

# **CHILDREN AND TOURISM: LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE**

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## **Socialist counties experience**

I would like to positon this presentation in a historical perspective comparing the policies and practices of socialist countries and western democracies in their efforts to develop accessible holiday, travel for children. Also, I will raise the question of the impact that the tourism industry cause to children as host community members.

I would like to start my presentation with an unprecedented and what later became an emblematic event for children of the world: the International Children's Assembly "Flag of Peace". Its first edition was dedicated to the International child's year announced by the UN in 1979. The Assembly "Flag of peace" was an initiative started by the Bulgarian minister of culture Lyudmila Zhivkova. She invited children from all around the world to meet in Bulgaria to socialize and represent their countries through culture and art. In the middle of the cold war period, the Assembly was adopted as a new form of diplomacy and cooperation for peace and was supported by the UN, UNESCO, UNICEF and other international organizations. The whole project was united by the motto "Unity, creativity and beauty". The name and the motto of the assembly were inspired by the philosophical system of the Russian artist and philosopher Nikolay Roerich. In 1987, the UN honored "Flag of Peace" with the title "Vespers of Peace". Until 1989, four assemblies and four meetings of children from around the world were held in Sofia. A total of 3,900 children from 138 countries and 14,000 children from Bulgaria participated in them. Children were given access to the Bulgarian Parliament where they discussed their views on the future of the planet and came up with a declaration published by UN in 1979. The monument "The Bells" was especially constructed for this Assembly where each country was represented by a bell. These bells could be rung exclusively and only by children. After the collapse of communism this movement ceased to exist. In 1990, the 18 foreign structures "Flag of Peace" were closed, the infrastructure "The bells", remained but were not maintained. Now Sofia municipality has projects to restore "The Bells" complex.

This event was the flagship of a complex network of programmes, initiatives and institutions allowing and involving the children access to holidays and travel for educational, leisu-

re and health purposes. During the socialist period, almost all socialist countries had active national and international exchange programmes and specialized tourist infrastructure for children such as entire resorts, camps, chalets, sanatoriums which provided access to free of charge healthcare and illness prevention programs for all school age children. These programmes operated at international and national levels.

There were two types of ownerships of these youth state resorts or smaller camps In Bulgaria:

### **State ownership**

Most of them were owned and managed directly by the ministers of education (summer/winter children camps) or Ministry of Health (for the sanatoriums) or by the Bulgarian Tourist Union who has more than 100 years' experience in owning and managing the network of mountain chalets. Established in pre-socialist times, the property was never taken away and the Bulgarian Tourist Union had the autonomy to manage and enlarge its network of mountain chalets using state funding and volunteering work from its members. All mountains chalets, shelters and camps were the favorite accommodation of school back pack groups exploring the Bulgarian mountains during pedestrian mountain tours.

### **Enterprises**

The second type of ownership was by major industrial enterprises and administrative institutions, which benefited from tax relieve in exchange for investing in holiday accommodations for their workers and employees. Part of these accommodations were used free of charge by school students with an agreement between the school and the enterprise. These mini resorts, bungalow camps or singular buildings were spread around the whole territory of the country often located in picturesque but not tourist areas, which contributed greatly to the development of domestic tourism and to the regional economy.

### **International level**

The International youth resorts were under the responsibility of the state agency for youth tourism "Orbita". In total four International Youth Centers were built in Bulgaria for the period of the 1970-1980s and was managed by "Orbita" until 2001. The management after 2001 that passed to the hands of Albena joint-stocks company and the resort is no longer designated to children but to the general public.

In post socialist times, the tradition of group school trips and holidays remained, although the whole system saw a decline in the numbers of camps specialized in children's holidays. Many of the buildings and entire resorts were poorly maintained during the post-socialist period most of them were privatized and then demolished; others were abandoned and decayed; a third group were sold and used for different purposes. This could be observed across the border of all ex-socialist countries. In post-communist times, the children school

trips remained a part of the education curriculum but are now organized either by the school themselves or by tour operators working with schools. The final payer being the parents and the price of such vacations are often hard to reach or are exceeding the financial capacities of many of the families. The length of stay is also reduced from 10-14 days during socialist period to 5-7 days in the post-communist period. At the moment in most of the ex-socialist countries, there is no governmental financial support for children and family holidays, however in Slovenia for example, parents can take children away from school for maximum 5 days once in a scholar year under a law introduced by the government of Slavko Gaber.

### **Lowering Health and safety standards**

In the post socialist period, we witnessed a lowering of the health and safety standards. Some critical incidences with food poisoning in children summer camps located at Black sea coast occurred. There was a case of a child death in pool due to poor pool maintenance and lack of surveillance. The biggest tragedy happened in 2004 during a school trip, when a bus accident happened and a bus with 34 children going on an educational trip fell in the cold waters of Lim River at the border of Serbia and Montenegro. Eleven children died. A monument "The angels of Lim river" was erected and inaugurated by the president of the three countries Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro. After this incident, the Bulgarian government passed a law forbidding schools (teachers) to organize trips themselves and imposed strict standards on tour agencies when dealing with children trips or holidays.

In some ex-socialist countries such as Russia, the state continued to build tourism infrastructure for children, maintaining the 70 years tradition in social tourism. The state owns and manages these resorts both nationally and internationally.

For example, in 2009 in the Bulgarian Black sea coast area named "Kamcia" the Government of Moscow built an entire complex dedicated to children. The complex accepts Russian children groups for free. All year round complex, children from Russian federation schools could stay between 7-21 days in this complex, which holds: an Olympic standard swimming pool, athletic sports complex, open-air amphitheater, athletes' health recovery and SPA complex, a primary school of the name of "Yuri Gagarin", astronomical observatory and planetarium, accommodation and children playgrounds.

### **Capitalist countries experience**

In the Western world, we also witness efforts to provide access to children for tourism and leisure, especially for those with restricted access: disabled children, and children from families with modest incomes. It is inscribed in the paradigm of social tourism movement institutionalized in 1963 when OTIS (International Office of Social Tourism) was founded. In the 1996 Montreal declaration, OTIS states that access to holidays is no longer a privilege but a fundamental human right. The social tourism movement and organizations such as OTIS provide policies to, on one hand, support the infrastructure including investments in

equipment (construction, renovation and modernization of infrastructure and facilities), and, on another hand, to support disadvantaged people making holiday possible for them through the access to specialized programmes. The type of funding and the level of state involvement varies from country to country. These initiatives are funded entirely or partially by the state or by charity organizations and in some cases with the participation of the industry as part of their Social Corporate Responsibility agendas. This is the case for example of the Canadian food chain “Tim Horton’s” who built a network of summer camps for children promoting active life through sports.

I must say that from the Western world, the Francophone countries are the most advanced in regard of children accessibility to vacations: France, Canada, Luxembourg allowing families with modest income to access holidays. The French programme such as “Vacances sac ados” (back pack vacations) provides bursaries for the teenagers and young adults 16-30 years old to access vacations combining holiday and learning skills. It aims to channel the youth to the work market. The state programme “ChèqueVacances” finance vacations for disadvantaged people including modest income families with children. Another state programme “Open Vacation” started in 2002 and aims the social insertion of teenagers with social difficulties and ultimately reintegrates them to society and to the work market. The youth receive assistance and 180 EUR to prepare their own schedule and have a holiday. Then receive a bursary financing the vacation from 4 to 15 days the total amount of the funding being up to 980 EUR. The self-funding by the beneficiary is expected to be up to 20% of the total cost of the vacation. This programme is put in place in conjunction with the organizations Mission locale, Second Chance schools; Centers of accommodation and social reinsertion and centers of work dynamic.

In Quebec province, Canada, the association of the summer camps offers a large network of certified by the Ministry of education camps where children for age of 5-17 can pass their vacation alone or with families benefitting of educational programmes (languages, nature based learning activities, sports programmes). The certification provide guarantees for safe environment, educated staff and health and food standards complying with the federal and provincial laws.

Great Britain joined the social tourism network only in 2007 and since then the state is not involved but rather NGO’s. The Public-Private Partnership is the base of the functioning of the British system of social tourism funding including programmes for family with children. Fundraising campaigns are the main source of financing such activities in UK.

### **Tourism impacts on children**

As we all know, tourism itself is not a neutral and impact-free industry, it does have impact on children taking part of tours and as being members of the host society. I would like to focus on the most negative sides of the industry that affect directly children’s health dignity and well-being. The darkest sides of criminal aspects of tourist practices are those in-

volving sex exploitation, trade and physical abuse of children. Sex tourism is a fact that is seldom discussed by the industry and academic community during conferences; however we cannot deny its existence. Tourism itself does not provokes such activities however it amplifies them in destinations where the conditions for the flourishing of such criminal acts exist: poverty, corruption and social acceptance despite the fact that law in all countries forbids child sex, and that the legislation in the receiving destinations is adequate. It exposes the most vulnerable members of society such as women and children victims of sex trade abuse and exploitation.

Immoral practices of another nature burst occasionally. In January 2012 an international scandal erupted in India, involving tourists and local policeman who treated the indigenous Jarawatiribe members as a “human zoo”. In one of the tourist footages posted on You Tube was recorded male tourists throwing food to the naked young female children from the tribe asking them to dance for it. Treating children with dignity is a matter of legislation first but also a matter of codes of ethical conduct which the tourist must be briefed before entering on the territory of the receiving destination.

Of course, the unacceptability of such flagrant acts is most obvious, however, in other cases it is not so clear of what is acceptable and what is not. For example, in the indigenous Mohawk community of Kahnawake(Canada) in 2004 after a referendum the community rejected the construction of casino, which would be very powerful source of income. One of the reasons pointed out by the community was that “the presence of gambling would be a bad example for children and youth, it will drag other problems of excessive alcohol consumption and may jeopardize the children security”. In other contexts, clashes with cultural values of visiting and host communities have directly impacted children’s wellbeing. For example, the Sunny beach resort in Bulgaria advertised officially by the government as family resort became a destination of alcohol tourism very popular amongst young Western tourists. Night noise and misbehavior making it impossible for the relaxation that families with young children are looking for and therefore, the lifestyle clashes and the different expectations hamper the healthy vacation for children in this resort.

## **Conclusion**

State involvement and support through policies, regulations and financial subsidies is a crucial for the opportunity of children and youth to have an access to vacations, health recovery, illness prevention, or to experience alternative ways of education through tourism. The other alternative such as involvement of charity organizations para governmental bodies and NGOs through fundraising for countries with no traditions of state parenting are helpful, but remain within limited scale as for the number of children benefiting from these programmes.

The tourism industry could contribute to this opportunity by allowing children to use the infrastructure and accommodation at off peak season during autumn and spring school bre-

aks for example. This public-private partnership is a win-win situation for the businesses and for the children and their families, as it could provide affordable holidays for them. Health and safety standards need to be maintained at a highest level when it is a question of children travel.

The involvement and the regulation of the host community should have a primordial role of what is acceptable and what is not on the territory of the destination taken in consideration legislative framework, social and cultural aspects of the host society.