

ASPECTS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS UPON THE ACCOMMODATION ACTIVITY IN BĂILE TUȘNAD RESORT

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Abstract: The town of Băile Tușnad (Tușnad Spa, Tusnádfürdő) is the most important tourism centre in Harghita County, aspect favoured, besides the mineral water resources, by its position on an important road and rail route. In time, due to successive upgrades, it has become one of the most important mountain spas in Romania, classified as a national importance tourist resort. The last stage of development took place after 2004, especially with EU development funds. Partially, this phase coincided with the economic crisis, manifested more intensely between 2008 and 2010, when people's lower income reduced tourism activities too. During the economic crisis one can find a more intense decrease of the number of tourists and overnight stays, reflected in smaller weights in the total of the county, most likely because during this period the tourists went for lower less expensive services. In Băile Tușnad the situation also reflects itself in the growth of the weight of tourists accommodating in tourist pensions, compared to the one of those accommodating in hotels. In comparison to the general evolution of Harghita County, as a consequence of the important weight of high comfort accommodation units and superior tourism services in Băile Tușnad resort, one can find a more difficult aligning to the crisis conditions, with bigger negative inflexions of the parameters, but without a prolonged period.

Keywords: *Tușnad, tourist, accommodation, overnight stays, capacity in operation.*

1. General premises of tourism activities in Băile Tușnad resort

In Tușnad area, the turning to good account of the mineral waters, by bottling and tourism use, started in 1845, when the mineral springs on “Talking Field” were leased for operation.

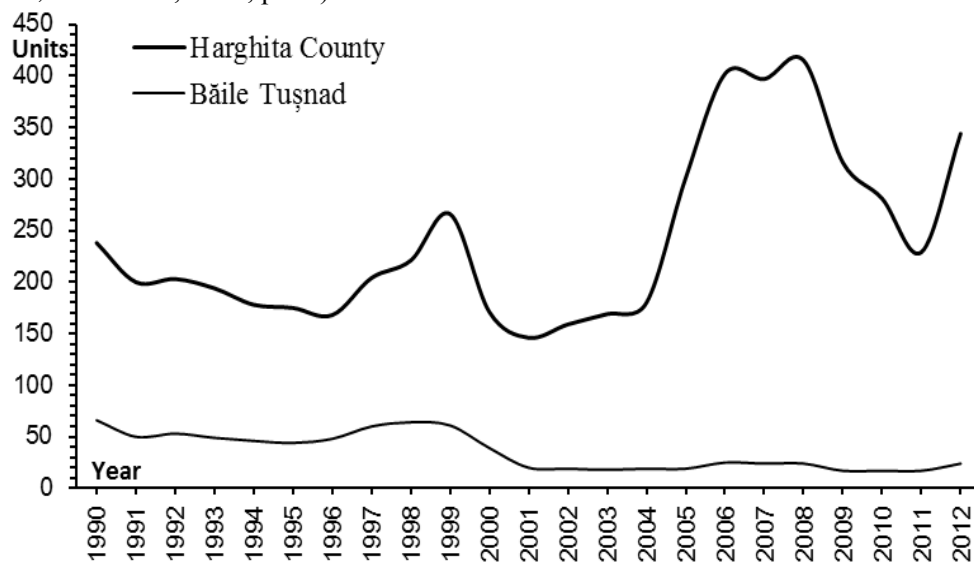
The first tourism constructions were rapidly erected, on Olt River floodplain and lower terrace; in only two years they equipped some mineral springs and built 40 villas and a house for welcoming visitors (Bicsák, 1973, p. 13). The resort was destroyed during the 1848 events and rebuilt after 1852, this time on the upper river terrace, which was larger and positioned at 30 – 40 m above the floodplain. Then they built numerous villas, a leisure complex, the spa pavilion and installed the first doctors. After 1893 they started to drain the swamp along the Olt River and, a few years later, Ciucaș Lake was arranged on its place. Between the two world wars they modernized and diversified the treatment modalities (newer resources were introduced, such as the therapeutic mud, the sapropelic mud and the mofettic gas), they increased the surface of Ciucaș Lake and built on its shore an auditorium and a restaurant. The number of tourist tripled, reaching 3080 in 1937 (Ielenicz, Vlăsceanu, 1989, p. 27). However, the resort was still a seasonal one.

The resort developed intensely after the communist nationalization in 1948, and in 1960 it turned into a spa and tourism resort with continuous operation. Firstly, they introduced

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some missing public utilities (such as electricity, water supply network, sewerage), built a spa clinic, the House of Culture, and upgraded the comfort of the villas. In 1964 there was built the chalet near St. Anne Lake. On the 27th of May 1968 the settlement was promoted as a town, turning into the smallest town in Romania.

The most important modernization of the resort took place in the '70s. The comfort of the villas was increased again, the spa clinic and the nourishment units were modernized; most important, there were built the great hotels of the resort (Ciucaş and Ana, in 1972, Tuşnad, in 1977, and Oltul, in 1978) and a newer and more complex treatment base. On the right of Olt River they built the mineral water beach and the camping, with a sport field. In 1973 they built the modernized road towards St. Anne Lake and Balványos resort. Consequently, in the '80s the number of tourists reached about 60,000 persons each year (Ielenicz, Vlăsceanu, 1989, p. 29).



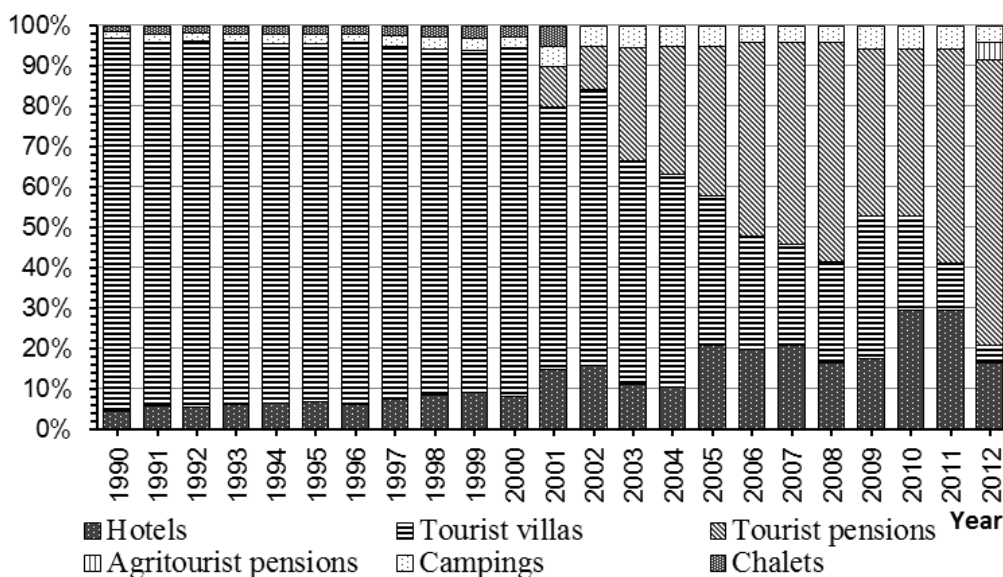
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Figure 1. The evolution of the number of accommodation units in Băile Tuşnad resort and in Harghita County.

After 1990, as a consequence of the economic situation in Romania, the annual number of tourists decreased gradually, to below 20,000. The maintenance and modernization works concentrated in the area of Ciucaş Lake and on the right of Olt River, where a swimming pool was built. In the spring of 2012 a modern wellness centre was inaugurated.

2. The evolution of the accommodation

After 1990 the evolution of *the accommodation base* in Băile Tuşnad is similar to the one of Harghita County, except for the period between 2004 and 2012; then, due to the intense increasing of the number of tourist pensions and agritourist pensions in the rural area of the county, on the background of their lower representation in Băile Tuşnad (but, still, increasing as a number), one can see a more intense increasing at the county level (figure 1). This increase is mainly due to the capital infusion in the tourism activity, through the EU financing programs, especially in the rural part of the county. If in 1990 the accommodation structures in Băile Tuşnad resort represented 27.7% of the ones in Harghita County, in 2000 their weight decreased to 22.8%, and in 2001 to 13.7% (some of the villas were put out of service); after 2004, as a consequence of the development of rural tourism, it decreased to 6% and even underneath in the economic crisis years, in order to return to 7% in 2012 (table 1).



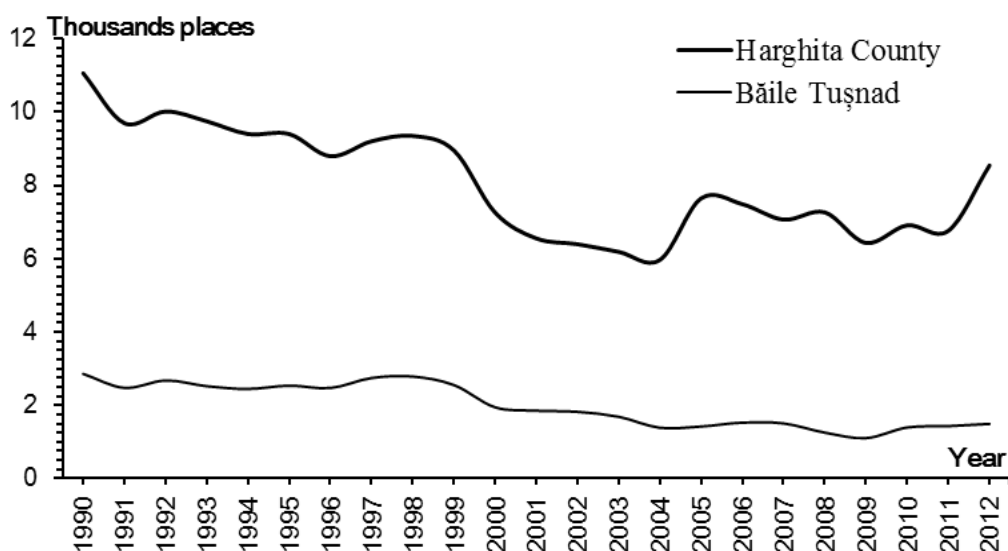
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Figure 2. The evolution of the structure of accommodation units in Băile Tușnad resort.

From the point of view of their number, the tourist villas were the main structures of accommodation in Băile Tușnad resort until the end of the '90s. Along the '90s, but especially in the 2000s, their number reduced drastically, due to the difficult adaptation to the newer comfort conditions; their place was partially covered by tourist pensions (figure 2). Hotels are still well represented in the resort, the ones built in the '70s being completed with another one, in 2006, in the period of development through the EU financing programs. Excepting some restoration periods, the number of the hotels in Băile Tușnad has always represented about 20% in the total of the ones in Harghita County, as a consequence of a higher stability of this accommodation category.

The number of *accommodation places* went according to the general tendencies in the county (figure 3). After 1990 their number gradually decreased, until 2004; afterwards, until 2012, the increasing EU funds infusion registered a negative inflexion during the economic crisis years. Yet, after 2004, contrary to the county tendencies, in Băile Tușnad one can see the growth of the number of accommodation places even in the years when the number of accommodation structures decreased; the cause resides in the putting into service of some newer and more modern accommodation units, especially hotels and tourist pensions, with an increased number of places and comfort, while the smaller units, such as the old tourist villas, were taken out of service.

If in 1990 the number of accommodation places in Băile Tușnad resort represented 25.8% of the ones in Harghita County, until 2002 it reached 28.5%, as a consequence of the decrease of the tourism activity in other resorts, which concentrated most of the accommodation basis of the county; putting the villas out of service and the progress of rural tourism in the following years made the weight of Băile Tușnad resort decrease to about 20%, and to 17% in the crisis period, as a consequence of a more difficult adjustment to the crisis of the bigger accommodation units (table 1). As numbers, the accommodation places in hotels remained constant, around the value of 600.

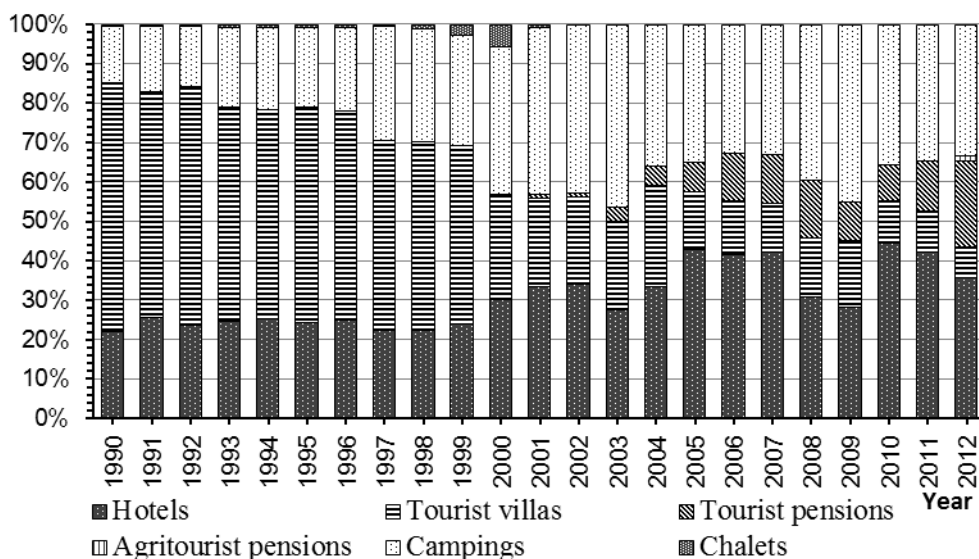


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Figure 3. The evolution of the number of accommodation places in Harghita County and Băile Tușnad resort.

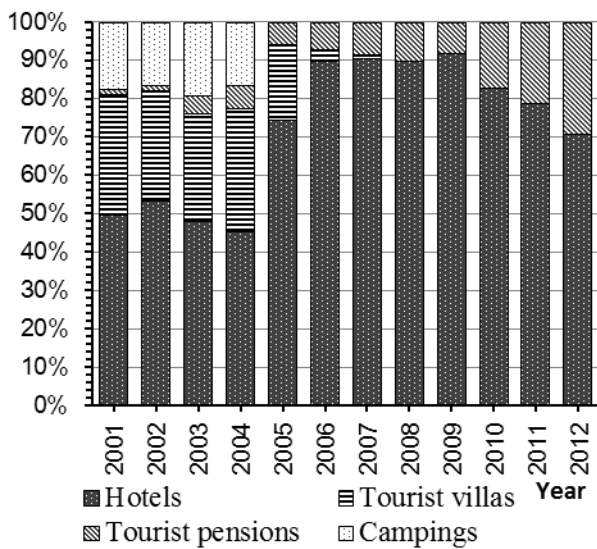
Here too, tourist pensions were in advantage, their number of places constantly growing due to the EU funds infusion in this type of accommodation. From the point of view of the weight in the total of the county, the number of accommodation places in the tourist pensions in Băile Tușnad grew from 3.3% in 2001 to 7.9% in 2012 (figure 4).

Between 2000 and 2012, by reducing the weight of the places in tourist villas and their partial replacement with places in tourist pensions, the structure of accommodation places in Băile Tușnad resort evolved towards a uniform distribution, each of the main accommodation structures (hotel, tourist pension/villa, camping) filling 1/3 of the accommodation places.



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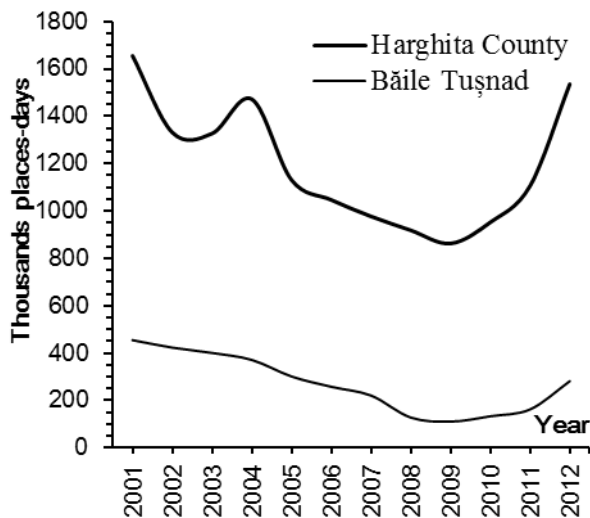
Figure 4. The evolution of the structure of accommodation places in Băile Tușnad resort.



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Figure 5. The structure of accommodation capacity in operation in Băile Tușnad resort.

tourism resorts, so that they cannot rival the newer tourist pensions or hotels. The camping, a seasonal structure, needs a quite important investment, less probable to be recovered in the short period of the tourism season, as much as the target camping tourist, nature and freedom lover, is attracted by the possibility to camp free around the resort. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the weight in the total of Harghita county, the accommodation capacity in operation yet decreased, from 31.8% in 2002, to 18.3% in 2012 (13% – 14% during the crisis years), as a consequence of the fact that most of the newer accommodation structures recently built in the county are permanent structures (table 1).



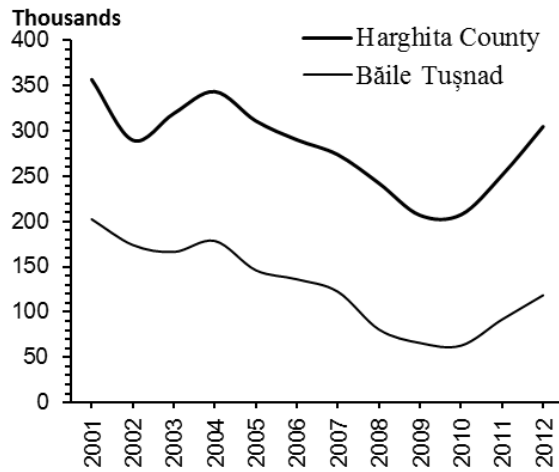
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Figure 6. The accommodation capacity in operation in Harghita County and Băile Tușnad resort.

The trend towards accommodation structures with higher number of places and comfort in Băile Tușnad resort, specific to all important tourism resorts and urban settlements, may be also noted when analysing the accommodation capacity in operation (figure 5); it is quantified in number of places-days, namely, the number of accommodation places available to tourists, considering the number of days in a year in which they were in service). Thus, one can find that starting with 2005, there were not available accommodation places in the camping, and starting with 2008, in the villas (figure 6). The explanation resides in the fact that the old villas could hardly be brought to the level of comfort demanded in the important

permanent structures (table 1).

Finally, the situation reflects itself in the very high weight that hotels have in the accommodation capacity in operation in Băile Tușnad resort, 70.8% in 2012 (figure 6), many of them being renovated and offering diversified services. Still, during the crisis years, the weight of the accommodation capacity in operation of the hotels in Băile Tușnad resort lost ground against the competition of tourist pensions (90.6% in 2007 and 70.8% in 2012 for hotels; 8.6% in 2007 and 29.2% in 2012 for tourist pensions), easier to adapt to tourists' demands and to the difficult social and economic conditions.



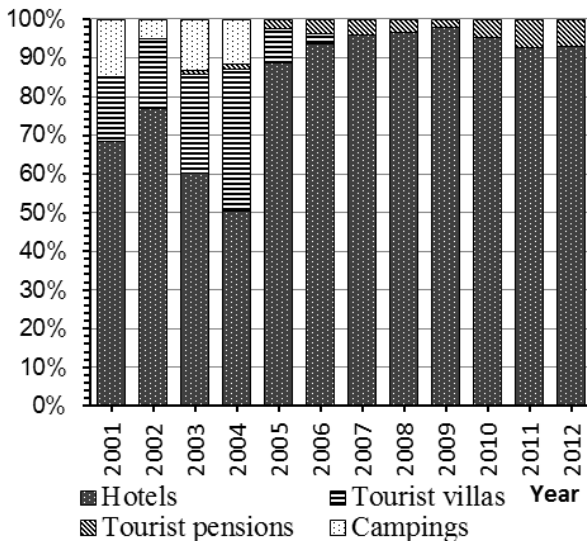
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Figure 7. The evolution of the number of overnight stays in Harghita county and Băile Tuşnad resort.

3. The evolution of the tourist movement

Analysing the number of tourists in Băile Tuşnad resort for the past 12 years, one can find an evolution which is pursuant to the one of Harghita County, except for the last year, when their number in the resort decreased, as against the one in the county (figure 7). One can also notice the strong decrease, in both cases, in the years 2008 and 2009, as a consequence of the economic crisis.

If at the beginning of the 2000s the tourists number in Băile Tuşnad resort represented about 30 – 32% of the ones in Harghita County, in 2012, due to the development of the tourism activities in other parts of the county their weight reduced to 14.3%; during the crisis years their weight lowered even more, to 9.9% in 2009 (table 1).



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Figure 8. The evolution of the structure of overnight stays in Băile Tuşnad resort. in Harghita County and in Băile Tuşnad resort.

Yet, the number of overnight stays was in a continuous decrease since 2004 when, as a consequence of the entrance of Romania in the EU and of the easier international movement, longer tourism stays moved outside the border; in Băile Tuşnad resort the tourists concentrated especially in the summer season. One can see the rapid decrease between 2008 and 2010, followed by an increasing trend, both at the local and county level (figure 8).

The growth of the overnight stays in Băile Tuşnad resort in the last interval, on the background of the decrease of the number of tourists, indicates an extension of the length of the stay. As a consequence of the longer staying, at the beginning of the 2000s the weight of Băile Tuşnad overnight stays in

the total of Harghita County was more than 50%, though the accommodation capacity in operation represented only about 30%; until 2012 the weight of overnight stays reduced to 38.9% (which still indicates a long staying if considering the accommodation capacity in operation), with a heavy negative inflexion, towards 30% – 32%, during the crisis years (table 1). In Băile Tuşnad resort, the highest weight of overnight stays is registered in hotels (figure 9); by reporting their number to the number of tourists, one can find that the staying in hotels is longer than in other types of accommodation. This is also due to the presence of elderly tourists benefitting from balneary treatment on behalf of the National House of Pensions and Other Social Insurance Rights of Romania. Due to the lower household income during the crisis years, there is also a growth of the weight of tourists and overnight stays in tourist pensions, easier to adapt to the newer social and economic conditions and offering more flexible travel packages.

4. Conclusions

During the last decade one can see that the accommodation units in Băile Tuşnad resort have evolved towards increased comfort ones, included in higher categories, especially new modern hotels and tourist pensions, specific to urbanized areas and important dynamic tourism resorts. Although the weight of accommodation units and accommodation places in the total of Harghita County decreased, one can notice an extension of the staying, confirming the orientation of the resort towards high quality organized tourism, based on spa activities.

Table 1. The evolution of the weight of some tourism parameters of Băile Tuşnad resort in the total of Harghita County (%).

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Accommodation units | 13.7 | 11.9 | 10.7 | 10.6 | 6.3 | 6.2 | 6 | 5.8 | 5.4 | 6 | 7.4 | 7 |
| Accommodation places | 28.3 | 28.5 | 27.3 | 23.2 | 18.6 | 20.4 | 21.3 | 17.3 | 17.2 | 20.2 | 21.2 | 17.5 |
| Accommodation capacity in operation | 27.5 | 31.8 | 30.2 | 25.2 | 26.7 | 24.7 | 22.6 | 13.9 | 12.9 | 14 | 14.7 | 18.3 |
| Tourists | 32.7 | 31.5 | 34.6 | 34.3 | 19.7 | 22.8 | 22.3 | 12.5 | 9.9 | 13.4 | 23 | 14.3 |
| Overnight stays | 56.8 | 60.1 | 52.1 | 52 | 47 | 46.9 | 44.7 | 33.3 | 31.8 | 30.3 | 36.5 | 38.9 |

Still, during the economic crisis one can find a more intense decrease of the number of tourists and overnight stays, reflected in smaller weights in the total of the county (table 1), most likely because during this period the tourists went for lower less expensive services. In Băile Tuşnad the situation also reflects itself in the growth of the weight of tourists accommodating in tourist pensions, compared to the one of those accommodating in hotels. According to the tourism demand, the number of the accommodation places in operation decreased too, especially by temporarily putting them out of service.

Finally, compared to the general evolution of Harghita County, as a consequence of the important weight of high comfort accommodation units and superior tourism services in Băile Tuşnad resort, one can find a more difficult aligning to the crisis conditions, with bigger negative inflexions of the parameters, but without a prolonged period.

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