

THE OPINION OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES REGARDING TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN ALBA COUNTY

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ABSTRACT: Tourism could be one of the most important factor in sustainable development. The aim of this paper is to find the opinion of public authorities regarding the tourism development and promotion in Alba County. A qualitative research was conducted among experts in tourism from Alba County Council. The results show the need for establishing concrete strategic development objectives and the necessity of identifying tools in tourism development and promotion.

Keywords: tourism development, tourism development strategy

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Introduction

Tourism development and promotion is based on the existence of a tourism potential, which, by its attractiveness aims to encourage and to ensure Alba's integration, and to allow tourists access through appropriate facilities. The Alba zone is a region with tourism vocation in the domestic and international tourism circuits.

The local and county authorities have a very important role in the development and promotion of Alba county tourism since they have the tools required for the functioning of the tourism phenomenon as a whole and for promoting the cultural- historical heritage and the natural environment the region has among Romanian and foreign tourists.

Alba County is a complex combination of natural beauty (unique landscapes, harmonious landforms, karst forms and natural reservations), areas with cultural-historical tourism potential of rural population creations (art and popular tradition, ethnography and folklore, cultural artistic events).

The anthropogenic frame benefits of the Apuseni Mountains' reputation through the cultural space called "Țara Moșilor". In addition, representatives are the many architectural buildings such as fortresses, wooden churches, and fortified churches. Some of these attractions are unique.

Moreover, there are numerous other attractions in the surrounding counties. We may mention the karst complex Ponor-Padiș, Turda Gorge, the Dacian fortresses of Orăștiei Mountains that can be further motivation for tourists to visit the whole region in the country centre.

Tourism, as part of the Alba County economy, has a critical role in exploiting the local tourism resources and in improving the living standards of people. It is also important for the socio-economic development of urban areas, but of the rural ones in particular, and of the community in general. By developing local, regional or zonal tourism agencies or units for the provision of related services, tourism creates jobs, both directly (in tourism structures) and indirectly (in the adjacent economic sectors – agriculture, crafts, trade, financial-banking services, transport, etc.) and reduces the exodus of young people from the county's rural areas.

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The context of the research

There are many actors involved in tourism in Alba County, some of them playing a more important role than others do, but each of them has an important contribution in developing and promoting this industry. Key actors can be classified as: governmental institutions, local governments, administrations of protected areas, members of the private tourism sector, NGOs, local communities, donors, academia, and tourists.

Government institutions are or should be involved in county tourism development, namely: the National Tourism Authority under the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education.

The National Tourism Authority (NTA), through its territorial representative for tourism promotion in Braşov, which includes Braşov, Sibiu, Mureş and Alba, achieves the Government's tourism policy. In recent years, it has initiated the progress of several strategies to develop forms of tourism and a National Master Plan for Tourism Development. From this position, NTA showed interest for tourism development in Alba County, as the co-organizer of various events in the area (the 2nd meeting of the Tourism Press Club, June 2005; the First International Congress of Rural Tourism in Romania, Alba Iulia, May 2011). It then initiated various activities to promote tourism (the visit of a group of 50 journalists from abroad participating at the International Conference "Identifying competitive advantages of a tourist destination – opportunities and challenges for sustainable tourism development in Romania", in July 2013; the program "Wine Route" in Alba County; designating the components of tourism heritage as EDEN destinations – "European destinations of Excellence" – Apuseni Natural Park in 2009 for the theme "Tourism and protected areas", the city of Alba Iulia, in 2012 for the topic "Tourism and regeneration of physical sites", along with 23 other tourism emerging cities and not famous destinations in the European Union countries).

Consistent with its role and tasks, NTA can contribute to the development of tourism in Alba County:

- Creating the inter-institutional cooperation framework for increasing the number of local and regional partnerships;
- Developing the tourism infrastructure to enable widening the range of services offered;
- intensifying the market research in order to achieve a database available to all organizations involved in tourism, and to identify competitive advantages specific to each cluster of tourism destinations and products that will be used for the unique offer of selling products, services and tour packages on the European tourist markets;
- promoting the Romanian tourism destinations and products including Alba County, both nationally and internationally through the implementation of joint tourism brands and joint marketing strategies regarding products, services and packages;
- supporting SMEs and other forms of small businesses (family businesses, individual businesses, freelancers) in order to diversify tourism activities, to increase economic competitiveness and employment, particularly in the mountain localities of Alba county, emphasising the use of local resources.

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MECC), through the more recent steps taken in the environment field, in water management and sustainable development (creating the legal framework for the protection of nature; creating and developing the national network of protected areas; realizing the National Strategy for Sustainable Development; achieving a guide for ecotourism; adapting the community legal framework for granting the eco-labels for hotel services), has an important role in the development of those tourism forms that are "friendly" to the environment. We may mention here the sustainable tourism, the ecotourism, the local and regional agricultural tourism.

In Alba County, through MECC³, the following environmental projects with direct implications on tourism are undertaken (Tabel 1):

Tabel no. 1.

Environmental projects in Alba county

Project Title	Beneficiary	Implementation period
Development of the ROSPA 0087 Integrated Management Plan – Trascău Mountains and ROSCI 0253 Trascău	Albamont Ecology and Mountain Tourism Club	2010-2013
Integrated management of ROSPA0043 Frumoasa and ROSCI0085 Frumoasa sites	Alba County Council	2012-2015
Sustainable management of SCI Muntele Mare and of Natura 2000 Trascău sites	Albamont Ecology and Mountain Tourism Club	2012-2015
Integrated project on the development of management plans for three protected areas in Region 7 Centre	Biounivers Association	2012-2014

Source: www.posmediu.ro/upload/.../Situatia%20proiectelor%20POS%20Mediu

At present, and for the future period, there are numerous financing alternatives available for the administrators of the protected areas, to the local authorities within or near the protected areas, to the economic agents involved in ecotourism and to the NGOs active in the field of ecotourism and environment protection.

The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, responsible for policy in fields such as territorial, national and regional development, cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation, urbanism and country planning, etc., manages the programs funded from European and national funds. It also has an impact on the tourism development, primarily through financing investments in general and tourism infrastructure, and helps promoting tourism destinations and services.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), through its structures and instruments represents and promotes the interests of agricultural farmers, of self-employed persons/businesses in agriculture, in all its branches, food industry, forestry, fisheries, rural tourism and agro tourism. The establishment in 2011 of the National Network for Rural Development⁴, MARD has conducted extremely diverse activities focused among others on promoting traditional products, producer groups and tourism.

The Ministry of Culture develops and provides the implementation of strategies and policies on culture and national heritage, and from this perspective, among its objectives there are: protecting the national tangible and intangible cultural heritage, promoting the Romanian cultural values within the international cultural and tourism circuit; supporting inheritance and cultural diversity; cultural infrastructure modernization. Through the Thematic Advisory Committee for Tourism, Culture and Heritage, the Ministry aims to promote Alba County in terms of tourism and culture, by organizing events (“Lucian Blaga” Festival, come to the XXIXth edition) or by carrying out programs such as the “Living Human Treasures – Keepers and transmitters of culture” of UNESCO (folk artist Maria Deac Poenaru, 2011).

³ www.posmediu.ro/upload/.../Situatia%20proiectelor%20POS%20Mediu

⁴ Ministerul Agriculturii și Dezvoltării Rurale – Autoritatea de management pentru PNDR, *Analiza socio-economică în perspectiva dezvoltării rurale 2014-2020*, Draft III iulie 2013.

The Ministry of National Education, responsible for developing, coordinating and implementing the national education policy, overwhelmingly contributes to the formation of human resources in the tourism sector. Teachers at all levels of education and researchers play an important role in learning facility in this area. In collaboration with other actors in the tourism market, they can carry out surveys, provide information about the tourists' preferences, gather data about the tourism potential of the Alba County, make documentaries and disseminate results, provide materials to those interested, contribute to the tourism education etc.

Regionally, several universities provide specialized masters or, within the undergraduate curricula, provide tourism specific subjects (e.g. "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia, "Babes Bolyai" University of Cluj Napoca, "Lucian Blag" University of Sibiu, and so on). Moreover, according to the "Education Code", project subject to public debate, education and training, through the national education system, aim among others to cultivate sensitivity towards human issues, towards moral and civic values, towards respect for nature and natural, social and cultural environment.

Local public administrations, namely the Alba County Council and the Local Councils are responsible for identifying and protecting the tourism resources, boosting the local tourism development and promoting the local products. As the tourist territorial problems they have to solve are quite complex, they have created specialized services within their structure. Thus, within Alba County Council operates the Tourism Service. Its main tasks are to promote the county tourism resources by organizing various events⁵ that attract tourism professionals and not only, but also Romanian or foreigner tourists (Rural Tourism Fair in Albac, 1st of December – the National Day of Romania, Dacian Fortresses Festival, "Ziua de Măine" – Music Festival Contest, "Dilema Veche" Festival, etc.), by publishing several editions and types of Alba County tourist guides, by participating in national and international tourism fairs, by developing a computer network and a travel portal, by establishing and maintaining the academic tourism workshops, by organizing camping and picnic sites, by establishing tourism information and development centres. The program of activities for the promotion and development of Alba County tourism is financed its own the budget, amounting to 1.3 million Lei in 2013.

Along with these organizations that, in a sense, can be integrated into a single system controlled and coordinated by NTA, there are other central institutions or bodies carrying responsibilities and tasks in tourism organization. We may mention the *National Youth Authority* which, through the *Alba County Youth Directorate*, manages the activities of Alba's school camps in Arieseni, Gârda de Sus, Roica, and develops special educational and formative tourism programs for the youth.

In the category of Alba County tourism promoters we may also include the *governments of protected areas* (Alba County Council – Frumoasa Site of Community Importance, Alba Forestry Department – Vârciorog Waterfall, ALBAMONT Mountain Tourism and Ecology Club – Big Mountain SCI and Trascău Natura 2000 sites, Biounivers Association – the natural area of the "Beautiful oak forest Miraslău", Trascău Corp Tourism and Ecology Association – Ampoița Limestones, Detunata) or the *non-governmental professional organizations* (National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism - NARECT Alba Branch, Association of Ecotourism in Romania, National Association of mountain Guides, etc.)

Direct tourism, meaning providing specific services, is conducted through *a system of companies belonging to the private sector*, which own tourism equipment and/or offers travel programs.

The *local community* plays an important role in establishing the tourism heritage and may contribute to providing quality services to tourists. However, in most areas of the county, tourism has not yet become a profitable activity for the local economy.

⁵ Alba County Council, Alba County Events 2013

The *financial institutions* have also an important role in tourism development in Alba County.

Tourists – are the main actors and the most active participants in the field. They provide impulses for the activities of all the other parties involved.

Territorial tourism development is very complex in terms of preparation, planning and management, which involves its implementation by stages, where the economic agents and the institutions involved have clear responsibilities in running the business, in complying with the tourism development projects and concepts.

Summarizing, we can say that a very useful way to develop and promote tourism in the county of Alba is joining efforts/integrating all the stakeholders (actors) involved in the local tourism development (local and central public institutions, other public or private bodies – NTA, NGOs, private travel agents - hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, etc.), enabling public-private partnership in a combined effort to revive the county tourism, exploring the possible regional partnerships and the benefits of collaborating with promotion agencies of other counties.

Research methodology

A qualitative research has been conducted in order to determine the county representatives' opinion on the Alba County tourism development. The research consists of six in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out among them. The research aims at knowing the vision that the Alba County Tourism Council staff has on tourism development and its importance in the economic development of the county.

The research objectives were established in conjunction with its purpose and are as follows:

- identifying the Alba county tourism strengths in the investigated subjects' opinion;
- formulating proposals for tourism improvement in terms of: general infrastructure, tourist transport services, accommodation network, catering establishments network, recreational facilities network, intermediation between tourism products and services, promotion of tourism in Alba County, the legal framework regulating the tourism activity;
- identifying the major issues faced by the Alba County tourism, in their opinion.

Primary information sources have been used, namely people from the county government, responsible for tourism in the county of Alba. The method of gathering information selected and used was the in-depth semi-structured interview. This type of interview gives the respondent the possibility to respond freely, and the operator is allowed to intervene in order to maximize the collection of relevant information. This type of interview can focus on a specific area of interest issues.

In terms of participants' selection, they were identified and selected using a theoretical sampling method, aiming at the selected persons to belong to different hierarchical levels, to be responsible for different activities within the department or office they belong to. The interviewed subjects were personally contacted for their consent to participate in the interview and to be told in advance the topic and the importance of the information they can provide in order to achieve the research goals and objectives.

The instrument for data collection was the interview guide that covers the main topics to be discussed and set according to the research objectives.

After the interviews were fully transcribed, the content analysis was used as a method of analysing the information gathered. Interview texts were broken into analysis units, namely phrases related to similar situations or concepts. They were then brought together with a general scale in order to obtain the most relevant and significant categories for the research purpose. It was subsequently appealed to quantification in order to evaluate the frequency of each analysis unit. The conclusions are presented below.

Results and conclusions

The main results obtained allow identifying the main strengths and weaknesses of tourism in Alba County, as expressed by the staff involved in its coordination.

Summarizing the views of the interviewed experts, one can say that *the main strengths* of tourism in Alba County are:

- The existence of some natural and human tourism heritage elements, very varied and attractive, some of which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage;
- Practicing various forms of tourism such as mountain tourism (hiking, winter sports), leisure and recreation tourism, rural tourism and agro-tourism, ecotourism – because of a large number of protected areas, cultural tourism, weekend tourism, adventure tourism, business tourism;
- The county and local authorities' involvement in supporting the development and promotion of the Alba County in terms of tourism and the fruitful cooperation between them and the business environment;
- A strategy for tourism development in Alba County;
- A better promotion of certain tourism destinations in the county such as the city of Alba Iulia, for example
- The existence of investment in the tourism infrastructure (primary tourism establishments, tourist information centres) and in the general one (Transalpina, other national and county roads), as well as at the tourism potential (arrangement of sights).

As *weaknesses* of tourism in Alba County, the following were mentioned:

- Insufficient development and promotion of the tourism potential Alba has on the domestic and international market;
- Little indicators of tourism offer and traffic (the index of accommodation capacity, the number of tourists, the average length of stay, etc.).
- No or sporadic leisure-entertainment services and specific equipment that would motivate tourists to stay longer at the destination, especially in the county's mountainous and rural area;
- The existence of a tourism offer, namely low tourism infrastructure in terms of comfort level and services provided, with certain exceptions;
- The lack of certain types of structures for welcoming tourists (e.g. campsites for tents and caravans);
- The inadequate promotion of tourism potential, with few exceptions (poor indicators of certain objectives and tourism routes, etc.).
- The poor training and involvement of the human resources working in this sector; the insufficient number of employees in certain areas of activity (for instance, too few hiking guides);
- The lack of a coherent system of education and training in tourism linked to the labour market requirements;
- The weak and undiversified souvenirs offer (specialized business units, poor diversification of handicrafts);
- The poor development of general infrastructure (roads, public transport) in some areas of the county;
- The lack of a means of transportation in some tourism areas to facilitate the access to certain destinations or tourism attractions;
- The reduced number or even the absence of toilets in the tourist attraction areas and in city centres;
- The relatively weak collaboration between the tourism stakeholders in Alba County, namely the public and private sector, between different professional or employers bodies;
- The limited access for people with disabilities to numerous tourist facilities and tourist attractions;
- The management and marketing activities undertaken in the underdeveloped tourist destinations;

- The lack of a network of tourism information and promotion or of tourist information points;
- The high prices compared to the quality of services (both accommodation and entertainment);
- The absence of tourism related services (no ATMs or any possibility for card payments, no commercial establishments, possibly with extended hours or non-stop, in areas with high tourist traffic, etc.)
- The lack of an organized system of tourist indicators for routes and objective in train stations, bus terminals, European roads;
- The lack of an online reservation system;
- The small number and the lack of integrated thematic tourist routes;
- The low number of road and tourist signs.

Some proposals regarding tourism strategy development in Alba county could be formulated as follows:

- Increasing the interest of the local community and of the county and local authorities on developing a strategy for county tourism development and promotion, especially for those forms of tourism that highly capitalize resources, being supported by all the economic operators involved in carrying out this activity
- Increasing the diversity of the tourism that can be practiced in Alba County by developing agro and ecotourism destinations, given that more than half of the county is rural; supporting them through public policy
- Tourism also contributes to raising awareness among people and local authorities for the city's/region's tourism value and cultural identity; the presence of tourists here is an appreciation of the natural environment quality and of their historical and cultural heritage.
- A better promotion of Alba County as a tourist destination through the development of the tourist information centres in the county and of other effective promotional means
- Development and management of tourism in the context of environmental protection, as there is very closely interrelated relation between tourism and environment
- Creating tourism advisory councils to provide necessary support for future investors in the field and to oversee the development of tourism
- Integrating tourism services as thematic tourism products representative for the county

In the current context of enhancing economic, social, political growth and transformation, and of all environment elements in general (national, regional and global), it is necessary to formulate and use macroeconomic strategies.

The elaboration of strategies and action programs (allowing a conscious development of tourism in Romania, starting from the benefits such a development could bring to our country in the long term), was long delayed. This is due, on the one hand, to the decision makers' unwillingness to really consider tourism as a national priority, and on the other hand, to the entrepreneurs' lack of skills for facing the social and economic changes in Romania.

This trend for analysis, involvement and willingness to take concrete steps is also emphasized in Alba County.

We believe that this study will serve as a valuable tool for other studies, analysis and research that will be developed in Alba County, in tourism and beyond.

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