

ASPECTS RELATED TO THE POST-PANDEMIC RURAL CULTURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *In Romania, rural cultural tourism has had and is expected to continue to have an extremely beneficial impact on the development of certain disadvantaged areas of the country, because it represents an economic driver, a means of capitalising on resources and of prompting local and territorial authorities. Thus, it provides medium and long-term contributions to the preservation and promotion of the most authentic and valuable aspects of the Romanian spirit. In what concerns the activities carried out in the rural area with respect to culture, the risk area has been extended during the sanitary crisis; however, the restrictions and the lockdown have been “useful” in increasing awareness of available resources, in planning actions in a more diligent manner and in broadening the vision of what should be done. In the context of the pandemic, all these aspects have become strengths. Post-pandemic tourism should be characterised by rediscovering itself, and the stake for rural cultural tourism in Romania should be the attraction of foreigners. This paper identifies and analyses the aforementioned strong points, which impact the so-called post-pandemic era.*

Key words: *rural cultural tourism, post-pandemic tourism, crisis, development, rural life.*

1. Introduction

Romania stands out as a country with a strong geographical personality, doubled by a special tourism vocation. The physical-geographical components feature biogeographical peculiarities favourable to various tourist activities. On an area of only 238.391 km², mountains, hills, plateaus and plains combine in a harmonious and balanced way, forming an imposing architectural ensemble. Thus, the physical background – belonging to different categories of genetic and structural types – outlines the potential and specificity of the Romanian territory from a tourist point of view. The Danube Delta stands out for its landscape, morpho-hydrological and faunal originality, being unique in Europe. The Romanian coast of the Black Sea with the sea water and the beach, the thermal mineral waters and the mud from the therapeutic lakes, the marine bioclimate, the cultural-historical and economic objectives respond to a wide range of

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tourist motivations: rest, complex spa treatment, sports leisure, recreational sailing, sport fishing, cultural entertainment etc. (Bogdan, Simon & Candea, 2021). In addition to all this, the traditional rural area of Romania is exploited, as it has remained unaltered in what is deeper and more authentic. Its engagement in the social and economic circuit of values constitutes a process of superior capitalization of the existing potential, an important factor in economic development and the organization of space. The corroboration of tourist development with the appropriate setting of the general and tourist infrastructure is of particular importance, and so is the increase in the level of professional training, of the behaviour of tourism staff; the imposition of a quality level of the development of the tourist act are all subsumed by this development.

The present research aims at analysing and identifying the chances of recovery, and, in particular, the chances of development of the cultural activities carried out in the rural areas of Romania. The prior-pandemic period showed a thriving rural cultural tourism economically and socially speaking, and it used to receive special attention both from local authorities and from small and medium enterprises. Among the activities conducted during that time, reference should be made to the repopulation of abandoned villages and the emphasis placed on the traditions and customs of the Romanian peasants through the organisation of craft camps for children and adults, craft workshops and fairs, i.e. *Zilele Fiilor Satului* (the Village Offsprings' Days) that reunites the people who have moved away, rural festivals that bring back the traditional dance ensembles, folkloric festivals, food festivals etc. The pandemic affected all of this, and the restrictions and the social, economic and psychological impact are still being discussed in the specialised literature. During the pandemic, rural life, with its constant weaknesses ranging from the lack of road infrastructure to the limited technology, has proven its strengths: uncrowded areas, sanitary safety, small number of deaths recorded, sustainability, natural and gastronomic hedonism. During the two years of the Covid crisis, these aspects have become key criteria for the Romanians in choosing holiday destinations. They have become more willing, both financially and spiritually, to discover the beauties of their own country, seeking individual or even isolated tourism (in the Danube Delta, Transylvania, Bucovina, Maramures).

The main challenges of the post-pandemic era include attracting foreign tourists and promoting and activating the engines through all possible means: mass media, social networks, holiday packages provided by travel agencies for more than one weekend, facilities, and last, but not least cultural activities. The aim of this paper is to identify the actions that can be taken in the field of cultural tourism in some of the rural tourist areas of Romania.

2. Literature Review and Methods

We must take into account the fact that, as of the second half of the 20th century, the idea of social equity has been a central part of the radical and alternative approaches to social development. This involves a bottom-up approach to development or one that is initiated by each member of the society. The development model that is being

promoted through rural cultural tourism is centred on the individual, thus “combining the ethics of development with sustainability” (Potter et al., 2012). As such, even the unprivileged majority can benefit from development, because it becomes emancipated and capable of initiating development. Social progress must be combined with economic progress in order to ensure inclusive development (Porter, 2015). In order to achieve this, an investment in people and in the system is required (modernisation of the labour market and of social protection), with a view to fighting poverty and adapting to the technological advancements and the establishment of community cohesion (Pisiotis, Peschner, 2020). In the context of Romania, where the polarisation of the social classes is apparent and is constantly increasing, one of the means to achieve the above-mentioned desiderata is to invest in rural cultural tourism (according to the National Association for Rural, Economical and Cultural Tourism of Romania, the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism of Romania and non-governmental organisations).

This research is based on the exploratory research of secondary data. The author used data from the Official Journal of the European Union, as well as communications issued by the European Economic and Social Committee and by the European Commission with regard to tourism, the implications of the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 crisis and the initiatives taken to establish a coordinated framework that would enable all European citizens to gradually and safely benefit from holidays after the restrictions are lifted.

The emphasis lies on supporting the member states of the EU to remove isolation measures and to resume their activities and social lives, in accordance with certain epidemiological and public health criteria. The author analyses the present state of the rural cultural tourism in Romania after consulting various publications, internal operation norms, reports and guidelines issued by non-governmental organisations in Romania, as well as documents issued by the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism in Romania. It is important to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks of resuming the usual tourist activities, and implicitly, those connected to the rural cultural tourism in Romania.

3. Findings and Implications

The challenges that the rural areas of Romania have to face represent realities that have been a constant topic of debate for specialists. These range from the structural changes in agriculture that have led to the people losing their jobs, to the smaller average wages compared to the urban areas, the emigration of the youth, the less developed service sector, the poor healthcare services, the aging demographic structure that is mostly inert and lacking the potential for initiative and entrepreneurship. In the last few years, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the local administrations in many rural communities have come to understand that tourism can represent a powerful and viable tool of economic and social progress. Thus, they have obtained and used national and EU funding with a view to implementing viable projects that would help develop the local communities. The global restrictions and lockdown have had immediate consequences

on the cultural activities supporting rural tourism (folk festivals, handicraft fairs and workshops, summer camps, etc.). The gastronomic field that is well represented and stands out for the Romanian hospitality should require special attention and investments from the local entrepreneurs after the pandemic (food and beverage producers: candies, traditional pastry products, specific agricultural products, plant-based beverages that are specific to certain areas, wineries etc.). The pandemic has created a real economic hiatus in the field of rural cultural tourism and to some extent, there has even been a paradigm shift (Matei and Chiriţă, 2020).

Two years after these forecasts, we can say that the return to normality and the resumption of the positive evolution of rural tourism, even in the conditions of underdevelopment of many rural communities, indicate a possible strategic direction of action for the future.

The tourist behaviour of Romanian citizens has evolved in this time towards new patterns, reflecting challenges such as: the ecological transformation of tourism, the extensive use of digital services and the integration of new technologies, and last but not least, competitiveness. The future tourism demand in our country will probably be determined by the increase in the environmental awareness, the shift to more personalized travel experiences, a better interaction with local communities and culture, destinations closer to home, as well as concerns regarding safety and health.

In order to resume and develop the network of cultural festivals and activities, a lot of planning needs to be done in what concerns the expansion and upgrading of the transport networks, the implementation of information technology and communication systems and carrying out significant ecological, sanitation, systematisation and rural cultural and historic heritage recovery works. The Administration of the National Cultural Fund is subordinated to the Ministry of Culture of Romania and it represents the main source of financing for the cultural activities in Romania. It finances projects that support contemporary creation and highlight the Romanian heritage. Through its actions, the Administration of the National Cultural Fund will contribute to increasing the access of Romanians and foreigners to the traditional rural culture and implicitly, to the development of rural tourism.

It is expected that soon enough, Romania will benefit from a new system of institutional and legislative instruments meant to stimulate the development and diversification of rural tourism, which will act as a powerful and efficient guarantee platform for sustainable economic and social development.

The cultural dimension of sustainable rural tourism offers the possibility for foreigners and Romanians to discover destinations in Romania that have been ignored until now. The assumption that foreigners would now be more inclined than ever to choose Romanian villages as a travel destination is based not only on the holistic calling, but also on the local gastronomy and traditions that are still so well preserved in many parts of the country. According to the experts of the World Travel & Tourism Council and of the World Tourism Organization, rural tourism represents a product that Romania can and should use to make itself known on the international market.

4. Conclusions

On the one hand, cultural tourism supports the development of disadvantaged rural areas and on the other hand, it preserves and maintains the traditions and practices of the immaterial heritage, thus having a major impact on preventing rural exodus. Besides the mission of the Administration of the National Cultural Fund to finance cultural projects that support traditional and contemporary creation in Romania, the local and regional authorities should intensify their actions shortly after the normal social and cultural life is resumed.

In Romania, the financing of cultural tourism projects from the local budgets is regulated by Law no. 350/2005 on non-refundable public funding and it should become accessible to local entrepreneurs once again. In the post-pandemic era, rural cultural tourism should also be based on increasing the creation of local, regional and national networks aimed at connecting the members of the network and ensuring the cooperation of the private and public actors with a view to creating a complex tourism product. The marketing strategies for rural cultural tourism should focus on unique offers and on the comparative competitive advantage of the cultural activities. Various marketing tools should be used in order to promote cultural tourism offers, particularly tourism and travel fairs, social networks and mass media.

The organisers of cultural activities related to cultural tourism must take into account the fact that post-pandemic tourists will be less willing to make any type of compromise. In order to live up to the expectations, the hospitality industry will have to prioritise the experiences, facilities and services provided in relation to health and general wellbeing.

5. Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge that this paper has been written with the support of documentation material and feedback from fellow professors and researchers while attending the ITSA 2022 Conference Gran Canaria with a poster presentation.

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