

CHALLENGES OF ROMANIAN TOURISM IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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Abstract: *Many studies talk about the anonymity of our country, in terms of international tourist identity. Romania has an enormous tourist potential, but unfortunately little known, not only by foreign tourists, but even by local ones. Moreover, the known tourist potential is not optimally valued and especially by the standards of the European Union. The tourist dowry is not enough to attract tourists, but also a better quality of services. In this context, of course and in the pandemic one, the objectives of the present article are to specify the problems that Romanian tourism encounters, as well as to present some possibly viable solutions for solving them.*

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JEL classification: *L83, L88, Q01, Z3*

INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the first decade of the 21st century, people from different countries of the globe knew very little about Romania from a tourist point of view. A study conducted by Future Brand in 2011 ranked our country on the 81st place out of 102 states, noting that the country's tourist profile is difficult to identify (Mazilu, 2011: 300). Many countries have achieved this goal of establishing a tourist identity, a country brand. For example, France remains in the top of culinary preferences, Japan is preferred for the nightlife, and Germany for its infrastructure. The situation has gradually improved, proof that in 2019, Future Brand Country Index, considered Romania the 42nd best national brand in the world out of 75 countries studied (increase by 20 places compared to 2014), mainly due to its cultural heritage (Melenciuc, 2019). Even if we are happy with this information, the reality on the ground shows us that Romanian tourism still has a long way to go to reach the level of that of other European states in terms of meeting all tourist needs. The development and quality of tourist services are dependent not only on the existence of a tourist potential, but also on the technical-material base and on the human resource. Romania has many peculiarities, truly Romanian, which make it unique from a tourist

point of view: nature, culture, traditions, architecture, gastronomy, authenticity, etc. The main problem is the low degree of capitalization of this potential. It is not enough for our country to be known, but it must provide quality services for tourists to return and become true ambassadors, bringing other tourists. In order to achieve this goal, efforts have been made to develop tourism in Romania, which spans several decades, most of which are materialized in a series of policies, strategic documents and guides. Unfortunately, these efforts did not produce the expected results, the causes being multiple: poor implementation of these strategies and plans; weak involvement of decision makers; lack of funding; frequent changes of leadership at different levels.

CURRENT CHALLENGES OF TOURISM IN ROMANIA

According to experts, Romanian tourism faces the following problems (Romania's Tourism Development Strategy, 2019):

- tourists (domestic and international) currently visiting Romania do not spend enough;
- not enough international tourists who are attracted and spend a high budget;
- tourist attractions are not sufficiently developed and difficult to access;
- insufficient and difficult to identify tourist consumption opportunities;
- the non-competitive quality of the experiences and services available at the level of tourist destinations;
- weak capacity to develop public policies in the field of tourism;
- inadequate market segmentation;
- the limited international visibility of the tourist objectives and of the unique tourist experiences that Romania can offer.

To all these problems of Romanian tourism were added others, much more serious, generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the National Institute of Statistics (2021), the arrivals registered in the tourist reception structures in the period 1.01.2020 - 30.11.2020 amounted to 5993.6 thousand, decreasing by 51.8% compared to the similar period of 2019. Out of the total number of arrivals, in the period 1.01.2020 - 30.11.2020 the arrivals of Romanian tourists in the structures of tourist reception with accommodation functions represented 92.7%, while the foreign tourists represented 7.3%. The overnight stays registered in the tourist reception structures during 1.01.2020-30.11.2020 amounted to 13819.0 thousand, decreasing by 51.0% compared to those from 1.01.2019

-30.11.2019. Of the total number of overnight stays, between 1.01.-30.11.2020 the overnight stays of Romanian tourists in the structures of tourist reception with accommodation functions represented 93.1%, while the overnight stays of foreign tourists represented 6.9%. The arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania, registered at the border points, were in the reference period 1.01.-30.11.2020 of 4738.1 thousand, decreasing by 60.2% compared to the same period last year.

Table 1. Arrivals and overnight stays in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in the period 1.01-30.11

	Arrivals			Overnight stays		
	Period 01.01- 30.11 2019 thousand	Period 01.01- 30.11 2020 -thousand	Per.01.01- 30.11.2020 to period 01.01- 30.11. 2019 -%-	Period 01.01- 30.11 2019 -thousand	Period 01.01- 30.11 2020 -thousand	Per.01.01- 30.11.2020 to period 01.01- 30.11. 2019 -%
Total	12434,1	5993,6	48,2	28178,6	13819,0	49,0
Romanian Tourists	9911,1	5556,8	56,1	23229,7	12861,7	55,4
Foreign Tourists	2523,0	436,8	17,3	4948,9	957,3	19,3

Source: Adapted from: www.insse.ro

TRANSFORMING ROMANIA INTO A WORLD-CLASS TOURIST DESTINATION

The role of the state in tourism is particularly important. There are several areas in which its role in tourism is manifested: coordination, planning, legislation and regulation, the state as an investor, stimulation and promotion (Bâc, 2013: 79). Through its institutions, the state can assume the role of coordinator in order to develop effective tourism strategies (Franklin, 2003: 129). Government planning for tourism materializes in different forms and areas: economic, social, environmental, promotion, labor, etc. (Bâc, 2013: 79). From the perspective of tourism, the legislative function is one of the most important activities of the governments. The state can stimulate the development of the tourism industry through investments and through marketing and promotion actions.

The Romanian state is aware of the many benefits brought by tourism. Therefore, it must assume its role of protector of tourism, especially in this pandemic period. Tourism providers have made huge efforts to overcome the crisis and restart tourism, but a response from the authorities is also needed. Small and medium-sized tourism companies in our country are forced to fight for survival in the face of competition from European destinations promoted by world-class professionals. In order to cope, these enterprises must move towards cooperation, innovation, specialization and the creation of high quality branded products (Mazilu, 2011: 300). Government decisions (especially political, economic and fiscal ones) can be essential for overcoming the current crisis in Romanian tourism:

Fiscal measures

- establishing the legal framework regarding the establishment of financial aid schemes (cheap loans, direct subsidies, etc.);
- postponement of the payment of taxes and duties;
- granting financial incentives for the promotion of domestic tourism;

Economic measures

- measures to restart the economy: reopening businesses in the services sector that would lead to a decrease in the number of unemployed (restaurants, cafes, theaters, cinemas, sports activities, concerts, etc.).

In order to transform Romania into a world-class tourist destination, measures are needed in several areas, measures coming from the authorities (Master Plan for the Development of National Tourism 2007 - 2026):

1. Geography and environment:

- pollution reduction: waters, forests, landscapes;
- combating beach erosion;
- combating illegal deforestation;

2. Culture and cultural heritage:

- changing the legislation regarding the urgency of the restoration and conservation processes of the architectural characteristics of numerous buildings and historical monuments; restoration and enhancement of the heritage of old buildings with tourist potential can help the responsible development of many disaffected areas and not only, making local tourism an essential activity for economic sustainability.

- increasing the state investments in order to develop and promote the tourist objectives, of the festivals and events, of the traditions;

3. Infrastructure, transport and communications:

- modernization of airports and establishment of new ones;
- modernization of the basic infrastructure (road, railway, naval network, etc.);

- modernization of the tourist infrastructure. According to RAOCCCE (Romanian Association of Organizers of Concerts and Cultural Events) the event industry, known in the specialized media as MICE (Meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) should be a priority. Despite its considerable potential, Romania is not yet perceived as a destination for event tourism.

4. Human resources

- poor awareness of opportunities and career development potential in the tourism industry;
- raising public awareness of the importance of tourism for the economy;
- professional qualification of the staff in the tourist field;
- raising public awareness about the elimination of kitsch, which has developed too much in the last 30 years;
- the authenticity of the services offered.

5. Legal framework and organization

- ensuring the legal framework regarding the sustainable development of tourism;
- the establishment of institutional structures for regional development of tourism;
- providing incentives for tourism investors.

6. Marketing and Promotion

- promoting Romania abroad as a safe tourist destination. According to the Institute for Economy and Peace (IEP), quoted by Global Finance Magazine, Romania ranks 22nd in the top of the most peaceful countries in the world, out of a total of 163 states considered (Ventura, 2020). The ranking is based on 23 indicators grouped into three criteria: safety and security of society; the extent of ongoing domestic and international conflicts; and the degree of militarization.

- establishing a tourist identity of Romania;
- use of modern IT means for information, marketing and promotion;
- spots must express reality, not fool tourists. The stranger comes, leaves, but becomes a promoter of what is seen;
- bringing to light the most beautiful experiences that tourists can have in Romania;
- state collaboration with the private sector;
- collaboration with the Romanian diaspora in order to promote Romania as a tourist destination;
- increasing Romania's presence on the tourism market of the events industry.

CONCLUSIONS

We have been talking about the great potential of Romanian tourism for years and we are surprised that we have far too few foreign tourists in Romania. The situation may change. The tourism industry is dominated by the private sector, but is particularly affected by the decisions taken by state authorities. The state must consider tourism as a priority sector, a catalyst for economic development at local, regional and national level. The key to restarting tourism is the government involvement. The efforts of the tourism industry alone to restart tourism are not enough. During 2020 and early 2021, they have adapted to the existing medical situation, and have begun to adopt new safety rules and regulations. Firm measures are needed as soon as possible for policy makers to help tourism. The state must be the first to be interested in restarting tourism.

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