

CURRENT STATE AND PROSPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT OF IAȘI IN THE CONTEXT OF PRACTICING URBAN TOURISM

Roxana Valentina Gârbea¹

Abstract. In the last period the major cities are looking to find themselves a new identity, to gain international recognition, to assert through originality and an effective way to achieve this wish is the opening for international tourism. Cities face a double challenge. On the one hand must be able to meet the expectations and needs of a growing number of tourists attracted by the richness and variety of cultural, sports, business, etc.. having to continually renew and improve such facilities, so that they may maintain the tourist demand. On the other hand, they must ensure that tourism is developed and managed in such a manner that will benefit the resident population and does not contribute to the deterioration of the urban environment. The article proposes to analyse the current state of development of tourism in the city of Iasi, in the context where there is a request to build a strong image of tourist destination, aspiring to the title of European Cultural Capital. Iasi was always perceived as a city of culture, visual identity generated by the presence of historical, architectural and cultural heritage, which gives the title of Cultural Capital of Romania. By obtaining the title of European City of Sport in 2012, Iasi has been placed on the map of major European cities, on the same level as large urban centres in France, Italy, United Kingdom and Belgium.

Key words: *Iasi, urban tourism, forms of tourism, potential, European City of Sport*

1. Introduction

To study urban tourism means to better understand a destination whose wealth is the city itself, with its identity, and that which is in parallel venue for the different activities, a city in motion.

Due to the increasing importance that tourism has in the economy of cities, it is given increasing attention by those in charge of development of these urban centres. Therefore, both at international level and in Romania, many cities have developed a series of strategies for tourism development, thus wanting to meet potential tourists with a wide variety of tourism products that can meet competition at regional level and beyond. A strategy that helps support and develops tourism at the level of The City of Iasi is also obtaining the title of European City of Sport in 2012, which gives a new status that will contribute to economic and urban development, to reinvigorate sport and develop tourism. Notoriety achieved, the development of local sports and infrastructure will facilitate the appointment of Iasi as European Capital of Culture in 2020, a project which, as seen in the case of the city of Sibiu has the ability to bring very many benefits. This success will largely depend on the ability of local government to adopt a competitive cultural strategy that would focus on the development and modernization

¹ “Al.I.Cuza” University of Iasi, Faculty of Geography and Geology, Department of Geography, Bd.Carol I 20A, 700505, Iasi, Romania, rocsval86@yahoo.ca

of general and touristic infrastructure, diversification of attractions, on promoting the destination, increasing the quality of services provided.

This article represents a blueprint for the current state of tourism in Iasi taking into account the continued changes and transformations to develop this important sector of the urban economy. In achieving the first part we consulted the specialized literature to familiarize with the concept of urban tourism. There were also used statistical data which were processed using Excel to highlight the evolution of the number of tourists in the city of Iași. Mapping method has not been neglected, with Philcarto program facilitating the realization of the flow of tourists coming to visit the city and the main elements were located on the ground for a better understanding of the data provided. Because it is an analysis belonging to the sphere of tourism, the methods used have both qualitative and quantitative characteristics.

2. Urban tourism between concept and perception

From European and world experience, urban tourism had manifested starting with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the major cultural cities were visited by young people wishing to complete their culture and professional training as well as by trader's world. With the development of modern society, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, urban administrations showed growing interest to preserve cultural heritage and traditional cultural events, placing increasing emphasis on encouraging touristic activities. Valorisation through tourism of all cultural goods is closely related to the actions of their conservation and restoration.

If urban tourism until recently was regarded as a result of population mobility, for which the city was only a short break, now because of the significant behavioural changes, but also due to the extensive changes that took part, the city became a cultural centre, sheltered where people are shopping, meet friends and spend pleasant leisure. Therefore it can be said that urban tourism is not just a form of tourism, but an integral, traditional and characteristic feature of urban life (Howie, 2003).

Although there are difficulties in defining and delimiting urban tourism - specialized literature does not provide a universally accepted definition for urban tourism – there could be identified common elements among different authors on the inclusion of the concept of tourist and hiker and delimitation of urban space. Therefore, we can highlight that urban tourism refers both to tourists movement in cities or urban agglomerations of more than 20,000 people, outside the main residence, on condition that at least for one night they stay at the place of destination as well as the movement for hikers less than 24 hours in urban areas, on condition that the travel distance to be of at least 100 km (Cazes, Potier, 1996).

Urban tourism represents an ensemble of tourism resources of a whole city proposed to external visitors (Vighetti, 1994), a destination or a bridge between the flows of people (Violier, 1998).

WTO considers that urban tourism refers to trips made in the cities or places with a high density of population, but without specifying how great this density must be (WTO, Tourism 2020 Vision). Other authors, when defining urban tourism, are considering the scope of tourism activities. Rodica Minciu (2003), characterizes urban tourism from the perspective of a very wide coverage - leisure time (holidays) in the cities, for visiting them and conducting a variety of activities, such as relatives, meeting friend, watching performances, exhibitions, shopping etc.

Urban tourism is enjoying great success in the past years, representing one of the most dynamic forms of tourism. Cities are constantly changing and transforming to adapt and to

serve residents and visitors. Tourism can contribute to sustainable development of urban areas by improving the competitiveness of existing businesses by responding to social needs and preserving cultural and natural environment.

2.1 Forms of tourism in Iasi

Tourism in urban centres is under the influence of predisposing factors, such as: increasing interest in cultural objectives, increasing domestic and international relationships, the development of business tourism and as a result of these factors can be distinguished several forms of urban tourism.

Iasi, by the diversity of tourism potential and tourism specific technical and material basis, meet the requirements of numerous forms of tourism, consequently, suited both for the short-stay tourism, as well as for the itinerant one. Due to the increasing importance that urban tourism has in the economy of cities, in recent years numerous studies and research were conducted at the level of Iasi Municipality. In this regard include: Study on the tourism potential in the border area of Iasi - Republic of Moldova, and Economic and social development strategy of Iasi County from the period of 2009 to 2014. Based on these studies, at the level Iasi Municipality can be identified the following forms of tourism:

a) Religious tourism is the type of tourism that has as motivation visiting the religious edifices, with spiritual implications. The large number of existing churches and monasteries in Iasi contributes to the development of religious tourism, allowing the organization of pilgrimages, through the creation of tourist routes to highlight the spirituality of these churches.

b) Cultural tourism is a rapidly growing form of tourism, because the level of culture and civilization level increases from year to year, boosting the tourists' desire for knowledge. Iasi has a great cultural heritage, which makes cultural tourism to be an important niche of tourism development. Sights such as the Palace of Culture, Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Union Museum, Ion Creanga's Hut are a few reference points for the culture and history of these places.

c) Business tourism is considered among the most important sources of income for the hotel industry from Iasi. In addition to hosting the congress or Conference, beneficiaries receive a whole package of services. Business tourism is a segment that brings tourists not only on weekends or holidays, offering a continuity of the tourist season

d) Sport tourism requires the existence of facilities for sporting activities from competitions, to sports demonstrations. Sport tourism focuses on two segments of tourists: on the one hand the general public attending such events in the position of spectators, on the other hand, participants who, after the event, want to spend a pleasant free time or sightseeing. Designation as European Capital of Sport in 2012 will be an opportunity for Iasi to be able to organize competitions that will attract a significant number of tourists. However, does the City of Iasi have the necessary sports infrastructure to host these events?

e) Shopping tourism- the large number of shopping centres that focused more in Iasi than in any other district in North-East makes the number of tourists who came specifically for such activities to be increasing. Shopping options are varied and, in recent years, the appearance of numerous commercial complexes gender "mall", they have multiplied

f) Transit tourism (on business interest or personal), stimulated in some measure by the persons movements to and from the Republic of Moldova.

g) The spa tourism. Sulphurous waters from Nicolina presents the best healing properties in the country and among the best in Europe, and comparative studies have shown

that the sludge has the same qualities as the one from the luxury resort of Karlovy Vary Czech. Implementation of a series of measures that have proven effective in these resorts with tradition in health tourism would be absolutely necessary, and in the case of the Nicolina treatment centre.

h) Leisure tourism. The recreational and leisure side of urban tourism is a relatively new one and has been developed in recent years acting as an engine for tourism planning of urban but also peripheral space. Remarkable in this regard for Iasi are the forested areas from Paun, Repedea, Bârnova in the southern part of the city, Ciric, Breazu, Cetațuia. DN Route 24 out of Iasi municipality into Pietrăria-Poieni-Schitu Duca is regarded as a particularly picturesque route.

In the future, amplifying and diversifying elements of attraction will offer new opportunities for the leisure of tourists.

2.2 Tourism accommodation capacity

The network accommodation units represent the most important component of the technical and material base because it answers to one of the fundamental needs of the tourist, which is rest.

Tourist accommodation structures in urban areas covers a wide variety typology (hotels, hostels, motels, pensions, villas, etc.), and besides optimal conditions of overnight, they provides other temporary services as well (food, recreation, conference facilities etc.)

By building numerous new structures and modernizing the existing ones, Iasi, has enriched both quantitatively and qualitatively the accommodation units base. Considering the tendency of accommodation offers, and some existing gaps in data collection methodology for official statistics, for a pertinent analysis of tourist accommodation structures in Iasi, units classified in the database of the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism were analysed (Table1).

Currently in Iasi there are 49 reception facilities for accommodation, with a total of 1254 rooms and 2517 seats. A moment that shows the lack of accommodation places is in the week when is celebrated Days of Iasi, coinciding with the religious feast of St. Paraskeva. October becomes the busiest month of the year, Iasi being visited by over one million pilgrims. All accommodation is occupied in these days, the faithful who come to Iasi having to make reservations with several weeks before.

Iasi stands out in the North East Region with the highest number in accommodation seats in hotel establishments. Only three hotels from Iasi manage to affiliate to international hotel chains.

Since 2009 the Hotel Astoria is affiliated with Best Western International hotel chain benefiting from a huge capital of image. Another hotel affiliate to an international hotel chain is Ramada. Ramada hotel chain was founded in 1954 and has about 900 hotels worldwide. Of a positive perception from potential customers is enjoying the Select hotel which is affiliated to the Marriott International brand.

Hotel infrastructure in Iasi is located mainly in the central area. In terms of pricing peak, in April 2010, we can observe that Ramada has the highest rate followed by the Hotel Europa. The Continental Hotel has the lowest rate (Figure 1).

Table1: Tourist reception structures existing in Iasi, on types of units and categories of comfort (Jan.2010)

Source: processing of existing data in the database of the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism (www.turism.gov.ro/ro/informatii-utile/)

	5*	4*	3*	2*	1*	Total	
						Absolute	%
Hotel							
- units		4	7	3	2	16	32.65
- rooms		168	491	79	26	764	60.92
- places		316	986	176	52	1530	60.79
Hotel for youth							
- units			2			2	4.08
- rooms			45			45	3.58
- places			90			90	3.57
Hostel							
- units			3	3	1	7	4.28
- rooms			129	33	5	167	13.31
- places			58	6	2	36	13.34
Motel							
- units			1			1	2.04
- rooms			56			56	4.46
- places			112			112	4.44
Touristic pension							
- units		7	12	4		23	46.93
- rooms		72	119	31		222	17.7
- places		149	238	62		449	17.83

2.3 Tourist circulation

Analysis of data on key indicators of tourist traffic in Iasi allows quantitative assessment of demand for tourism products, as well as highlighting its trends.

Tourist circulation must be analysed through the evolution and structure of the three main indicators: tourist arrivals, overnight stays in accommodation and average length of stay.

The main European countries providing tourists in Iasi are: France, Germany, Spain, England and Italy (Fig. 3). The presence of two Cultural Centers, French and German, seems to have a positive influence on the country's image abroad and therefore on the number of tourist arrivals from these two countries.

It is known that tourists who come from these two countries are lovers of culture and history, thus explaining the large number of visitors to the sights. The two main countries suppliers of tourists from outside Europe are: U.S. and Israel. Regarding the Israeli tourists there can be two possible explanations: a large number of students coming from this country, which is visited by relatives, family. Another explanation could be the large number of

Hebrew who lived in Iasi if we consider that in 1899, 50% of Iasi population was formed by Hebrew. Most of the Jews who survived the Second World War immigrated to Israel.

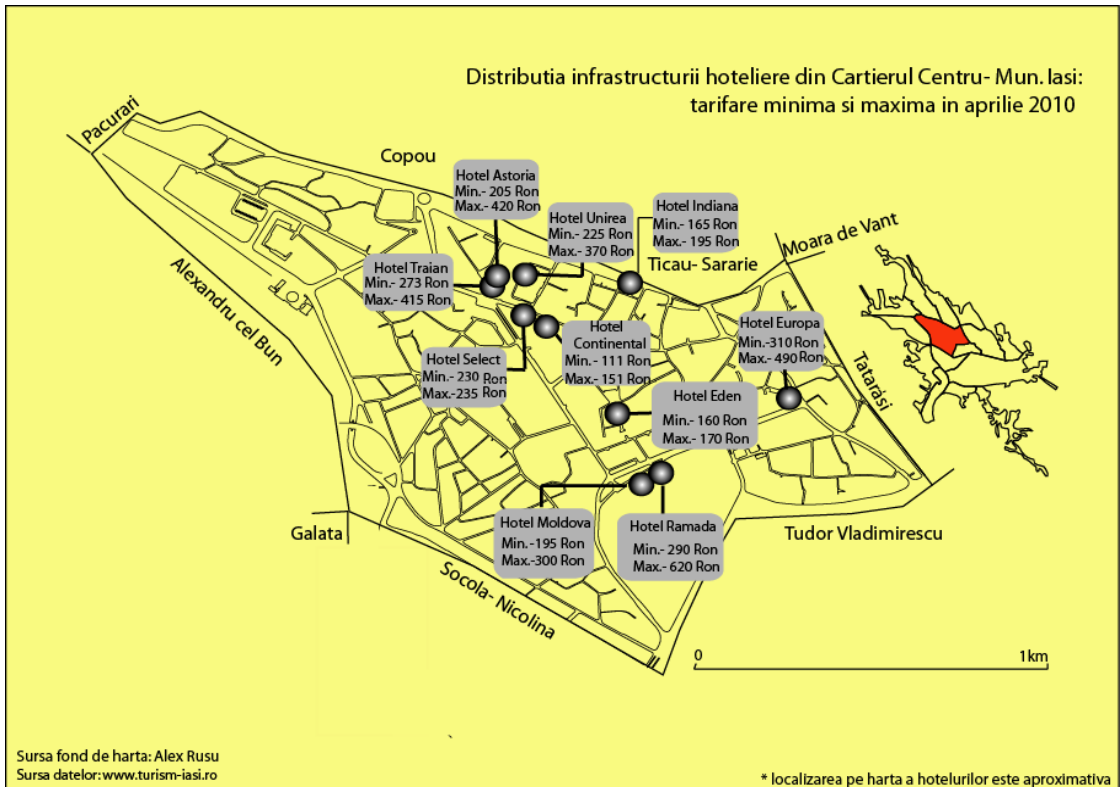


Figure 1: Distribution of the hotel infrastructure in Central District, Iasi: pricing minimum and maximum in April 2010 Data source: www.turism-info.ro.

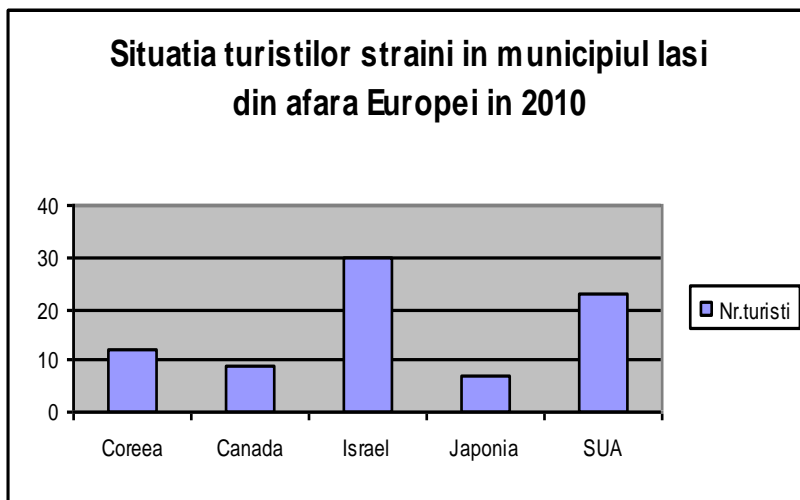


Figure 2: The situation of foreign tourists in Iasi from outside Europe in 2010 Data source: The Tourist Information Centre Iasi

Ethnic tourism in these conditions takes shape in Iasi, most Jews who come and visit the city are history lovers eager to visit the places where their parents grew up. Among all the synagogues and houses of worship that existed in Iasi, was preserved only The Great Synagogue.

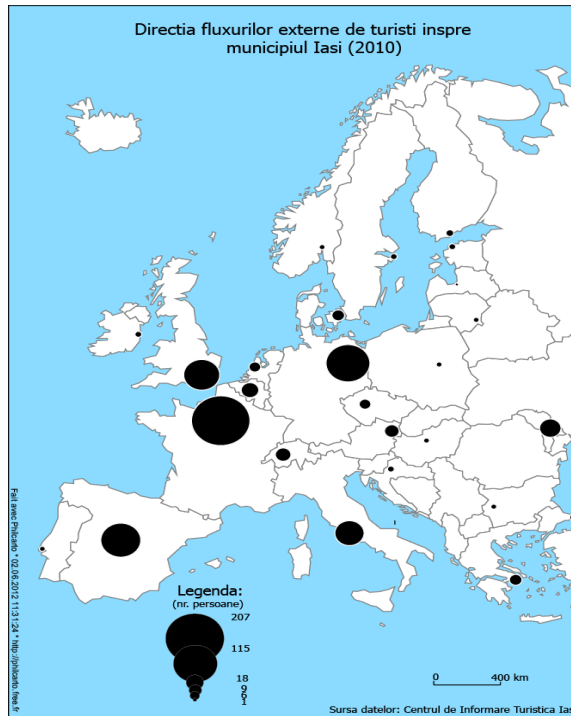


Figure 3: Direction flows of foreign tourists to city of Iasi in 2010
Data source: The Tourist Information Centre Iasi

Unlike neighbouring counties, the capital of Moldova is privileged in terms of the influx of tourists. Although they do not spend more than two or three days or up to one week in Iasi, tourists who come here rise the occupancy level of accommodation structures during the week. It comes in first, business people and participants at various fairs, exhibitions and symposiums.

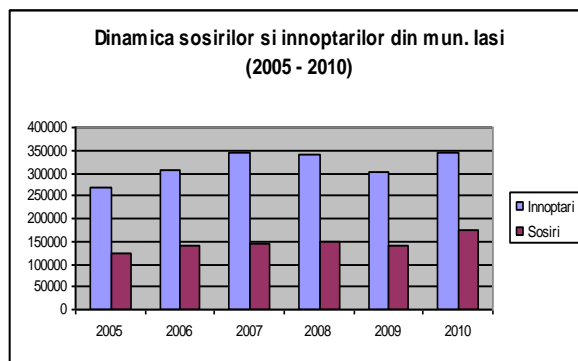


Figure 4: The dynamics of arrivals and overnight stays in Iasi
Data source: National Institute of Statistics

Data analysis on arrivals and overnight stays for the period 2005-2008 shows a steady increase for these two indicators (fig. 4). In 2009 a decrease is observed for both overnight stays and arrivals, which is largely due to economic problems. Since 2010, we witness once again the growth of the two indicators.

Conclusions and proposals

The city of Iasi aims to become European Capital of Culture in 2020, but this success will largely depend on the ability of local governments to adopt a competitive cultural strategy until 2015 when it will be decide whether the city of Iasi will receive this new status. The main objectives of the program "Iasi - European Cultural Capital 2020 " would be: improving the city's international visibility, long-term cultural development, attracting visitors on national and international level, improving the feeling of local pride, promoting creativity and innovation.

Iasi has a very special cultural glow but cultural infrastructure is in a long process of restoration. Thus, the mere existence of a great cultural heritage is not sufficient to develop a strong tourism sector that will have a major impact on economic and social development of the city. Several conditions must be fulfilled and several measures taken to make Iasi an attractive tourist destination.

In order to obtain an unambiguous identity and worldwide recognition it is important for the city to develop its own image which will be found in social, economic and tourism development within the city.

A major project that will change, definitively, the image of the city's cultural and historical centre is the PALAS project, which has been completed in May 2012. At first glance, the project, the largest private investment in Iasi so far, seems to present only benefits, both economically and socially. A major objection concerns the location of this miniature city near the Palace of Culture. When work will end and the assembly will come alive there is the real danger of underexposing the palace, which is already dominated by the new buildings that rise around it.

Completion of other projects that are underway will contribute to a positive change in the image of the city. It stands out in this the projects of rearranging the Ciric base of entertainment and of the river Bahlui.

Obtaining the title of European Capital of Sport in 2012 is a great achievement which will contribute to reviving the sport Iasi, attracting investment, as well as tourism development. The city of Iasi will be required to host at least 24 events or sports competitions for both performance sports as well as table sports. Unfortunately, the sports infrastructure has important shortcomings: the lack of a stadium that meets international standards, of some swimming pools, skating rinks or modern polyvalent halls.

Along with originality and authenticity of sightseeing, existing facilities provide unique benefits. Often the tourist level of satisfaction is given not only by visiting and knowing of heritage sites, but also by the quality of tourist services and equipment. Although Iasi has a high number of beds in hotel-type units it is noted the low international profile membership units and the lack of a 5-star hotel.

The evolution of tourism in Iasi requires coordination, investment, training, promotion, resulting in collaboration between local public administration authorities, commercial companies, communities and this moment is to be aware, increasingly, by the

institutions targeted, but also by the population. Without a wide policy to promote tourism Iasi will be unable to impose as a reference destination of Romania.

Contents by the effervescence of transformations, Iasi leaves visitors the impression of a city filled with history, whose identity is in full process of reconstruction. Through major economic and urban projects there is the chance to regain the former brightness.

References

1. Cazes G., Potier F., 1996, *Le Tourisme Urbain*, PUF, Paris.
2. Howie F., 2003, *Managing Tourist Destination*, Thomson Learning EMEA.
3. Minciu R., 2005, *Economia turismului*. Ediția a III-a revăzută și adăugită, Editura Uranus, București.
4. Vighetti J.B., 1994, *Qu'est-ce que le tourisme urbain?*, Cahier d'Espaces, no 39, Le Tourisme urbain, p.31-35.
5. Violier P., 1998, *A la recherche du tourisme urbain : exploration nantaise*, L'Harmattan, coll. Tourisme et Sociétés.
6. OMT, *Tourisme 2020 Vision*.
7. Studiul asupra potențialului turistic în zona transfrontalieră Municipiul Iași – Republica Moldova.
8. Strategia de dezvoltare economică și socială a județului Iași pentru perioada 2009 – 2014.
9. INSSE - The National Institute of Statistics
10. www.turism.gov.ro/ro/informatii-utile/
11. www.turism-info.ro
12. Centrul de Informare Turistică Iași