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## TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE BELARUSIAN PART OF THE AUGUSTOW CANAL

**Summary.** The Augustow Canal basin currently displays the most potential for the development of tourism within the Republic of Belarus. Its convenient location on the border with Lithuania and Poland creates the possibility to develop both international as well as cross-border tourism. The Belarusian portion of the Augustow Canal is home to over fifty interesting historical and cultural attractions which, along with the canal itself, create a lot of potential for exploratory tourism. This area is a part of the Grodno Forest biosphere nature preserve and as such makes its natural resources available to tourists interested in active and health tourism. Within the area of the reservation the development of tourism related infrastructure is possible only as it relates to agritourism businesses, which makes the creation of a model for their functioning essential. Remembering the specific character of the area this is an important requirement since the Canal basin is within the border zone which holds a special status in Belarus. Access to this area requires a special permit and unrestricted movement within the border zone is prohibited. In 2016 the Augustow Canal basin as well as the city of Grodno which is located 30 kilometers from this body of water has been declared a visa-free zone. Defining rules for the governing of the functioning of agritourism farms within the border zone, the protected area and visa-free region is essential. The creation of a cluster within which detailed guidelines and preferences for both the owners as well as the guests of such businesses located in the Belorussian portion of the Canal seems to be one of the solutions for this problem.

**Key words:** Belarus, Augustow Canal, development, tourism, agritourism.

### Introduction

The Augustow Canal built in 1824–1836 connecting the Vistula and Neman rivers to ensure the transfer of goods from the Polish Crown to Russian ports on the Baltic Sea had been used for tourism as early as the second half of the 19th century. After World War II the route of the Canal was divided by the border with its longer portion remain-

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ing within the boundaries of Poland and continuing to actively develop as a tourist area. The Augustow Canal in Belarus is nearly 30 kilometers long. The reconstruction of its Belorussian section began after a decree issued on 8 January 2004 by the President of the Republic of Belarus. Until July 2006 four locks and four weirs have been successfully renovated and the bed of the canal has been extended by 2 kilometers at its outlet into the Neman River. In regards to tourism the Belarusian part of the area surrounding the Augustow Canal has become very attractive. Being conveniently located on the borders with Lithuania and Poland it makes international and trans-border tourism possible. Tourists may be drawn to it not only by its natural environment but also by its rich historical heritage.

Aside from the Canal the area also contains numerous historical and architectural landmarks such as the 18th and 19th century churches in Sopotskin, Selivanovtsy, Vasilievicy and Adamavicy; forts from both the first as well as the second World Wars, graves of soldiers involved in uprisings from 1830 to 1863; historical cemeteries in Sopotskin and Selivanovtsy, the museum of the Augustow Canal, museum of the border guard and others<sup>1</sup>.

In order to create favourable conditions for the development of tourist infrastructure in the area along the Belarusian portion of the Canal and the Neman River in 2011 a special decree of the President of Belarus<sup>2</sup> created a special "Augustow Canal" tourist-recreational park having a total area of 5,750 hectares.

To facilitate the development of tourism in the area surrounding the Augustow Canal and create an attractive tourism program it is necessary to establish mechanisms for the management of human, natural, cultural and historical resources. The services offered by agritourism farms already operating in this area or which could be established in the near future must become an integral part of this process. The main aim of this work is to present both the positive and the negative aspects of the environment within which agritourism farms of this area operate in as well as the identification of possible ways of optimizing their function<sup>3</sup>.

The results of studies done on the Belarusian portion of the Augustow Canal performed as part of the preparation of the project establishing the "Grodno Forest" biosphere reservation<sup>4</sup>, materials gathered by the Laboratory of regional culture of the

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<sup>2</sup> Decree of the President from 26.05.2011.#220 About creation of the special tourist-recreational Park Augustov Canal, retrieved from: <http://pravo.newsby.org/belarus/ukaz0/uk778.htm> (accessed: 11.02.2017).

<sup>3</sup> M. Roman, A. Niedziółka: Agroturystyka jako forma przedsiębiorczości na obszarach wiejskich, Wydawnictwo SGGW, Warszawa 2017, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> G.V. Dudko: Preparation of justification and package of documants for the announcement of the republican landscape wildfire area and to creation of biosphere reserve Grodno dense forest, GR 20063798, RUP BełNICzem, Minsk 2006, p. 12.

Yanka Kupala Grodno State University managed by Sviatlana Sialverstava, information obtained from websites of various agritourism businesses and others were made use of during the creation of this thesis.

### **Socio-economic, demographic and natural resources in the Belarusian part of the Augustow Canal**

The area surrounding the Augustow Canal is part of the Sopotskin commune and falls within the district and province of Grodno. The area contains 49 population centers the largest of these being Sopotskin inhabited by approximately 1,100 people with the rest being villages with several dozen homesteads each. The villages are populated by about 1,500 people and all together with the district capital of Sopotskin the area is inhabited by approximately 2,600 people or 4.5% of the entire population of the Grodno District. The majority of the population consists of ethnic Poles who are Roman Catholic. The Grodno District's population change is negative and mortality is greater than the birth rate with the percentage of people over 60 reaching nearly 30% of the total population; if the district's capital and the town of Skidziel were to be excluded this percentage would be considerably higher<sup>5</sup>. The Augustow Canal basin does not contain any large industrial facilities and most of the area (approximately 85%) is covered by forest making agriculture difficult. South of the Canal there are three collective farms, but they cannot provide work for all the local populace.

The Belarusian portion of the Augustow Canal is located within a triangle formed by the borders of Belarus with Poland and with Lithuania. The first boundary is the same as the old border between Poland and the Soviet Union and since 1946 this region has been designated as a border zone. Prior to the initiation of the renovation work on the Augustow Canal the border zone was established as the area exceeding 20 kilometers from state boundary. The town of Sopotskin as well as the Canal itself were therefore included in this zone. However, through the decree of the Executive Committee of the Grodno District the configuration of the border zone was changed and the area of the Augustow Canal starting at the Usawa village in the north and reaching to the village of Sonici in the south was excluded. To support the development of tourism within the area of the Augustow Canal the tourist trails and places used as campgrounds or festival grounds were not included into the border zone. These changes were further augmented on 15 September 2014. According to Belarusian law access to the border zone is allowed only after all duties have been paid and only for a specified period of time. Within the border zone it is prohibited to leave a vehicle beyond areas which are inhabited. All people must carry on their person at all times documents confirming their identity. All access to and departure from the border zone is controlled by the border guard who have the right to check the docu-

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<sup>5</sup> Grodno Regional Executive Committee, retrieved from: <http://grodnorik.gov.by/ru/population/> (accessed: 10.02.2017); Central Statistical Office of Grodno region, retrieved from: <http://grodno.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/sotsialnaya-sfera/demografiya> (accessed: 10.02.2017).

ments of people within the zone and to verify their reasons for being there. These rules apply to everyone including foreigners<sup>6</sup>.

Several villages including Gołowienczy, Goraczki, Baliniety, Dmissewicz, Dorgun, Kadysz, Kalety, Soniczy, Markowcy and Siniewicz are located within the border zone. Their inhabitants have unlimited access to the border zone and their movements within it are not restricted in any way.

The region surrounding the Augustow Canal has been treated as the border zone for centuries and access into the area has always been restricted. Prior to the outbreak of Second World War and immediately after its conclusion the inhabitants of this region were subjected to repressions: over 1,200 people were deported to the far reaches of the Soviet Union, property was confiscated and catholic priests were persecuted. The region saw fierce fighting both during the First as well as the Second World War. During these times several villages were completely destroyed. Historic events shaped the unique way in which inhabitants of this region think distrusting authorities and strangers who may visit the area<sup>7</sup>.

In 2007 through the decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus to preserve valuable landscapes, forests and meadows, ecological systems, species of wild flora and fauna listed within the Red Book of Belarus (List of Endangered Species) as well as the environments in which they live, the nature reservation Grodno Forest was established (Graphic 1). The Biospheres have been clearly divided into separate zones: the strictly protected core zone surrounded by a buffer and transition zones which allow for an increased ingerence of people into these areas.

The terrain of the reservation is a hilly plain and within its borders lays the lowest place in Belarus (80.3 meters – located in the vicinity of the Pryvalki village). The area's terrain also shows a bit of variety with hills, hollows and small marshes and deeply cut river valleys which are very complex in their shape. The tributary systems in the valleys of small rivers, streams and lakes are also very picturesque.

The rivers Neman, Czarna Hańcza, Marycha, Szlamica as well as lakes Wieszowicz, Szlamy, Sawiek, Jndrenia, Kawienia and others comprise the reservation's water resources with the Augustow Canal holding a special place within this system.

Forest complexes make up 93.5% of the reservation's area. Pine forests completely dominate this area but there are regions of birch and spruce forests as well as, the less common, aspen and other deciduous forests. Especially valuable are those regions covered by lime, oak and oak forests as well as old firs lining the hills along the river banks. The flood plains of the Augustow Canal, mostly meadows, are also populated by black poplars. Marsh plants cover a relatively small area but every type of peat land occur-

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<sup>6</sup> The entrance (entry), temporary stay and movement in the border zone of citizens of the Republic of Belarus and having a residence permit in Belarus, State Border Committee of Belarus, Informational portal, retrieved from: <http://gpk.gov.by/border/vezd-vhod-prebyvanie-v-pogran-zone.php> (accessed: 17.07.2017).

<sup>7</sup> S. Kul-Sielwiestrowa, N. Taranda: Rozwój turystyki w regionie Kanału Augustowskiego, *Studia Mazowieckie* 2009, IV/V no. 1–2, p. 231–238.



**Figure.** The area of the Grodno Forest reservation

Source: own elaboration based on data of the Statistical Office in Mińsk.

ring in Belarus is represented here. Approximately 1,000 species of vascular plants with 27 of those being rare or protected as well as over 20 species of mammals including beavers, roe deer, boar, otters and 121 species of birds living here of which 12 are listed in the Belarusian Red Book of Endangered Species. Especially valuable are the booted eagle and the red kite whose numbers in Belarus are counted in single individuals. The reservation's valuable fish species include the brown trout and the grayling<sup>8</sup>.

During the planning of the new configuration of the border zone, in which the authors of this paper took part in, plans for the management of natural resources were taken into consideration. The boundary of the zone has mostly been established along the boundaries of the strictly protected central zone of the future reservation as well as a portion of the transition zone. The southern boundary runs along the Augustow Canal approximately 200–500 meters from its northern bank<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> G.V. Dudko: Preparation..., op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> Decision Grodno Regional Executive Committee 15 September 2014, no 496, retrieved from: <http://www.pravo.by/main.aspx?guid=12551&p0=R914r0066317&p1=1&p5=0> (accessed: 15.02.2017).

### **Possibilities and directions of tourism development**

Since the completion of the reconstruction of the Augustow Canal there have been several attempts to establish a plan allowing the area to function as an area designated for tourism. The first such attempt was made during the preparation stage of recreation of the Canal. However, since the project was not designed with participation of representatives of the tourism business the proposed model turned out to be unacceptable and was not realized. The next project for the development of tourism infrastructure and the activation of tourism on the Augustow Canal was included in the program passed by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus in accordance with the presidential decree from 2011 for the "Creation of the tourism and recreational Augustow Canal Park". According to these documents the creation of this tourism product offered within the area of the Augustow Canal was assigned to the administration of the free economic zone "Grodnoinvest" with money from the state budget and the introduction of preferential tax rates for the residents of the tourism and recreational park<sup>10</sup>. The project planned investment into rebuilding of roads, the construction of several cafes and hotels, the establishment of tourist hotel centers in the old Wollowicze palace in Swiack and the "Niemen" Guesthouse, a pier on the canal and on the bank of the Nemman River at the place where the two join<sup>11</sup>.

According to official data in 2016 within the area of the Augustow Canal there were 9 agritourism farms, most of them located along the border zone with two inside the core zone of the reservation. The offer of all of these contains the utilization of the unique natural resources of the region including fishing, gathering of berries and mushrooms, walking and cycling tours as well as boating on the Canal. They also offer sight-seeing tours of the local monuments as well programs introducing local culture<sup>12</sup>.

In considering the demographic and socio-economic situation within the Belarusian portion of the area surrounding the Augustow Canal it is possible for these agritourism farms to take full advantage of existing natural, historical and cultural potential of the region for tourism. The villages are small with many individually standing farms which will afford guests a peaceful stay and privacy. The drawback of this is the unique mentality of the residents who are not ready to accept strangers into their homes. With the exception of one farm (the Zarzecki farm in Nemnowo) agritourism is being carried out by people from outside the region who purchased houses or land from former residents. Experience shows us that agritourism farms are the best form of tourism infrastructure in areas which are naturally valuable<sup>13</sup>. This type of infrastructure makes it possible to take advantage of those natural resources without doing harm to the environment.

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<sup>10</sup> Decree of the..., op.cit.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Special tourist and recreation park Avgustov Canal, Hotels, retrieved from: <http://grodnoturinvest.by/rus/Information/hotels> (accessed: 10.02.2017).

<sup>13</sup> M. Bajda-Gołębiewska: Oferta turystyczna Narwiańskiego Parku Narodowego, [in:] *Rozwój turystyki na obszarach wiejskich*, M. Jalinik (ed.), Wydawnictwo Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 2009, p. 316–323.



The second, just like the first, project of development for the Augustow Canal did not consider the formulation of a tourist product on the basis of agritourism businesses which already operate within the area or which could appear with the right support from the local authorities.

In accordance with the statute of the tourist and recreational park it can be home only to those companies or organization who can implement investment projects worth no less than two hundred thousand Euro<sup>14</sup>. With these stipulations one of the solutions for agritourism farms may be the establishment of a business cluster<sup>15</sup> and through combining their funds be able to become residents of the tourist and recreational park. Becoming a resident grants significant preferences for all members of such an association since, according to the statute of the park, all inhabitants gain preferential tax status, lower rates for electricity, communication services, and opportunities for free advertising and other benefits. At the same time activities for the development of tourism within the area of the Augustow Canal will provide a good legal base as well as support from the local authorities and the management of the tourism and recreation park.

### Conclusions

A large portion of the area surrounding the Augustow Canal falls into the strictly protected core zone of the reservation and the border zone where new construction and business activity is prohibited. It is, therefore, impossible to build there large elements of tourism infrastructure which is restricted to the narrow band running along the Canal itself and areas which are quite far from the most touristically desirable natural, historical and cultural attractions. For this reason, in our opinion, the creation of agritourism farms in villages and homesteads located within the reservation and the border zone is the best solution for the establishment of tourism infrastructure which will allow the utilization of the region's potential for tourism.

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<sup>14</sup> Special tourist and recreation park Avgustov Canal, Registration, retrieved from: <http://grodnoturinvest.by/rus/Investor/registration> (accessed: 11.02.2017).

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