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SCHOOL

**Role of local gastronomy in tourism in Nógrád  
County**

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# 1. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

## 1.1 Relevance of topic and objective of research

The role of gastro-tourism has been increasingly appreciated all over the world in the recent decades. The topic of rural tourism has come into the foreground more and more often in connection with sustainability of societies, economic globalisation or even climate change.

The relevance of the topic in Hungary can be led back to many reasons. The structure and volume of tourism in Central European countries has changed after the post-communist transition in the 1990s due to the economic convergence and European integration. This phenomenon has created an entirely new situation in the life of Hungary and the neighbouring countries because mainly the market mechanisms, the supply and demand have determined the characteristics of tourism since the transition. Thus the research of gastro-tourism or its profit-oriented examination in Hungary has not had long traditions, especially not in Nógrád County. Since the actual target areas and settlements are the crystallization points of tourism (Michalkó 2008), the regional research has become a key part of tourism analysis.

The tourism in Nógrád County is important not only because of the more efficient utilization of advantages but also for its local impact, which affects the social-economic situation of the region. Due to this dual nature as well as the deeper understanding of the characteristics of rural and gastro-tourism it is especially important for Hungary to map the possible domestic destinations, to understand the local conditions and to regard the rural and gastro-tourism as a network. None of these have happened yet.

The tourism is one of the driving forces behind global economy; the annual 4% increase of the international tourist turnover on average, the similar growth in spending money by the travellers crossing the borders positively affects the GDP, employment and export indicators of countries concerned (UNWTO 2015). The phenomenon has been recognised by the European Union as well. The strategic importance of tourism-related topics is well indicated by the EU Council Directive 95/57/EC *on the collection of statistical information in the field of tourism*, as well as its amendment with a regulation by the European Parliament and the Council in 2011. Since the gastronomic tourism is increasingly popular, the development of these products is an important part of product development policies. It is a great advantage of gastronomy that it can be related to all forms of tourism.

The review of the situation of Hungarian tourism and its capability of following the international trends is important in terms of supporting the domestic

objectives and the EU common policies as well as increasing efficiency. Considering the local aspects is inevitable in this process.

As regards the research of tourism in Hungary, the identification of the different types of tourism and their volumes, as well as mapping of destination areas have been given priority until now. At the moment there is no such local examination concentrating on the specific features of each target areas, which would place the problem in appropriate regional, economic and social context. The reason for this is mostly the lack of data (or availability of data), which definitely makes the region-specific research harder. Thus my primary objective was to explore thoroughly the regional impacts in case of Nógrád County by placing my research on different pillars.

My main objectives are as follows: how the concept of gastro tourism can be defined and how much relevance it may have in the development of the economy and tourism of a certain region; what kind of actual events can reveal the rich gastronomic traditions of the county for the tourists; and how much the three sample groups picked for my research (guests, hospitality and catering students and hoteliers) know about these gastronomic traditions and what kind of travel and host experiences and habits they have. The last aspect was the compilation of the comprehensive touristic inventory of the county (see Annex 2), which provide valuable information for the service providers and enable network-type cooperation with other service providers. It may also help the decision-makers in tourism sector to develop strategies and plans connected with the region.

## **1.2 Importance of gastro-tourism**

The gastro-tourism is a new, creative and dynamic branch of tourism (Boita – Anghelina – Costi 2014), which is part of cultural tourism (Özel– Kozak 2012, Jovicic 2014), and can also be part of urban and rural tourism due to a couple of specific activities. Gastro-tourism is a novel form of cultural tourism, which focuses on the values of local communities and blends the exploration of local and regional traditions, as well as the treasures of gastronomy. Gastronomy has become the key element of touristic experiences (UNWTO 2012). More and more attention has been given to the culinary tourism in the recent years because providing experiences, which leave good memories in the tourists, can be regarded as the essence of tourism industry. Consumers are looking for experiences and are willing to pay higher prices for positive adventures. Travellers also use their memories in planning their future travels, making decisions about visiting locations or to go through the same experiences again and again. Local food and culinary adventures are important aspects of these positive, memorable experiences (Björk – Kauppinen-Räsänen 2014).

The visitors love to buy and consume local products; therefore an increasing number of touristic destinations consider this fact in the development and marketing of their products. Moreover, the touristic organisations have also recognised the potential in culinary tourism, as an important tool of promoting destinations (Sanchez – Castillo-Canalejo 2015). It is especially important in case of rural communities, which face the challenges of accelerating urbanisation process and maintaining the role of traditional economic branches. Gastro-tourism offers comparative advantages for them because – due to their proximity to food producing areas - they have the possibility to make money from this specific branch of tourism, create jobs and, since it is a spiralling process, the agricultural production is also positively affected (UNWTO 2012).

In terms of consumption, gastro-tourism has several advantages at local as well as enterprise/company levels ((Presenza – Del Chiappa 2013), therefore it can be declared that gastro-tourism is a form of tourism which has been created by the changing consumption habits (Hall – Sharples 2008). Gastro-tourism can offer a touristic alternative, which aims the best possible utilization of the narrow resources (Teo – Chang 2000), in other words it can be a viable form of tourism for destinations which do not abound with advantages from „sun, sea, sand” or other natural attractions (e.g. stalactite cave) or cultural assets (e.g. ancient ruins) (Richards 2002).

The events, which can be connected to food and drinks (Organ, K. et al. 2015) meet with different expectations both from producers and consumers. It is especially important to explore the „push” and „pull” motives (Smith – Costello – Muenchen 2010). Events connected with food can be tied to the promotion of products and advertising destinations. Nevertheless, it is increasingly recognised that not only the rising number of visitors and tourists, or the success of selling a product is important but attention should also be given to the development of a brand (Medway 2015) at different levels (regional, producer) and strengthening the loyalty for the brand, thus creating a long-term relation with consumers (Mowle – Merrilees 2005).

The branding of location and „local” products – produced with traditional tools then marketed – can be significant in the evaluation of product quality. The local food systems are set up in designated location or localized areas and can be described with close product-consumer relation. They support long-term relations; meet the economic, social, health and environmental needs; connect the producers and the market with properly concentrated infrastructure; support environmental protection and healthy nutrition; and provide competitive advantage to the local food industry enterprises (Buck, K. et al. 2007). That’s why it is necessary to promote local food, products and their consumption on the spot at the food and drink festivals, trade fairs and trade exhibitions instead of exporting them from their regions to the shelves of supermarkets.

The role of artisan products is even more specialised because they are being sold in special shops today (e.g. „*Csak a jó sör*” („*Only good beer*”) in Budapest) and this has been enhanced by the tourists who have discovered these special products during their rural or urban visits and demanded to make these products easily available on the market (Hall, C. M. et al. 2003).

### **1.3 Strategies for gastro-tourism development**

Market access strategy is required for creating any kind of food and drink event (or a food festival) (Sidali– Kastenholz– Bianchi 2013). The food and drink events or festivals are usually connected to a community event, like for example a grape harvest in a wine growing region or any other harvest. Thus both the location and the date are given, which is required for setting up a successful event and attracting high number of tourists. It is worth considering whether the planned festival could be connected with other events in the region (Sotiriadis 2015) because it would be attracting even greater number of travellers. Stephenson, Lev and Brewer (2006) suggest the marketing organizers to spend a lot of time of planning and surveying if it is worth at all to open a new market and the most efficient ways to achieve their objectives. Thorough planning and proper promotion can help to face the organisational issues and problems in the first year. It is an important part of the planning process to determine the size of the prospective market or the visitor capacity that can be hosted, thus the cash flow and the market scale can be harmonized in the first year already. So planning the volumes is the first step in setting up a viable organisation. The marketing strategy, which meets the planning and organisational targets of the given event, should contain the following elements: analysis of market possibilities, identification and targeting of those market segments, where the enterprise is supposed to „break in”, and developing an appropriate marketing mix for each segment (Cai 2002).

The destination branding is a strong marketing resource, which is used for distinguishing the touristic destinations or regions from each other, and for making them unique (Spilková – Fialová 2013). The successful destination branding should be built on several elements in order to convey a specific and positive image, which helps to attract visitors to the given location (Lee – Wall – Kovacs 2015). In our days it is more and more common that the rural areas organise food and drink festivals in order to distinguish or customize their local areas or communities, to make these attractive for visitors. The gastronomic culture has a significant appeal for tourists upon visiting a destination. Tastes, way of eating, variety and availability of meals also indicate the social situation of the individual (Lee – Scott 2015).

The traditional food basically contributes to the understanding of the culture of a society (Amuquandoh – Asafo-Adjei 2013). The festivals often mean the celebration of specific elements of regional culture by displaying local products, food and beverages, which are closely connected to the culture of the given location (Bessiere 2001). In most of the cases, the consumption of food and beverages is the primary objective of festival celebration. At the same time, it is an excellent opportunity for the tourists and visitors to explore new cultures and flavours (Long 2004). The local cuisine and flavours enable the tourist to „take responsibility” for the destination. The personal feature of this interaction helps to develop deeper relations between consumers and the culture of the given location. The personal experiences generate emotional identification with the given destination. This emotional component stimulates the tourist to consume the local products of the destination later on as well, and assimilate it into the image of destination (Long 1998).

In summary, it can be concluded that gastro-tourism is an extremely holistic area, which can be related to a number of spheres. Since gastro-tourism itself could not be easily separated from other types of tourism (e.g. cultural, rural tourism) and since it is in interaction with other branches of tourism, its impact is rather diverse and its importance is increasing. Gastro-tourism may have a complex impact on a disadvantaged region and may positively affect its development; create jobs at corporate level; provide good promotion for local products, thus affecting the development of local food system and influencing the agriculture and all those branches, which serve the local food systems. In our days, one of the most popular forms of implementing gastro-tourism is the organisation of food and drink festivals, which can enhance the enforcement of above listed beneficial synergies in destinations by applying appropriate marketing strategies and successful destination branding.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

I have used a wide range of methodology for my research. The official KSH (Hungarian Statistical Office) databases were used for the analysis of tourism in Hungary and Nógrád County. The foreign references related to gastro-tourism were retrieved from Emerald, ScienceDirect and Taylor&Francis databases subscribed by the Budapest Economic University. (The journals of these databases can also be found in the Tourism Library on Klauzál Square, but it was easier to search the database by using keywords than paper journals.)

Three main written sources were available for the research of gastronomic events in Nógrád County. The first source included the posters, announcements, advertisements connected to the events uploaded to the websites of settlements, the second covered the posters and news on the Facebook timeline of local governments, community centres or non-profit organisations of settlements, while the third group covered the digitally uploaded versions of local newspapers on the websites of the settlements. Therefore major part of utilised references was electronic, the source of which was almost exclusively the URL link, where the author could not be identified (maximum it could be presumed that the news, invitations or posters were uploaded by the staff of the local government or community centre). In most of the case even the title was missing, it only says „The star guests of the village party this year will be XY. Everybody is welcome at the event!” And below this opening sentence you can read the list of performers and the agenda of the event.

The gastronomic events have three forms in the life of settlements in the County. The first group of events includes the traditional gastronomic programs; some of them have already had long traditions and become the brand of the settlement. The gastronomic feature in this case is clearly indicated by the title of the event (e.g. Pie Festival in Varsány, Laska Pasta Festival and Rösti Party in Kazár, etc.). The second case is when the local governments or non-profit organisations set up a cooking or baking competition related to a gastronomic topic (e.g. fish soup cooking or cake baking competitions). The competition feature highlights and defines the timing of the program within the event. It often happens that gastronomy appears at an event as a side program (e.g. tastings) in an organized form – because all the gastronomic programs should be prepared and implemented properly – but not particularly as a gastronomic program or a gastronomic competition enriching a different type of event. Perhaps the gastronomic side programs are the most frequent in the life of settlements (the research reviews a lot of actual examples together with the names of meals provided (see Attachment 2) but the poster or advertisement of the event refers to it only as a common lunch or dinner, or „introduction to Palóc tastes”, tasting of fine food, etc. These latter two types of culinary programs are included in the agenda of events only as side programs or added as an item to other programs.



I have also prepared topologic maps for analysing the role of Nógrád County in the domestic tourism. I have decided to construct topologic maps because the simple thematic maps can only demonstrate the categories where the given area unit belongs to, but are not able to show how the scale of data from the given area unit relate to the total volume. This can be the problem in case of mapping for example specific data, when the large area units often dominate the map, while the phenomenon to be examined there (e.g. population) is rather low. Topologic maps have been created to solve this issue. On these maps, the originally adjacent area units are also adjacent but the size of area units is proportional with the social-economic volume, which is to be described. In order to make them comparable, I have drawn the guest nights of 2012 spent in commercial or other accommodation (known as private until 2009) and rural holiday homes on topologic maps with the help of ScapeToad software.

The questionnaire survey – carried out among altogether 842 people – was an important part of the research. Considering the needs of different groups, the survey tried to approach and analyse the specific features of tourism, the differences in expectations and opinions in the examined County from the aspect of hotel or guesthouse owners, students of hospitality colleges and the customers.

Part of the questions put for the three groups were the same, while the others were different for each target group. Thus it has been ensured that the questions of depth interview questionnaires efficiently suited the characteristics of the target group. There were both closed and open-ended questions in the questionnaire. This structure has proved to be very efficient for exploring the special attributes of tourism in the County.

*The owners were interviewed* with the help of an online database about enterprises dealing with hospitality and accommodation services in Nógrád County. The questionnaire survey was performed on the basis of available information, following a consultation by phone. Twenty-two hospitality enterprises responded positively and all the interviews were conducted successfully.

I travelled to big tourist events to Hollókő in order to *interview guests* because I could reach them in the greatest numbers there. Such big events were the Easter Festival of Hollókő (30 March – 1 April, 2013) and the Wine Days of Hollókő (27-28 April, 2013).

It is important to note that the survey of tourists was made in a very unique location because I presumed that I can reach more tourists via random sampling with my questions on the only world heritage site of the county. In this case, however, it has the risk that the evaluation of questionnaire survey for guests can be distorting in terms of county-level representation. In order to optimize it, it would have been appropriate to carry out questionnaire surveys on gastronomic events of less-known settlements, or in other micro-regions.

The interviewing of *students*, as „prospective experts” was carried out among college students. I picked the date and location, obtained preliminary permission from the dean and the lecturers responsible for the subjects and went to the lecture halls presuming that I could meet greater number of students there.

As I have outlined above, I have examined the elements of three different *statistical populations* separately then simultaneously in my paper, and drew statistical conclusions from the analysis. Since it is not possible to fully observe the phenomenon, I observe a narrow group by sampling and relate this information to the full population

The range of methods applied for the research depends on the type of criteria, which we have to work with. The questionnaire contained mostly *quality criteria*, which can be measured on a nominal scale (Babbie 2004). In these cases the categories cannot be classified on quantitative basis; we cannot say which is „better” or „more” (Velleman – Wilkinson 1993). For example, the responses given to the question „What languages can you speak?” (English, German, French, Russian, etc.) cannot be transformed into quantity criteria. The links among quality criteria can be measured with the help of statistical series and strength of association relations. Detailed description about these can be found in chapter titled associated examinations.

There are also some *quantity criteria* – although to a lesser degree – in the questionnaires. In these cases the quantitative measuring ensured the analysis of multi-variable correlations. The method of factor and cluster analysis was applied in the dissertation. The factor and cluster analysis chapters provide detailed description about the methods. The statistical analyses were carried out with the help of SPSS 21.0 software.

As regards the natural and man-made attractions in the touristic value inventory in Annex 2 I used the latest travel guides of Nógrád county (2005, 2006, 2009), the websites of settlements, professional websites (directorates of national parks, angling clubs, outdoor sculptures, war memorials and monuments in the county), as well as Google search engine (names of settlements one by one + “forest school”, “riders” services).

## 2.1 Hypotheses of dissertation

The dissertation discusses the confirmation of the following hypotheses:

Hyp1: There are some traditions in Nógrád County, which may provide basis for a gastro-touristic development.

Hyp2: The current economic-social situation of Nógrád County does not enable significant improvement in the tourism sector.

Hyp3: There are a lot of tourists who would not go to Nógrád County just because of rural tourism; if it is connected, however, with other events and programs, they would be interested in gastro-tourism.

Hyp4: The seasonal feature does not prevail in the tourism of Nógrád county because there are no waterfronts or high mountains in the region which would be suitable for leisure purposes.

Hyp5: Regarding touristic habits, there are significant differences between the opinion and responses of groups concerned by tourism (hotel owners, tourists).

Hyp6: The groups of tourists visiting Nógrád County and caterers living there are not homogenous. Typical groups can be distinguished among them.

Hyp7: The gastro-tourism in Nógrád County shows regional imbalances. Gastro-touristic programs of different intensity are offered in the six micro-region of the County.

Hyp8: The County can utilize the cultural and gastronomic possibilities offered by the Slovak minority.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Confirmation of hypotheses

**Hyp1:** There are some traditions in Nógrád County, which can provide basis for a gastro-touristic development.

*The first hypothesis has been proved.* Following the systematic review of references and full-range analysis of gastronomic events in the country, it has been revealed that there are very rich gastronomic traditions in the County, which can provide solid basis for a gastro-touristic concept and development.

**Hyp2:** The current economic-social situation of Nógrád County does not enable significant improvement in the tourism sector.

Seemingly there is a contradiction between the first and second hypothesis, but, unfortunately, the *second statement is also true*. Nógrád is one of the least developed counties in Hungary; with 100% of beneficiary districts in 2015 it was the county the most in need in terms of convergence. In 2014 Nógrád was the last in the ranking of counties in terms of guest nights spent in commercial accommodation facilities, which was 0.5% of total guest nights spent in Hungary that year. In case of other types of accommodation, Nógrád was the penultimate in 2014 with 1% of total guest nights. Only Komárom-Esztergom county had lower share.

**Hyp3:** There are a lot of tourists who would not go to Nógrád County just because of rural tourism; if it is connected, however, with other events and programs, they would be interested in gastro-tourism.

*The third hypothesis has also been confirmed.* It means that rural and/or gastro-tourism in the form of 1-2 day optional programs can be offered to Hungarian or foreign guests who travel to other events or spend longer holidays around the region. In this case, even those could be guests who otherwise would not be considered for these services.

**Hyp4:** The seasonal feature does not prevail in the tourism of Nógrád county.

The most frequent problem of domestic tourism is the seasonal feature. Since the tourism of Nógrád County is less tied to watersides and high mountains, first I presumed that the seasonal feature is not very strong in the tourism of the region.

However, the truth is – and it has been confirmed by the research, too – that most of the events are held in the summer months, therefore there is a strong seasonal character in this regards. *Therefore this hypothesis should be rejected.*

Higher revenues could be realised by stretching out the season and it would help to create more jobs as well. The touristic income could be increased by more frequent and/or longer visits and by extending the season.

**Hyp5:** Regarding touristic habits, there are significant differences among the opinion and responses of groups concerned by tourism (hotel or guesthouse owners, tourists).

According to the research, there are considerable differences among the groups of tourists visiting Nógrád county and hoteliers in the region. The best proof of this was provided by the different groups formed in the cluster analysis of guests and hosts. The identification of these groups helped to increase the efficiency of tourism in the county and the satisfaction of guests. *The hypothesis has been confirmed.*

**Hyp6:** The groups of tourists visiting Nógrád County and caterers living there are not homogenous. Typical groups can be distinguished among them.

*The hypothesis has been confirmed.* The guests have reported about significantly more frequent and longer stays in Nógrád County than the hosts. The examples cited in the sub-chapter support the above hypothesis. Altogether it can be concluded that the students have the least knowledge about the demands and habits of tourists, but the owners of accommodation facilities are also often unaware why a tourist comes to Nógrád County.

**Hyp7:** The gastro-tourism in Nógrád County shows regional imbalances. Gastro-touristic programs of different intensity are offered in the six micro-region of the County.

The outcomes of the analyses have revealed that *this was realised in the hypothesis part*, because each of the six micro-regions of the County has minimum 3 well-established, traditional gastronomic events (which have been organized at least three times before), which were actually held in 2015 as well (except for two events in Kozárd). There were 3 such events in Rétság micro-region (e.g. Plum Saturday in Kétybodony, Donut Festival in Kisecset); 9 events in Pásztó micro-region (e.g. Palóc Tastes Festival in Erdőkürt, Plum Ripening Celebration in Garáb, Hungarian Tastes – Hungarian Colours Gastronomy and Fruits Festival in Kozárd, Farmer Day and Apple Blossom Festival in Kozárd, Strudel Festival in Hasznos, Goose Festival in Püspök, Noodles Festival in Vanyarc); 5 events in Balassagyarmat micro-region (e.g. Big Dumpling Festival in Érsekvadkert, Village Day and Roly-Poly Festival in Iliny, Palóc Meatloaf Festival in Nógrádkövesd, Ratatouille Festival in Szécsénke); 9 events in Salgótarján micro-region (e.g. Laska Pasta Festival and Rősti Party in Kazár, Plum Day in Szele, Spring Wine Festival in Tarján, Festive Lunch in Rónafalus, Rock Soup Festival in Szilaspogony); 3 events in Bátorterenyé micro-region (e.g. Porcini Festival in Mátranovák, Pancake Festival in Mátraterenyé, Rabbit Cooking Competition in Nemti); and 4 events in Szécsény micro-region (e.g.

Wine Days in Hollókő, Gastro Castle in Hollókő, Rural Pig Killing Feast a la Benczúrfalva in Szécsény, Pie Festival in Varsány).

**Hyp8:** The county can utilize the cultural and gastronomic possibilities offered by the Slovak minority.

The tradition of typical meals of the Slovak minority are only marginally cared and promoted at the gastronomic events of settlements with significant proportion of Slovak minorities. Only one event, the Noodles Festival in Vanyarc belong to those gastronomic programs in the County, which foster the traditions of ethnic cuisine by preparing foods of Slovak origin in a village with considerable Slovak minority. *Therefore this hypothesis has not been confirmed.*

### 3.2 New and novel scientific achievements

My achievements can be summarised as follows:

1. Introducing the concept of gastro-tourism in the field of tourism and rural development. Based on a wide range of relevant literature, I have tried to place the causes, processes and impacts of tourism, rural and gastro-tourism into a more comprehensive context in the dissertation, where the geographical approach has a highlighted role. My conclusions can contribute to more precise definition of micro-regional and national development targets, as well as to the improvement of efficiency regarding tourism development and marketing strategy. Gastro-tourism has become a holistic area, which relates to a couple of spheres, interacts with other branches of tourism, thus its impact is far-reaching. The gastronomic tourism definitely has a complex effect on the underdeveloped regions and can have a positive impact on their development: it may create jobs at company level, may provide good publicity to local products, strengthen the local economy, thus influencing agriculture and all the branches which are able to serve the needs of local tourism. The most popular forms of gastro-tourism in Hungary are the food and drink festivals, which can enhance the prevailing of multiplicative benefits in destinations by implementing appropriate marketing strategies and successful destination branding. It would be very advisable to regard gastro-tourism as a network, but this has not happened yet.
2. Regarding gastro-tourism in Nógrád County, I have constructed an extensive inventory about the traditional gastronomic events, as well as cooking and baking competitions, as complementary programs, as well as about the special features of Palóc gastronomy. The inventory fills a niche because, on the one hand, no similar and comprehensive summary had been made about

the gastronomic events of Nógrád County and, on the other hand, it can contribute to the strategy development and support action plans.

3. The research has a completely novel element: the questionnaire survey involving almost a thousand people and focusing on rural tourism in Nógrád County. The survey tried to approach the special characteristics of the county; the differences in expectations and opinions from the aspect of accommodation facility owners, students of hospitality colleges and the guests. The correlations among the different target groups have been revealed in the dissertation. Well-distinguishable clusters have been formed from tourists and hosts.
4. The adaptation of topologic maps and determination of regional GDP is regarded a novel scientific achievement in the dissertation. The situation of individual counties according to different touristic aspects can be demonstrated convincingly with the help of these maps and these also enabled to draw several conclusions.
5. Annex 2 provides the comprehensive inventory of natural and man-made touristic values in the form of a table. It may drive the attention of service providers to the interdependence, necessity of collaboration (e.g. joint compilation of complex touristic packages) and, on the other hand, it may offer help for decision-makers to plan the tourism in the country more efficiently.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nógrád County belongs to the disadvantaged counties of Hungary. The factors discussed in the dissertation (demography, employment, infrastructure and different sectors) clearly indicate that the county is definitely forced to rely both on internal and external resources. Considering this environment, the rural nature, its natural framework and rich gastronomic supply, the County is suitable for operating and developing rural and farm tourism, as well as gastro-tourism.

The utilisation of rural destinations as locations for smaller conferences or team-building training programs can be a step in this direction. A completely new group of guests can be targeted with minimum investment (perhaps some ministries or universities could hold such events in the county to set example). Due to the variety and novelty of programs offered here, the business sphere would be a steady market and offer good publicity in terms of choosing future destinations for employees and owners, and the „good news”, the dissemination of information.

Nógrád County could also benefit from integrating part of the unemployed people into the tourism-related workforce. It would strengthen the touristic potential and decrease the number of the unemployed. It would be rather beneficial in terms of economy and also a step in the right direction considering the human side. The mood, wellbeing and mentality of people with steady jobs is much better (and their purchasing power is stronger, which in turn can give another impetus to the economy). Training, further training, touristic experts and enterprises can have a key role in this process. The government and Nógrád County itself could help and encourage this role, the entrepreneurship by offering different subsidies and favours to the participants.

Nógrád County is also a border region. The border regions have been traditionally regarded as disadvantaged areas due to the customs frontier or the potential military threats (Andreson – O’Down 1999). Due to the increasing transaction costs, the state borders negatively affected the economy of these regions, not mentioning the fact that the purchasing power of the given domestic market was weaker on the peripheries. The occurring taxes and duties, the different languages and cultures hampered the trading across the borders, thus reducing the demand for settling domestic or foreign producers in these regions (Hansen 1977). The disadvantaged situation has changed following the globalized (transnational) market processes and large international economic integration projects and treaties (e.g. World Trade Organization). *The border regions have become active contact areas* (Nemes Nagy 1998; Nijkamp 1998). The borderline county of Nógrád should find its own profile in this changing picture. Nógrád County may find the advantage in its borderline status. It should



build much stronger connections with the Hungarian and non-Hungarian economic sphere in Slovakia.

According to the regional development concept of Nógrád County, the natural historical connections provide appropriate basis for the development of international relations and exploitation of economic-cooperation advantages. In order to achieve this, there was a noticeable effort to cultivate the borderline relations, to find new partners and develop new forms of cooperation (e.g. joint EU-regions with Slovakia, as potential development opportunity for the county). Continuing the above train of thoughts, it can be concluded that the Palóc identity has an important role in the development of internal network and mentality of the county. The identity experience is an inevitable condition for utilizing the county resources efficiently and enforcing the advantages based on cooperation.

I entirely agree with those strategies, marketing plans and concepts, which underline that the touristic enterprises cannot be successful separately; the trick is the cooperation or collaboration among the stakeholders in tourism, which is also the essence of TDM system. The rural or gastro-tourism in itself does not guarantee several nights of stay in a destination. The service providers should combine the stay – in the forms of touristic packages – with green, geo, cultural and active touristic products, which are very typical and abundantly available in Nógrád County. I have compiled the thematic value inventory of these products, broken down by micro-regions, in Annex 2. It is the only chance to generate more guest nights and higher spending by the tourists for the county and the region. Hopefully this inventory will also help the decision-makers in the county because I firmly believe that the endowments of the county, the Palóc culture and traditions are really valuable and suitable for utilization in rural and gastro-tourism.

Reviewing the gastronomic events by micro-regions, it can be concluded that there are settlements in all the micro-regions of the county where some kind of traditional gastronomic events were organized in the last three years. Their common feature is that a gastronomic program is the centrepiece of the happening and all the other events, however high quality they are, can only be accompanying programs. The gastronomic feature of the event is unmistakably indicated in almost all cases by the title of the event, which clearly refers to gastronomy. Another important characteristic of these events is that they are organised by the local government, non-profit organisation or both of them cyclically, in the same period of the year. The higher is the number of repetition of the gastronomic event, the greater is the chance that it becomes the brand of the settlement; in other words the title of the event will be tied to the name of the settlement even for outsiders. It does not mean that the event should be built up according to the same pattern year by year. The accompanying programs can be made various and attractive to more age groups (e.g. there must be some

programs for children even at a gastronomic festival), but the essence of the central, traditional gastronomic element should be stable. It means that the participants know in advance what gastronomic happenings or programs provide the framework for the whole event.

I have drawn important conclusions from the examination of target groups concerned by tourism. The groups, which are stakeholders in the tourism of Nógrád County are significantly different in terms of travel objectives. The perception of students showed the greatest difference from the actual demand and supply side. Visiting relatives and running official errands in the county is less significant proportionally than the hosts think. Moreover, comparing the attractions, which are visited during the travels, there are greater differences between the groups; although the students give more emphasis to wine, green and rural types of tourism - that they learn about - than the reality.

I have distinguished four types of tourists in Nógrád County with the help of cluster analysis. The first group included mostly the rarely travelling people with less money to spend; the second group is the low-income white-collar families with higher touristic activity; the third group consists of mostly older people with secondary school qualifications and better financial background; while the wealthy families with at least graduate degree belong to the last group. The identification of these groups can help to improve the efficiency of tourism activities in the County and to increase the satisfaction of guests.

My finding that the majority of tourists would not go to Nógrád County only for the sake of rural tourism, is a very important outcome of the dissertation. Therefore it would be worth selling rural and/or gastro-tourism in the frames of 1-2-day optional programs for Hungarian and foreign guests who visit other events or spend longer holidays. In this case even those people could be guests who otherwise would not be considered for these services.

The rural tourism of Nógrád County should be promoted in the whole country (at least in the bigger cities) in order to increase the number of guests. The tourists staying there should be encouraged to leave their contact details at the hotels or guest houses, thus the potential customers – and their friends and acquaintances through them - could be reached directly with the given campaigns or events. As we have seen, this is the „most profitable” advertisement because friends, acquaintances and relatives disseminate the information the most efficiently. Not to mention the fact, that tourists are coming to Nógrád County from all over Hungary, therefore the touristic destinations of the country could be promoted and offered everywhere in the country.

Efficient opening to the foreigners would be inevitable for the rural tourism and Nógrád County. The examined county is a border county of Hungary. The touristic potential could be utilised much more efficiently by transforming the borderline into active contact areas.

In order to implement a successful strategy, not only the summer months should be prioritized. If the season is longer, much more tourists could be attracted and higher income achieved, which would be seen in the employment figures as well. The touristic income could be increased by more frequent and/or longer visits as well as by extending seasonality. A step in this direction is the utilisation of rural destinations as locations for smaller conferences or team-building trainings.

Complex touristic services should be offered by strengthening the cooperation, and in connection with these, the regional gastronomic endowments should be highlighted in the catering facilities. The values of gastronomy offer excellent opportunities to complement and highlight the variety of other attractions. The gastro-culture is as outstanding part of the touristic appeal of the Northern region – including Nógrád County – as the natural environment.

## 5. SUMMARY

The gastro-tourism is an innovative and increasingly expansive branch of tourism. The dissertation focuses on the examination of gastro-tourism in Nógrád County. The introduction discusses the aim of research, justifies the relevance of the topic and outlines the structure of the dissertation and the hypotheses.

Following the introduction, the second chapter deals with the concept and significance of tourism and gastro-tourism. The review of relevant references analyses the development of tourism and gastro-tourism. This chapter also explores the situation of tourism in the European Union, Hungary and Nógrád County. The analysis of tendencies within tourism highlights the increasing economic importance of tourism, including gastro-tourism and also the fact that the tourism sector in Nógrád County is weak; its development potential is low; although there are a lot of underused possibilities in the field of rural, village and gastro-tourism.

The *third chapter* analyses the economic and social situation of Nógrád County in terms of tourism. The first sub-chapter details the materials and methodology applied in the dissertation. In this chapter I intended to give a comprehensive picture of the natural geography of Palóc people in Nógrád county; the statistical time series changes of population and the population of the three most significant minorities; the situation of transport in the county; the economic and social situation described with the help of a comprehensive index, and the farming sector which provides raw materials for the local gastronomy. As part of the economy, special emphasis was given to the role of Nógrád county in the tourism of Hungary and the guest turnover in the commercial, other and rural accommodation facilities. Separate sub-chapter deals with the changes in data regarding guest turnover and accommodation capacity per 1000 inhabitants in the micro-regions of the county following the global economic crisis. The chapter ends with a small ethnographic bypass and the introduction of specificities of traditional Palóc gastronomy and diet through the description of nine typical food groups.

The *fourth chapter* details the gastronomic events in Nógrád county, which happened in the course of three years (2013-2015) between the questionnaire survey and the internal discussion of the dissertation. This was made on the basis of the summary of traditional gastronomic events and, on the other hand, the non-gastronomic events complemented by gastronomic competitions. The main objective of gastronomic events in Nógrád county is the introduction and promotion of Palóc cuisine, as well as preserving traditions with authentic experiences and environment (mostly by folklore performers) for the participants.

*The fifth chapter* is the pivotal part of the dissertation: it is the individual primer research which analyses a questionnaire survey regarding Palóc gastronomy. It is a novel part in the research that the questionnaire survey among 842 people was made in three separate target groups. The survey intended to address the specific features of tourism in Nógrád county and the differences between expectations and opinions from the aspect of guests (130 persons), students studying hospitality and rural development (690 persons) and hoteliers (22 persons).

*The sixth chapter* discusses the confirmation/rejection of hypotheses, as well as the novel scientific achievements. *The seventh chapter* includes the conclusions and recommendations regarding the tourism of Nógrád county. On the basis of the statistical data and own questionnaire survey I have elaborated recommendations about how the tourism based on local traditions can be made more efficient and more profitable. I have also examined how and in which directions can the existing conditions be improved in the near future and what types of investments could be successful. The dissertation is closed by a summary and annexes.

In addition to the list of references, Annex 2 contains a touristic value inventory divided into micro-regions. The objective of this is to clearly show to the sector, how many and what type of values and attractions can complement the range of programmes offered for gastro- or rural tourists visiting the county. One of the reasons for adding this annex was – as it is also obvious from the dissertation – that gastro-tourism, as an independent touristic product element, does not increase considerably the touristic performance of the county. In most of the cases (except for multi-day gastronomic events, like e.g. in Hollókő) it would create an opportunity for stays over several days – thus also utilizing local accommodation facilities – if it is connected to other types of tourism, which are already well-bedded in the county, like e.g. cultural, hiker or active tourism, even in the forms of touristic packages compiled by service providers.

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