

TOURISM – OPPORTUNITY FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN TUTOVA HILLS

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Abstract. Tourism is often perceived as a modality to improve local economies of rural areas in crisis, modality which allows an appropriate development for marginal or of subsistence socio-economic environments. While it hasn't the impact of the agricultural potential valorization, for instance, it may represent yet a viable alternative to mono-economic areas. It is also the situation of Tutova Hills, an area at least theoretically well-polarized by the urban centers that surround it and which may become a weekend tourist destination, exponent of alternative tourism.

Keywords: Tutova Hills, rural tourism, transit tourism, economic growth, degree of touristic attractiveness

Introduction

Tutova Hills represent a physical-geographical sub-unit of the Central Moldavian Plateau, which lies between the Siret Corridor (in the west) and the Bârlad Valley (in the east), being a territory which overlaps two Romanian development regions (North-East and South-East). (Fig. 1) They are a rural space *par excellence* and hence there is no urban centre in the area, even if some more or less important cities and towns are adjacent (Bacău, Vaslui, Bârlad, but also Adjud or Măreșești).

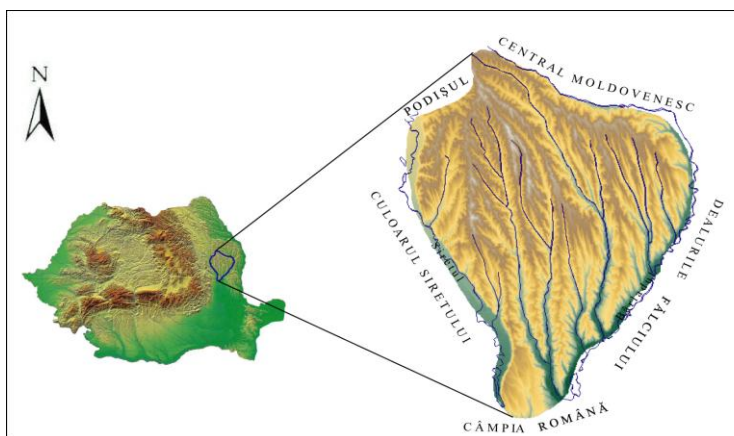


Figure no.1 The position of Tutova Hills in Romania

As far as the natural touristic heritage is concerned, this territory benefits from couple of attractions, such as hills and massive hills, with sightseeing opportunities on the surrounding areas (Doroșanu Hill, with the relief unit maximum altitude of 561 m, Chișoc Hill - which offers an interesting panorama of Vaslui or Dealul Mare - Bârlad) or some natural reserves and monuments, like Nuțasca-Ruseni geological reserve (volcanic ash derived from eruptions that took place in the second half of the Tertiary in the Eastern Carpathians), Pădurea Buciumeni (Buciumeni Forest) reserve, with deciduous forest associations – ash trees, hornbeams, beeches and limes – Mânzați paleontological reserve (where the skeleton of a giant mammal, actually a fossilized specimen of *Deinotherium gigantissimum*, was discovered) and last but not least, many secular oaks (Corobănești, Bogdănești, Bogheștii de Sus). One might also enjoy the possibility of rebuilding windmills, a defining element of the region in the past, 67 such facilities being recorded in 1893 (Poghirc 1972). Moreover, Tutova Hills can become an important destination for those interested in sports or adventure activities, such as cycling, angling, horse riding or touristic orientation, while man-made lakes or forest areas can become important recreational areas suitable for practicing active tourism or hunting.

Regarding the anthropogenic touristic heritage, one can mention ecclesiastic architecture monuments, such as monasteries, most of them built between 16th-17th centuries, or as wooden churches, spread relatively evenly in the area (Motoșeni, Pogana, Puiești), but also civil architecture monuments, such as museums and memorial houses (Vasile Pârvan Memorial Museum in Huruiești village or Gheorghe Vrânceanu Agriculture Museum in Lipova village) or boyars mansions (Strat Mansion in Horgești or Crissoveloni Mansion in Ghidigeni). Various periodic events are worth mentioning in this respect, such as festivals or fairs of local interest, events that may become touristic manifestations for nearby visitors. Another defining element of the area, which could turn into at least peripheral touristic space, is its deeply rural character that must be integrated into a profitable duality traditionalism-modernism.

Given the existing touristic heritage, Tutova Hills can be considered a suitable area for rural tourism (with the concentration of touristic movements taking place especially during the weekends, the region being situated at relatively short distances from important urban centers), for leisure tourism (whose importance could also be enhanced through the presence of local and regional important monuments) and active tourism. This duality (rural/ethnographic tourism – active tourism) is not singular, as there are numerous regions in Europe that have implemented development programs from this point of view, such as Limousin in France (with a well-chosen motto – *Parfum d'Enfance*) or Extremadura in Spain, less polarized areas where the dominant of most localities is still an agricultural or an agro-industrial one. Generally speaking, the decline or stagnation of one economic sector (in this case, farming), may create room for another kind of tourism. (Ateljevic 2009).

Furthermore, this area situated between two important transport axis is likely to stake also on transit tourism (otherwise, this type channels in the present the most significant tourist flows). In a broader perspective, certain elements related to rural tourism might also interest foreign visitors (handcraft, farm works and in general, the entire archaic way of life that may seem exotic), but the region has not a reputation which might individualize it throughout Europe (as Bucovina or Maramureș), so development in this regard is highly unlikely.

Results and discussions

Infrastructure

An advantage of Tutova Hills future tourism development is also represented also the specialization of the neighboring spaces, which could bet particularly on wine-related tourism (Huși area, but also Panciu-Odobești), spa tourism (Trotuș Valley) or transit tourism (Siret Corridor). However, even the considered area may include in its economic strategy the development of that latter type of tourism, given the fact that it is located in the proximity of some major road routes, such as E581 and E85. In this respect, we have created a map of distances by road to the nearest urban center, using the Kriging method (Fig. 2).

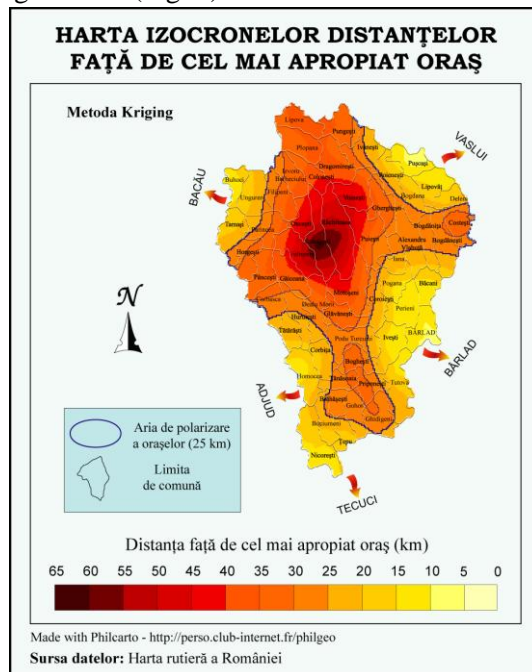


Figure 2 Map of distances to the nearest town

It is actually an expression of the value estimation (in kilometers) of each point of the territory depending on the points lying in an immediate neighborhood. (Groza, Muntele 2002).

By analyzing figure no.2, one can say that the cities' polarization areas are extremely well represented, the spaces that might benefit from major tourist flows from adjacent urban centers being suggested as well - flows that could be, at least theoretically, even more important if we take into consideration the presence, in the average vicinity, of some Moldavian leading emitting centers, such as Iași, Focșani or even Galați. One major factor of this cartographic distribution is represented by the north-south road routes orientation, determined by the topographic particularities (areas of maximum accessibility) and by the urban centers adjacent position. In order to minimize the impact of the central area's periphery character, an upgrade of DJ 243, between Pogana and Dragomirești, with a general direction southeast-northwest, should be taken into account. Moreover, it can easily be observed that the accessibility of Bârlad City's polarization area is by far the largest and yet, tourism activities are quite undeveloped there.

Another extremely important type of infrastructure for a possible tourism development boost, in addition to communication infrastructure, is the one which regards accommodation. In this respect, we have analyzed the dynamics of the number of accommodation facilities and touristic places, as well as the dynamics of the tourist arrivals and overnights number (Fig. 3, 4, 5 and 6).

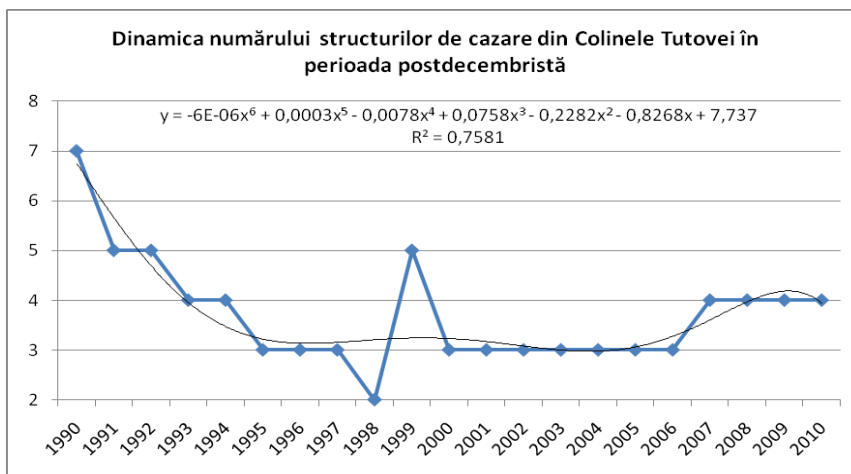


Figure 3 Evolution of the accommodation facilities number in Tutova Hills after 1990

Data source: INS

Thus, we processed the existing information (by counties) of INS Tempo online database, considering only the communes situated in Tutova Hills. In general, the

indicators' trends are non-linear, with a drastic value decrease until 2004 or 2005, period after which a slight increase or a stabilization of the phenomena can be observed.

As far as the number of accommodation structures evolution is concerned, the indicator values varied between a maximum of seven units in 1990 and a minimum of two units in 1998 (Fig. 3), a situation that does not comply with the trend being registered in 1999, when two agro-touristic boarding houses were built in Bogdana; they were ephemeral structures considering the fact they had a “lifespan” of only an year. The number of touristic places presented a similar evolution (Fig. 4), varying from a maximum of 1408 units in 1991 to a minimum of 441 units in 2005. Since 2007, the trend tends to stabilize around the value of 500 units. The greatest value discrepancy is registered between 1990 (450 units) and 1991, and it was caused by the increase of Lipovăț (from 398 to 560 units) and Buciumeni (from 28 to 894 units) student camps capacity, an indicator that from 1991 presents an essential downward inflection.

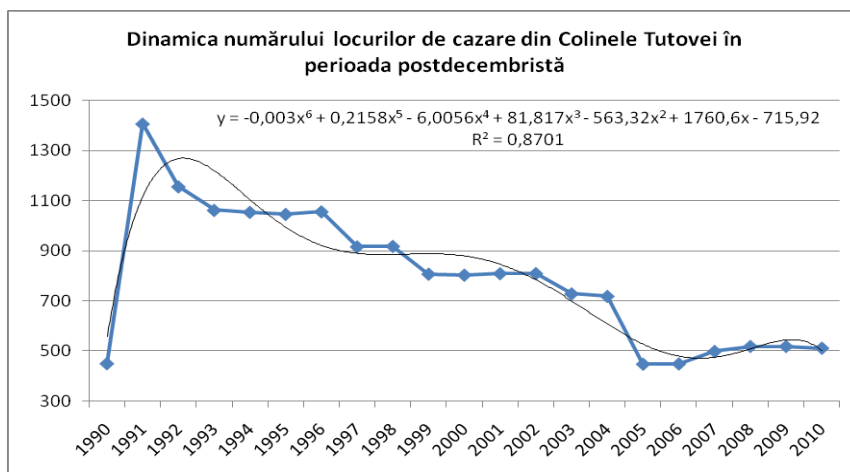


Figure 4 Evolution of the accommodation capacity in Tutova Hills after 1990

Data source: INS

A very significant proportion of the region's accommodation capacity is constituted by the number of touristic places in student camps, agro-touristic boarding houses being extremely few (and being located mostly along Bârlad Valley) and the only camp in the area closing its doors in 1994. Thus, the current accommodation infrastructure is oriented either towards social tourism, either to transit tourism, the units specific to rural tourism (including chalets and touristic halting places/parking and fast-food inns) being almost nonexistent (Iepe Chalet in Oncești or Oprișița Chalet in Poieniști). In this respect, it is very likely that the road infrastructure

development on a north-south axis in the central part of Tutova Hills encourages touristic attractions valorization and boosts the construction of units that are specific to rural tourism (accommodation ones, but also leisure and recreation ones).

Concerning touristic flows, the same non-linear trend may be observed, with the minimum of tourist arrivals and overnights value being registered in 2006 (in this case, the considered period is between 2001 and 2009, according to the information provided by the Tempo database). However, similarities between these two distributions stop at this point. In terms of tourist arrivals evolution (Fig. 5), the values recorded in the last two years (2757 units in 2008 and 2616 units in 2009) are above those recorded at the beginning of the analyzed period (around 2000 units), a situation which is mainly derived from the opening of Costești touristic halting place and agro-touristic boarding house (from 305 units in 2005 to 2597 in 2009). Moreover, the units that were providing most of arrivals at the beginning of the time series (Lipovăț and Buciumeni student camps) presented negative inflections, and there are years without any arrival in this kind of structure (for instance, 2006 for Lipovăț). From this point of view, a major discrepancy between the accommodation capacity and the number of arrivals in student camps can be observed, situation which shows that social tourism is no longer viable for youngsters and, to a lesser extent, suggests the unattractiveness of the area.

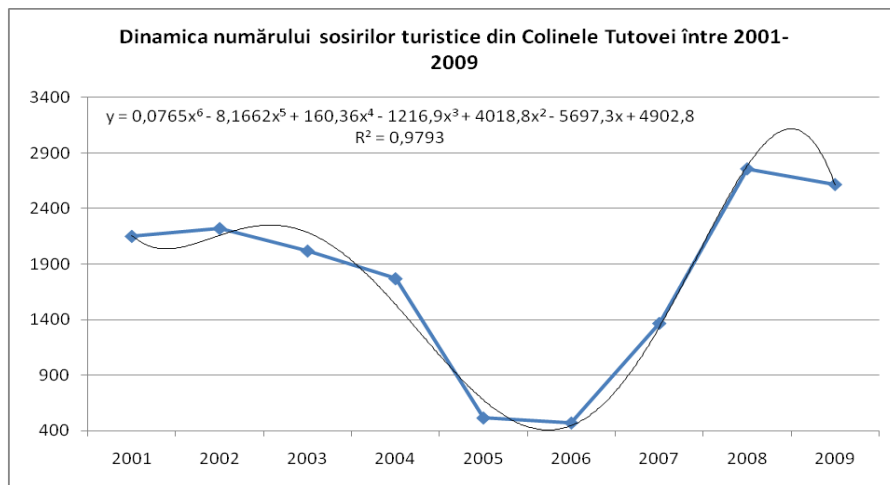


Figure 5 Evolution of the touristic arrivals number in Tutova Hills between 2001-2009

Data source: INS

The overnight stays evolution is also extremely irregular, but the overall trend was negative, from 11219 units in 2001 to 474 units in 2006 (Fig. 6). Even if the values do increase after 2006, they represent less than one third of those registered in

2001, for the same reasons related to the touristic arrivals evolution (student camps become obsolete, the change in young people's travel preferences).

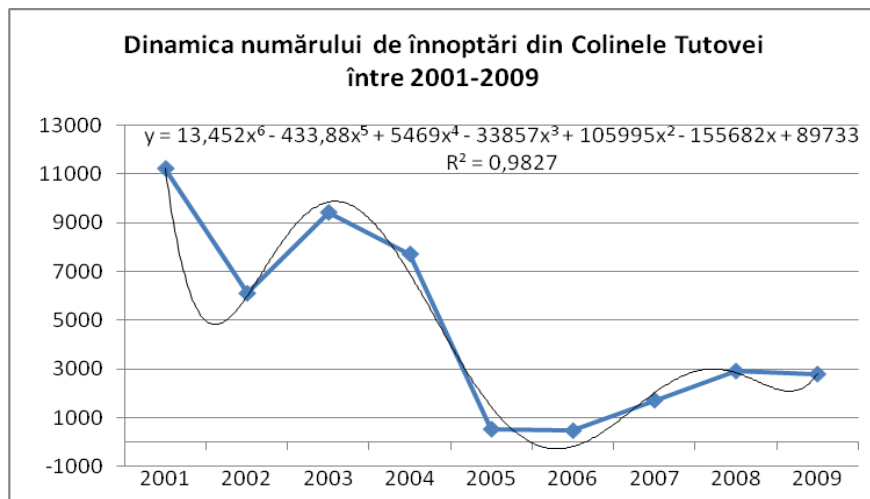


Figure 6 Evolution of the touristic overnights number in Tutova Hills between 2001-2009

Data source: INS

In the same context, the average length of the touristic stay decreased from a value of 5,22 units in 2001 to just 1,07 units in 2009. From this point of view, Tutova Hills are characterized in recent years by transit tourism, and to a lesser extent, by weekend tourism. In order to tackle the tourism relative current importance in the area, tourism functionality rates, both theoretical and concrete, should be used. They measure the intensity of this economic activity by referring to the accommodation capacity or the arrivals number to resident population. Thus, the theoretical tourism functionality rate has been calculated, – $T(F) = (L \cdot 100) / P$, where L represents accommodation capacity and P resident population. Its value (for 2010, according to INS databases) is 0,247 (512 beds, respectively 206524 inhabitants, not taking into consideration Bârlad Municipality). On the other hand, the value for the concrete tourism functionality rate in 2009 – $T(F) = (R \cdot 100) / P$, where R represents arrivals number – is 1,266. Both values are extremely low, given the fact that, at least theoretically, some polarising rural centres can reach values of 8-10.

Considerations upon the future touristic development

Taking into consideration the indicators analyzed above, it is absolutely clear that Tutova Hills is an undeveloped area from the touristic point of view and tourism pressure is extremely low. Even if this socio-economic phenomenon may cause frictions between the owners of specialized structures (both autochthonous and

allochthonous) and the rest of the resident population, due to financial discrepancies, its impact on a mono-economic area can only be benefic. In general, tourism related investments (correlated to marketing policies in emitter areas) trigger revenues, which leads to taxes that involve (at least theoretically) new investments. It is a positive circularity that invariably leads to economic growth. A growing number of tourists may involve local traditions and crafts survival, even if only for commercial reasons. The social impact that tourism has cannot be neglected, as the local people interaction with tourists leads to a “psychological urbanization”, to an increasing level of education and sometimes to social cohesion.

As far as tourism development strategies are concerned, a model which could be adopted (officially or unofficially) at a national scale is that of French “villages d'étapes”, meaning villages with less than 5000 inhabitants standing or just off a motorway or national dual carriageway, having accommodation and leisure facilities. Some communes from both east and west sides of Tutova Hills could meet quality criteria (eventually adapted for Romanian reality), while others could be helped to develop their tourism related infrastructure if short distances to the communication axis and a heritage suitable for rural tourism are taken into consideration. Another model that could be adapted on a national/regional scale is that of French “stations vertes”, in fact leisure and active tourism destinations. This system would encourage the development of the communes with natural reserves (for instance, Plopana, Voinești, Coroiști, Bogdănești or Tutova), which could become gateways to deep rural spaces and could combine active tourism related activities and rural tourism related ones, given their interdependence. Moreover, the creation of an organism for promoting rural tourism in Tutova Hills would also be appropriate. For instance, the Flemish Region tourism authorities (Toerisme Vlaanderen) have created websites for promoting every natural area in the north of Belgium (Vlaamse Ardennen, Maasland, Brugse Ommeland, Scheldeland, Groene Gordel, Haspengouw). Those areas have no administrative function, being strictly delimited by their natural features.

In order to realize an eventual tourism development strategy for Tutova Hills, it is appropriate to determine the degree of touristic attractiveness for each commune. Thus, in order to achieve this goal, we have determined a couple of criteria (Table 1), including the number of tourism attractions (information taken from Institute of Cultural Memory website), the distance to the nearest urban center, the accommodation infrastructure or the recreation opportunities (information taken from the county councils websites). The method used for creating a cartographic representation (Fig. 7) is called Kriging (the same as for creating the map of distances to the nearest town). Given the total criteria score, we have also realized a top of the most attractive and repulsive areas. The most important communes, with real possibilities to attract tourists are Costești (45 points), Poienești (38 points), Podu Turcului (34 points), Bogdănești (33 points) and Tutova (33 points), the most

repulsive being Glăvănești (1 point), Țepu (3 points), Gohor (3 points), Tamași (3 points) and Iana (7 points).

Table 1: Criteria for establishing the degree of touristic attractiveness

Analyzed criteria	Score
1. Number of touristic attractions	45 p
1.1. Reserves and nature monuments	10
1.2. Ecclesiastic architecture monuments	27
- Monasteries built between 12 th century - 1412	10
- Monasteries built between 1412-1918	7
- Wooden churches	5
- Church ruins	3
- Monasteries built after 1918	2
1.3. Historical sites	5
1.4. Civil architecture monuments (heroes monuments, museums, boyar mansions)	3
2. Transportation and touristic infrastructure	40 p
2.1. Distance to nearest town	10
0 – 15 km	6
16 – 30 km	3
over 30 km	1
2.2. Accommodation structures	25
- Bed & Breakfast (agro-touristic boarding houses)	10
- Campgrounds	5
- Chalets	4
- Touristic halting places	3
- Student camps	3
2.3. Catering structures	5
- Restaurants	5
3. Recreation possibilities (traditional events)	10 p
- Fairs	3
- Traditional holidays	3
- Churches and monasteries patron holidays	2
- Periodic markets	2
4. Financial and banking structures	5 p
- Banks or ATMs	5
Total	100 p

It may be noted that of the top five communes only Costești has accommodation structures, other localities that are characterized by this type of facilities having middle ranking positions (Bogdana, Dragomirești, Lipovăț, Buciumeni). In this respect, there isn't almost any correlation between the location of tourism attractions and tourism related infrastructure. Moreover, some less accessible central areas have rather a high degree of tourism attractiveness, as local cultural tourism heritage does not always take into account the orientation of main transport axes (Nimigeanu, 2001).

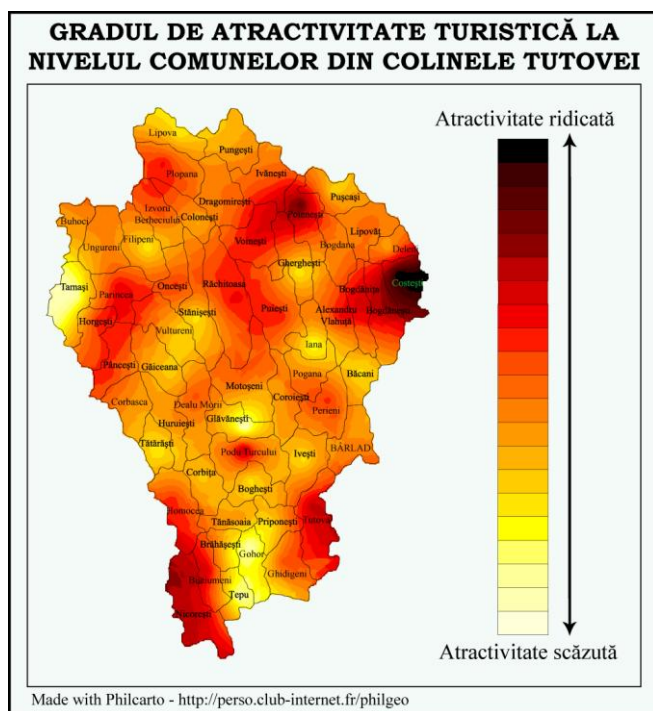


Figure 7 Tutova Hills communes' degree of touristic attractiveness

According to figure 7, tourism could represent an alternative to the farm crisis that appeared after the fall of communism and after the promulgation of the Land Law (1991) (Chevalier, 2009), at least in the communes with a degree of attractiveness superior to 30 points. But, in order to achieve the goal of touristic development, a collective strategy is needed, in fact a conjoint mobilization of resources and the formulation of shared actions by all the organizations involved. These actions should lead to a double valorization, both of each enterprise and of the territory considered as a whole. (Gundolf, Jaouen, Loup, 2006).

Conclusions

Tourism may represent a viable alternative to mono-economic areas (or to less developed ones) and Tutova Hills are no exception from this assertion. Having the resident population from the surrounding areas (local and regional interest touristic area) rather than international visitors as target group, the region is suitable for both transit tourism (given its relatively central position in Moldavia) and rural tourism (with its ethnographic and active characteristics). It may become an alternative to some partially saturated and well-known mountain areas (Bucovina, Neamț, even Trotuș Valley), which currently channel most of the Moldavian touristic flows. As it can be included in leisure periphery category, Tutova Hills area, given its existing heritage and its relative geographic position, has the opportunity of becoming a polarized and polarizing touristic space.

Acknowledgements

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