

GIVING EVERYONE THE RIGHT TO TRAVEL: MANAGEMENT OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Accessible or barrier-free tourism is still an under-researched area in tourism research in Hungary. With a better management and a more focused marketing, better access and more successful involvement of this target group with special needs is an unused reserve in tourism development. Based on the results of a questionnaire survey, the authors highlight some important aspects of the travel demand of people living with disabilities, which should be considered by tourism destination management when developing tourist attractions and products, as well as in the design of visitor management tools and methods. Accessible tourism concerns more than one-tenth of the European population, so in addition to its social and societal importance, it is also a non-negligible business opportunity. Understanding the expectations and specific consumer habits of the stakeholders is essential to develop an appropriate offer and to ensure equal access to services. The authors, having acted as experts in the Erasmus Peer Act project, are demonstrating findings of a Hungarian survey on the issue, with international outlook.

Keywords: accessible tourism, travel habits and frequency, motivation.

INTRODUCTION

In developed countries, accessibility is also receiving increasing attention in the organisation of tourism supply, partly out of humanity and partly in recognition of the significant business potential. In the most general terms, accessible tourism is tourism that is equally accessible to all, including people with disabilities, people with temporary disabilities, older people, people with young children and multi-generational families. Accordingly, the main areas of analysis of equal access are the same as the main areas of the supply side of tourism, namely: accommodation services; hospitality; tourist attractions; transport; communication. Of these, it is perhaps the accessibility of attractions that is the most addressed in the literature, probably in the context of the fact that a significant number of attractions are public institutions owned by the state (CSESZNÁK É. ET AL. 2009, KÁLDY M. 2010). In this study, based on the results of a questionnaire survey, we will investigate which are the most popular tourism products in the demand of people with disabilities and what type of offer they are looking for.

The definition of the target group for accessible tourism is problematic. In many cases, the public does not even include in the target group those who, due to their life situation, are members of the target group for a shorter or longer period of time: for example, pregnant women, people with temporary disabilities recovering from surgery, or the elderly. The proportion of the latter in the overall population is steadily increasing, and for them many forms of accessibility are a major need. In a broader and philosophical approach, accessibility is a constant aspiration of human existence, constantly striving for comfort (FARKAS-PETKYÓ 2019, 2020). Many of the people live with some kind of permanent or temporary disability, which can be an obstacle in their lives and a barrier to their journeys. In fact, “Accessible tourism is a *continuous effort to make* all destinations, tourism products and services

accessible to all people, regardless of their physical limitations, disabilities or age, and whether they are private or public tourist sites” (ACCESSIBLE TOURISM).

Accessibility is no longer an issue at the level of declarations, but the reality is different. This is confirmed by the results of research carried out in the framework of the Peer Act international project.

1. LITERATURE SUMMARY

Defining disability is not an easy task, as it takes many forms. “We can include not only people with limited mobility, visual and hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, but also those who suffer from other conditions that have a long-term impact on their quality of life, such as allergies” (ZSARNÓCZKY M. 2018:39). According to WHO estimates, *one in six people on earth has a disability*, and the proportion is steadily increasing (WHO 2011). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the UNO in 2006 and proclaimed in Hungary, obliges States Parties to ensure access for persons with disabilities to sport, recreation and tourism facilities and services (2007). Special needs occur in older age for everyone, but there are also other life situations that can give rise to special needs: people undergoing rehabilitation after an accident, families with young children (DARCY, S. – DISCKSON, T. J. 2009).

The World Tourism Organisation is committed to promoting accessible tourism; it dedicated World Tourism Day 2016 to this theme. The organisation has issued several recommendations and a handbook on the issue (UNWTO 2016). Throughout human history, there have been many efforts to promote accessibility, but it only became a widely recognised social issue in the first and even more so in the second half of the 20th century. It is now widely accepted that everyone, despite a disability, should be able to enjoy the pleasures of travel as much as anyone else, “since the enjoyment of the fullness of life is a right for all” (VÉGH Zs. 2005:31). The European Parliament’s resolution of 29 October 2015 on the European Union’s priorities for the future and the European Agenda for European Tourism stresses: the importance of developing sustainable, responsible and accessible tourism; the principle of ‘tourism for all’; and that full accessibility and affordability of tourism are key to the sustainability of the sector.

According to the 2011 census data of the Hungarian Census Office (KSH), there were 595,187 persons with disabilities living in Hungary (ERNSZT et al. 2019). The population affected by accessible tourism may be much larger than this, as it can be assumed that elderly persons in good health do not consider themselves as persons with disability, but at the same time, they already require accessibility when using tourism services. As tourism has become a social phenomenon, it is also important factor in shaping quality of life (GONDA, T. et al. 2019). Facilitating travel for people with disabilities and providing the necessary physical conditions is not only a human, ethical, moral and legal obligation, but also an important economic issue. At present, accessible tourism is an untapped niche in the tourism market, despite several positive counter-examples in the recent past (BUHALIS, D. et al. 2012). However, this untapped market segment is not a homogeneous group, as they have different specific needs for services depending on the type and extent of their disability. There are barriers that can affect all travellers and barriers that are insurmountable problems for certain narrow segments, only (SHAW, G.–COLES, T. 2004). The existence of different disabilities leads to different and specific needs, which can be addressed with specific ideas and solutions. The needs of blind and hard of hearing (or deaf) people and creative solutions for accessibility designed to meet their needs are presented by ZAJADACZ, A. (2015); ZAJADACZ–LUBARSKA, A. (2020).

Different tourist destinations are at different levels in implementing accessibility. Some are developing special offers for people with disabilities, others are presenting accessibility as a

distinctive feature – recognising its market potential (LÖRINCZ et al. 2019; RAFFAY-DANYI, Á. – ERNSZT, I. 2021). The major European countries in the international tourism market are clearly placing a strong emphasis on this issue. Thus, the efforts made by Spain (VILA – DARCY – GONZÁLEZ 2015) and Italy (AGOVINO, M. ET AL. 2017) in the field of accessibility in tourism deserve to be highlighted. Among the former socialist countries, Poland has paid a lot of attention to research on this topic (ZAJADACZ, A. 2014, 2019), and it is clear that there is also a growing interest among Hungarian researchers in research on accessible tourism (GONDA–RAFFAY 2020A; FARKAS ET AL. 2022A, 2022B, 2022C, 2023). The implementation of accessible tourism is not the same as physical accessibility, the experience provided by an accessible destination is much more than that: it is the implementation of the principles of independence, equality and human dignity in the tourism experience. Experiencing the spirit of a place, exploring a geographical space, is as important for people with disabilities as it is for anyone else. Therefore, the geographical aspects of the subject should be addressed in the analysis of this topic. From a bibliometric analysis of social geography, we can see that neither urban studies nor general social geography journals give much attention to the study of accessibility or equal access (CSOMÓS 2018). Important perspectives can be drawn from KITCHIN’S (2009) work on the interpretation of place, on the approach and values of positive geography (KITCHIN, R. 2015) and on the threats and opportunities of smart settlement (KITCHIN, R. – DODGE, M. 2017). By examining these issues, we can place the issue of equal access in the context of the use of space. It is generally accepted that the experience of travelling and holidays enhances subjective feelings of happiness (CSAPÓ J. et al. 2018; GONDA et al. 2019). This is particularly true for people with disabilities, for whom tourism often offers the opportunity to escape from the daily hardships of everyday life. In many cases, travel is a holiday for them, and the experience helps them connect and integrate more easily into society (GONDA – RAFFAY 2020; GÁLNÉ KUCSÁK K. 2008). Several empirical studies in Hungary have shown that people with disabilities face significant problems when travelling and that their disability hinders them in realising their travel plans. This is why many people choose not to travel (CSAPÓ J. – GONDA T. 2019, CSAPÓ J. et al. 2019).

Very few Hungarian publications have addressed the issue of accessibility of accommodation and the motivation of people with disabilities when choosing accommodation. Around half of people with reduced mobility have a disability that prevents them from taking part in a tourism programme, compared to 75% of visually impaired people (MOTIVATION AND REVITA RESEARCH WORKSHOP 2009). Providing a high level of service to disabled guests requires empathy and attention from tourism industry stakeholders, be they state organisations, business actors or NGOs (MÁTÉ, A. 2021; HORVÁTH, G. 2021; ANGLER, K. 2021).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

When making the technical preparation of the questionnaire survey applied in the research, it was decided that the Hungarian partner in charge of the research would carry out the baseline survey on a sample of 200 people, which would be compared with national characteristics, for which the partners undertook to complete 30-30 questionnaires. It was very difficult to reach disabled stakeholders. The questionnaire was mainly completed through an online software, but in some cases it was also possible to collect data in person. In this respect, the Hungarian partner was very successful, as 89 questionnaires were completed in person at the Orfű Accessible Tourism Day in early September 2019, with the involvement of university students. In fact, 262 Hungarian completions were actually completed, which is one of the largest sample numbers in the Hungarian accessible tourism research to our knowledge. To this result, we compare the results of the other 4 countries, where the number of completions ranged from 22 to 34, as control. The larger sample was evaluated first, with the results

expressed as a percentage. Given the low number of foreign samples, in their case percentages were not calculated but the number of responses was indicated. A short research summary of the results and a workshop paper presenting the full research results were prepared (GONDA-RAFFAY 2021). 47.8% of the Hungarians who completed the questionnaire were male and 52.2% were female (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of people with disabilities by sex

Breakdown by sex					
No/Country	Engl ish	Spani sh	Itali an	Ger man	Cro atia
Female	140	12	13	22	14
Male	128	9	21	11	18

Source: own editing

Hungarians aged between 36 and 50 are the most numerous (47.8%), with almost half of the respondents in this group, 20.1% between 18 and 25, 14.2% between 50 and 65, 12.7% between 26 and 35 and 5.2% over 66 (Table 2).

Table 2: Age distribution of people with disabilities

Distribution by age					
Age/Country	Engl ish	Spani sh	Itali an	Ger man	Cro atia
18-25 years	54	1	9	8	0
26-35 years	34	0	10	8	12
36-50 years	128	13	11	6	12
50-65 years	38	8	3	8	7
Over 66 years	14	0	1	2	2

Source: own editing

Other demographic data included economic activity, housing type, educational attainment and marital status (GONDA – RAFFAY 2020b).

3. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

3.1. Composition of disabled people surveyed and frequency of travel

An important aspect of the survey was to include a wide range of disabilities. The majority of respondents have a disability that makes life difficult, with 44% of all respondents having this type of problem. The second most frequent response was about vision, with 20% of respondents experiencing difficulties in their daily lives. This is followed by hearing and other intellectual disabilities with 12-12%, followed by speech impairment (5%) and autism or Asperger's syndrome (3%). 4% of respondents said they have a multiple disability. When asked the question, more than one response was possible.

All partners sought diversity and managed to include different types of disability in the survey. In all cases, people with a motor disability are the most numerous, except in the survey in Croatia, where people with an intellectual disability make up the largest group (Figure 1).

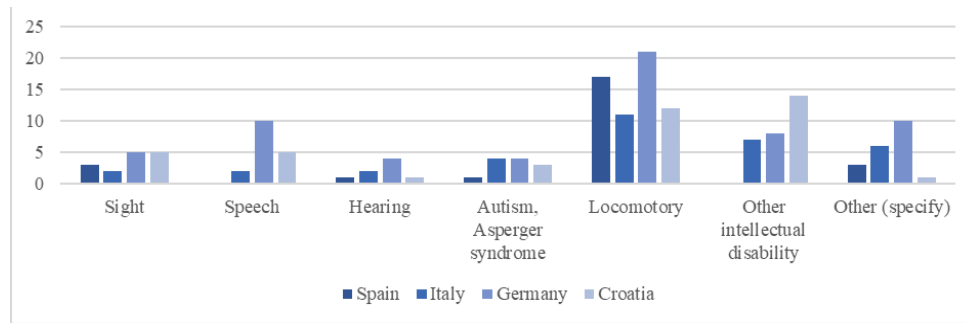


Figure 1: What disability do you live with?
Source: own editing

The difficulties most commonly encountered by people with disabilities are as follows: transport difficulties (30%), difficulties using a catering facility (20%), difficulties using accommodation (18%), difficulties in doing sports (15%), difficulties in finding attractions (12%) and communication difficulties (2%). Only 4% of respondents said they did not encounter any difficulties in their daily lives. The results are similar for the other four partners, with transport being the most frequent response, followed by accessing attractions (Figure 2).

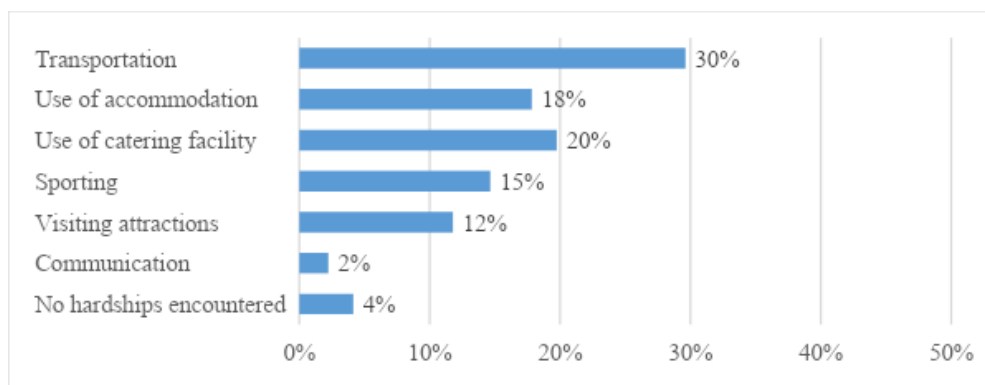


Figure 2: What difficulties do you encounter most often?
Source: own editing

The survey also asked whether respondents travel abroad or use domestic tourism services. Respondents were asked whether and how many times they had travelled abroad in the previous five years). 36% of all respondents said they had not travelled abroad at all in the five years before the survey. Of those who had, 13% of respondents had travelled only once, 21% twice, 6% three times and 24% more than three times (Figure 3).

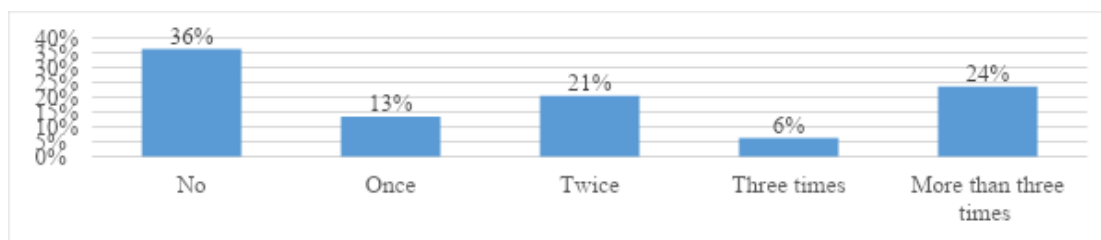


Figure 3: Have you travelled abroad in the last five years? (n=254)
Source: own editing

The next question asked whether respondents had travelled domestically for tourism purposes in 2018. 77.1% of respondents had travelled, while 22.9% had not. Of those who had

travelled, 29% had travelled once, 23% twice, 21% three times and 27% four or more times domestically. This is a much higher frequency of travel than we know from the Central Statistical Office's report on the travel habits of the domestic population (KSH 2019) or than we had previously thought based on a representative survey carried out in 2018 (CSAPÓ ET AL. 2018).

The next question was about why respondents did not travel. The main reason was clearly lack of money (25%), followed by lack of an assisting person (15.7%), and lack of company (10.2%). In addition, respondents feared not receiving the accessibility promised and/or needed during the trip (9.7%), and lack of language skills and finding the trip cumbersome were the deciding factors (9.3-9.3%). Some are afraid of new situations (7.4%), some choose to stay at home because of lack of time (6%) and some simply because their health does not allow them to travel (4.2%). Some justified their decision saying that they could gain travel experience at home with the help of the internet and technology (2.3%) or cited transport difficulties (0.9%).

3.2. Tourism preferred by people with disabilities

The importance of accessibility of tourist services is also underlined. A small proportion of respondents, only 19.1%, prefer to participate in programmes made specifically for people with disabilities. Another small share (19.8%) of respondents prefer inclusive programmes; and almost two thirds (61.1%) of them said they do not prefer to participate in programmes specifically for people with disabilities, but would like to use the same offer as anyone else.

An important question in the analysis of demand is what kind of tourism products are of interest to the members of the target group, motivated by what kind of incentives. Several of the preferred programmes could be ticked in response to the questionnaire. The most popular programmes were cultural (60.2%), nature (55.6%) and sightseeing (50.4%) (Figure 4).

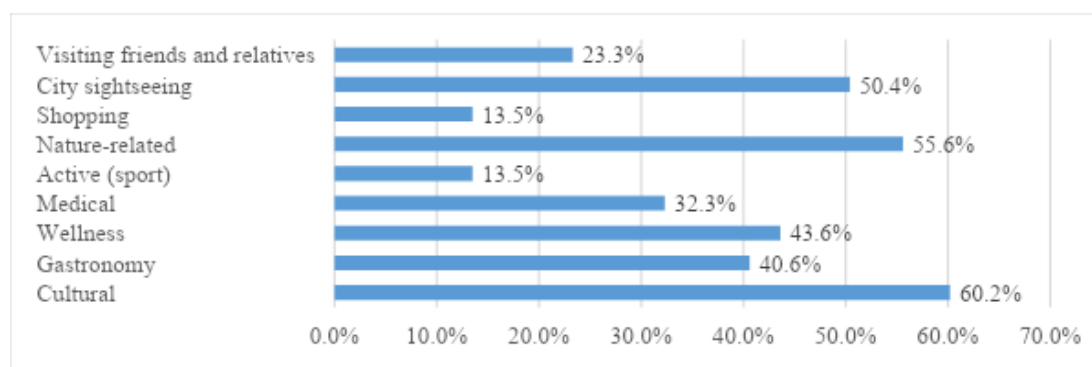


Figure 4: Which programmes do you prefer when you travel (n=264)?

Source: own editing

More respondents voted for wellness (43.6%), gastronomy (40.6%) and VFR (23.3%). In addition, there were also responses for shopping and active programmes (13.5-13.5%). This suggests that the motivation to travel of people with disabilities is more diverse than the national average and that they have a very strong interest in cultural and natural values. A question about interest in extreme sports was deliberately included. Practising extreme sports and living with a disability seem to be mutually exclusive. However, if they were provided with adequate technical support and accompaniment to try extreme sports, these activities would also attract people with disabilities at a rate well above the average for the population, see Figure 5.

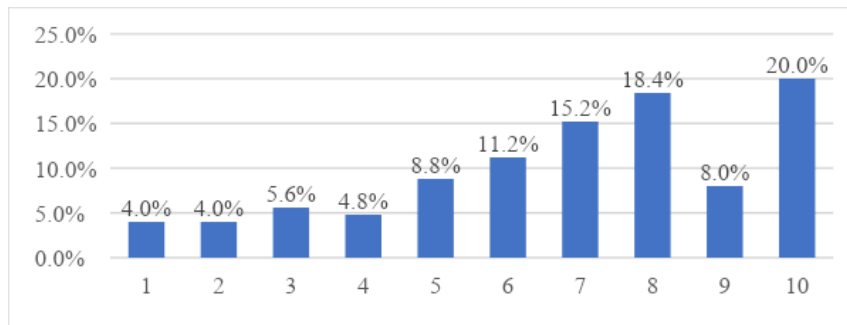


Figure 5: Extreme sports and activities would attract people with disabilities if they were provided with adequate technical support and accompaniment (n=250)
Source: own editing

Respondents from the other four countries gave similar answers to the statement on extreme sports and activities (Figure 6).

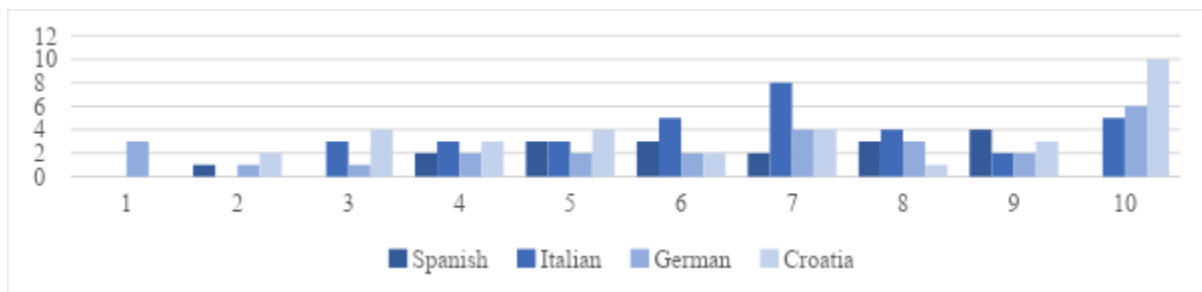


Figure 6: Extreme sports and activities would attract people with disabilities if they were provided with adequate technical support and accompaniment
Source: own editing

3.3 Impact of accessibility improvements on accessible tourism

An attitude survey was conducted to find out how the target group members perceive the situation of accessible tourism, asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement on a scale of 1 to 10 (1: strongly disagree; 10: strongly agree). The most important actors are tourism service providers, who themselves can do a lot to promote equal access. This is why tourism service providers were asked whether they are better prepared and more open to welcoming disabled guests. The results are illustrated in Figure 7. Here again, there is a relatively high disparity in the responses, with no overall agreement on the issue. The highest response rate is for the median comfort level (16.9%), followed by a scale of 8 (15.4%), and then a scale of 2 at the other extreme (13.8%). There is roughly a 50/50 split between agree and disagree. The lowest number of responses was 'strongly agree', so it can be said that tourism operators have room for improvement in terms of preparedness and openness.

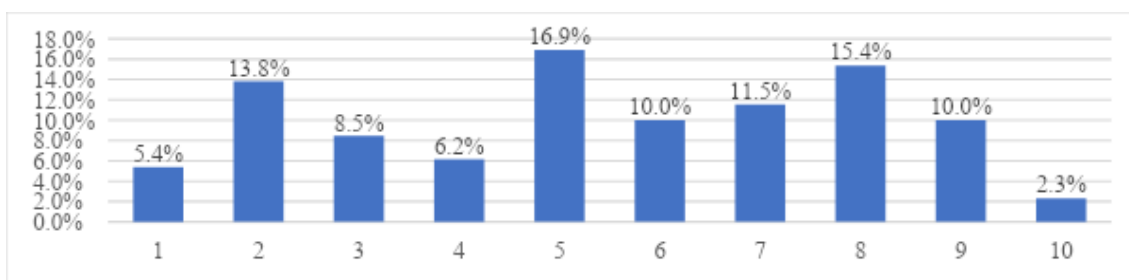


Figure 7: Tourism service providers are becoming more prepared and open to visitors with disabilities (n=260)
Source: own editing

As in the previous statement, there is no agreement in Figure 8, with a wide variation in responses, similar to the Hungarian values. The highest scores are on the 4-7 scale.

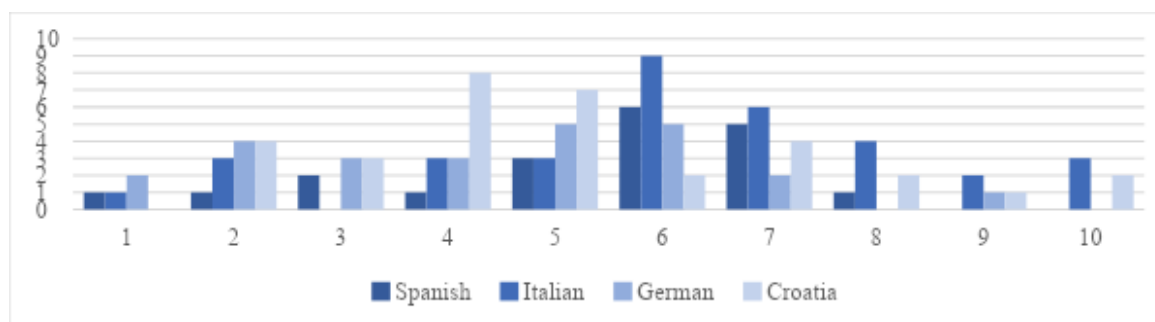


Figure 8: Tourism service providers are becoming more prepared and open to disabled visitors
Source: own editing

The link between travel and the mobility offered by transport is obvious. That is why we thought it important to ask specifically about accessibility in public transport in this context. The claim was that if wheelchair access to public transport in the respective countries were possible, more disabled people would travel. There was broad agreement on this statement. The majority of respondents agreed, with almost 2/3 of the top three scales (8 to 10) receiving a response rate. Only a small percentage of those who disagreed were spread across the lower scales (Figure 9).

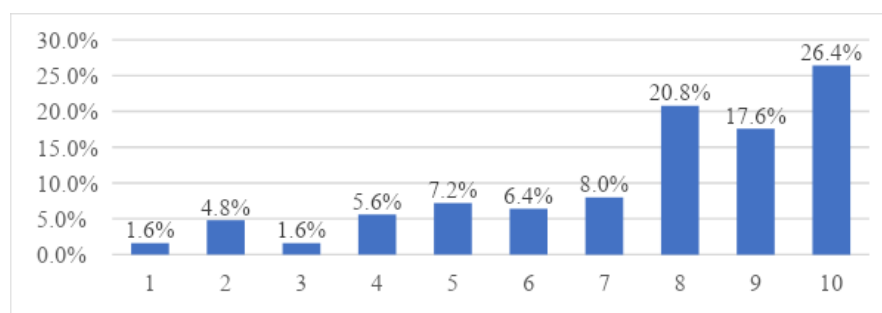


Figure 9: If wheelchair access to trains and long-distance buses were available in Hungary, more disabled people would travel (n=250)
Source: own editing

More than 90% of respondents in all four countries agree, and their responses are above the median. Most responses from all four countries were in full agreement (scale of 10). The existence of barrier-free tourist routes also helps individual mobility. Unfortunately, this infrastructure is still very limited, though cycle paths are generally well adapted to wheelchair users, and their development is well underway in Hungary. The fact that there will also be a demand for this among people with disabilities is confirmed by the results of the answers to the question that if there were wheelchair accessible tourist routes in Hungary, at least in the park forests surrounding the cities, more people with disabilities would be able to get out. As with the previous statement, there is a high level of agreement with this, with over 60% of respondents voting for the top three scales (8 to 10). Results for the lower scales are scattered, with none of them significant (Figure 10). The results of the international survey showed a similar scatter.

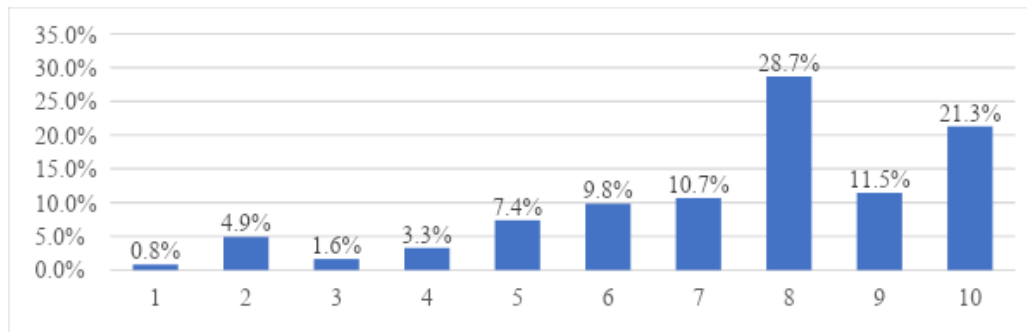


Figure 10: If there were wheelchair-accessible tourist routes in Hungary, at least in the park forests surrounding cities, more disabled people would move out (n=244)
Source: own editing

Lastly, we examine the claim that if there were a reliable online collection of wheelchair accessible hiking trails, more people would choose to travel in nature. The answer is clear, with more than half of respondents voting for the top three scales. Four fifths of respondents think that more people would choose this type of trip if it were available.

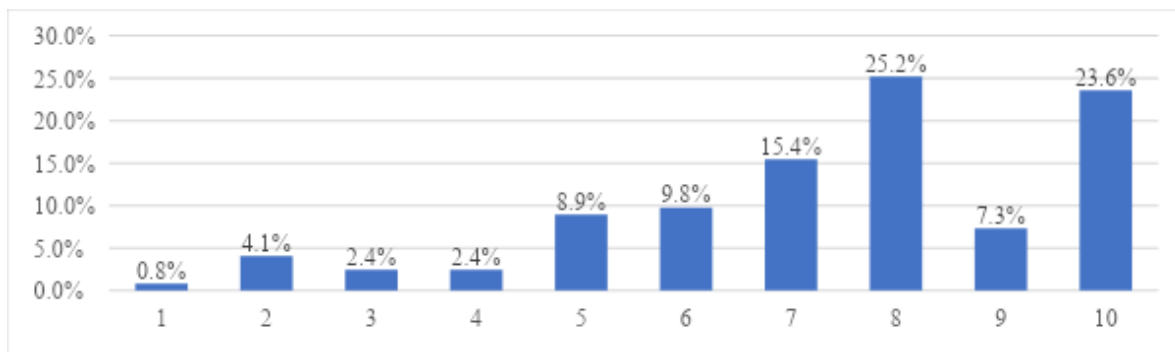


Figure 11: If there was a reliable online collection of wheelchair accessible hiking routes, more people would choose a nature trip (n=246)
Source: own editing

The highest response from Germans and Croatians to the statement about the Internet collection was a scale of 10, i.e. full agreement. The Italians' highest response is a scale of 8 and 10, they also agree. Spaniards slightly agreed (scale 6) with the statement (Figure 12).

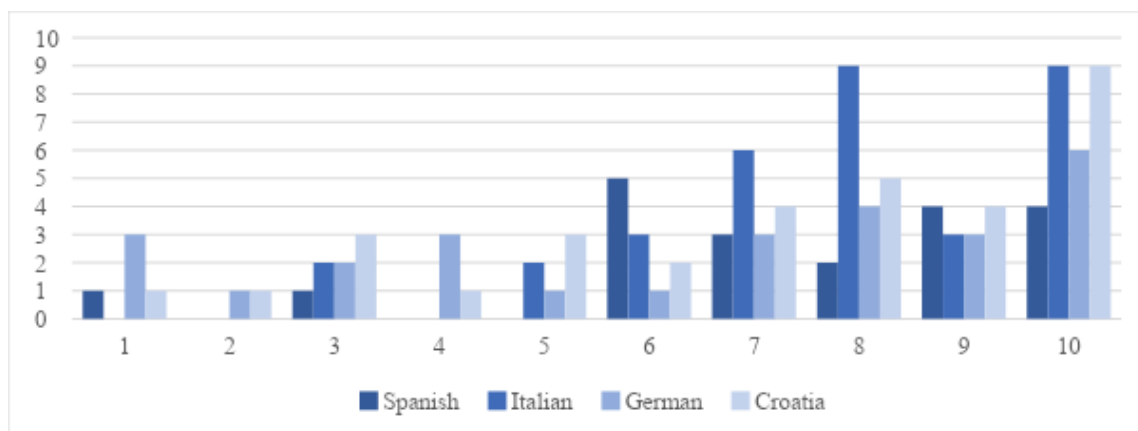


Figure 12: If there was a reliable online collection of wheelchair accessible hiking routes, more people would choose to travel in nature
Source: own editing

SUMMARY

The number of people living permanently or temporarily with a disability, whether acquired at or since birth, is in the billions of people in the world's population, and this group with special needs and special circumstances is growing in numbers and in proportion in almost every country. In order to live a full life like their non-disabled peers, in addition to ensuring the usability of spaces and buildings used in everyday life, they also need to be able to travel, to participate in the 'beatific journey' of tourism. This is not only an ethical duty for the profession, but also a financial interest, because people with disabilities (and in many cases their accompanying persons) represent a significant, and far from fully exploited, market potential for tourism.

There are three ways of making travel easier or even more accessible: special travel programmes and packages for people with disabilities; inclusive travel, i.e. programmes for people with and without disabilities; and traditional travel solutions, where people with disabilities are as much a part of the journey as their non-disabled counterparts. Unsurprisingly, the latter is by far the most popular among people with disabilities, according to research by PeerAct, a five-country EU project involving the authors. In addition to complying with the provisions of international conventions and national legislation on accessibility, this also requires sensitising society and changing attitudes towards people with disabilities, as well as sensitising and training those working in the travel sector and, of course, making tourist facilities and services (travel facilities, accommodation, catering, attractions) accessible to all, not just physically. The research also clearly shows that the willingness and frequency of travel among the target group is higher than the national average. Their motivation and interests are similar to those of the vast majority in terms of seeking similar tourist attractions and services. It was also confirmed that if physical accessibility was to improve significantly in certain areas (public transport, access to extreme sports, accessible tourist routes), demand would increase by leaps and bounds.

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