

# *Failures in Building Partnership for Success in the Competitive Market: The Case of Polish Ski Resorts*

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The topic of local stakeholders' collaboration for success on the tourism market is a popular one, however research is usually devoted to well established Western economies. Created in this way, rules of cooperation are not fully suitable for new democracies in Central and Eastern European countries. Western standards of cooperation can not be achieved in Polish winter sports destinations, which is mirrored in the analyzed example of the Polish biggest ski resort – Szczyrk. Mutual mistrust and hostile attitude are typical for stakeholders in this example. The very low competitiveness level of the product is the most visible effect. Additionally, ski product development in Poland is highly criticized from the environmental point of view, which results in another difficult to manage, severe conflict sourced in different interpretations of the idea of sustainable tourism development.

*Key Words:* ski resort, partnership, Central and Eastern Europe,  
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## **Introduction**

Mountain holidays are regarded as being the third most popular way of spending leisure holidays in Europe with an estimated share of 12% of the market. Among them almost half of the journeys are taken in the winter season (Freitag 1996). It is very probable that most of those winter mountain holidays are connected with winter sports like skiing or snowboarding. So winter sports create a huge and very competitive market. The opening of borders and the European integration process have changed conditions of operating for most of ski resorts both in Western and Central Europe. Both of them were given an opportunity to enter new markets but also have to face new competitors. It is a very challenging task for Polish ski resorts used to the surplus of the demand over the supply.

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According to Flagestad and Hope, indicators such as the number of ski visitors in lift systems during the 1980s and 1990s suggest that the Western European ski market is in stagnation (Flagestad and Hope 2001a, 6). The ski markets of Eastern and Central Europe, including, amongst others, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, are exceptions. The Eastern and Central European market is characterised by rapid growth resulting in an average growth for the whole continent reaching 2.5% annually (Smith and Jenner 1999). According to Hudson, with two million visits annually, Poland's share in the world ski market can be estimated to be about 0.5% (Hudson 2000, 28). These statistics are significant and illustrate the huge potential of the Polish ski market, as these two million visits are almost entirely domestic ones. As many as 20% of Poles declare they go skiing at least once a year (TNS OBOP 2004).

The concept of local and regional cooperation for success in the tourism market, although still discussed regarding details and changing requirements (Hall 1999), is well developed (Jamal and Getz 1995; Fyall and Garrod 2005) and the idea of a Local and Regional Tourism Organization looks to be set down strongly (Murphy 1985; Middleton and Hawkins 1998). Still, the theory prepared on the basis of and for western well-established democracies is not always suitable and easy to implement in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Brezovec and Brezovec 2004; Roberts and Simpson 1999). The aim of presented paper is to close partially this gap by analyzing the example of Polish winter sports destinations and their specific problems. Instead of being another good example of positive effects gained thanks to the local partnership, the case of Polish winter sports destinations reveals clearly what can happen if the effective cooperation is missing. However, Schendler argues that failure is often more instructive than a case study of a success (Schendler 2001). One of the most illustrative examples of local problems which remain unsolvable is Szczyrk – one of the most traditional and popular Polish ski resorts.

The main methodology used is the case study approach (Yin 1981; 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994). Regarding Yin's (1994, 39) terminology, it is a Type 3 case study – embedded single case study. One of the most popular and biggest Polish winter sport destinations – Szczyrk – is the main object of the study, however, when necessary, other examples of Polish ski resorts are also mentioned. The use of case study methodology is justified here by the fact that the presented research involves initial reconnaissance, as no previous research on Polish winter sports desti-

nations was conducted before. Data necessary to prepare the case study were collected from official and informal statements of local stakeholders and from the analysis of their web pages. The case study is supported by results of marketing research into the Polish winter sports market conducted by the Tourism Department at the Katowice School of Economics in 2004 and 2005. Data were obtained from ten Polish major ski areas, including Czyrna-Solisko in Szczyrk. In each of the ski areas, 100 skiers, or snowboarders, were asked to answer a questionnaire in the form of an interview. As the interview was conducted while people were standing in ski-lift queues, and was generally perceived as an attractive way of making use of time, there were very few refusals, which is similar with other researches conducted among queuing skiers (Tsiotsou 2005). A full presentation of the obtained results is presented in Żemła 2005 and Cieślowski, Chudy-Hyski and Żemła (2004). Most of those results are only partially connected with the specific subject of this paper and are not presented here. However, answers to questions about the level of satisfaction derived from a stay in a resort, evaluation of main weaknesses of the researched resort, the most important customers' requirements and length of ski trip are used here to illustrate the presented ideas and problems.

Although stakeholders' cooperation in tourism destinations' and winter sports destinations operating are widely presented in the literature, they are not so far presented thoroughly in the context of Central and Eastern European countries in transition. Typical problems of those countries connected with tourism destinations' development were also presented in the literature but with regard to analysis of destination competitiveness (Gomezelj Omerzel 2005), economic change (Williams and Balaz 2000), destination image (Hall 1999; Konečnik 2004; Konečnik and Ruzzier 2006) or destination positioning (Orth and Turečkova 2002). Among the rare examples in which the stakeholders' cooperation in tourism destinations in European countries in transition was examined are the works of Roberts and Simpson (1999), Brezovec and Brezovec (2004) and Holesinska (2007). Still only in the work of Holesinska (2007) is a focused analysis of a specific case offered but, in contrast to the present paper, Holesinska's research was based on the interview with stakeholders, which leads rather to a description of stakeholders willingness to cooperate than to the less optimistic reality. Also all cited papers are written within a national or regional context and it is difficult to find a single study of problems of collaboration in countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe devoted to the analysis of local development.

### **Cooperation, Partnership and Networking in Winter Sports Tourism Destinations**

In present – day society, rapid changes in the transitional global economy have increased competition between businesses and organizations that produce value for customers. The use of cooperation and alliances between local actors has for a long time been discussed as providing strategies to meet up with this increasing competition. One example where this focus has gained acceptance is among tourist destinations. Middleton and Hawkins point out four major groups of players involved in local tourism development. They are: residents, elected representatives and appointed officials of local government, businesses providing directly and indirectly services and goods for visitors to the destination, and visitors (Middleton and Hawkins 1998, 87). Because of differences in goals and ways of acting between the stated players, the importance of developing partnership to achieve synergy between the private and public sector is inescapable. Local partnership, however, needs jointly negotiated and agreed approaches to tourism management in which the goals are mutually defined and endorsed, and the techniques designed to achieve matching of demand and supply are jointly operated (Middleton and Hawkins 1998). Such a partnership might be reached thanks to the effective operations of the Local Tourism Organizations. Although the concept of LTO is well known, there is no universal best way of organizing effective structure of such institution, and instead the need for an elastic situational approach is pointed (Heath and Wall 1992). New management theoretical concepts, especially networking and inter-organizational competitive advantage paradigms (Gulati, Nohria, and Zaheer 2000), might be helpful when searching for effective ways to achieve destination management (Fyall and Garrod 2005; Wang and Xiang 2007; Beritelli, Bieger, and Laesser 2007).

Previous studies show that traditional marketing theory is only of limited value to most tourist enterprises and destinations, as it is based on the assumption that a company has full control over the marketing and image-creation of its product (von Friedrichs Grängsjö 2007, 2). A further limitation for tourist enterprises is that a tourist product with spatial fixity does not usually involve a single entrepreneur, but ownership is often spread amongst several small enterprises, each of which is dependent on the others to provide a unified quality product for the tourist. The different entrepreneurs involved in the tourist destination could all have

their own individual motives and values that affect the way in which they operate. Another of the disadvantages of traditional marketing theories is that they do not include the relationships, interactions and networks that provide the geographical and social framework within which the entrepreneur operates. The relationship between cooperation and competition becomes essential with regard to the marketing of a tourist destination as it occurs at various levels (Weaver and Oppermann 2000). In one respect, the tourist destination constitutes a unified tourist product in relation to other potential destinations for tourists. In another respect, competition exists at the destination between the various elements of the tourist product (von Friedrichs Grängsjö 2007, 2).

It is considered here that tourism is a network industry par excellence (Scott, Cooper, and Baggio 2007, 7). Support for this claim is found in the definition of tourism as systems where interdependence is essential (Bjork and Virtanen 2005), and collaboration and cooperation between different organizations within a tourism destination creates the tourism product (Pechlaner, Abfalder, and Raich 2002; Fyall and Garrod 2005). In this way, local alliances, agreements and other formal and informal governance structures help to compensate for the fragmented nature of a tourism destination (Scott, Cooper, and Baggio 2007, 8). Networking theories has been suggested as a way to better understand ongoing marketing activities and processes aiming to develop a business (von Friedrichs Grängsjö 2007, 2). Buhalis (2000) indicates that most destinations consist of networks of tourism suppliers and that the benefits of such networks include a more profitable tourism destination (Morrison, Lynch, and Johns 2004). A second reason for studying networks as a central part of tourism is that they form a basis for collective action. In tourism, many of the main resources of a tourism destination are community 'owned', so that are used jointly to attract tourists. These may be physical resources such as beaches, lakes, scenic outlook, national parks and beaches; built resources such as museums, art galleries and heritage buildings; or intangible resources such as destination brands or the reputation for friendliness of the local people. Such collective action does not necessarily require a network organization, but in a situation with a general lack of resources and where decisions related to tourism are not often seen within the government mandate, the response is often a network of interested stakeholders (Scott, Cooper, and Baggio 2007, 8).

Implementation of company management originated theories into the ground of tourism destinations has to be very careful, as phenomena

not observed commonly in business networks do occur here. These are, among the others, strong involvement of public authorities and the political nature of decisions (Hall 1999; 2003), key role of free goods in product development (Hassan 2000), or non-profit character of the destination. Also the management should acknowledge the existence of a very big number of stakeholders with different characteristics, powers and aims, often conflicting (Flagestad 2002; Hall 2004), though the multistakeholder approach should be implemented (Sautter and Leisen 1999; Flagestad 2002), and one of the most important tasks is conflict management. In presented here case study, conflicts between stakeholders are pointed as one of the most important reasons for failure in establishing long term partnership or at least operational cooperation. Understanding the difference between different levels of cooperation and partnership is also important here, as, according to Mendell (1999) and Hall (1999), those might include; 1) linkages or intensive contacts between two or more actors; 2) intermittent coordination or mutual adjustment of the policies and procedures; 3) ad hoc or temporary task force activity; 4) permanent and/or regular coordination; 5) a coalition; 6) a network structure. As far as cooperation might be taken only to implement some current actions and to achieve short-term goals, the term partnership imposes a long time horizon of cooperation and mutual trust. So the real partnership in a destination will be established when all parties involved in development of the product would gather, not once but regularly, and work out and implement a common vision of this development and common strategy with measures taken to achieve common goals. This task seems to be much more challenging than just taking from-time-to-time common actions, but the existence of local partnership may be the starting condition for effectiveness of short-term common actions.

Ski resorts are specific destinations because of their tourism infrastructure and strong connection with mountain areas. There are also specific management problems characteristic for ski resorts. The first and most obvious difference is connected with business engaged in the local tourism stage. In resorts with big ski areas the operator of the ski lift infrastructure is often one of the most powerful actors and a bigger company than the rest of local tourism sector. Then, differently than in most other destinations, Jarillo's (1988) hub network seems to describe best the relationships among stakeholders in winter sports destinations. This situation might be even more complicated in many Polish ski localities like in Wisła or Szczyrk as there are numerous examples

of the existence of two or more not interlinked ski areas in one locality which are rather competitors than cooperators. The question of stakeholders' cooperation in winter sports destinations was undertaken by Flagestad (2002) and Bieger, Beritelli and Weinert (2004) but only with regard to the well developed markets of Alpine countries or Sweden and their results are not to be easily extended into the Polish winter sports market.

On the basis of literature analysis, four major problem areas of collaborative approach to winter sports destinations are examined in the paper. These are: cooperation and conflicts between local stakeholders, involvement of local authorities, intra-destination cooperation and dealing with conflict between tourism product development and nature preservation. Studying the bases of cooperation and conflicts between local stakeholders is the most obvious. Regarding the fact that most Polish winter sports destinations can be classified as integrated resorts (Żemła 2004) where the special role is reserved for public authorities, also here their role is examined thoroughly. Western European destinations examples proves that nowadays only intra-destination cooperation is usually not enough for creating a competitive offer, for the question of regional inter-destination cooperation is also raised. Finally, the underlying the problem of nature preservation mirrors the typical feature of winter sports destinations, which is especially sharp criticism from ecologists' organizations.

### **Polish Ski Market and Szczyrk's Position as a Leading Polish Winter Sports Destination**

The general perception that Poland is a typical lowland country is a correct one as only about 3% of the country area is 500m above sea level. However, the 3% of the Polish territory represents, in absolute terms, a surface area of about 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> which is about half of the size of Slovenia. Although relatively small in size, one fifth of the Polish accommodation capacity, is concentrated in these mountainous districts. Demand for this area comes from domestic markets, as about 20% of Poles state that they go skiing at least once a year (TNS OBOP 2004).

The Polish ski market's closure to international tourism has resulted in specific attitudes of Polish skiers, who used to ski only on Polish slopes, and of the owners of Polish ski areas, who used to cater only for the domestic market. Now, almost 20 years after the fall of communism, the Polish ski market continues to be almost autarkical. Polish skiers, gen-

erally preferring one-day ski trips, usually ski in Poland, while foreign guests in Polish ski resorts are extremely rare.

Therefore, the Polish ski-operators have been operating in a market characterized by the surplus of demand over supply. The opening of borders and the growing popularity of outbound tourism, especially after Poland's accession to the EU, have begun to change the comfortable situation of Polish ski operators. Due to the huge quality gap between Polish and foreign ski-resorts, those in neighbouring Slovakia and the Czech Republic, as well as those in the Alpine regions are becoming more popular among Polish skiers. The key question now is how the stakeholders in Polish ski resorts can adapt their actions to become competitive internationally.

In total, there are almost 100 towns and villages in the Polish Carpathians and Sudety Mountains with some ski infrastructure, although these are mostly small and poorly equipped ski resorts. Most of them are located in the Carpathian Mountains, where Szczyrk, Białka Tatrzańska, Wisła and Zakopane seem to be the most popular ones, although only Zakopane and Wisła have become recognizable names among international tourists due to the hallmark ski-jumping competitions, and the Polish ski-jumping champion Adam Małysz. Szczyrk and Zakopane are the best developed Polish ski resorts regarding numbers of lifts and slopes. Although the Sudety Mountains have only fourteen ski areas, they have the two amongst the biggest ones in Poland – Szklarska Poręba and Karpacz. In addition, the resorts in Zieleniec and Sienna are also very popular.

Polish ski-resorts are exceedingly overcrowded and 30 minute queues for a ski lift are nothing out of the ordinary. This is due to the high popularity of skiing in a country with a very limited supply of mountainous areas. In Poland statistically there are 1300 people per 1 km<sup>2</sup> of the mountainous area. In comparison this figure is 10 times lower in Austria. As a consequence, ski lift operators do not feel any need to improve their services as their profits are dependent almost entirely on weather conditions. Thus, Poland has many small ski-areas with appalling infrastructure and poor quality of service, which partly explains why there are almost no foreign tourists at Polish ski-resorts.

Up till now, Polish skiers nurtured on Polish resorts have not been very demanding and have accepted the local offer as long as it was provided at a reasonable price. However, since Polish ski resorts have become more expensive than their Czech and Slovak counterparts, and

Poles have started visiting the Alpine regions, Polish resorts are gradually facing a very competitive market environment. To adjust appropriately is a challenging task for most of the Polish ski-operators, who are used to having a guaranteed visiting rate as long as there are good snow conditions. Some of them visibly follow the market changes, and rapid development of the existing and new ski areas can be observed in Poland during recent years. This includes both quantitative growth represented by the increasing number of ski facilities and qualitative growth connected with the growing number of high standard lifts, snow guns etc.

Szczyrk – a popular town in the western part of Carpathian mountains range – can be presented as an example of a locality where ski areas built by external investors have existed for over 20 years. In spite of many investments made in other places, the Czyrna-Solisko ski area in Szczyrk remains by far the biggest Polish ski area as regards the number of lifts and total length of slopes. Remembering that Czyrna-Solisko is not the sole ski area located in Szczyrk, this town can be truly regarded as the ‘Polish winter capital’.

In spite of the impressive numbers, the situation is not so optimistic when looking deep inside. Szczyrk is the only important ski locality in Poland where a single ski lift has not been built in last five years. The ratio of slopes with artificial snowing equipment as well as with evening lights is among the lowest Poland. There are only two very old and slow chair lifts and t-bar ski lifts are also often behind the times. Szczyrk is justifiably regarded as one of the most crowded ski localities in Poland and the level of visitor’s satisfaction remains lower than in competing places. Long queues to lifts were pointed out by 62% of Szczyrk visitors as one of the three major weaknesses, which was the second highest result among 10 researched resorts. Respondents were asked also about their general satisfaction derived from their stay in a given ski resort. They were asked to use a 5 point Likert scale ranging from –2 (completely unsatisfied) to 2 (completely satisfied). Results are presented in table 1. With the mean 0.59 Szczyrk found itself to be number 9 among 10 researched ski resorts. However, one should not conclude that Szczyrk’s visitors are more unsatisfied than those of its competitors. Only 7 respondents declared themselves to be unsatisfied and none to be completely unsatisfied, which is comparable to most of Szczyrk’s competitors. Low level of overall satisfaction is here strongly affected by the highest among researched resorts ratio of visitors remaining indifferent – not satisfied nor unsatisfied (o). Generally it is visible in table 1 that the highest level of customer satis-

TABLE 1 Overall satisfaction derived from the stay in the researched ski resort

Resort	2	1	0	-1	-2	Mean
Szczyrk (Czarna-Solisko)	17	32	43	7	0	0,59
Zakopane (Gubałówka)	32	54	14	0	0	1,18
Białka Tatrzańska (Kotelnica)	36	45	15	3	1	1,12
Wierchomla Mała	31	52	15	0	2	1,10
Międzybrodzie Żywieckie (Żar)	32	44	22	1	1	1,05
Sienna (Czarna Góra)	24	48	28	2	0	0,94
Szczawnica (Palenica)	19	54	23	3	1	0,87
Ustroń (Czantoria)	16	49	28	6	1	0,73
Szklarska Poręba (Szrenica)	18	32	41	7	0	0,61
Zakopane (Kasprowy)	14	35	34	5	2	0,54
10 researched resorts	25	45	26	3	1	0,90

NOTES 2 – completely satisfied, 1 – satisfied, 0 – neutral, -1 – unsatisfied, -2 – completely unsatisfied.

faction was detected in newly built resorts like Białka Tatrzańska, Wierchomla or Żar, while the most traditional resorts with established position in the Polish ski market for many years, because of suffering from the lack of new investments in improvement of the old infrastructure – Szczyrk, Szklarska Poręba and Zakopane-Kasprowy Wierch – were evaluated as the worst among the researched resorts.

### **Conflicts and Problems: In Search of Reasons for Szczyrk's Stagnation**

Szczyrk is also the model example of conflicts blocking the development of winter sports destinations. The big potential and leading positions on the market are being lost due to the helplessness of local stakeholders involved in numerous conflicts.

#### SKI AREA OPERATOR VERSUS LAND OWNERS CONFLICT

In countries where there are no legal regulations on use of land for ski purposes and where ski lift operators usually only lease land for slopes, like Poland, owners of the land agreement for the development or even existence of ski infrastructure must be ensured. The most convincing negative example is Szczyrk. Due to the conflict of the land owners with GAT – the company operating the Czarna-Solisko ski area – 9 out of 13 ski lifts had to be closed down because their slopes were cut with

fences. Both sides treat their opponents as enemies and accuse them of numerous little frauds. Additionally the conflict has also a personal background, as one of the most prominent GAT opponents among the land owners is a previous member of the board of GAT who clashed with the new board. The unpredictable situation with the land owners is still pointed to as the main reason why GAT has not made any new investments since the ski area opening over 20 years ago.

Sharp conflicts between ski area operators and land owners can be observed also in many other Polish ski resorts. The most famous, in the 2005/2006 winter season, was the case of Gubałówka in Zakopane where only one family against all the other land owners stopped the ski area. This was the direct reason for setting up works on snow law by a few politics parties. However the project, created in a nervous atmosphere, instead of solving problems was concentrated only on defending the interests of ski operators. The main accusations made by land owners were not referred to. These include the way of using and preparing slopes both in winter and in summer, including illegal cutting of trees to widen the slope by the ski operator and conducting building and other construction works in summer by land owners. The projects of 'snow law', prepared in consultancy with major ski operators, show their perception of land owners and their role in ski resort development. They are perceived rather as an anti-development power and rivals than as partners and important local stakeholders. Often good examples of Alpine countries with some kind of 'snow law' were referred to. But presentation of only legal conditions without full examination of practice may give the wrong impression of the role played by land owners in countries with the highest level of development of the skiing industry. In research conducted by Flagestad (2002) land owners were found to be the most important and powerful stakeholders in winter sports destinations both in Sweden and Switzerland, overlapping investors or ski operators.

One of the reasons for the problem is the impression of being excluded from the decision process and from benefiting their own propriety felt by land owners. Especially when the ski operator is an external, big company, this may lead to the existence of two different groups of stakeholders with two different goals and conflicting interests. Local stakeholders, including land owners, and external investor do not play in one team to create an outstanding market offer, instead they try to maximize their profit at the expense of the second side. In Szczyrk there is one more reason for such a situation. This is its localization and connected with this

the structure of visitors. The biggest segment of skiers visiting Szczyrk are one day visitors from the Silesian voivodeship, especially from the nearby located Katowice agglomeration, who are characterized by very low interest in local services other than ski lifts. Visitors from the Silesian voivodeship made up as much as 46% of visitors in Szczyrk. This results in one of the shortest mean declared lengths of stay – 4.39 days (while the mean for 10 researched resorts was 5.19) and one of the biggest ratios of one day visits – 46% (mean for 10 resorts – 30%). Also respondents were asked about the three most important requirements regarding a ski resort. Characteristic is that visitors in Szczyrk put much more weight than visitors of other resorts onto elements connected directly with ski infrastructure, like good preparation of ski slopes, no queues to lifts or comfortable lifts, while not appreciating the importance of elements of the ski resort's product not directly linked with skiing, like accommodation, après-ski or safety (table 2).

The data presented above shows that skiers' spendings at the destination in Szczyrk are small, and almost the sole stakeholders truly benefiting from their visits are the ski area operators. Then it is easy to understand why local inhabitants do not connect their prosperity with winter offer development, which connection should be obvious in other situations and which is treated as obvious by GAT.

#### OTHER CONFLICTS AND LACK OF COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

Apart from the most important and sharpest conflict between GAT and land owners, there are also many other conflicts or at least passiveness and mistrust between stakeholders. As an effect, there is no much – needed cooperation between them. The best example can be the two biggest ski areas which are situated just next to each other. Actually they are even connected by a slope, but skiers have to watch out which lift they take to use the ticket they have bought. This impossibility of implementing a common ticketing system or other forms of cooperation is even stranger when it is considered that both operators are state owned companies (however they are within the responsibility of different ministries). During the problems described above with slopes closure, the number of winter visitors in Szczyrk felled so dramatically that it not only threatened the profitable existence of local service providers like accommodation facilities or gastronomic outlets, but was also visible in diminished turnover in other ski areas, including Skrzyczne – the second biggest ski area. However, even this situation did not force ski area op-

TABLE 2 Three of the most important customer requirements in a winter sport destinations

Requirement	Visitors to Szczyrk (%)	Visitors to 10 researched resorts (%)
Easy access	35	38
Information available	7	7
Feeling of safety	9	18
Guarantee of snow-cover	24	33
No queues to lifts	50	32
Large number of diversified ski slopes	23	20
Well-prepared ski slopes	53	31
Fast and comfortable lifts	26	15
Ski ticket covering many lifts	9	7
Low price of services	11	18
Separated snowboard infrastructure	4	6
Additional services for skiers	2	4
Satisfying accommodation base	3	10
Satisfying gastronomic base	6	7
Evening entertainment	1	5
Additional recreational offer	1	2
Local folk/cultural events	0	2
Scenic beauty	7	10
Peaceful atmosphere	0	2
Others	3	4

erators or other stakeholders to think over some collaborative actions to fight the crisis.

In many Alpine countries ski operators cooperate with other services providers in promotion by preparing common publications and web pages. Also, often a common pricing policy is established by creation of tourism packages consisting of ski ticket and accommodation. Those kinds of cooperation so far have been not even considered. There is also no idea of ski buses, even though the number of skiers' private cars exceeds highly the capacity of local roads and parking places.

#### THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

One of the first ways, which come to one's mind when thinking about possible solutions to the described situation might be the strong lo-

cal leadership, which could integrate all stakeholders, including those in conflict, around the idea of development of the ski resort. This role should and might be played by the local government. Unfortunately local authorities in Szczyrk are weak, without the charisma needed to be a leader, and are not efficient. Totally helpless with huge traffic jams and lack of parking places, responsible for poor and dispersed tourism promotion and, even worse, absence of vision for development of the town's tourism offer and not effectively acting as mediator, Szczyrk local authorities cannot be regarded by other stakeholders as a powerful player and potential leader.

However the strongest criticism of Szczyrk's local authorities is connected with their weak response to the conflict between GAT and land owners, which can be dangerous for the whole economy of Szczyrk. The priority taken by authorities is to not get involved in the conflict as one of the sides, which is correct, however neutrality cannot be mixed with passiveness. Also no single interesting solution was offered by the authorities.

#### POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF REGIONAL COOPERATION BETWEEN SKI RESORTS

As long as local partnership is the basic condition for achieving sustainable success for a ski resort, regional cooperation between resorts seems to be a good way of setting up the competitive advantage. This cooperation should be carried out within the wider understood region managed as a tourism destination. This task appears to be especially challenging because it encourages the closest competitors to cooperate.

The first reason why it is worth considering such cooperation is connected with the very essential feature of tourism – tourists' need to visit and explore different places. Many tourists during their stay in one place tend to visit also some other towns and villages around. This means that the relative increase in attractiveness of the neighbouring locality need not necessarily create the threat of losing some potential guests, but could be also an opportunity to attract new visitors to nearby located attractions. The same thing may concern ski resorts. First of all, communities within the ski area may benefit from a non-skiing attraction located nearby. This justifies the need for cooperation of ski resorts with other types of resorts. But also the cooperation between ski resorts may be profitable. In Alpine countries where huge ski areas prevail, the cooperation between communities connected by one ski area is obvious.

But rather less probable is cooperation of that type between communities from different ski areas as, due to the uncountable number of slopes and ski operators' pricing policies, skiers tend to spend all the stay in one area. The opposite situation emerges in Poland: 3 or 5 slopes are usually not enough for tourists to spend a week skiing in one ski area, and visitors often look for new impressions in neighbouring resorts. So improvements made in nearby areas may stimulate visits, but this needs not only cooperation between resorts but also taking specific action like information campaigns.

One of the most important dimensions of segmentation of the winter sports market is the distance between destination and visitor's place of living, which is strongly connected with length of stay and frequency of visits. Not surprisingly, tourists from remote markets usually visit a ski resort rarely and stay longer, while skiers from the closest surrounding prefer frequent one-day visits. It's worth adding that the demand of each of those segments is seasonal, but their seasonality differs by the length of the cycle. Visits from distant places are usually concentrated into the short period of the peak of the season, especially during winter holidays, Christmas or Easter, while one-day visits are divided more equally over the whole winter season with strong intensification during weekends. In order to combat the negative effects of seasonality, ski resorts have to keep a balance between visits by tourists from both segments, and too strong dependency on one of them can be dangerous. This situation may be observed in many Polish ski resorts like Szczyrk, where short visits are dominant.

Operating on two market segments imposes the use of different marketing strategies. When competing in nearby located markets among the most important factors are ease and length of journey. The limited time that skiers agree to devote to a journey also limits their possibilities of choice. In this market, the closest neighbours must be also the closest competitors. Remembering the already stated great importance of this market in Poland, it is easier to understand mutual reluctance between neighbouring resorts.

Still, there is a need to balance short visits with longer stays much more profitable for a resort. However, there is a barrier for many Polish ski resorts to compete effectively on remote markets. They are simply too small and not sufficiently recognizable, not only for international tourists but also for inhabitants of Central and Northern Poland. To fight this situation they should create a positive image of the region, which can

easily be recognized. Without a positive overall image of the Polish ski areas, any single Polish resort can have only limited chances for success on the international market. The decision to start closer cooperation with closest competitors can be painful for many resorts, yet it seems to be unavoidable in long-term horizon.

Establishing such a cooperation or even partnership at regional level can produce one more opportunity. Apart from the criterion of length of stay, also some other dimensions of segmentation can be very useful. An example of one of them is the choice between attracting families with children or youth. Expectations of those two groups are different and sometimes even divergent, so it is difficult to serve them both in one locality. Ski resorts in one region, however, instead of competing with each other in offering similar products can differentiate their offers and specialize in serving one specific segment. This is well illustrated by examples of Austrian resorts from Landers Tyrol or Salzburg. Maria Alm in Hochkönig Winterreich is a typical resort prepared to serve families with kids where there aren't any places playing loud music late, but where there are plenty of attractions for children and also specially prepared ski-schools. Located 30 km. from Maria Alm, Saalbach offers a completely different product based on well-developed après-ski services and amusement business.

Such differentiation of ski resort images can be copied also into the Polish ground, but is practically impossible without involvement of regional authorities. As with Tirol Werbung in Tyrol or Salzburger Land gmbH in Salzburg, a similar role can be played by Polish voivodeship governments and Regional Tourism Organizations created with their initiations. Regional government and/or the Regional Tourism Organization is responsible for the image of the whole region and has to coordinate actions taken by all localities, and should also support or even prepare plans for strengthening the image of the region as a destination offering differentiated products well adjusted to the specific needs of many different tourists. A suggestion for implementing such a product differentiation was made in the Strategy of Tourism Development in the Silesian voivodeship. According to this proposal, Szczyrk is to develop the position of perfect resort for demanding skiers while Wisła and Istebna should attract skiers interested in local traditions and culture, and Brenna should appeal to families with children and other groups looking for small scale tourism often combining skiing with agrotourism stays. This long-term vision seems to be a bit unrealistic according to the hith-

erto lack of cooperation at both local and regional levels, yet if carefully implemented by small steps it may strengthen the competitive position of all Silesian resorts in few years time.

#### OPPOSITION FROM NATURE PRESERVATION ORGANIZATIONS

Alpine skiing is considered to be one of the most environmentally damaging forms of tourism (Kurek 2004; Holden 2000; Pickering and Hill 2003; Geneletti, forthcoming). Also the location of skiing in mountainous areas means that it is using using one of the most fragile and also often valuable ecosystems (Kurek 1999). Conflict between protection and development of the ski industry is especially sharp in Poland, where traditions of ecological movements are very strong and the supply of suitable areas for skiing is dramatically lower than the demand. Almost all Polish mountain ranges, and even single mountains with better than average natural conditions for skiing development, are protected as National Parks or in other ways. Often on the area of National Parks there are some infrastructures for skiers, existing which are older than those of park protection. This is the situation of 3 of Poland's biggest ski resorts: Zakopane (Tatrzański NP) and Karpacz and Szlarska Poręba (Karkonoski NP). Since law forbids new investments in ski infrastructure in National Parks – and this restriction includes not only building new lifts or slopes, but also raising their capacity – those ski areas remain with very old equipment and a rather low quality of services. This causes great dissatisfaction to the so-called 'ski lobby' including ski operators, some skiers and local officials. Very strong pressure made by them integrates also the 'ecologist lobby'. The position of National Parks' administrations supported by many ecologists' organizations seems to be also unbreakable. The most extreme example of 'war' between those two parties is from the Carpathians resort of Korbiewów – where ski lifts operate up to the peak of Pilsko where conditions for skiing are especially good, but where also a very valuable nature reserve is located. During the strongest argument a few years ago an 'unknown delinquent' damaged the rope of a lift in a way that caused a big loss for the ski operator and might have threatened the safety of users if not detected earlier. This shows that players like National Park administration, ecological organizations and the Ministry of Nature Protection, have to be welcomed when plans for developing ski areas are made. Building new lifts cannot be treated as a single victory over the ecologists but has to be based on a long-term agreement. This agreement can be reached only when both sides soften their positions.

Protectionists have to understand the need for the existence of ski infrastructure, but also the most environmentally damaging projects have to be abandoned.

Development-protection conflict is not visible in Szczyrk as strongly as in other regions of the Polish mountains. Located far away from National Parks and nature reserves, Szczyrk is usually not perceived by ecologists as an especially valuable area. Additionally, the scale of investments taken many years ago means that nowadays there is not much nature to preserve in Szczyrk. However, this 'peace' between ecology and development lobbies in Szczyrk can be explained also the other way. Usually ecologists' protests are connected with new investments projects. And in Szczyrk there has been no such a project with high probability of implementation for many years.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The practice of Western European countries offers easy and efficient solutions when trying to develop a tourism destination. However, in a country without many years of existence of established and effective local democracy and free market, inhabited mainly by people who have grown up under communism, characterized by lack of knowledge and difficulty with defining the common good, tourism destinations in Central and Eastern European countries in transition are not yet prepared to implement those solutions based on collaborative actions of local stakeholders. In Polish winter sports destinations, differently than in other Central and European countries like Slovakia, the Czech Republic or Slovenia, the huge domestic demand and low level of skiers' expectations additionally 'helped' local stakeholders to underestimate threats connected with competition in the open market. In such conditions it is even harder to persuade almost anyone to consider collaboration.

In Poland, ski areas are often situated in former existing settlements in which the tourism offer is not limited to the ski product. This situation imposes on local governments the task of ensuring sustainable development of ski tourism. The first step must be to integrate all players and encourage them towards close cooperation. All examples of local conflicts listed above show how difficult a task it is. Unfortunately neither of the parties, including the authorities, is prepared for cooperation. The awareness of divergences of goals of different players and mutual mistrust are still dominant in Polish ski resorts. Actually, doubts about the existence of common goals are partially justified. Especially the ski oper-

ator, when it is as an external investor, might be the subject of suspicions of other players. The operator's simplest aim is maximal usage of the lift's capacity. In many Polish resorts the easiest way to achieve this is to attract one-day visitors from nearby located cities. But one-day visitors are not profitable guests for the local economy, which needs development of some public services like transport, parking places etc. In a situation when demand for one-day skiing in Poland is huge, ski operators expect from local governments rather improving those services than preparing and implementing a holistic development strategy. On the other hand, local governments vainly rarely attempt to implement the strategy by encouraging ski operators to adopt a discount ticket policy for longer or off-season stays.

Sharing profits is the most common problem blocking potential cooperation between business entities in Polish ski resorts. The conflicts between ski lift operators and landowners are typical examples. Also this seems to be the main reason why it is so difficult to implement common ticketing systems. In this situation, such normal things in Alpine countries like price cooperation between ski operator and accommodation entities or common financing of operation of ski buses are not even considered.

Overcoming those prejudices may be done by local governments, yet local governments are often responsible for their existence. Attempting to initiate the local cooperation is their important task, and without such actions all other players tend to be passive too. In all conflicts where the authorities are not directly one of the sides, they should also act as a mediator. This includes conflicts of ski operators with landowners or with ecologists. (Unfortunately many Polish local governments got involved in the second mentioned conflict by taking the side of ski development.) Closing most of slopes in a town economically dependent on skiers' expenses, as in Szczyrk, can cause serious damages to the local economy – and passive position of local authorities is surprising.

The low efficiency of local governments' actions can be a self-evident prediction. The common lack of competency in implementing political aims warned citizens and companies of the pointlessness of all actions taken by local governments. Such a position is maintained often without deep analysis of local authorities' aims, which are neglected even if they are really well prepared. In these conditions it is difficult to persuade almost anyone to break the mistrust and start to cooperate with the local authorities. Lack of current efficient actions taken by local government is

the most visible and damaging effect of aversion to cooperation among the local players.

Problems of cooperation for development of inter sports destinations in Poland, as illustrated by the example of the 'Polish winter capital' – Szczyrk – presented in this paper, show how difficult is implementation of the rules prepared on the basis of Western highly developed countries in the practice of the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Especially, since those general rules usually do not cover precisely the problems observed in those countries as well as the specific problems of destinations of a special kind, like winter sports destinations in this example. To be prepared for effective collaboration and partnership, stakeholders in Western destinations have gained experience over many years and have had strong support of science in analyzing the extensively emerging problems. In countries like Poland, it is difficult to expect that public or private sector stakeholders would be prepared to make the move and cut the distance to Western European countries, especially since the support from the scientists is very low and the debate on the approach proper for the new democracies is still absent (Hall 1998). In a situation when neither of the parties is prepared for cooperation, the stress has to be made on stakeholders' education and a help in changing their hostile attitude towards other stakeholders. The presented paper analyzes the main reasons for typical Polish ski resorts' problems of development and suggests some ways of solving them. This is, is hopefully the beginning of scientific debate on the topic of creation of the most effective solutions and spread of knowledge among actors involved in winter sports product development in Poland. The main contribution of the presented paper is, therefore, pointing out the main reasons for failure of the researched destination, which might be similar to many other destinations in Central and Eastern Europe. Earlier studies on destination collaboration (Brezovec and Brezovec 2004; Roberts and Simpson 1999) in this region were concentrated rather on searching for some general rules than on investigating specific examples.

Further studies based on the presented topic should include two main areas. First, is there a need for a tailor-made theory for destinations like Szczyrk? Can the failure of Szczyrk be explained by the same measures as the success of one of the Western European destinations? And if not, is Szczyrk different from most other destinations because it is a destination located in country in transition in Central Europe, or because it is a destination of specific type – winter sports destination? Once the general

theory of collaboration within tourism destinations is well developed it is time to investigate the adjustment needed in given situations.

The second question is connected with actions needed to enhance collaboration in Szczyrk-like destinations. Do local stakeholders not cooperate because they do not have knowledge to understand possible benefits of cooperation, or because the mutual mistrust is strong enough to overcome the expected benefits of cooperation? The case of Szczyrk might suggest that to some extent both possibilities are correct. Expert support and education can be enough to overcome lack of knowledge, however it might not be sufficient to overcome prejudices. This task without sound leadership and good practice examples could be not feasible.

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