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International Tourism from the Perspective of Czech Hospitality Professionals: A Pilot Study for Exploring Origin-Specific Stereotypes

These research notes summarize a pilot study on stereotypes held by Czech hospitality industry professionals toward visitors from leading foreign origins. While the overall perception of international tourism is highly positive, the survey results reveal perceived differences in economic, social, and environmental impact of tourists that correspond to their country of origin. Further probing unveils emotions related to personal experiences with foreigners as well as contemporary and historical relations between countries. Additional findings suggest that improvements in infrastructure, security, and cultural events might enhance the positive effects of international tourism, especially outside of Prague, the country's dominant destination. These preliminary findings point the way for further study.

Key words: International tourism, origin-specific stereotypes, tourism impact, Czech Republic.

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Introduction

The enormous impact of international tourism continues to grow, especially in European states that are surrounded by neighbors with increasingly permeable borders (World Travel and Tourism Council [“WTTC”] 2004; World Tourism Organization 2006). Tourism receipts and indirect multipliers represent on average 10.2 percent of annual national income (WTTC 2004). Benefiting from its centrality in Europe, the Czech Republic is no exception, having hosted 6,061,225 foreign visitors in 2004 (Czech Statistical Office 2005). The Czech Republic represents a particularly interesting laboratory for examining international tourism because the widespread presence of visitors and magnitude of the hospitality industry remain a novelty in a region that was until 1989 largely hidden behind Europe’s Iron Curtain. In an effort to better understand stereotypes toward visitors, these paper reports upon a pilot survey for probing perceptions held by practitioners in the Czech hospitality industry toward international guests with regard to their economic, social, and environmental impacts.

This research was in part inspired by anecdotal observations in Europe and reinforced by common reports of misconduct by visitors such as Winter’s (2004) account of “drunken revelry” of American students in Europe and O’Connor’s (2004) story on British stag parties in Prague. Nevertheless, such negative impacts should be measured against positive effects on the economy, and O’Connor (2004) argues that in balance hosts’ tradeoffs are worthwhile. Still, cross-cultural behavioral incidents such as these, witnessed by an untold number of local residents and publicized through the media, reinforce stereotypes about nationalities.

In his pioneering work on the impacts of tourism, Getz (1977) sets forth a framework for conceptualizing the impacts of tourism. He articulates three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental, each of which can range negative to positive. Following Getz, Deichmann (2002) quantifies and analyzes these dimensions in the cross-cultural context of visitors to Prague, unveiling systematic regularities in perceptions of each nationality.

Unfortunately, the study's scope is limited to residents of Central Prague. In an attempt to improve upon that contribution, however, the questionnaire used in the present inquiry probes into perceived origin-specific behaviors by targeting more credible respondents: professionals in the Czech tourism & hospitality industry. The research design is to sample respondents *throughout* the Czech Republic with the intention of reaching a more broad-based sample. In addition, the survey attempts to probe into stereotypes of a wider range of visitors, including the twelve top origins. To augment Deichmann's (2002) inquiry of behavioral traits of Germans, Americans, English, Russians, French, Japanese, and Italians, this survey adds Austrians, Spaniards, Poles, Slovaks, and Canadians.

Methodology and Data

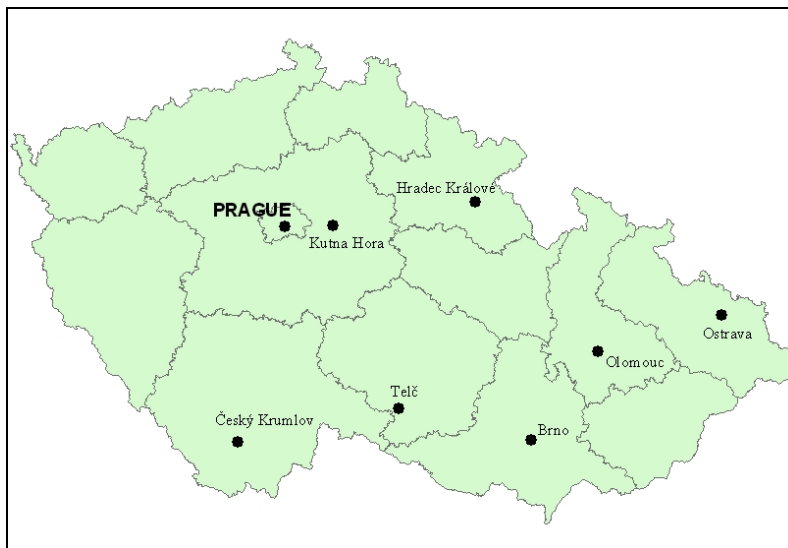
Data collection involved a three-page semi-structured survey instrument³ that was designed to be brief and simple enough for respondents to complete within ten minutes. Its brevity was intended to maximize our response rate during one week of data collection. The survey contained four short sections: A: Perceptions of International Tourism; B: Differences in Visitors from Specific Origins; C: International Tourism and Regional Development; and D: Respondent Information. Although labor intensive, the construction, administration, and analysis of this survey instrument was particularly rewarding because the research team personally visited the sites and spoke with each of the respondents.

A minimum of ten responses were sought in each city or town: Kutna Hora, Hradec Králové, Ostrava, Olomouc, Brno, Telč, Český Krumlov, and Prague (Figure 1), which are spread throughout the country and feature a variety of tourist attractions. As the peak summer tourist season commenced in May 2003, places of tourist accommodation (hotels, pensions, and hostels) were targeted as well as restaurants, places of entertainment, and tourist

³ Available upon request in English or Czech.

information centers. In order to achieve a high rate of response we used a face-to-face approach and attempted to be very friendly. Each respondent was greeted in Czech and asked to complete the survey, then Mr. Vacek fielded any general questions in Czech. In order to minimize influences on responses, the survey instrument was administered “blindly”; that is, no reference was made to the research team’s national origin and affiliations. However, when asked, Mr. Vacek told the respondents that the survey was for university research project. The survey was well received, especially outside of Prague where the tourism industry lags behind. A majority (58.4%) of those approached completed the survey, while others either refused straight-out or explained that they were too busy, in some cases appearing to be suspicious. The questionnaires were left at the establishment to be picked up later the same day or returned by mail.

Figure 1: *Czech Republic: Location of Survey Respondents*



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Following data collection, all forty-four responses (58.4% response rate) were translated back into English and entered into SPSS for analysis. Section A of the survey measured overall awareness and perceptions of international tourism as it relates to the respondents’ place of business. Overall, the respondents estimated that about 43% of their

customers and clients are from outside the Czech Republic, and their assessments of the leading origins closely mirrored data reported by the Czech Statistical Office (2003). These observations lend credence to the credibility of the respondents' perceptions toward foreigners. As summary data (Section D), it is useful to note that type of business, our respondents represented hotels or pensions (13), restaurants (7), or other enterprises including shops, information kiosks, and museums (24). Respondents ranged from owners to clerks, but nearly all deal with foreigners on a daily basis.

Are The Impacts of International Tourism Specific to Nationality?

As indicated by our respondents (Table 1), international tourism is widely assumed to play a positive role at the end of the day (thanks mainly to spending and its multipliers), overshadowing social and environmental costs. Recognizing this, governments throughout the world go to great lengths to promote inbound tourism, as indicated, for example by the Czech Tourism web site (<http://www.czechtourism.com/>). However, for policy makers to maximize the positive impacts while minimizing the negative ones, they must understand the nature of the effects clearly. Toward this end, scholars customarily divide the impacts of tourism into three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (Getz 1977). Economic impacts range from direct and indirect income and job creation to economic dependency. Social impacts range from cosmopolitanism and the pleasure of interacting with other cultures to support for begging, prostitution, and other forms of social blight. Environmental impacts may range to the provision and improvement of infrastructure to litter, graffiti, and noise pollution.

In order to further explore the underlying dimensions of stereotypes toward foreigners on the basis of their economic, social, and environmental behavior, respondents were asked to quantify their perception of each group of visitors. Section B of the Questionnaire asks the

respondent to rate the “overall impact of foreigners from (country name) toward the local (economy/culture/environment)”, with each dimension in a distinct block. Table 1 summarizes the responses, listing average scores on a Likert scale ranging from -2 (very negative) to +2 (very positive). After reviewing the mean scores, it is possible to analyze these origin-specific patterns in perceptions of visitors based upon their behavior with regard to spending, as well as interaction with their hosts and host environment.

Table 1: Industry Average Opinion on Origin-Specific Impact.

	ECON	SOC	ENV	Mean
All Origins	2.026	1.853	0.452	1.444
Japanese	1.575	1.667	0.677	1.306
Americans	1.737	1.757	0.387	1.294
British	1.539	1.667	0.645	1.283
French	1.513	1.684	0.452	1.216
Dutch	1.474	1.500	0.516	1.163
Austrians	1.447	1.189	0.645	1.094
Canadians	1.237	1.500	0.387	1.041
Slovaks	0.744	1.711	0.344	0.933
Germans	1.897	0.395	0.219	0.837
Spanish	0.921	0.973	0.323	0.739
Poles	0.821	0.553	0.194	0.522
Italians	1.158	0.487	-0.129	0.505
Russians	0.290	-0.282	-0.094	-0.029
Mean	1.313	1.189	0.358	

Data collected and processed by the author, May 2003.

Generally, visitors from all origins are considered to be beneficial (nearly all mean scores are positive), and it is worth noting that several respondents specifically mentioned that all visitors are welcome, irrespective of origin. Others revealed deeply held prejudices against visitors from countries that have been historical occupiers of Czech lands (for example, Germany and Russia). As suggested by Deichmann (2002), even the generous expenditures of German tourists (at +1.897, perceived to be the highest) seem unable to erase such deeply-held emotions (cultural impact of +.395, among the lowest), and it is incumbent upon groups from these origins to overcome this inertia. While the overall impact of Americans and British appears to be better (+1.294 and +1.283, respectively), one might

wonder if recent highly-publicized incidents of misbehavior (Wilson 2004) and the increase in British stag parties (O'Connor 2004) might eventually take a toll. Moreover, some American tourists have reportedly been hassled for their government's involvement in Iraq—an issue that sharply divides Czech society like many others (Jarrett 2006).

Table 1 clearly distinguishes people from countries with higher incomes (Japan, USA, and northern Europe) from those with lower incomes (Spain, Poland, Italy, and Russia). Aside from cultural prejudices, Southern and Eastern Europeans are stereotyped as spending less money than people from the countries with higher impact scores. In the Czech Republic, where per capita incomes still lag behind most of the EU and tourism approach ten percent of the economy (World Tourism Organization 2006), tourist expenditures are vital. Therefore, when some aspects of visitors are perceived as undesirable, the behavior that underlies such perceptions warrants additional probing. As the economic impact of tourism is nearly always viewed as positive, this differential invites a closer examination of social and environmental impacts.

International Tourists as Ambassadors

Toward understanding the bases for these stereotypes, respondents were asked to describe what is considered to be appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the Czech Republic. To be viewed favorably, tourists are expected to explore quietly, interact with hosts politely and patiently, show interest in and respect for the hosts and surroundings. Some hospitality professionals point out that visitors from wealthier countries in particular become visibly frustrated and sometimes rude because services tend to lag behind those to which they are accustomed, especially outside of Prague. Finally, many respondents mentioned that visitors tend to react to their own insecurities abroad by acting standoffishly or suspiciously toward Czechs, which contributes to a negative interaction.

In order to probe into negative stereotypes, respondents were also asked specific questions about their experiences with tourists. When asked if they had ever been treated disrespectfully by foreigners, more than half (54.5%) of the respondents marked “yes” and provided details. An even larger percentage (56.8%) reports that they have observed foreigners behaving in an otherwise inappropriate manner. Specifically, inappropriate behavior may include one or more of the following: arrogance, drunkenness, noisiness, vandalism, fighting, vulgar sexual innuendos, playing sports in public places, overstaying one’s welcome, theft, litter, attempting to haggle when prices are fixed, unwillingness to pay, and insulting locals. Multiple respondents independently associated these forms of behavior with Germans, Russians, and Italians. Many respondents cited a possible connection between inappropriate behavior and insufficient local security, infrastructure, and cultural opportunities. These considerations should be examined in more detail toward introducing policy measures for ameliorating the problematic aspects of international tourism.

Suggestions and Implications

The pilot survey, administered to hospitality practitioners throughout the Czech Republic, met the goal of identifying stereotypes and perceived behavioral tendencies of tourists according to their origins. The results reveal a tendency for tourists to become pigeon-holed based upon their country’s history (Germany and Russia) or foreign policy (USA or Russia) before an interaction even begins. The Czech historical context of German occupation during World War II, Soviet occupation and isolation behind the Iron Curtain until 1989, and now as a leading international tourism destination within the European Union, makes the findings particularly interesting. Still, these findings should be considered preliminary, as much additional work remains to be done. Although the questionnaire revealed many valuable insights, a wider distribution would have yielded more robust results. The intention of this

brief analysis was not to perpetuate stereotypes, but rather to identify them as a basis for further inquiry and improved understanding of the origin-specific impacts upon host economy, society, and environment. Behavior can reinforce or challenge stereotypes; as articulated by one survey respondent, a single individual from any country can have a widespread influence upon their country's reputation.

The relationship between political events and stereotypes of tourists offers myriad opportunities for further research. The world has changed enormously in the five years since September 11, 2001, and much of the empirical literature on international tourism precedes those industry-altering events and their aftermath, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Knowles, Diamantis, and El-Mourhabi 2004, WTTC 2004). How has the perception of travelers from the USA and UK changed during the three years following the US-led invasion of Iraq? Also related to security issues, new potential exists to conduct research on how terrorist events have dissuaded people from traveling abroad. During the first full year after the events of September 11th, the Czech Statistical Office (2003) reports that receipts were down more than five percent. Seventeen percent of respondents to this survey noticed fewer tourists following September 11, and most of them associated the decrease with Americans.

This inquiry also attempts to identify some key areas for improvement in the Czech tourism industry. Some respondents empathized with frustrated visitors who were victims of pickpockets or unscrupulous taxi drivers. Others cited outdated tourism infrastructure, as well as a lack of recreational facilities and toilets near tourist sites, fueling frustrations among travelers and driving them to return to Prague from the smaller cities and villages. In addition to providing better infrastructure, facilities, and security, several respondents suggested that more cultural events should be organized to help keep tourists in their communities in order to maximize local expenditures and economic multipliers.

This pilot study has attempted to unveil stereotypes of international visitors to the Czech Republic and identify individual behaviors that can reflect differentially upon groups of tourists. Whether good or bad, whether right or wrong, national stereotypes abound. When individuals become aware of these stereotypes, they can respond accordingly. International travel is a privilege, and the traveler assumes a certain ambassadorial responsibility that provides an opportunity to contribute positively to mutual understanding and improved foreign relations.

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