Political-Economic Transitions and their impacts on tourism in Svaneti, Georgia

Dr. Frieder Voll
Institute for Tourism and Leisure, HTW Chur Switzerland

• Changing Political Economies in Eastern Europe (Hall 2004)
• Transitions into Capitalism: yet "transitions are far from spatially even or unilinear in their direction" (Tickle 2000: 57)
• Tourism and Identities (Light 2001)
• Livelihoods (Putwain 2005)
• Individual Entrepreneurship in postsocialism (Wyrwich 2012)

Methods:
Research Question: (Lecturers: Dr. Frieder Voll and Bruno Lasermann)
What opportunities and barriers have been emerged for developing nature-based tourism in the hiking region of Svaneti (Georgia)?

Preliminary Study on a research stay with students including
• semi-structured interviews (purposive sampling)
• mapping different types of occupancy categorized in unoccupied, agriculture, agritourism and second homes based on the conditions of the gardens
• and short-term, mobile ethnography of the tourism producers in the region (Buscher & Urry 2009; Knoblauch 2005; Jackson 2006)

History of Tourism Development in Georgia

Perfect preconditions for Tourism:
• In Soviet times: The „Italy of eastern Europe“ and „Switzerland of the East“ (Beaches, Mountains for hiking, Spas and Wine Cultivation - Origin of Wine) Steinmetzer 2006
• Tourists from the Soviet Union: Mass Tourism at the Black Sea and Health Tourism at the Spas e.g. Borjomi. Maximum of 152 000 beds before Independence in Georgia (Switzerland 2014: 248 000) Steinmetzer 2006; Brade & Piteriski 1994
• Already in Soviet times mountain tourism became more important. E.g. Gudauri - First western investment in Tourism (1980s during Soviet era of Perestroika): Ski Station in the Caucasus built with Austrian Know-How / Fussgänger 1988; Gudauri.Info 2010
• With the Independence of Georgia 1991: Several civil wars => 300 000 refugees (many in former tourism infrastructure) => end of former tourism! (Steinmetzer 2006)

Developments of Sustainable Tourism Offers in Georgia

• New sustainable tourism developments for tourists from Western Europe in the last 2 decades: Different kind of tourism than during Soviet Times
• Chance for tourism offers based on local communities, culture and nature
• Large network of protected areas in Georgia (20 % of the country): Mixture of intact traditional cultural landscapes and wilderness areas (highest biodiversity within Europe) WWF 2010a; WWF 2010b
• Cultural landscapes can only exist via the continued survival of livelihoods. Also, wilderness areas will only exist with protection models which include local communities
• Sustainable tourism offers should be community based and refer to local culture and nature to protect the natural beauty and to establish job opportunities in the peripheries
Svaneti (tourist capital)
Gorshkov 2010; Pro Mestia Georgien 2010

Mountain peaks above 5000 m and glaciers

A hiking region with the highest village of Europe

One of the last virgin forests of Europe mixed with intact cultural and natural landscapes => high biodiversity

historical important towers (UNESCO World Heritage)

Upper Svaneti in the transformation process

- famous for mountain hiking during the era of the Soviet Union
- Closed boarders to Russia from the 90s onwards => End of the hiking tourism from Elbrus region
- Until 2003 revolution in Georgia Svaneti was dominated by clan structures
- Massive depopulation within the transition process

=> “No Go” area for tourists

Since 2003:

- Fundamental change of political economy: More stable market economy and democracy
- Reemerging tourism development in Georgia with fluctuation (war in South Ossetia in 2008)
- Far away from developments in the centers: Many communities reachable just by 4x4
  - 45000 inhabitants (2010)
- economic and political frameworks have impacts on livelihoods/traditional cultural landscapes and remain a challenge

Development of a ‘new’ Hiking Tourism in Svaneti

Help from Outside

- Development aid and political foundations from Western Europe and the USA support bottom up community-based tourism projects
- WWF supports this development to protect nature over sustainable tourism
- Tourism which is based on cultural, historical and natural resources (Nature based tourism: Hiking, Camping, Trekking)
- Originality and authenticity: unspoilt nature and intact cultural landscapes => low infrastructures as an advantage => «Europe as it used to be»
- 2 projects: Pro Mestia (renovation of historical buildings and agriculture support) and Svanetitrekking
Development of a ‘new’ Hiking Tourism in Svaneti

Foundation of a NGO together with Georgian Mountain Guides in 2006: Svanetitrekking

• Protection of livelihoods (incl. biodiversity and landscapes) and new earning possibilities to stop depopulation

• Remoteness and difficult access (only accessible by 4x4 ) as a chance ⇒ not too many tourists in relation to inhabitants and more products produced in the region

• Farmers can profit without massive external investments and control (Governance)

• Community based decisions over the development of tourism and renovation of historical buildings

• Target market: trekking tourists who don’t expect too much comfort: Trekking tours with mountain guides and horses

The aspect of homestays at Svaneti Trekking

Developing homestay offers:

Aim: individual entrepreneurship

Difficulty:

• contesting the traditional values of hospitality in these regions predominantly based on religious and ‘tribal’ norms rather than purely on entrepreneurial values Curro 2014

• Competition within the community families

Strategy:

• Seminars and teaching of local family enterprises (farmers, tourist guides)

• Supporting with Professionalism (e.g. Internet) respecting local cultures

Implications:

Example of Ushguli

• Calls himself ‘highest community in Europe’, towers are part of UNESCO World heritage (Paintings from 7th century)

• Many articles about the region as a hiking destination in the western press (e.g. Neubronner 2006, Eshelby 2008)
Implications: Results of Interviews

Interviewees agree:
- positive developments through these activities
- Difficult access leads to local production and families can profit from hikers in summer
- Number of inhabitants is rising again in the regions where trekking tourism occurs
- World heritage (Towers) and nature heritage can be better protected throughout sustainable tourism

Different opinions:
- History and culture can be saved via the development of tourism; otherwise there may be further danger of depopulation
- Loss of cultural traditions (hospitality) due to professionalism and competition between families selling hospitality

Actual developments:
- Because of the success of community-based tourism, the Central Government and external investors from Tbilisi is starting to invest into local infrastructures
- Construction of new roads and buildings (resp. renovation of the destroyed former Soviet buildings) especially in the main centre of Svaneti Mestia

Actual Development:
Further changes in the political-economic framework have now shifted the focus towards larger-scale tourism developments supported by public-private partnerships
- The towers are symbols of this challenge and of the transformation towards actually existing neo-liberalism (Brenner & Theodore 2002)
- Tourism development in public-private partnerships is influenced and negotiated by external influences (national state, international organisations)
- Impacting local identities, cultures (in particular notions of hospitality) and livelihoods these developments are contested by some(Currently under development)

Literature: