

DEVELOPMENTS AND DISCONTINUITIES WITHIN THE ROMANIAN URBAN TOURISM

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Abstract: Against the background of a continuous growth of tourist traffic, the urban products and destinations have specialized and diversified in recent years, trying to respond to higher demands. In Romania, urban areas are heterogeneous, different in size, position, image, heritage, having as common feature the possibility of developing their tourist function. The Romanian urban tourism offer, without enjoying the complexity of the Western European tourism market, is constantly upgrading and developing, numerous urban centres managing to provide a wide range of tourist motivations: culture, education, business, shopping etc. This article aims to analyse the current state of urban tourism development at the national level, taking into consideration that some cities want to increase their attractiveness, developing a competitive tourism that can satisfy different segments of tourists.

Keywords: urban tourism, accommodation offer, arrivals, Romania

1. Introduction

In the context of the increasing global tourism phenomenon, cities become more and more attractive and therefore they should meet the expectations and needs of a growing number of tourists. Statistics show that the urban environment mainly attracts visitors of urban origin, generally coming from cities having the same size as the cities they visit, because they want to compare the newly visited places to those of their residence (Simon, Tătaru et al, 2009). The high interest of tourists for a particular city is caused by information and publicity from tourism, which allow visitors to know and integrate into its environment. Although difficult to estimate, international tourist flows bound for cities are massive, only at the EU level being estimated at about 75-80 million tourists, corresponding to more than 550 million overnight stays (Muntele and Iațu, 2006).

Urban tourism addresses visitors everywhere and cities which aim to develop their touristic function can be metropolitan centres or only historic, cultural small towns, although in the opinion of certain specialists (Cazes and Potier, 1996) tourism is conducted in cities or urban agglomerations of minimum 20,000 inhabitants.

The article proposes a brief conceptual analysis of urban tourism, then focusing on the supply and demand of this form of tourism in Romania, aimed at identifying those representative cities that may be true examples for other urban centres.

2. Genesis and evolution of urban tourism research stage

Although the term is relatively new, from the point of view of historical development, urban tourism has its origin in ancient times, when many travellers were recorded between the Greek cities on the shores of the Mediterranean (Pădurean, 2006). Later, in the Middle Ages, they spoke about long journeys of young aristocrats who visited several European cities. The

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major interest was raised almost exclusively by cultural objectives, which were to be found mainly in cities.

Until the development of mass tourism in the second half of the nineteenth century, cities stood out as the special travel destinations. Difficult economic conditions since the 1970s have contributed to the development of the tourist function of the city. The economic decline of the industrial cities in Northern England highlighted the role of tourism as a catalyst for enhancing urban economy.

While other forms of tourism have experienced a spectacular growth in the 60s - 70s of the last century, during which tourism was associated with residents moving from urban areas to rural ones and tourist resorts, urban tourism stands out starting with the 80s, when many cities obviously turned into major tourist destinations.

The study of the tourism phenomenon in cities has not led to an abundant literary production, even if the subject is undeniably fashionable. Compared to other destinations, where tourism is more noticeable, in the urban system the identification of the tourism functions is much more complicated. Because a city brings together several functions (commercial, administrative, industrial, etc.), the analysis of tourism in this context is more complex compared to other destinations that have an economic structure based on tourism (Pearce D., 1993). Thus, the more studies on urban tourism appear, the more complex this phenomenon and its social, cultural, economic and environmental implications get. The completion of a study in this regard complicates the work of researchers, because they have to study areas outside their training.

The Anglophone vision on urban tourism is dominated by the economic impact of this activity (Law, 2002), while the Francophone side focusses on issues like urban tourism planning and its contribution to the urban regeneration (Cazes and Potier, 1996).

At the national level, the theme of urban tourism is rarely met, although, quite shyly, in recent years it has begun to find its place in the Romanian literature. Initially urban tourism was given a little space in some papers on tourism geography (Muntele and Iațu, 2006), tourism economy (Minciù, 2005) or tourist development (Erdeli and Gheorghilaș, 2006). Among the authors who have paid special attention to urban tourism, bringing important contributions in this area, we can mention: Gabriela Stănciulescu (2009), Aurel Gheorghilaș (2004) and Gabriela Ilieș (2008).

3. Urban tourism in Romania

Before 1990 Romania represented an important tourist destination especially for the Eastern European market, mainly promoting its tourism products related to the seaside, spa resorts, mountain resorts and the monasteries in northern Moldavia and Bucovina. The lack of some coherent and efficient policies and of a tourism strategy contributed to modest results in the economic sector. The differences noticed from one region to another in terms of their potential to capitalize tourism are determined by their historical conditions of development, as well as by the general infrastructure of the country, which often prevented the development of highly attractive areas with a low level of accessibility, and facilitated the development of others (Gruescu, Axinte, 2010).

In parallel with the strengthening and modernization of mountainous, seaside, resorts and rural touristic products, Romania features urban centres with touristic valences that can improve Romania's tourist image. Experience shows that the future of all forms of tourism that have adequate resources decisively depends on the ability of those working in this field to achieve a modern and competitive tourism to meet the requirements of tourism demand.

The urban tourism offer, without enjoying the complexity of the Western European tourism market, is constantly upgrading and developing in many urban centres, managing to

satisfy a wide range of tourist motivations: culture, education, business, shopping. Besides their cultural, educational, commercial offers, county seats also dispose of four and five-star hotels, conference rooms for organizing exhibitions, scientific and political meetings. In this regard, the following tourist centres can be mentioned: Bucharest, Constanța, Brașov, Iași, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara. Due to its complex functions, the position in the country and the numerous historical and architectural objectives, Bucharest stands out from other large cities, being the only place in the country where the number of foreign tourists exceeds the number of Romanian ones. Also, in terms of business tourism and conferences, Bucharest can be considered as an area of great interest.

Smaller cities usually provide a certain cultural and religious potential but a poor accommodation offer (such as: Fălticeni, Mediaș, Adjud, Târgu Jiu). Tourism can provide an alternative to the development of these cities as long as they develop attractive and quality services for tourists.

Depending on the importance of their cultural and historical importance, Romanian cities can be classified (according to the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, 2004) into:

- Historic urban centres **of very great tourist importance**: Bucharest, Brașov, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași, Sighișoara, Sibiu;
- Historic urban centres **of great tourist importance**: Alba Iulia, Oradea, Arad, Suceava, Constanța, Bistrița, Baia Mare, Târgu Mureș;
- Historic urban centres **of average tourist importance**: Drobeta Turnu Severin, Curtea de Arges, Botoșani, Piatra Neamț;
- Historic urban centres **of tourist importance**: Vaslui, Sebeș, Târgu Jiu, Craiova, Tulcea, Mangalia, Câmpulung, Vatra Dornei;

In the classification made by the National Institute for Research and Development in Tourism, the moving of cities from one category to another is relative, being represented mainly by how cities manage to develop over time their tourist function, especially the centre and its historic cores.

The cities in the first two categories stand out because of a higher number of cultural monuments, compared to other categories, which bring additional tourist attraction to these urban centres. The presence and inclusion of these cultural resources in various programs and tours bring numerous benefits to cities. Unfortunately, most of the existing travel agencies in the main Romanian cities focus the promotion and integration of domestic and international programs of cultural objectives recognized for their importance. International experience shows that a rational alternative of amplifying urban tourism is to focus the effort in certain vital areas, to achieve strong endowed touristic cores, true polarization centres, which in time, will attract other urban areas with less importance.

In these circumstances, the urban centres of smaller importance situated in the proximity of some dynamic areas will be able to be included in a higher category if they develop cultural and entertainment activities, accompanied by an infrastructure that meets the demands of the tourists.

3.1. Urban tourism offer for accommodation

The tourist accommodation offer was assessed by means of the number of units and the number of beds, indicators supplied by the National Institute of Statistics. Accommodation represents, along with transport, catering and entertainment, one of the basic services required by a tourist during his journey and also an important factor in stimulating the tourist demand. Tourist accommodation fulfills the role of temporary residence for the tourist and must have a complex functionality.

For a better understanding of the urban tourism phenomenon we have resorted to mapping the main indicators specific to the tourist offer. The presence of tourist reception structures represents the most direct expression of the importance of the tourism phenomenon through the facilities, investments and labour force engaged by them.

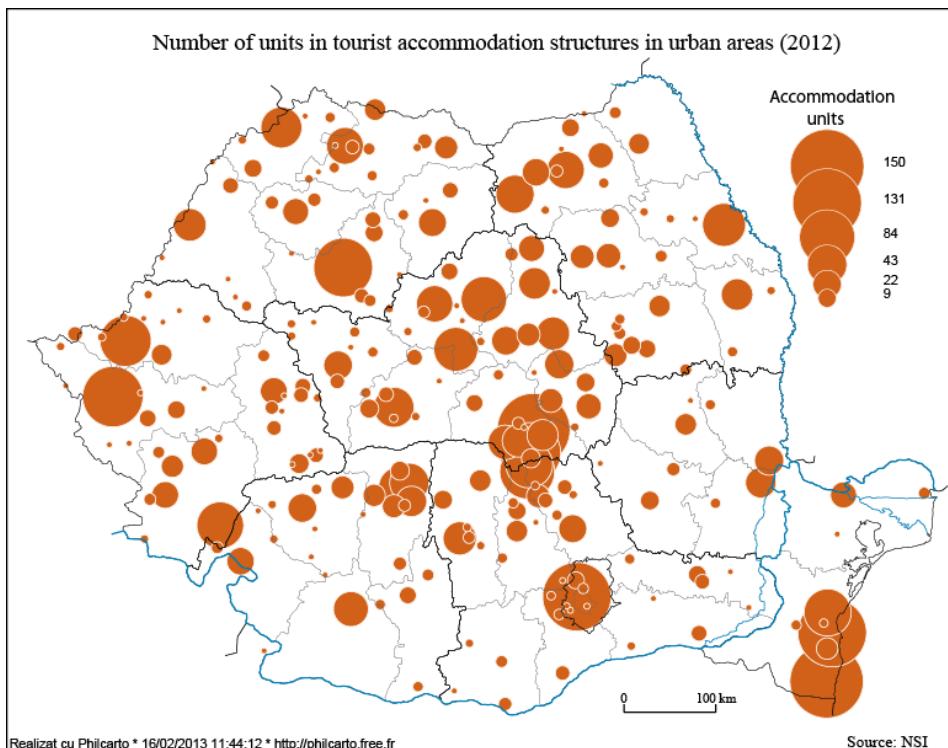


Figure 1: Number of units in tourist accommodation structures in urban areas
Source: NSI, 2012

In many cases, most accommodation units are located in the county seats. The presence of these structures in a large number may also indicate the attractive tourist potential of these urban centres (for example: Bucharest, Constanța, Brașov, Iași, Timișoara, Sibiu). Even if we eliminate the discrepancy elements - cities in Constanța County and Bucharest, which concentrate 21% of the housing units base (32% of the accommodation places), the material accommodation base is poorly represented in many small and medium cities. Even though they belong to the lower echelon of the urban hierarchy, these cities can become points of support in attracting and directing tourist flows if they manage to improve their tourist offer.

Spatially, there is a discrepancy between the evolution of the cities in the centre of the country compared to the ones in the east or south-west. The importance of the areas with a low potential decreased even more, while the ones with a high potential benefited from investments in the development of their housing units. Unfortunately, many small urban areas failed to reinforce their urban character and become economic centres, being still dependent on their rural and agricultural heritage.

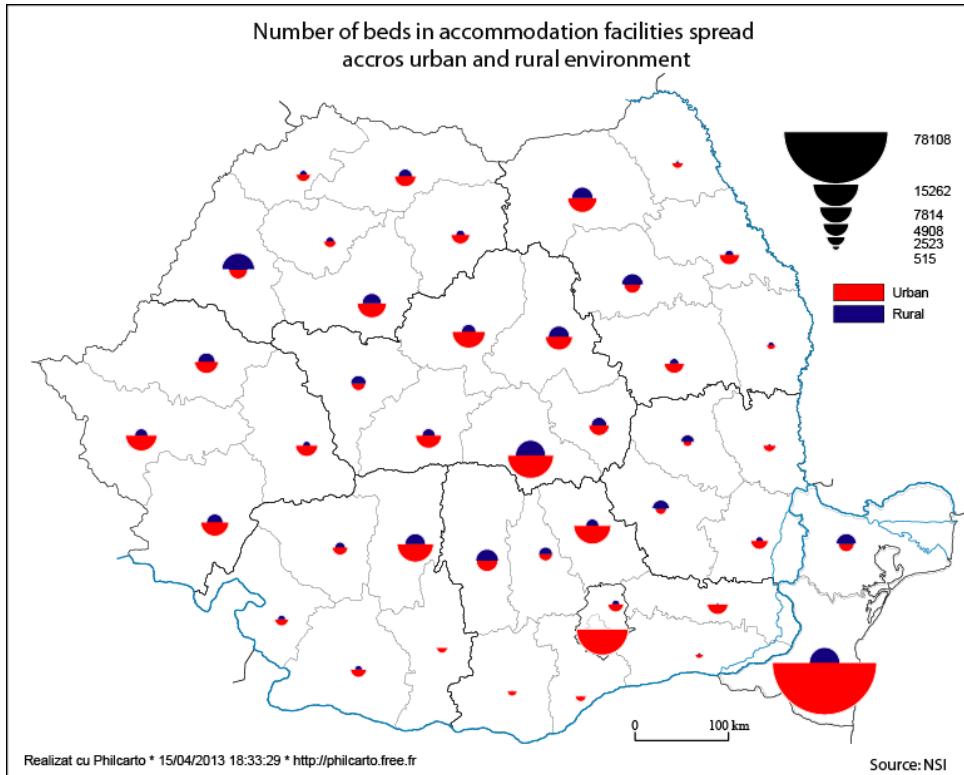


Figure 2: Number of beds in accommodation facilities spread across urban and rural environment; Source: NSI, 2012

The distribution of the accommodation places in tourist reception structures at the county level reveals a disparity between the level of equipment of the urban areas compared to the rural ones, which suggests that urban tourism is favoured. In most southern counties we can notice the absence of rural accommodation units, which happens because of the lack of investments in the development of the tourist sector.

3.2. Tourist arrivals

Tourist arrivals represents (according to the National Institute of Statistics) the number of "people accommodated in tourist accommodation establishments, traveling outside the localities in which they have their stable domicile for a period of less than 12 months and staying at least one night in a tourist accommodation structure in the visited areas in the country; the main reason for the trip is other than to carry out a paid activity in the visited places". In reality, the number of tourist arrivals represents the recordings made at the accommodation receptions by the people who require this service, being designed to show the amount of people which a destination can attract during one year. In these conditions, the areas with a large number of accommodation units also stand out through a high number of tourist arrivals. It can be noticed that the urban centres that attract a significant number of tourists are represented by the big cities and those located in the mountainous or coastal area (for example Bucharest, Iași, Timișoara, Cluj).

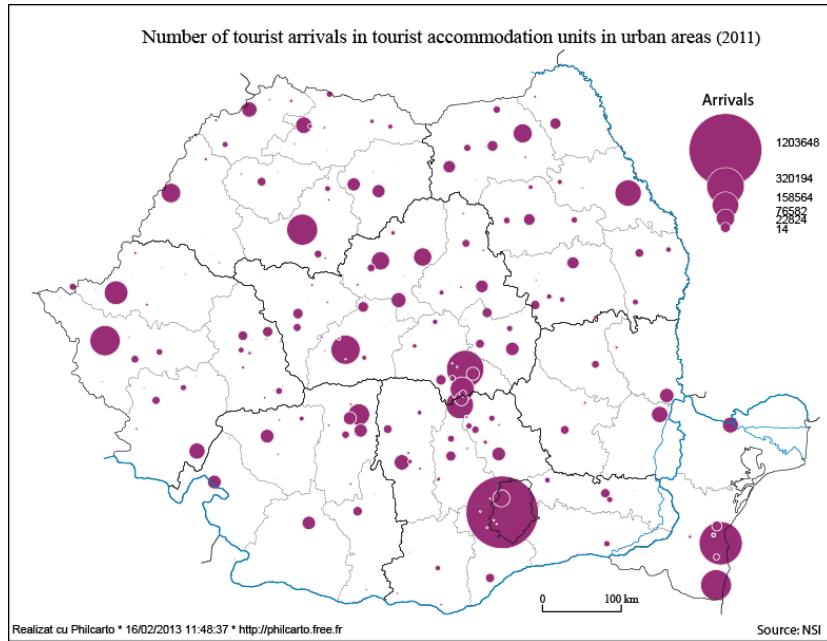


Figure 3: Number of tourist arrivals in tourist accommodation units in urban areas
Source: NSI, 2011.

Cities are the most important tourist destination for both foreign and Romanian tourists. Unfortunately, the short duration of holidays in urban areas (2 days) is a consequence of the fact that a large part of the tourism trips made are of city-break type, but also of the large extent of tourism transit, especially in small and medium towns.

4. Conclusions

In Romania, urban areas are rather mixed, different in size, position, image, heritage, having as common feature the possibility of developing their tourist functions. The identification of these types of tourist places allows a better knowledge and understanding of the tourism phenomenon within the urban space. Cities must provide a high level of diversity and complexity of the resources and tourist facilities, able to meet the needs of different segments of tourists. If within a city only one form of tourism is practiced, the existing tourist facilities will not attract numerous tourists, which will reduce the efficiency of resource exploitation. A wider range of services will increase the number of tourists visiting that city. The attractiveness performed by urban tourism is not punctual, determined by a visit to a single locality. Tourists using the car as a means of travelling are also often attracted by the tourist facilities and resources in the neighbouring localities.

In the context of the continuous growth of tourist circulation, tourist 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 the weaknesses and to map the strategic directions in order to compete effectively on the Western European market.

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