défis de développement pour les villes et les régions dans une Europe en mutation

Polycentricity and cultural tourism development: Networking festival destinations in Northern Greece

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Référence à la session / reference to the session

C6, D7

Résumé / Summary

Worldwide, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of networking and polycentric development, since the turn from monocentric to polycentric spatial systems is becoming a global phenomenon and one of the main objectives of spatial planning policies. Polycentricity indicates the connection of neighbouring centres that have common characteristics and their integration in wider spatial networks.

Tourism is considered as a major indicator of integration in a polycentric spatial system, the tourism process being characterized by nodes (attractions) and links (tourism flows) linking the place of origin with the destination. In this context, cultural tourism, widely recognized as one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry, enables cultural exchange and encourages local development to flourish as a major creator of jobs and investment. As a result, a growing number of cities and regions worldwide are basing their tourism development strategies on the promotion of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and the number of cultural attractions is growing rapidly.

In the international academic literature on sustainable tourism development, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of cultural heritage regeneration on urban and regional scale. Cultural heritage defines a locality's identity and inhabitants' "sense of belonging", so it may be considered as an important resource for local economic and social development. Regional networks of cultural tourism destinations integrating cultural, tourist and travel infrastructure might create conditions for flexible regulation of tourist flows.

In this paper, the issue of polycentric networking is investigated based on the links between cultural heritage

and sustainable tourism development. The paper focuses on festival tourism networking in the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace in Northern Greece, a region with rich historical and cultural background. The Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, according to Kallikratis recent administrative reform plan N.3852/2010, consists of five Regional Units, namely Evros, Rhodope, Xanthi, Kavala and Drama. In this study, the analysis focuses on urban and rural areas of the Evros, Rhodope and Xanthi Regional Units, that present multiple opportunities for networking, through their common historical and cultural heritage.

The main aim of the research analysis is to explore the factors that hinder cultural polycentric development and more specifically, the perspectives for festival tourism through festivals' networking in the study area. Research on the identification of polycentric networks is targeted so far, on areas connected to transportation, employment or economic activities. Polycentricity and its connection with intangible heritage and tourism is a research topic that needs to be further investigated both theoretically and empirically.

The proposed methodology is divided into two stages. The first stage aims to identify the degree of spatial polycentricity in the study area, in terms of three parameters: rank and size index, based on the population of each festival destination; location index, based on distance and travel time between festival destinations of the study area; and connectivity index, defined in terms of transportation network and accessibility. The next stage focuses on festival tourism networking, by identifying morphological and functional polycentricity of festivals. For this purpose, various indicators and parameters are introduced, such as, centrality (at the local and regional level), characteristics of events (type, local importance, seasonality e.tc.) and tourism infrastructure.

The scope of the research is to propose polycentric networks of urban and rural centers and festival cultural routes in order to create a strong brand name of event tourism services of national and international significance in the study area. The approach of polycentricity and cultural tourism is a dynamic field of research and the contribution of this work relies on creating a Cultural Tourism Polycentricity Indicator, an innovative tool linking event tourism and polycentric networks, that could be applied on different spatial levels.

Key words: polycentricity, cultural tourism, festivals, networks

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