

A DYNAMICALLY DEVELOPING HUNGARIAN SPA TOWN: MÓRAHALOM

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Abstract

The paper presents the case of a small town located in Southern Hungary: Mórahalom. Although a hundred years ago Mórahalom has not even been incorporated as a separate town, today it is one of the most successful municipalities in the region. For the last few decades, agriculture has been the dominant economic sector in the region, but then massive investments have been made to the spa industry, contributing to the development of Mórahalom. The aim of this paper is to present how the changes (especially in the tourism sector) have affected the development of the town and the lives of the residents of Mórahalom. The paper is based on secondary – analysis of local media and statistical data – and primary data (interviews). Results show that well founded planning and the appropriate utilisation of local conditions may enable the transformation of a lesser-known town into a significant tourist destination. The data prove that tourism contributed to the renewal and economic prosperity of the town. The case of Mórahalom may be instructive for other municipalities to see that achieving only a certain degree of success is not enough to sustain competitiveness in the tourism market; a continuous extension of offers and constant improvement are also necessary.

Keywords: *tourism, spa, competitiveness, urban success, integrated development*

1. INTRODUCTION

When cities and towns of Hungary are being characterised, both the '*spa*' and the '*dynamically developing*' attributes are considered trite nowadays. Due to the exploitation of thermal resources and the restoration of historical spas, several towns can boast high quality *spas* nowadays. In Hungary, this also represents such a potential for tourism that shall definitely be utilised. Therefore since 2000 Hungarian Economic Development Programmes have given high priority to the development of health tourism. While the expression *dynamic development* indicated a unique attribute of certain settlements after the transition to democracy in 1990, this indicator has become so popular that it is nowadays used for most of the settlements in some way, so it has almost lost its meaning.

The case of Mórahalom – a small town located in Southern Hungary (fig. 1) – is noteworthy because the two aforementioned features are intertwined, interrelated in a tightly causal relationship, as the dynamic development of the town is mainly attributable to the development of the spa, or more precisely to tourism, which is generated by the development of the spa. The recovery of tourism has resulted in Mórahalom (which did not even exist as a separate town until 120 years ago) becoming a dominant small town of the county by now. In the town tourism and urban functions have appeared on top of the agricultural function, enabling the town to become a sub-regional centre. Although the agricultural cooperative of the town went bankrupt over time – quite a common phenomenon in the history of Hungary –, by that time Mórahalom already managed to find new ways, thus the development of the settlement did not stop, and it even intensified. Revenues from tourism were reinvested into the renovation and modernisation of the town, improving infrastructure and thereby making the town more attractive to companies of retail trade, and even to major foreign companies (e.g. the subsidiaries of the Belgian VanReusel Snacks or the Belgian-Dutch Pacapime – LC Packaging corporation). Stepping forward from the shadow of Szeged – which is the main city in the county (fig.1) –, Mórahalom became a rather significant health tourism destination and a district (sub-regional) centre.



Figure 1. The location of Mórahalom within Hungary and in its county (Based on: <http://www.erzsebetfurdo.morahalom.hu/info/elerhetoseg/>)

The focal point of this study is to examine what kind of (mainly tourism-related) changes have taken place in Mórahalom since the millennium. It shall also evaluate how these changes affected the development of the town and the lives of the local residents. To answer these questions the content analysis of the local media and interviews with local residents and experts were carried out. In addition to this, the available statistical data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office and the local government were processed. The results may prove that with proper planning and an appropriate development strategy, lesser-known settlements may also become attractive destinations for tourists and investors as well.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH TOURISM IN HUNGARY

Tourism has a significant role in economic development; it is often considered the greatest potential opportunity to develop a settlement (Williams & Shaw, 1998; Mező & Kovács, 2010; Ramukumba et al., 2012). There are several positive effects of tourism, which manifest in different ways. For instance the multiplier effect of tourism can be highlighted: tourism revenues generate additional direct and indirect incomes and development in the economy (Khan et al., 1990; Dávid et al., 2003; Lamperth, 2011). Tourism can also have positive sociocultural impacts on the environment (Puczkó & Rátz, 2005; Rátz & Vizi, 2007). On a larger scale, tourism developments can be considered the tools of regional development (Clarke, 1981; Aubert, 2001; Csordás, 2003; Péteri, 2003; Hanusz & Pristyák, 2007; Mundruczó et al., 2010; Yang & Fik, 2014). Therefore in Hungarian regional development programmes the development of tourism is prioritised and most of these programs support health tourism because of the good natural endowments and favourable trends as well.

The popularity of health and wellness tourism has been growing in almost every part of the world (Joppe, 2010). Currently spa tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of health tourism (Mak et al., 2009; Gustavo 2010). Spa tourism is a particularly important area of Hungarian tourism, because one of the most important natural resources in the country is geothermal energy which is typically found in thermal water (Bender, 2005; Kruppa, 2005). According to the results of different assessments of geothermal reserves, Hungary has the largest underground thermal water reserves and geothermal energy potential in Europe. In addition to this, in the Pannonian Basin – which includes Hungary – because of the very thin crust, the average of the geothermal gradient is one and a half times more than the world average (Árpási & Szabó, 2000). As a result of the aforementioned phenomenon, hot water is available from a lower depth in Hungary (Fischer et. al. 2009). Waters over the temperature of 30 degrees Celsius are called thermal water in Hungary and this kind of water may be available in 70% of the country (Kulcsár, 2012).

Health tourism is also positively influenced by international trends, namely the increasing participation of the elderly (Mester, 2003; Kapiki, 2012) and the intensifying demand for health and recreation (Kiss & Török, 2001; García-Altés, 2005; Aubert & Berki, 2007; Cohen & Bodeker, 2008). Health tourism can solve the issues of seasonality and short residence periods as well, which are considered to be general problems in this sector. Indeed, health treatments can be applied at any time, and in addition to this, health tourists are characterised by longer residence periods and higher spending (Smith & Puczkó, 2010). It can also contribute to regional deconcentration, boosting domestic tourism, especially in Hungary, where in most cases thermal water is available under the surface (Budai, 2001).

Recognising this potential, a growing number of Hungarian official tourism and regional development documents give priority to health tourism (Csizmadia, 2001; Kincses, 2009; Boros et al. 2011), and several development strategies put great emphasis on it, both on a national and a regional level. With the huge amount of funding from the government spas, the infrastructure related to spas, and hotel capacity could start developing intensively. Thanks to the support and the increasing demand, several spa developments have taken place in Hungary in the last 10 years, so the quantity and quality of the available services in health tourism has been growing explosively (fig. 2). Because of the increasing competition, it is more and more difficult to maintain competitiveness for spa destinations, but Mórahalom is a good example of successful development.

Mórahalom has also recognised the benefits of health tourism, took advantage of its thermal water supply and the government funding and in order to strengthen tourism in the town, the spa industry received an enormous amount of funding. These investments caused many changes in the everyday life of the settlement and the spa, and these changes are presented in the next chapter.

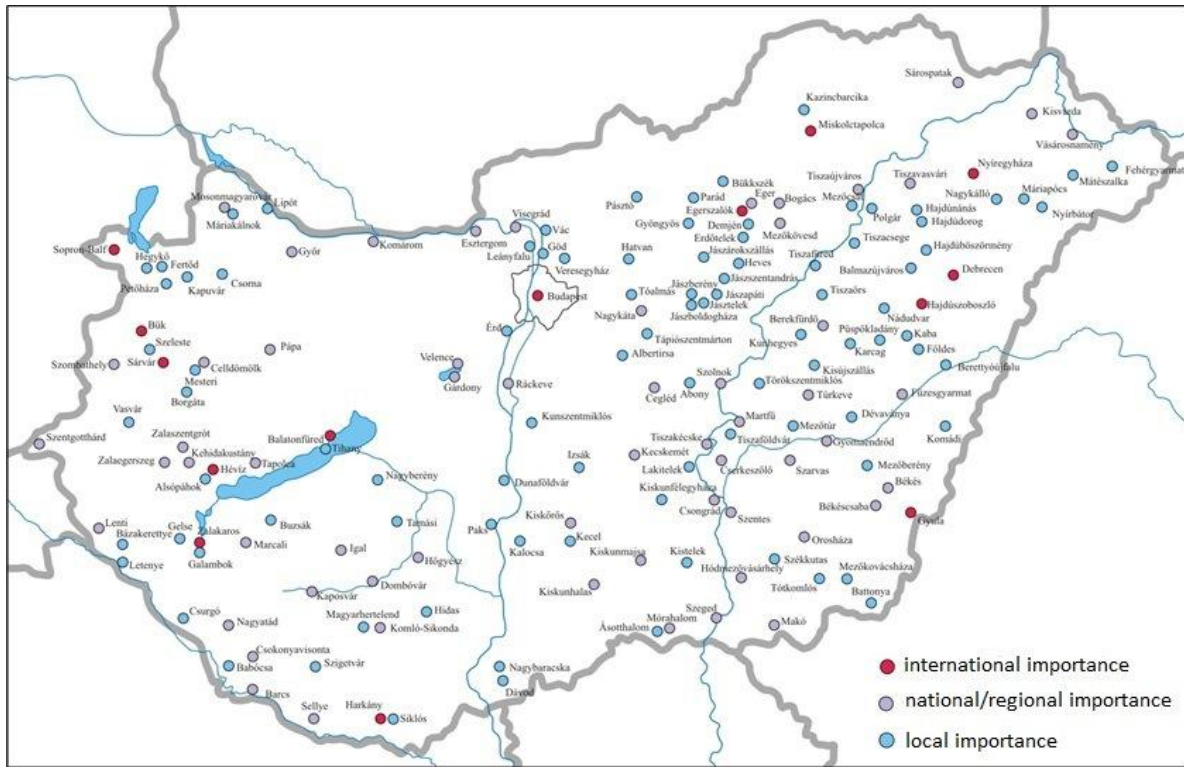


Figure 2. The location and importance of Hungarian spas

3. CHANGES IN MÓRAHALOM AND AT THE LOCAL SPA

Mórahalom is a small town in Southern Hungary, close to the Serbian border, 20 kilometres from Szeged which is the main city of its county. In the 19th century Mórahalom was just one part of the huge rural area of Szeged, which meant that it was administratively part of the county capital. While 120 years ago it did not exist as an independent settlement (did not have its own government), nowadays it is one of the most attractive tourist destinations of the county (Csordás, 2009). We can hardly find a town in the Hungarian Great Plain which developed in a similar manner (Juhász, 1992). In 1930 Mórahalom became the centre of this rural area and 20 years later it was already administratively an independent village with its own local government (Mészáros, 1997; Boros et al., 2006). In 1989 it received township status and nowadays it is one of the most dynamically developing settlements in its region. Moreover, after significant investments to the spa industry, its functions are broadening: a traditional agricultural village has become a spa town and performs a sub-regional central role in many areas.

According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, the population of Mórahalom was 5532 in 1990, while in 2012 the population reached 6007 (fig. 3). In the last 50 years the proportion of

the residents living in homesteads in the outlying areas (so-called “tanyas”) and in the inner areas changed significantly. While 50 years ago 30% were inner residents, nowadays 75% live in the inner areas (Szécsy, 1967). There were also changes in the structure of employment. In the 1960s the employment structure was very simple: 80% of the residents worked as farmers, nowadays it is more differentiated, since tourism has a significant effect on creating jobs directly and indirectly in numerous sectors. The local vocational school used to train agricultural skilled workers, but recently it started training skilled workers for tourism (e.g. masseurs), which clearly reflects that the settlement has changed its orientation from agriculture towards tourism (Martyin & Boros, 2012).

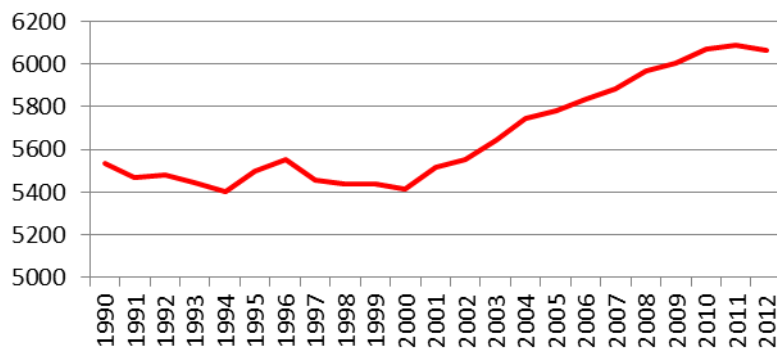


Figure 3. Changes of resident population in Mórahalom (1990-2012)

As it was mentioned above, the dynamic development of Mórahalom is primarily due to tourism and the spa itself, as it is almost the only, but definitely the primary tourist attraction of the town. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the local government invested heavily in the spa industry, so in the spa some significant changes were also carried out, which are detailed in the next paragraph.

The first thermal well was drilled in 1960, and the spa – which is located in the centre of the town – was opened in 1964. However, the planned and larger-scale developments only commenced in 1999 when its water was declared medicinal water, since medicinal water provided the basis for the growing demand of health tourism. From that time, thanks to some successful tenders, further developments took place with smaller or larger investments each year. In 2002 the local spa received a health spa certification (the 41st in Hungary), which rapidly boosted its popularity from local to regional. In 2004, not only the number of pools was expanded, but a new three-storey building was also constructed. As the result of the renewal sequence, the whole institution received a new name (St. Elizabeth Spa of Mórahalom) as well. By 2005, the total water surface of the spa exceeded 2200 square metres and its capacity was 4700 people. In 2006, in the spa category, it was awarded the (then) highest, 4 star qualification from the Hungarian Baths Association. The most recent major investment was in 2010, when new indoor children's pools, slides and a sauna world were opened. Nowadays in the peak season the water surface of the spa exceeds 2700 square metres and the reception capacity is around 9800 guests¹. As a summary of the changes during the last 15 years, I would like to highlight that the spa of Mórahalom had only 5 pools (in the peak season) in 1998, while now it has 21 different pools (table 1). The number of saunas increased from zero to 11 and of course, these

developments increased the number of employees (from 8 to 81) and companies operating within the facility (from 4 to 22), as well.

Table 1: Changes in the spa of Mórahalom in the last 15 years

THE SPA OF MÓRAHALOM	1998		2013	
	<i>low season</i>	peak season	<i>low season</i>	peak season
RECEPTION CAPACITY	21	1020	2710	9793
NUMBER OF POOLS	1	5	16	21
NUMBER OF SAUNAS	0	0	11	11
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES (without medical workers)	5	8	59	81
NUMBER OF ACTIVE COMPANIES IN THE FACILITY	3	4	12	22

Regarding Mórahalom it is important to highlight that not only the spa developed dynamically but the town itself as well, because tourism development was integrated into urban development. In several cases it manifested in some functional changes for tourism. For instance, a new police station was built in 2003 at the edge of the town. The old building – which was in the centre, close to the spa – stood empty, without any function for years. Finally, it was demolished and in 2011 a new 4 star hotel opened with 77 rooms in its place. Another example is the building close to the main entrance of the spa, which used to be a pharmacy and dwelling-house, but now for the purpose of health tourism it has become a micro-regional health centre and it provides the medical entrance to the spa. A further good example for touristic functional change is the city hall. The city hall used to be located between the aforementioned building (health centre) and the hotel until December 2012, when as the result of a brownfield investment, a new, larger city hall was opened in the centre, a little further away from the spa. The old building stood without any functions for two years, but in April 2015 a rehabilitation centre and hotel was opened there for guests whose treatment is not financed by the national health fund. These developments are also noteworthy because in many cases the local authorities prefer greenfield investments, so brownfield tourism developments are still rare phenomena in Hungary (Csapó & Pintér, 2015).

Besides the buildings which changed function for tourism, almost every public building and public place was renovated, reconstructed and all the buildings have a uniform image. Nowadays the built structures contribute to the beauty of the landscape with a growing emphasis (Szalai & Szilágyi 2007), so it is important for the town to develop these elements in order to give tourists a positive impression. For instance, in 2006 the bus station was renovated, because a lot of tourists arrive by coach service. The building of the elementary school was expanded and modernised, education started to focus on tourism (masseur, host, and physiotherapist trainings). The cultural centre also underwent improvement, during its renovation a conference room and a new 300-seat theatre were added to the building. Every year since 2003, in the courtyard of the cultural centre, a two-week open-air music and culinary festival is held, which attracts an increasing number of tourists from the surrounding villages. In addition to this, flowers are

planted, the park is maintained continuously in the town, which makes Mórahalom more attractive not only to tourists but to the local residents as well.

Indeed, earlier Mórahalom was just the part of the provincial area of Szeged, but continuously, through development, it developed into a real independent town. The functions of the town expanded in accordance with the typical urban functions and it now plays a central role in the sub-region (fig. 4). Moreover, due to tourism, townscape has also renewed and new buildings, new businesses, new jobs have been established. The locally significant spa gained regional significance and attracts a growing number of foreign visitors – especially from Serbia and Romania (Martyin, 2013).

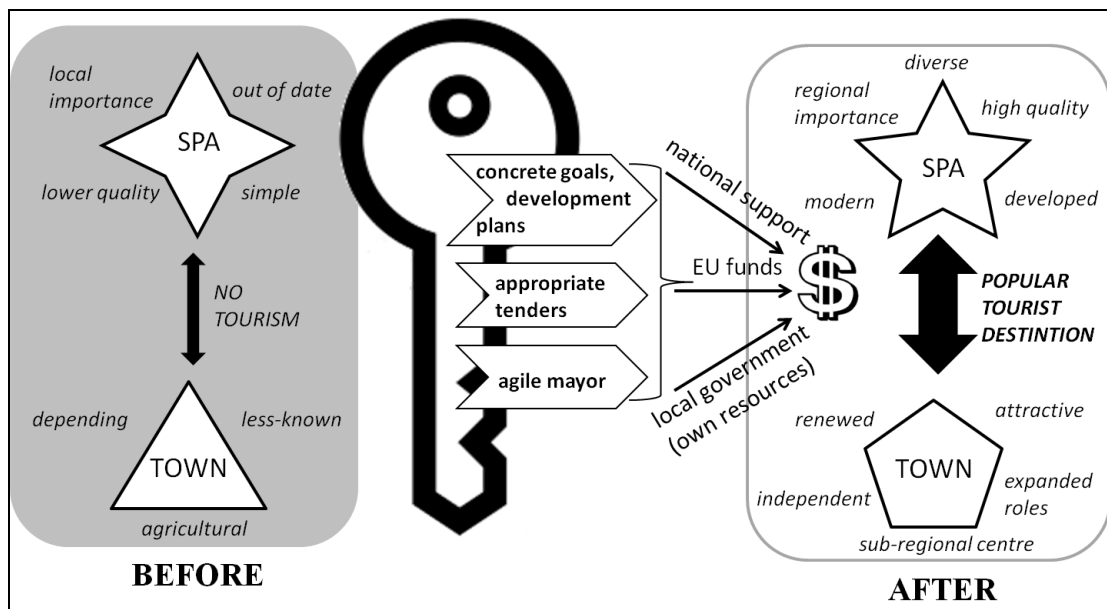


Figure 4. Changes in Mórahalom and at the local spa

4. THE IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT ACCORDING TO THE STATISTICS

The developments of the spa and the renewal of the settlement boosted tourism in the town, which is also supported by the following statistical data. The number of visitors at the spa increased significantly in the last 10 years. While in 2003 the spa had 70 552 visitors, 10 years later it increased to 411 992, so in 10 years the number of visitors increased six-fold (fig. 5). It can also be observed that the number of visitors is growing noticeably after major developments. For example due to the two biggest developments in the last 10 years (in 2004 and in 2010) the growth rate is twice as much in 2005 (76 523) and three times bigger in 2011 (111 472) than the average growth rate (37 938). Therefore it seems to be a good strategy of the spa to carry out developments year after year, as this way there are always new attractive features for the guests.

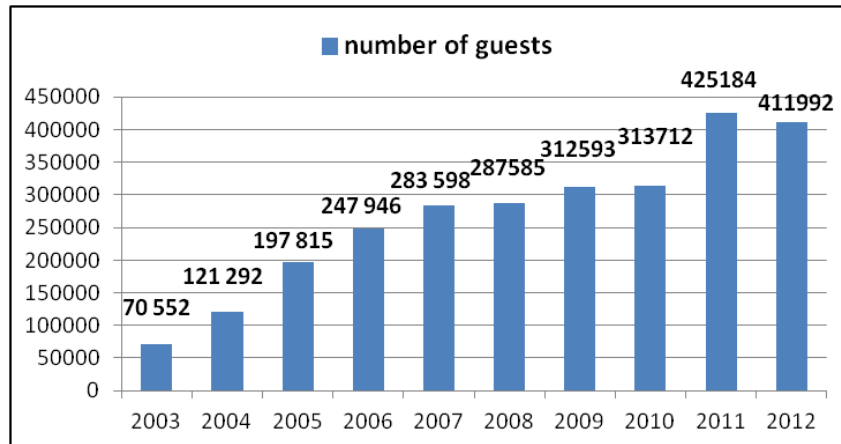


Figure 5. The number of spa visitors in the last 10 years (based on the data from the Municipality of Mórahalom)

Similarly to the international trends, more considerable changes can be observed in revenues than in the number of visitors. During 10 years (from 2003 to 2012) revenues increased seventeen-fold (from about 95 800 EUR to about 1 638 000 EUR).

With the growing number of tourists it was necessary to provide more and more accommodation in Mórahalom. There are only three *commercial accommodations* (including: hotels, guesthouses, camping grounds, hostels, youth hostels) in the town: one guesthouse and two hotels. The capacity of these places would not have been enough for the tourists, but the number of *private accommodations* (the guests can rent a part of the owners' private apartment or holiday house) in Mórahalom has been growing in a unique way. While in 2000 only 3 families offered accommodationⁱⁱ, in 2009 nearly 80 did (fig. 6). This caused an increase in capacity, too. The total capacity is more than 900 people now, which is remarkable for such a small settlement with only 6000 inhabitants.

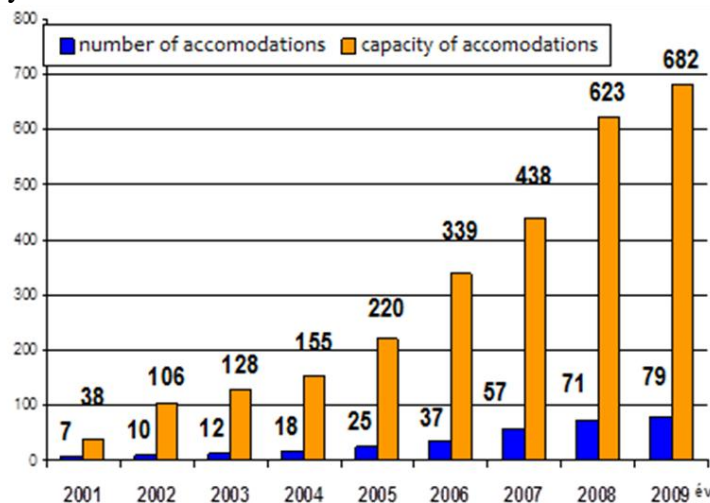


Figure 6. Changes in the number of private accommodations and capacity in Mórahalom (based on the data from the Municipality of Mórahalom)

Due to the growing number of accommodations, the number of guest nights increased significantly, too. The record was in 2013 with 66 521 guest nights, which means that only the county seat (Szeged) has better results in this regard. The number of guest nights in commercial accommodations started to rise after 2002, because the first commercial accommodation, the 3 star guesthouse was opened then. But from 2006 the annual occupancy rate of the guesthouse was more than 80% so it could not satisfy the growing demand anymore. This is the reason why so many local people started to offer private accommodations. For this reason, the number of guest nights in private accommodation started to increase sharply from 2006. But from 2009 the popularity of private accommodation started to decrease, therefore the local government decided to open other, higher quality commercial accommodations. Consequently in 2011 the abovementioned four-star hotel was opened (and in 2015 another three-star hotel as well) close to the spa, which increased the number of guest nights at commercial accommodations in the town.

After every guest night the local government receives income, so naturally with the increase of guest nights the local tourism tax revenue increased significantly, too. While in 2001 the local tourism tax income was only around 7 EUR, in 2009 it was more than 28 000 EUR.

5. ASSESSMENT OF THE CHANGES

In order to assess the changes – not only from the statistical point of view – content analysis of the local media was carried out as well and interviews were made with local residents (who live close to the spa or work in fields related to tourism). The main aim was to find the most commonly used words in the media in the last 10 years related to Mórahalom. For this research the online archives of the Délmagyarország regional newspaper (<http://www.delmagyar.hu/archivum/>) were used. The archives include articles from 1 January 2005 and when the articles were selected the keyword ‘Mórahalom’ was set (no advanced search was used). Up to now 172 articles were analysed (the analysis is still in progress), but later some articles were removed, only related to football and accidents (so finally 129 articles were analysed).

The content analysis of the media shows that Mórahalom became a spa town, because the *spa* word occurred 88 times in the articles (fig. 7). The *local government* word appeared 75 times, and the name of *Zoltán Nógrádi*, the mayor of the town was included 61 times. It highlights the important role of the mayor and the local government in the life of Mórahalom. The most frequently included words were also *application* and *investment*, which is not surprising, because in the recent years several investments have taken place in the town and a number of successful tenders contributed to development. The words *farm* and *guest* also occurred frequently in the articles about Mórahalom, which clearly reflects the dual (traditional and new) roles of the town. Most of the words are linked to the town in a positive way, only *illegal immigrants* have appeared several times in the articles as a type of problem.



Figure 7. The most commonly used words related to Mórahalom

People agreed in the interviews that Mórahalom has changed a lot during the past 10 years, it is renewed, embellished and it became more comfortable. One of the interviewees thought that after the large developments Mórahalom had become a real spa town. It also appeared in the interviews that the local government has an important role in the development of the town: „... *is the engine of touristic developments, so the local government starts the largest developments directly or indirectly ...*” (a man working in local tourism development). The changes mostly have winners according to the interviewees, one interviewee said that: “*everyone who wanted to work in tourism, hospitality is definitely winner, but even property owners are winners as the value of their properties has increased*” (a local guesthouse owner). They also mentioned the local government as winner, because it has direct benefits from tourism income. According to respondents, the changes do not really cause a loss to anyone, except those who are bothered by increased traffic or more noise.

The changes caused only smaller conflicts according to the examined answers and the local media. There were some conflicts because of tourists parking everywhere. The increased amount of noise bothered some residents who live close to the spa, and usage also worsens the quality of the previously built roads. The interviewees considered the developments of Mórahalom basically successful. They highlighted the spa and the hotel development as the most successful developments, one of them said: „*I live close to the hotel ... sometimes I talk to the guests: surprisingly, they are very satisfied...well, I consider this success*” (a local resident who lives close to the spa). As unsuccessful development they mentioned the boating lake which was formed at the edge of Mórahalom, but often dries up, so sometimes it does not have any function. The Cacao Club (a disco in the centre of the town) was also mentioned as a bad example, because it was built instead of a cinema and became a notorious rather than a popular youth club.

They think that the future of tourism in the town depends mainly on external factors, like macroeconomic situation. Several interviewees also mentioned the question of whether Serbia will join the EU and will get more money to develop their spas, as it could be very unfavourable

for Mórahalom, because now around 60% of the guests in the spa come from Serbia (the director of the spa).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, even a small town can become a significant tourist destination with the appropriate use of its capabilities and conscious planning. Mórahalom has recognized the benefits of health tourism, took advantage of its thermal water supply and the funding received from the government. The local government invested a lot into the development of the spa, and these investments caused many changes in the everyday life of the settlement and made Mórahalom a successful health tourism destination. This success is not obvious, as there are many negative examples in Hungary. For instance, there are spas, where despite the winning tenders the development is stuck for a shorter period (e.g. Esztergom) or where they are still waiting to collect own resources (e.g. Harkány) and the towns have accumulated significant debt. There are also some spas, where the operation is so unprofitable, that the spa had to be closed (e.g. Újpest, District IV of Budapest) or the opening hours had to be reduced (e.g. Nyíregyháza-Aquarius).

In the case of Mórahalom, simultaneously with tourism development the whole town has developed all along. The statistical data support that tourism has contributed to urban renewal and economic prosperity as well. Since tourism plays an important, growing role among the functions of the town, in the past decade the number of buildings related to tourism has increased. The vast majority of these buildings are concentrated in the city centre, and the buildings with other functions are located on the edge of the town. More and more people have started businesses, have opened private accommodations or got a job related to tourism. The townscape is renewed, the image of the town has become uniform. Thus it can be said that it is an attractive small town now, what is evidenced by the fact that population has been increasing recently.

Local residents are satisfied with the changes in the town, as they often highlighted the spa and the four star hotel as successful developments. Both the interviews and the media analysis showed that the local government and the mayor have a key role in the development of the town. During the research and until now, no larger-scale conflicts have surfaced, the local residents are not estranged from tourists. They are basically proud of their town and their identity strengthened over these years. It is suggested that the local government manages to handle the problems appropriately; they carry out the improvements with consideration of the interests of the residents, which may be instructive for other settlements.

Tourism in general is a fragile business, which depends on many internal and external factors, therefore, a regional economy based only on tourism will never be sustainable. Hence revenue diversification is important for every settlement and provides an opportunity to peripheral areas. Therefore Mórahalom is also an instructive example, because the town was not only made attractive for investors in tourism but also for other investors and developers. There are many articles about urban developments, but less about the relationship between tourism (spa tourism) and urban development. The case study of Mórahalom would present that tourism development can generate such positive changes in the lives of the cities which basically could change the structure, the appearance and functions of the city.

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ⁱ <http://www.erzsebetfurdo.morahalom.hu/info/a-furdorol/furdo-tortenet/> - downloaded: 2015.05.08

ⁱⁱ <http://www.delmagyar.hu/archivum/?kulcsszo=Mórahalom> – downloaded: 2014.04.03