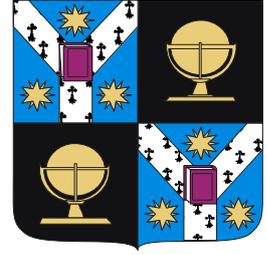


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**Urban tourism – current state and development
prospects of cities in Western Moldova
- Summary of doctoral thesis -**

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Keywords: urban tourism, Western Moldova , tourists, tourism strategies.

1. Introduction

1.1. The motivation for choosing the theme

The chosen research theme is part of the human geography domain, specifically in the field of tourism geography, having an interdisciplinary character. The intention of making a doctoral thesis entitled „Urban tourism - current state and development prospects of cities in Western Moldova" is a continuation of studies undertaken in the dissertation entitled „Tourism development strategies with regional impact. Case Study: Iasi". The more theoretical and descriptive approach of the tourism phenomenon within this last paper, prompted us to continue these efforts, in a new formula that would help us find and analyze the mechanisms that operate in urban tourism.

The difficult approach of this study starts from its very central concept around which it gravitates. Urban tourism is a concept poorly founded and developed in the studies undertaken so far in Romania, and thus, this research will have as the main references the international studies in this field or in related fields.

The study of tourism in major cities in Romania is very little known, because small research is largely due to the lack of methods and analysis techniques that allow the identification of the place that tourism occupy in relation to other functions held by the city. Many books and websites aimed at presenting a county or city in Romania, have a tourism section, which in most cases consists only in a list of monuments with tourist valence. Such an approach is entirely inappropriate and only highlights that tourist function now occupies a secondary place in the economy of cities in Romania.

In these circumstances, the possibility of deepening urban tourism in the region of Moldova is a big challenge and responsibility in the context in which tourism studies undertaken so far in the region focused more on the presentation of other forms of tourism. The paper aims to provide an important contribution to clearer knowledge of the urban tourism phenomenon, wanting to exceed the level of description or inventory where you can find many papers in the literature of tourism in Romania.

1.2. The issue of research. Questions and assumptions

Compared to other destinations where tourism is easier to notice, in the urban system identification of the tourist function is much more complicated. The diversity of functions exercised by the city in territory and in society in general, contributed to the

exclusion of some parts - like tourism - which becomes indistinguishable. Thus, studies on cities omitted tourism analysis, while also tourism seems to neglect urban areas.

During the last years many cities in Moldova seek to find a new identity, to assert their originality to gain national and international recognition. Although statistically for the urban environment we observe significant increases in key tourism indicators, basically we can say that the existing urban tourism is still in an early stage.

To have a meaningful image of what really lies in the analyzed territory we must leave from the correct inventory of everything that exists there in order to achieve the classification of units that can be part of an integrated and hierarchical system. Thus, knowledge of urban potential and tourist perception will lead to new guidelines from local authorities regarding urban tourism development in Moldova.

For a better understanding of the issues and to facilitate the analytical approach, we can outline a series of secondary hypotheses formulated in the form of questions:

- Is urban tourism defining for Moldova?
- Can urban tourism represent a viable alternative for the development of urban areas?
- Which are the factors that hinder or boost in the region of Moldova optimum exploitation of urban tourism potential?
- There is an interurban competition in the cities of Moldova?
- How much regional tourism policies developed by the authorities endorse urban tourism?

The issues exposed in this research open a broad perspective of the subject. With the help of secondary hypotheses and based on studied references, we can formulate the following main assumptions:

1. The lack of studies on urban tourism can generate a lack of perception that block the development and expansion of this activity. Therefore, investigation of this issue becomes a fundamental matter;
2. Urban tourism presents some specific characteristics, both in terms of supply and demand, which calls for a detailed and differentiated study;
3. Tourist attractiveness is an essential condition for the development of urban tourism;
4. Tourist strategies and policies correspond to the real needs of urban space in Western Moldova;
5. There is an interdependence between city size and tourism development.

1.3. Research objectives

The main objective

Making a complex work on urban tourism based on identifying, analyzing and deepening the current stage of the development of tourism in Moldova, and also its optimal conditions for exploitation.

Secondary objectives

- Conceptual analysis of urban tourism;
- Deepening patterns of urban tourism development in countries that have experience in this type of tourism development;
- Establish a classification from the tourist point of view of cities in Moldova to determine the importance of urban tourism and its dynamics over the past 10 years;
- Identifying the factors that led to the appearance of so obvious gaps in tourism development in urban areas;
- Compilation and application of questionnaires among tourists from major cities in Moldova;
- Analysis of tourism strategies and the formulation of proposals which wants to integrate urban tourism in local and regional development policies;

II. Urban tourism between content and perception

Urban tourism stands out among the forms of tourism through its complex and heterogeneous content. Although it is practiced since ancient times, starting with the '80s it began to enjoy the attention of specialists, making it the subject of numerous articles. In this regard, based on international and national specialized literature, this chapter aims to clarify the concept of urban tourism.

What is urban tourism? Although at first glance may seem like a simple question, defining urban tourism is something extremely complex. In the same way we might ask: is there really urban tourism or this is just an accumulation of other forms of tourism that coincide in a given context? Is urban tourism a new form of tourism? These questions, among others, have been cataloged by Cazes (1996) as disturbing.

Urban tourism is an ambiguous concept, blending various activities vaguely formulated. Defining urban tourism is essential to any attempt to deepen the mechanisms governing this activity. Adding the adjective urban to the notion of tourism we localized a activity in space but this does not define the context and limit the activity itself. The concept of urban is more complex, it requires a certain framework and a way of life that is

expressed in the surrounding reality. Cities have as main competitive advantage a variety of services, a complex technical infrastructure and a high accessibility. Evaluation of urban tourism potential, development of tourist facilities, adoption of coherent policies and strategies, can become elements of attraction and concentration of tourist flows in cities. So far, there is no universally accepted definition for urban tourism that would succeed to restore the whole semantic panoply of the term.

Of particular significance is the presentation of favorable and narrowly factors of tourist capitalization in urban space. Tourism and urban tourism, in particular, have evolved under a number of factors, different in content, intensity, importance and mode of action.

Analysis of urban tourism in terms of structure, characteristics, forms of expression and the interference from them, requires a broad approach and provides an overview of the complexity of the urban space tourism phenomenon. The variety of touristic offer makes the urban areas to identify a wide range of motivations for travel, from business tourism, to cultural tourism, leisure tourism, sports tourism, shopping tourism or visiting family and friends, and numerous combinations between these forms of tourism.

III. Urban tourism market trends: national and international experience

This chapter highlights the upward trend that urban tourism has on major European cities, but also the evolution and current level of development of urban tourism in Romania. Given the many benefits that tourism development can bring to a city, competition to attract tourists has become increasingly fierce.

For a city to act as a factor in tourist attraction, first it must have a valuable tourism potential to be accompanied by tourist facilities that would meet the tourists requirements. If the first component can be regarded as fixed, the second one has a dynamic character, in the sense of an evolution or involution, according to the applied tourist policies and strategies.

Romanian touristic offer, without having the complexity of that on Western European tourism market, upgrades and develops continuously in many urban centers, managing to meet a wide range of tourist motivations: culture, education, business, shopping etc. County capitals in addition to cultural, educational and commercial offers, have in general, four and five star hotels, conference rooms for organizing exhibitions, scientific meetings, political internal and international meetings. In this regard, stand out: Bucharest, Constanta, Brasov, Iasi, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara etc.

Against the background of continued growth in tourist traffic, products and urban destinations have specialized and diversified in recent years trying to respond to higher demands. For urban tourism development, it is necessary to identify weaknesses and tracing of strategic directions in order to compete effectively on the Western European market.

IV. Tourist attractiveness of urban space in Western Moldova

The main objective of this chapter is to clarify the concept of tourist attractiveness, according to the most representative viewpoints existing at international and national level and to highlight cities of Western Moldova that are attractive for tourists. Attractiveness must be understood and assessed through the lived experiences of tourists and its components.

Research in this domain shows that studies on the attractiveness of some territories are extremely important in understanding the elements that encourages people to travel. Although we may observe similarities between the concept of tourism potential and attractiveness, some authors prefer the use of the concept of tourist attractiveness being considered a more comprehensive exploration of the relationships that forms between supply and demand (Iațu and Bulai, 2011).

At the national level there is a study conducted by the National Spatial Plan Section VI - Tourism, which based on its own and unified methodology manages to asses tourist attraction of administrative units in Romania, taking into account natural and human resources, and specific tourism technical infrastructure. Due to the complex character and uniform methodology applied to the entire national territory, this quantitative assessment has the role to evaluate the true tourism potential of each locality.

Based on NSP indicators used to achieve a hierarchical ascending classification of urban units from Moldavia, we overlapped the number of tourist arrivals to have a clearer picture of the current state of tourism development. We have identified six classes having the following features:

- First class includes a number of small urban areas that stand out only at the technical infrastructure level (eg Bicz, Moinești, Onești, Buhuși Podu Iloaie Târgu Frumos, Salcea, Frasin). The mere presence of the technical infrastructure can not create the necessary premises for the affirmation of tourism in these localities. To become

attractive there are required a series of other resources and activities in which to establish complementary relationships.

- The second category is represented by small cities (Mărășești, Tecuci, etc.) that have human resources and technical infrastructure. In the absence of adequate tourism infrastructure, tourism affirmation in these areas becomes an elusive goal.

- The third group consists of a number of locations nationally recognized for their valuable natural resources and diversified tourist infrastructure. Can be mentioned cities such as Vatra Dornei, Câmpulung, Târgu Neamț and Slănic Moldova. The existence of exploitable mineral spas, of some climatic and environmental factors scientifically recognized, and of some adequate technical facilities provides the opportunity for urban areas to be classified as health resorts (Vatra Dornei, Slănic Moldova).

- Spaces with human resources and infrastructure correspond generally to county seats (Galați, Focșani, Bacău, Iași, Suceava). Compared to other forms of tourism, urban tourism is more complex and diversified, human resources being key elements, contributing to the increase of tourism attractiveness, cities representing the most favorable environment for the accumulation of cultural goods. In this context, concerns about development and preservation of cultural and historical elements are a decisive factor in increasing the competitiveness of a tourist town. They perform the role of polarizing centers, both by their own resources and through the services they offer, and there are in most cases, the gateway to the region. In brochures and tourist guides, cities from this category are identified mostly with the architectural heritage.

- Areas without tourism resources and infrastructure are extremely numerous (22 of the 55 existing urban areas in the region) which shows that currently these are not attractive places for tourists and can not develop an actual offer this sector.

In Moldavia the urban areas are heterogeneous, have different sizes, tourist resources, infrastructure, but with a common feature for many cities: the possibility of developing tourism. Identifying these types of tourist places allows a better knowledge and understanding of the tourist phenomenon in urban space. Cities must ensure a high level of diversity and complexity of resources and tourist facilities enabling satisfaction in terms of quality of the needs for different segments of tourists. Attractiveness exerted by urban tourism is not punctual, determined by visiting a single city. In these conditions, an opportunity for the valorisation of resources with tourist valences consists from the developing of specialized routes between these cities.

V. Supply and demand in urban tourism from Western Moldova

A more accurate analysis of tourism in the urban environment in Moldova should take into account the information on tourism supply and demand. Thus, to analyze tourist offer, we appealed to data collected by the National Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism since 2001. The tourist offer will be presented from the level of accommodation structures, catering establishments and leisure structures.

In the analysis of tourism demand in Moldova will use both quantitative indicators (number of arrivals, overnight stays, average length of stay, tourist overnight stays distribution within various accommodations, analysis of the indicators over several years), and qualitative (questionnaires will be applied to identify the tourist profile from Iași, Vatra Dornei and Piatra Neamt).

VI. Policies and strategies to exploit urban tourism

Policies, strategies and programs developed in the tourism sector must take into account the specific characteristics and complexity of cities functions. Although urban areas can have many points in common, we can identify economic, social and cultural differences which must be taken into account when carrying out adequate strategies. Implementing strategies in tourism in Western Moldova must start from knowing tourist potential, leverage and general and local economic situation, which is reflected in the evolution of tourism in region. Any strategy identifies weaknesses in the tourist offer and determines strategic directions to remove them.

Conclusions

Tourism activity undertaken at the urban space level is one of the most dynamic form of tourism practiced both in international and national background, and it can contribute significantly to the economic and social development of urban space and also to an efficient and sustainable use of tourism resources. Investigation of city in terms of tourism on the Romanian territory is a complex activity, complicated at least for the following reasons: the shortage of specialized literature, novelty of field and the lack of some research directions. In these circumstances, the first research hypothesis (lack of studies on urban tourism can generate a lack of perception that block development and expansion of this activity) is validated. Therefore, to investigate this issue becomes a fundamental problem given the many benefits that tourism development can bring to a city.

Although from statistical point of view urban tourism holds the most important material and technical base and attracts the most numerous tourists, urban tourism in Western Moldova is still in an early stage. The analysis made at the urban environment level, regarding small towns, reflects the fact that the capitalization of attractions is unfortunately limited by the quality or lack of accommodation and leisure infrastructure which represents sometimes major obstacles in urban tourism development. Despite the many weaknesses that urban areas have, tourism can be a viable alternative for many cities in Western Moldova, but it requires close cooperation between the actors involved in this sector, both from the private and from the public environment.

Development of the tourist sector is dependent on the identification of attractive elements that are responsible for the development of the tourism in that area. In these circumstances, the third hypothesis (tourist attractiveness is an essential condition for the development of urban tourism) is validated. Based on the indicators provided by the NSP we made an assessment of the touristic conditions that cities of Moldova meet. The highest scores belong to large cities (Iasi, Galati, Bacau, Focsani, Piatra Neamt) but also to small towns that have outstanding natural conditions (Vatra Dornei, Gura Humorului, Campulung Moldovenesc, Slănic Moldova) and favors the development of the tourism function.

The importance in tourism which cities located in the upper hierarchy have is one of national level and whit real opportunities to assert themselves internationally only in the case of Iași. The experience of Sibiu in 2007 was a driving reason for other applications from other cities in Romania (eg Iasi, Cluj, Alba Iulia).

Urban tourism will benefit in future from a favorable context following developments in the transportation sector (which will result in lower prices and schedules distances), improving living standards and integration of new destinations into the international circuit. In this background, authorities should become aware of the value of cities, the opportunities they have, and to resolve the shortcomings pointed out by tourists or experts in the field.

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