

Tourism and refugees: a case study of the Chechen community in Flanders

By Myriam Fierens

E-mail: myriamfierens@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

As a result of the Russian-Chechen conflict, a lot of Chechens fled to Belgium over the past decade. As cultural and hence vacation participation seem to be important for integration into other fields, it is crucial to provide every member in our society with this possibility. As little is known about the tourist needs and wishes of this ethnic group, primary explorative research is required before Belgian tourism policies can be adopted to cater to the needs of Chechens. Consequently, this paper offers an analysis of the tourism tastes and choices of Chechens who reside currently in Flanders, as well as some critical success factors for an inclusive tourist policy.

Ces derniers temps, à la suite du conflit entre la Russie et la Tchétchénie, de nombreux Tchétchènes se sont enfuis de leur pays pour s'installer en Belgique. Étant donné que la participation culturelle ainsi qu'une adhésion aux vacances et aux loisirs sont intéressants pour une intégration complète, il est crucial que chaque membre de la société puisse y adhérer. Vu la connaissance plutôt limitée de ce groupe, une enquête exploratrice s'avère nécessaire afin que la politique touristique belge puisse être amendée en faveur de ces Tchétchènes. Par conséquent cet article offre une analyse des choix et des préférences touristiques actuels ainsi que quelques critères de succès pour une politique touristique inclusive.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

Chechen refugees, holidays, integration

How to refer to this article

Fierens M., Tourism and refugees: a case study of the Chechen community in Flanders, 2007, Omertaa, Journal for Applied Anthropology, <http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0018.pdf>

Introduction

The multidisciplinary nature of the concept 'tourism' implies social and cultural dimensions and aspects of town and country planning, apart from the mere economic aspects. Hence the need to study the social importance of tourism, alongside the usual research into the economic impact.

Article 7 of the 'Global code of Ethics for Tourism' states the individual right for recreation and any form of vacation. Furthermore, it has been stated that it is an obligation of the government to develop a tourist policy in which 'social tourism' has its own prominent place.

Engbersen & Gabriëls (1995) have shown that cultural participation, and hence vacation, have far-reaching effects for the optimal integration of ethnic groups in the different realms of society. Despite the endorsement of this social right, the reality is that a lot of people have no access to any form of vacation whatsoever.

The Flemish tourist policy has recognised this fact and has established a breakthrough in terms of 'social tourism'. 'Social tourism' is a form of tourism in which a relatively cheap recreation/vacation offer is made available to people with financial, social, cultural or physical limitations. The principle of service supersedes the role of commercial profit.

Although social tourism aims to reach multiple target groups, this research focuses on the possibilities to enhance vacation participation of people with limited financial means.

Holiday Participation Centre (Steunpunt Vakantieparticipatie or SV)

"Tourism Flanders" (Toerisme Vlaanderen), the administration involved in the promotion of recreation and tourism to and within Flanders, has been the home of a committee called "Holiday Participation Centre" (Steunpunt Vakantieparticipatie, i.e. SV) since May 2001. The core task of this committee is to provide a recreation and vacation offer to financially restricted people. In practice this happens through negotiations with tourist players in order to obtain discounts for this particular target group.

It is important to note that SV does not subsidise but creates goodwill from financial partners such as theme parks, swimming pools, museums, festivals etc. The current holiday offer involves day trips, organised vacations, group holidays as well as individual holidays. This offer is made available to the public every year in a clear brochure and website. In order to reach the desired target group and to eliminate abuses as much as possible, SV works together with about 700 social organisations. They have the duty to perform a thorough screening of the candidates and to approach the target group in an appropriate way, to make sure they have maximum access to the holiday offer. The holiday offer is made to underprivileged people both indigenous and allochthonous. This research focuses on the possibilities offered by SV to Chechen asylum seekers.

The Chechens

We will try to picture the target group, based on the works of Nichols (1995), Dragadze (1995), Rommens (2005), Souleimanov (2005), and Expeditions (2005). Literature on the Chechen culture has become scarce after the destruction of most libraries during the Russian-Chechen wars. Actually, 'Chechnya' is merely the name of a village in the north of Caucasus. The Russians, during their con-

quests in the 18th century, have named the entire region after the village. The Chechens prefer to be called Nokchi. The Chechen mountain people are the largest North Caucasian group with about a million people. The tough mountain life has strongly influenced the Chechen identity. Power, courage, modesty, generosity, charity, competitiveness and dignity are core values in the Chechen culture.

Since the second Russian-Chechen war, many thousands of Chechens have fled and have found a new home throughout Europe. About 7000 Chechens live in Belgium today. Research by Expeditions (2005) shows that the Chechen refugees in Belgium are very traumatized by what they have been through. They come from a totally fractured culture where all their trusted values have been dramatically questioned and their cultural identity has been heavily tested. At worst, a confrontation between cultures can lead to de-culturation which basically means that the traditional culture is abandoned and no relations are secured with the new home society. Research has shown that long wars, in general, often result in de-culturation in the occupied country. People lose faith in their own diverse cultural identities such as nationality, identity, ethnicity, language and religion. This means that most Chechens in the initial stage of their stay in Belgium feel broken and have lost every anchorage. On top of this all, these people face a great amount of misunderstanding or even worse indifference, which needless to stress is not conducive to their integration. Social integration is further hindered by language problems, a detrimental social-economic situation and their traumatised minds.

To help them overcome these difficulties, Chechens in Belgium and in Europe need to unite and to seek support with their peers. Over the past few years, they have tried to organise this mutual support in a number of unions. These unions aim to improve social and cultural integration. At the same time they attempt to keep the Chechen culture alive.

Methodology

A lot of members of various Chechen unions in Antwerp and Leuven were willing to participate in this survey. Through snowball sampling we have taken 44 in-depth interviews in the period 2005-2006. The first half of these interviews were taken from Chechen women, currently living in Antwerp, in the age range of 30 to 50 years old, of whom mostly had fled their home country with their family. The other half was taken from Chechen young men, currently living in Leuven between the

age of 18 and 30, that most often had to flee Chechnya on their own. These distinct subgroups within the ethnic Group of Chechens have clearly influenced the outcome of the research. The processing of research data was done through manual analysis by which data were coded and labelled. By doing this, we have seen that the final results were heavily influenced by specific cultural dynamics. In order to complete our research with respect to the policy, we have conducted an interview with the former coordinator of SV.

'Tourism': a familiar concept for Chechens.

The results clearly demonstrate that the Chechen respondents are aware of the concept 'tourism'. Back in Chechnya they used to go on vacation every year. Despite the fact that they understand the concept, it has a different meaning for them than for the average Flemish person. Holiday or tourism for Chechens is in general related to family visits and geographically limited to the FIS (Federation of Independent States). Travelling abroad was completely impossible due to the costly visa needed. It is striking that it is mostly the citizens of large cities such as Grozny that go on yearly vacation to family in the Mountains or near the seaside. The people living up in the mountains, according to themselves, have a lesser need for vacation because they live in a healthy environment day to day. On top of that, leaving a farm is very difficult for practical reasons. This kind of holiday within the framework of family visit is related to the Chechen culture, not unlike other traditional rural cultures. It happens that the Chechen society is based on close networks. There is always someone who knows someone that can help with solving issues, and the same applies to holiday participation. Hospitality is a strong point in their holiday behaviour in the home country. And in the very rare case that people rent a holiday cottage instead of making use of the hospitality of family or relatives, there is never an organisation involved. Chechens are unfamiliar with the principle of bookings and timely reservations. One can always be assured that on late notice things can be arranged with local tourist providers and if not, in case of need, one can always rely on the hospitality of the local community. Their tourist interests are mainly day trips and holidays to the Mountains or the seaside. City trips would only be sporadically considered and nature is central in their holiday experience. They attach great importance to mythology and history and appear very proud on what their country has to offer. Youngsters often go on youth sport camps and even schools occasionally organise day trips or organised holidays.

Tourism in the host country?

After their arrival in Belgium, holiday is not the first thing that the refugees have in mind. The horror of the war and the stress of the flight make these people initially focus on survival. These people have been pushed to their limits, both physically as mentally. On top of that, the long procedure to obtain asylum creates a climate of uncertainty and fear. The way that people deal with all these things, the first years after their arrival here, is different for the Chechen women in Antwerp and the young men in Leuven. All this is determined by the background of those two subgroups and especially the age on which they have to leave Chechnya.

In general the Chechen women in Antwerp have had a relatively carefree youth, they had received higher education and most of them had started a family already before they had left the country. What stands out with this subgroup, is that they feel extremely guilty towards the family that was left behind in Chechnya. Often they are heartbroken by the choices that they had to make and not uncommonly this leads to medical complaints like fatigue and headaches. When asked about vacation, they say it is something they had not thought of for a long time, but something they really urgently need. They look forward to coming to rest and relax after years of violence.

A trip or vacation with their family to the Ardennes rank high on their wish list but they lack the energy and the experience of actually organising and planning such a trip. This again indicates their need for contact with nature. The financial aspect of vacation plays an equally important role. These women were forced in terms of financial means to take a serious step back in comparison to the standards of living in Chechnya. Back in the home country, they had a good job generating a decent income, while here they depend on social welfare. Strictly financially they are unable to make savings for tourism or recreation.

The situation of the Chechen young men in Leuven is different. They are youngsters that have left their homeland as teenagers by their own means, in most cases alone, and they have their whole life before them. Due to the war they had no access to higher education and upon their arrival here, there was no one for them to rely on. They invariably describe the first months in Belgium as very difficult and tough. After a while though, they seem to get their act together and step by step they rediscover courage, self-respect and power; values they attribute to the own Chechen culture. They are broken by all they have lived through,

but are dedicated to rebuilding their lives here. They like to go out with other youngsters and make as many contacts as possible, either with compatriots, Belgians or with other nationalities. Vacation for them equals leisure, relaxing and fun. They are not too fussy about holidays. To go outdoors in a group with a tent and spend some time in nature is sufficient to meet their needs. They appear to be very interested in discovering Belgium and to get to know the local culture. Furthermore it appears they try to find a balance between traditional values on one hand and the Belgian customs on the other. A typical example is their approach to women. Given their Muslim background they are not used to hanging out with girls. They consider it a plus that mixing with girls in Belgium is possible. Nevertheless it is clear to see that they show a lot of respect for women and for the elderly, and in this respect cling to the values of their own culture. For example they will never go swimming with girls and will never allow them to pay for anything when going out. Just as the Chechen women in Antwerp, they are very restricted in their holiday participation by their lack of financial means.

Washburne confirmed

This research reveals that with the Chechen respondents, their entire recreational behaviour and their perception of the concept 'vacation' is defined by elements typical of Chechen culture. The typical hospitality they are used to means that they do not have the know-how to organise trips or vacations in advance, let alone make timely reservations. With domestic as well as international destinations on top of their wish list, it is apparent that they go in search of recognizable elements from their home country and home culture.

Southern destinations such as Italy and Spain are very popular because they presume that the openness, the hospitality and the machismo, inherent to those cultures, show similarities to the Chechen one. As for the domestic destinations, they intuitively choose recognizable things. Outdoor trips or vacations are popular because nature reminds them of landscapes in Chechnya. Cities like Bruges e.g. are interesting because they hope that there are old stories connected to all those old houses, just like the myths about attractions in Chechnya. Based on all this, we can conclude that the typical holiday behaviour can be partly explained by cultural preferences. Hence we can conclude that this research confirms the ethnicity hypothesis of Washburne (1978), for as far as this target group in these conditions is concerned. Because their holiday participation is currently relatively low, due to financial restrictions resulting from their low socio economic position in society as refugee, this research also

confirms the marginality hypothesis of Washburne. In other words, the holiday experience and holiday behaviour of the Chechen respondents confirm both the ethnicity as marginality hypothesis.

The social importance of vacation

The results also show that holiday participation is of great social importance and can as a whole contribute to improved social integration. The informants have on more than one occasion indicated their interest in taking part in day trips and going on holidays within Belgium. Doing this, they hope to get to know the local culture better and to develop a lot of contacts.

They consider cultural integration as paramount for integration in different fields. It is important in any form of integration and therefore also in cultural integration, to take the expressive need of these Chechen refugees into account. Just as any other subgroup in society they dispose of certain values and a specific way of living by which they express identity. Failure to be recognised can lead to alienation or identity crises, which would stand in the way of optimal integration.

An inclusive tourist policy: the administration's responsibility?

From this research it is clear that the tourist sector can contribute to the social integration of Chechen refugees in Flanders by enhancing their holiday participation. The decree 'Tourism for all' has been a major breakthrough in this respect. Figures show that SV has reached all targets and more importantly that the Chechen refugees have been included in the target group of the policy makers and hence have gained access to the proposed holiday offer. The results show that a committee such as SV is able to meet the expressive needs of the Chechen refugees, provided that a number of factors have been taken into consideration. Below we propose such critical success factors for an inclusive tourist policy.

Critical success factors

Although SV has accomplished a lot on short notice and meets the financial aspect that currently inhibits the holiday participation of Chechens, there are a number of issues that could be improved.

The holiday offer up until now is regrettably limited to Flanders, whereas the target group mostly shows interest in day trips in Wallonia and the Ardennes. Another point

is the language barrier. Chechen refugees have no experience whatsoever in organizing holidays or trips. The fact that the brochure is only issued in Dutch does not help the matter.

Obviously this is due to the fact that there simply is no SV in Wallonia. An extension of the current offer to the entire country of Belgium would not only be welcome, it is absolutely necessary. Although the Chechen community has been a member of SV since last year, and although the offer seems to reach the correct target group, the limited experience in organising holidays and the language gap still prevents people from actually taking the step of making reservations through SV. Therefore it is the task of social organisations to assist the Chechen candidates in making reservations. Whilst expanding the offer, the preferences of the Chechen target group should be taken into consideration, i.e. day trips in nature, group holidays and sporting activities. One last stumbling-block is not applicable to the Chechen target group solely, but is an obstacle for SV in general, namely the transport aspect. A lot of attractions in the offer are not so easily accessible by public transport and the cost of this is relatively high.

Implementing these critical success factors is not so easy because SV is for its offer entirely dependent on the goodwill of tourist partners. In terms of public transport, the current negotiations with the official bus lines management (De Lijn) and the railway management (NMBS) are a first step in the good direction. Critical to the successful continuity of SV is an increase of resources to be made available by "Tourism Flanders" (Toerisme Vlaanderen). SV suffers from serious understaffing, which obviously has serious implications for the proper functioning of the committee. It is generally seen and recognized that SV is usually successful and therefore it is even more regrettable that resources are not increased proportionally to demand. With more means, not only negotiations with Wallonia but also international negotiations could be continued successfully, resulting in an improved offer. The administrations from other European countries have shown interest, as well as the target group in Flanders.

Conclusion

It is clear that holiday participation is hugely important to help people integrating in different areas of society and in this way offer people the chance of a new life. It is important to come to an inclusive tourist policy in which cultural aspects of all parties are taken into account.

The 21st century, distinguished by major global shifts and changing relations, is a time of increasing multicultural diversity as a result of major population movements. The development of multi-ethnic societies obviously has a lot of repercussions for the policy of the so-called host countries. In this case, Chechen refugees will try to build a new life in Belgium. Various Chechen organisations have been founded and will be the backbone of a new Chechnya in Europe. These new citizens will integrate and this will, over time, lead to mixed marriages. A multi-ethnic society based on entirely different relations is a new challenge for the tourist sector. Every person, regardless of his or her origin, has a fundamental right to any form of recreation and vacation. Hence, social implications of tourism can not be overestimated. It is a duty of and a challenge to the administration to develop an inclusive tourist policy in order to grant all citizens of the new multi-ethnic society access to holiday and leisure.

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