

## **Tourism Acting as a Factor of Integration: The Case of Right-wing Extremism and Crime in the Former GDR**

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### **Background, Goal and Research Method**

Over the past years, reports over brutal, racist attacks in the former eastern states of Germany have filled the headlines of German and international media again and again. Tourism authorities in these states have complained that these attacks harm their tourism figures. In 2007, for example, a representative survey of 1000 travelers found that, in the state of Saxony-Anhalt, tourism figures could have been 11 percent higher last year had people not associated it so strongly with neo-Nazis.

The goal of this paper is to explore the manner in which reported racist attacks personally affect travelers' decisions on traveling to the former eastern states and what reactions and strategies travelers - in this case Berlin residents - show and develop.

As the research method, focus group discussions were used. Altogether, three group discussions took place in Berlin. For group-dynamic reasons, groups were made up of persons with similar backgrounds: a group with citizens from former communist East-Berlin, a group with citizens from former West-Berlin and a group with people who have immigrated to Berlin. All three groups had a similar distribution according to the demographic characteristics concerning age, gender and familial status.

### **Results**

The topic 'tourism and right-wing extremism' is particularly present among the residents of Berlin due to the frequent reports in the local media on brutal, racist attacks on foreigners and foreign tourists. Reasons for the stronger neo-Nazi-movement in the former eastern states are seen in the high unemployment rate, and thus, in a greater frustration of the population in these states, the disorientation of the youth, the enviousness of the youth towards the tourists from wealthier regions, as well as people who are not accustomed to being around many foreigners and, therefore, avoid contact with them.

Sensitivity for this topic, however, depends strongly on the social background of the residents. For example, the topic 'right-wing extremism' has more significance for people who have immigrated to

Berlin. The awareness of the neo-Nazi movement and their xenophobic attitude accompany them on each trip to the eastern states and exerts an influence on their travel behavior. For Berlin-born residents who can partly look back on a long travel experience in the eastern states, however, this topic has a marginal influence on their travel behavior.

Immigrants in Berlin, the group particularly concerned about the topic, called a set of strategies to avoid conflicts with the neo-Nazi-movement: they would try to avoid uncomfortable and dangerous situations (not visiting known dangerous places and neo-Nazi gathering spots), they would try not to attract attention and not to be recognized as a foreigner, they would travel in a group with Germans and in the case of violence, they would take flight.

Despite the reported racist attacks, all who participated in the discussion continue to make further trips into the eastern federal states; however, they avoid destinations which are estimated to be dangerous. The potential danger is seen not only in the context with right-wing extremism, but also in connection with other criminal actions.

Personal experience with a xenophobic incident would lead to two main reactions: first of all, the majority would not return to the place where the incident happened; and secondly, one would inform his or her friends, family and colleagues about the incident, as well as in the media, to make it widely known publicly.

A change in the travel behavior due to media reports on brutal, racist attacks can be determined only under certain conditions. Again, the foreigners living in Berlin would react very sensitively on reported right-wing extremist incidences, while East- and West-Berliners would react only for a short time with a boycott of the destination concerned. East and West-Berliners do not feel like a target group for right-wing extremist attacks. They also tend to be well informed about the situation in the eastern federal states and are able to estimate the danger well. Only repeated racist attacks and crimes in a destination and, above all, the acceptance of right-wing extremist attitudes by local politicians (opinion makers) and/or local residents would result in a boycott of the destination.

The participants of the discussion proposed several measures to combat the negative effects of racist attacks and counteract negative tourist developments:

*Socio-political measures* like job creation in the former eastern federal states (high unemployment is seen as one of the causes for right-wing attitude); affirmative action for the youth; promotion of a positive tourism attitude amongst the population; improvement of law regulations to judge right-extremist crimes easier.

*Security measures*: it is important to create more security with, for example, a higher presence of police or the employment of tourist companions to satisfy the need for more security. Furthermore,

neo-Nazis should be banned and excluded from certain areas to prevent xenophobic attacks and crimes.

*Communication measures:* extensive education of the tourists about the neo-Nazi movement and right wing extremism scene is seen as another measure for a positive tourism development. Furthermore, it is an absolute must that local politicians and the local population distance themselves from the right-wing extremism ideas and right-wing extremist scene. If (foreign) tourists can count on the support of the local population and if they are openly and whole-heartedly welcomed, the fear of racist attacks will lose its impact on travel behavior.

### **Prospects**

Tourism as an integration factor? The explorative group discussions show that intensively perceived right-wing extremism and xenophobia in a tourist destination has an impact on travel behavior. Thus, the following hypotheses can be derived:

- Frequent, brutal, racist attacks in a tourist destination have a negative impact on the tourist arrivals in the destination.
- The open and visible presence of right-wing extremist groups leads to a decrease in the travel to the destination.
- The acceptance of right-wing extremism attitude by local politicians, opinion makers and local population leads to a decrease in travel to the destination.

In contrast to this, the hypothesis can be derived that

- Foreigners and foreign tourists in highly developed tourist destinations are treated more positively than in weakly developed tourist regions.

Hence, it follows that tourism plays an important role in

- the reduction of prejudices towards foreigners and in the reduction of right-wing extremist attitudes,
- the build-up of dialogues between the local population and (foreign) tourists, as well as
- the integration of right-extremism minded fringe groups.