



SUMMARY OF KEY RESULTS: ATTITUDES OF THE CROATIAN POPULATION ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR TRAVEL HABITS

A lot of attention has been paid to accessible tourism in Croatia recently, especially from the perspective of policy development. However, considerable efforts still need to be made to raise awareness of the importance of accessibility in general and in tourism in particular. After a literature review on this topic with a focus on Croatia, it can be concluded that there is a significant research gap in this field in terms of sample size and stakeholders included in the research. More specifically, the cooperation within the Accessible Project (2022-2-HU01-KA220-HED-000099410 number, entitled „The development of the innovative educational method of ACCESSIBLE tourism in Central Europe - ACCESSIBLE") enabled the acquisition of much-needed knowledge about the legal framework, the demand for accessible tourism, but also about the attitudes of the general public towards the state of accessible tourism and the potential for development in Croatia.

The study was conducted with a purposive sample of 1,000 people from Croatia, so that a balanced representation of age and gender could be ensured. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes of the general public towards the state of development of accessible tourism in Croatia, their attitudes towards the needs and requirements of this specific demand segment, their knowledge about possible barriers for people with disabilities, but also about the social dimension of this tourism segment.

In general, it can be stated that the respondents have quite high awareness of accessibility in general and accessible tourism in particular, although the perception of the main challenges is slightly underestimated compared to the results of the primary research conducted within the same project among people with disabilities in Croatia.

Great efforts were made to ensure that the national population was represented in Croatia. The main goal was representativeness in terms of age and gender distribution. The survey included 52% female and 47.6% male respondents, which corresponds to the national Financirano sredstvima Europske unije. Izneseni stavovi i mišljenja su stavovi i mišljenja autora i ne moraju se podudarati sa stavovima i mišljenjima Europske unije ili Europske izvršne agencije za obrazovanje i kulturu (EACEA). Ni Europska unija ni EACEA ne mogu se smatrati odgovornima za njih.

demographic structure (51.56% women and 48.44% men). The average age of respondents was 47.8 years, slightly higher than the average age in Croatia, but the difference is not so large as to affect the representativeness of the results.

The analysis of the respondents' level of education revealed that almost 50% of respondents had a university degree, while respondents with a vocational qualification made up a quarter of the sample. It could be argued that this distribution had an impact on the overall results, as it is quite plausible that those with a higher level of education were more exposed to various insights that allowed them to draw broader conclusions about the social aspects of accessibility in general, which is the basis for forming opinions about accessible tourism in particular. For this reason, they were probably much more aware of the specific aspects of accessible tourism policy and the need to implement different strategies with the aim of creating a more favourable development environment.

One of the aims of this research was to assess the general population's knowledge of the barriers faced by people with disabilities, particularly in relation to their participation in tourism activities. From the results, it can be concluded that almost two thirds of respondents rate the opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in tourism as either unacceptably bad or quite poor. Only a small proportion of respondents consider the opportunities to be rather good or excellent.

In terms of the general population's perception of barriers for people with disabilities, it is important to note that respondents are well aware of the various difficulties that are part of the lives of people with disabilities. For example, respondents cited using rail transport, using long-distance buses, using public transport, using accommodation, participating in sporting activities as an athlete, participating in sporting activities as a spectator and visiting tourist attractions as situations in which people with disabilities face the greatest difficulties when trying to engage in these activities. These results indicate a high level of awareness of all barriers, which is a good starting point for educating the general population and developing policies.

On the other hand, respondents noted that three situations in the lives of people with disabilities present fewer difficulties – accessing reliable information about actual availability, using catering facilities (restaurants) and attending outdoor concerts and festivals. This suggests that respondents have thought about the opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in certain aspects of tourism activities with fewer barriers, but at the same time it should be noted that the general population perceives access to reliable information about actual availability as far less of a barrier than is actually the case. This is an aspect that still

requires much improvement, both in terms of service providers' engagement and public awareness.

The results of the study show that the general public is well aware that continuous efforts are needed to improve the situation of accessible tourism in Croatia. Almost half of the respondents are aware of this need, while almost a third of the respondents believe that equal access to tourist services and attractions for all should be ensured as soon as possible, which requires substantial investment and a change in attitudes. These results are encouraging and represent a positive starting point for creating a public perception of accessible tourism. On the other hand, about a quarter of respondents believe that the current quality of accessible tourism in Croatia is satisfactory and that no significant improvements are needed.

Taking these results into account, it can be concluded that the public perception of accessibility in tourism in Croatia is quite high and that investments in improving accessibility would be met with public support, which is of great importance when discussing the concept of universal design as mainstream, especially in public facilities.

People with disabilities make up around 16% of the Croatian population. When asked about the percentage of the local population that could be targeted by accessible tourism, respondents gave somewhat mixed results. In fact, there was no clear consensus on the percentage of the total population that could benefit from the development of accessible tourism. 17.9% of respondents stated that between 16 and 20 % of the population could be considered as a target group. The majority of respondents (31.8%) opted for a proportion of the population between 10 and 15. However, these results must be interpreted against the background of general knowledge about the proportion of people with disabilities in Croatia. Although respondents were unable to determine this proportion precisely, it should be noted that potential answers tended to cover small ranges, so this could be the reason for their general indecision.

This finding is also important from a policy-making perspective, as such disagreement about the potential size of the market could also exist among service providers. Without a clear picture of the number of users who could directly benefit from investment in the accessibility of facilities and services, it is difficult to reach a general agreement among all stakeholders involved in this process.

A seven-point Likert scale was used to examine public opinion on various aspects of the development of accessible tourism. The statements were graded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to gain a deeper understanding of the general public's attitude towards certain aspects of accessible tourism in Croatia. Respondents fully agree that people

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with disabilities do not travel much at home and abroad for leisure purposes. They also believe that people with disabilities should be given the same opportunities to use accommodation, hospitality facilities and public transportation as people without disabilities (the level of agreement with all statements is 7, with the standard deviation indicating that respondents have a general consensus on this matter).

The results suggest that people have a high awareness of the special needs of people with disabilities when travelling. For example, respondents are aware that communication is of great importance in this process, as is the ability to use communication spaces and facilities as easily as possible. The responses show that respondents are less certain when it comes to the question of which programmes are preferred by people with disabilities. The result is slightly above average for this statement, as respondents are not sure whether people with disabilities prefer programmes designed specifically for their needs or whether they want to participate in tourism experiences like all other tourists.

On the other hand, respondents showed a high level of empathy for the special needs of people with disabilities. They are aware that the level of communication and hospitality should be very high and that they should be treated with a lot of respect. The respondents believe that the tourism industry in general and tourism employees in particular should be very well aware of the specificities of this demand segment and that it is necessary to improve the attitude of tourism employees towards people with disabilities. This result is also very positive when it comes to the possibilities of improving the quality of accessible tourism in Croatia.

Together with the previously elaborated results, the aim of the research was to determine the level of awareness of the general population about the possibilities of including people with disabilities in the tourism system. The results indicate that while public opinion shows some understanding of the special needs of this segment, there is still much work to be done to improve it. For example, respondents disagree (mode 2, scale 1-4) that other people do not like to go on vacation with people with physical or severe disabilities. However, the level of agreement is 3 (4 means that I fully agree) when it comes to going on vacation together with people with intellectual disabilities.

Respondents do not believe that society is tolerant towards people with disabilities. This result indicates that although there is a high level of empathy in society, there is still a lot of room for improvement in this particular segment of the tourism offer. However, awareness of the needs and special requirements of people with disabilities is also an important social issue and stronger incentives to address this situation and increase awareness and tolerance should create a more inclusive society.

However, respondents have reflected on their answers as the results suggest that anything that is accessible and good for people with disabilities makes their lives easier, indicating that they have thought about the possibilities and benefits of universal design. They also believe that Croatian society supports social integration and inclusion and that the development of accessible tourism is very important.

The results in the area of social integration and empathy indicate that respondents are aware of the importance of these issues and show a high level of empathy for this demand segment and for people with disabilities. However, society as a whole should work to achieve a higher level of tolerance towards this segment and create a more inclusive environment that would enable a more intensive development of accessible tourism along the way.

This study provides information on the attitudes of the population towards the development of accessible tourism in Croatia, and these valuable results should be useful for the development of tourism policy and the general decision-making processes in this area. In general, the results show that the population in Croatia is aware of the importance of this segment and the issue of accessibility in general. In addition to this valuable insight, the results also show that the population is aware that some other aspects should be considered in the future development of accessible tourism in Croatia.

The general characteristics of the respondents indicate that the sample reflects the current demographic characteristics of the Croatian population and that the responses should be taken into account in future decisions and actions. The general population is aware of the specific needs of this segment in terms of accessibility, especially for certain aspects of the tourism offer. They are aware that people with disabilities have a high need for accurate, specific and reliable information. However, they note that the information provided to this segment is sufficient, i.e. of satisfactory quality, which is not in line with the results obtained by people with disabilities.

Society in general needs to be more strongly encouraged to accept tolerance and inclusion as a way of life so that all people who are part of society can have the same opportunities. Accessibility, as is often emphasized, is a matter of basic human rights and as such should be granted to everyone. By increasing the provision of accessible tourism, more facilities and attractions would be available not only for tourists but also for the local population.

It can be concluded that accessibility is a necessary requirement for the development of society and that there is strong support among the Croatian population for achieving this level of development. By incorporating tolerance and empathy into the core values of society, the foundation for the development of accessible tourism will be strengthened and tourism policy

will have a much greater potential to develop this specific product and provide equal access to tourism experiences for all tourists.

Erasmus+ project „The development of the innovative educational method of accessible tourism in Central Europe“ (2022-2-HU01- KA220-HED-000099410).

