

Aluculesei, Alina-Cerasela; Nistoreanu, Puiu

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ROMANIAN WELLNESS TOURISM – A POTENTIAL SOLUTION WITH POSITIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EFFECTS OF THE AGING POPULATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Alina-Cerasela Aluculesei^{1*} and Puiu Nistoreanu²

^{1) 2)} Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

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Abstract

Romania is a member state of the European Union. Among the resources of the Romanian tourist patrimony, mineral and thermal waters, mofettes, salt mines, muds and the climate build up a valuable portfolio of the wellness tourism offer. These resources are used to recover and reacquire the strength to work, but also for minimizing the effects of degenerative diseases commonly affecting senior citizens.

The aging of the population of the European Union is one of the challenges affecting this block on a macroeconomic level increasingly more visibly. A solution for minimizing the effects of the rising number of senior citizens might be the integration of the Romanian wellness offer in the European tourist offer. Our country is also affected by this phenomenon and the existing wellness resources are useful in diminishing the negative effects of the aging process. The research began by analyzing the specialized literature, which confirmed the phenomenon of aging among the Europe's population. This was followed by a pilot study (287 respondents) which was undertaken from June to December 2015 on representatives of the Romanian population.

Romania's tourist heritage, represented by its wellness tourism resources, may represent an important tourist product on the European market which can help senior citizens benefit from treatments of degenerative illnesses.

Keywords: European Union, European demographics, population ageing, third age, wellness tourism.

JEL Classifications: P42, L83.

* Corresponding author, Alina-Cerasela Aluculesei – alina_cerasella@yahoo.com

Introduction

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st are bringing about major changes in the dynamics of European economies. The European Union has incorporated 28 states out of a total of 50 (Castree, Kitchin și Rogers, 2013), while 5 other states are currently candidates and 2 others are potential candidates (European Commission, 2015a).

The concept of European integration represents the process through which the member countries agree to collaborate in certain fields in order to accomplish their set objectives, sharing a series of competences related to national suzerainty (Jinga and Popescu, 2000; Bărbulescu and Răpan, 2009). The integration of countries in the European Union brings multiple benefits for citizens through social policies (Jovanovic, 2005). So, Directive 88/2003 talks about the 8 hour working program (Baldwin and Wyplosz, 2006); Directive 24/2011 concerns the rights of patients beyond the borders of their countries of origin (European Commission, 2015b) and so on.

One of the greatest problems of the 21st century on a European Union-wide level is the ageing of the population, the number of people over the age of 65 experiencing a visible rising trend (Poladin, et.al., 2015). The long term consequences are significant, influencing all economic sectors, as the shrinking of the active population can create an economic deadlock. In financial terms, it is estimated that this phenomenon will cause an increase of expenditures as part of the EU's GDP by 8% between 2000-2050 (Murea, 2014). Also, the decrease of the active population leads to a negative balance of savings, at the same time influencing consumer behavior (Hanse, 2005).

Taking these aspects into account, a pilot study was undertaken with the purpose of verifying the main research hypotheses: (1) Romanians are aware of the aging problem their country is experiencing and (2) they would propose spa treatments as a solution to alleviate diseases affecting senior citizens. Thus a survey was devised and conducted among representatives of the Romanian population in the following areas of Romania: Vrancea, Ialomița and Bucharest, with the answers being processed with the help of the IBM SPSS 20 statistic program.

1. A study of specialized literature on the demographic structure of the European Union's population

As the decrease of the active population's share has significant economic consequences, solutions are continuously being sought and the start of the Horizon 2020 program is one of the European Union's priorities in the near future. One of the subtopics directly set makes refers to the *Health, Demographic Change and Wellbeing* issue and has the purpose of maintaining the elderly population active and independent as long as possible (European Commission, 2015c). Another implemented program is part of the Innovation Union – an initiative which has the purpose of financing projects that primarily concern the active and healthy ageing process (European Commission, 2015d). Other accomplished projects are: "More years, better lives", "The ambient assisted living", "Active ageing index", "Health for growth" (Euro Health Net, 2015a; 2015b), the project accomplished by the National Public Health Institute of Sweden in 2007 which emphasizes the need to develop preventive health services in the context of population ageing.

From all the above data, it is clear the existing problem of an aging population and the desire of European administration to find ways to decrease negative effects.

1.1. The demographic structure of the European Union

For the European Union, the high number of elderly people has several causes: low birth rates, the rise of the average life expectancy, the wave of immigrants and persons who demanded political asylum in member states in the 60's (European Parliament, 2008). Due to aging, there are some specific issues of third age segment: active population decline, increased contributions to the social security system, the need to find ways to reduce the suffering caused by diseases associated.

The European Union is registering the fastest growth of the elderly population in the world (Tragaki, 2014). According to Eurostat, the retired population is growing both in EU member states and in those who wish to join (Eurostat, 2015a; 2015b). The category of those over 80, which is growing, is especially notable (National Council of Elderly People, 2014b). According to Eurostat data from 2003 to 2014 the share of people aged 65-70 rose from a level of 12.4% of the total population across the 28 EU member states to 13.4% in 2014, rising by 1% over a span of 11 years. The share of people over 80 was also on the rise, growing by 1.3% from 3.8% in 2003 to 5.1% in 2014 (table no. 1).

Table no. 1: The proportion of people over 65 in total population and forecasts the EU and Romania

Period	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
The population structure of 65-79 years (EU)	12,4	12,5	12,6	12,7	12,7	12,7	12,7	12,8	12,8	12,9	13,1	13,4
The population structure over 80 years (EU)	3,8	3,9	4,0	4,1	4,3	4,4	4,5	4,7	4,8	4,9	5,1	5,1
Period	2020		2030		2040		2050		2060		2070	
Outlook dependency ratio in the EU	31,8		39		45,9		49,4		50,2		49,3	
Period	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
The population structure of 65-79 years old (Romania)	12,1	13,2	13,3	13,3	13,3	13,4	13,5	13,6	13,8	13,9	14,1	14,3
The population structure over 80 years old (Romania)	2,0	2,0	2,1	2,5	3,0	3,6	3,6	3,6	3,6	3,6	3,8	4,0
Period	2020		2030		2040		2050		2060		2070	
Outlook dependency ratio in Romania	28,4		32,7		41,3		48,5		51,9		49,9	

Source: Made by the authors according to Eurostat data: 2003-2014/2020-2070

The rising share of senior citizens in the total population reaches a new dimension when analyzing previsions regarding the evolution of dependence rates of people over 65 compared to the active population aged 15-65. Considering that in 2014 the dependence rate between senior citizens and the active population was 28.1%, calculations made by Eurostat show that it will steadily grow, reaching 49,3% in 2070. This means that on a EU-wide level, out of every 100 persons, 49,3 will be inactive on the labor market in 2070, being supported by the 15-64-year-old population.

The predominance of elderly people in the EU leads to the development of several scenarios: “the grey scenario” and “the open borders scenario”, which propose various directions (Davoudi, Wishardt and Strange, 2010) for minimizing the negative effects. Countries such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia are also affected by the migration of able-bodied population to more developed countries, an aspect which led to a ratio of 1,5 able-bodied persons to one retired person, which has true negative effects (National Council of Elderly People, 2009).

Considering Europe's demographic structure, projects for promoting wellness tourism as an alternative to improving health and preventing diseases were initiated, such as the Sowell Project (Sowell Project, 2015), the Social Thermalism Project in Spain (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2012), the Balneary Decade Project in Romania (ANAT, 2015).

Romania is also beginning to be affected by the rising numbers of senior citizens. Eurostat data shows that the dynamics of population over 65 years old is similar to that of the European Union.

In the time series which was analyzed (2003-2014) the levels of people aged 65-70 and those over 80 as a share of the total population rose for both age categories. People aged 65-79 represented a share of 12.1% in 2003 and in 2014 they reached the level of 14.3%. In the case of those over 80, the proportion doubled in a time span of 11 years, from 2% in 2003 to 4% in 2014.

As far as the dependence rates of senior citizens compared to the population with an active status on the labor market go, table no. 1 shows previsions for the time frame covering the years 2020-2070. Starting from 2014, when the dependence rate between people over 65 and those active on the labor market on a Romanian-wide level was 24.3%, previsions show that in 2050 this rate will almost double and in 2060 it will reach a maximum level of 51.9%. This means that out of 100 persons, 51.9 - more than half - will depend on those active on the labor market and in 2070, this share will drop by 2%.

1.2. Romania's wellness potential

On the long term, an answer to the problems of senior citizens may be wellness tourism. Also known as *spa tourism*, it employs natural resources with demonstrated chemical properties, such as mineral and thermal waters, mud, various types of climate or moffettes, for the purpose of improving general health or preventing certain illnesses (Jafari, 2000).

In Europe, the spa potential is especially high, including in most countries in the Balkan Peninsula or its surroundings, such as Slovenia, Croatia, Romania or Bulgaria. These countries have their own wellness facilities, with lower prizes (Smith and Puczko, 2014) compared to Western European countries such as Great Britain, France or Germany. This aspect, coupled with the right of free movement of EU citizens, can contribute to national economies by sending patients suffering of illnesses that can be treated in spa resorts in their own countries to locations similar to those in their country, but which offer their services at inferior rates. For example, patients in Austria can be directed towards the neighboring country – Slovenia, whose level of resources is notable, this being the spot of over 110 sources recognized as having healing qualities (Hall, 2013).

The importance and the potential of wellness tourism in maintaining the population's health is undeniable. Furthermore, the level of the financial resources generated by this industry must be considered, rising to 574 bln. dollars on a worldwide level in 2013 (Statista, 2013). Thus, apart from the medical benefits, the financial ones as well are not to be neglected, especially because since the EU integration, citizens of the participating states have gained rights that contribute to this type of tourism, such as the right to free movement.

Mineral and thermal waters often represent the main common resource of European countries, offering the possibility of treating the same illness in resorts across the continent (Cooper and Cooper, 2009). These resources annually attract tourist who come for prevention or recuperation, Europe being a place where the tradition of spa treatments has been cultivated for centuries. Resorts such as Baden-Baden – fueled by 23 springs of mineral healing waters (Smith and Puczko, 2009), Baden-Wurttemberg (Germany) – with a spa history dating back to the Roman Empire (Reisman, 2010), Heviz (Hungary), Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic) – resort founded by the Czech king Charles IV in the 14th century (Hall, 2013), equipped with complex facilities (Hudman and Jackson, 2003), Vichy (France) – dating since the time of the Roman emperor Julius Cesar (Altman, 2000) are known all across the world.

Many countries have a centuries old experience. Romania, for example, has been exploiting spa resources for healing purposes for 2000 years. Once Dacia was conquered by the Roman Empire, healing and thermal waters began to be used in places well known in those times, such as Ad Mediam (currently Băile Herculane resort) and Gormisara (currently Geoagiu Băi resort). Empirical use was strengthened centuries later through the chemical analysis of the waters, which certified their healing properties (Albu, Banks and Nash 1997). Presently, wellness tourism is associated with social tourism, as it is subsidized by the state (National House of Public Pensions, 2014). The benefits of spa treatments, especially among the elderly population and the richness of elements across the country's territory make it possible for elderly people to go to a treatment facility yearly.

Wellness tourism is beneficial for retired people both from a medical point of view, as well as from a social point of view (Morgan, Pritchard and Sedgley 2015; Gustavo, 2010). The elderly chooses the spa resort depending on the types of illnesses which can be treated there (Tomasovic et al., 2015) and it is more obvious than ever that health systems must adapt by starting to offer prevention programs (Bernd et al., 2013). Spa treatments are beneficial for illnesses related to old age, such as cardiac diseases, rheumatic disorders (Borges, 2013), kidney diseases (Irsay et al., 2014) or recuperation after surgical procedures (Sinescu, Anghel and Vulcănescu, 2014), which puts spa tickets among the facilities offered to the elderly (National Council of Elderly People, 2014a).

Romania is the EU member state that holds almost 30% of Europe's spa and wellness resources (Surdu, Surdu and Surdu, 2015), having as an advantage the possibility of treating multiple types of illnesses in the same resort (Stăncioiu et al., 2013). Spa infrastructure is comprised of 37 national interest resorts and 46 local interest ones (Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism, 2011 - HG 852/2008), having therapeutic recommendations for: occupational diseases, hepatobiliary diseases, dermatology and allergies, respiratory apparatus and ENT, endocrine diseases, renal system, nutrition and metabolism, digestive disorders, gynecology, neuroses, cardiac diseases, rheumatism and parasympathetic nervous system (Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism, 2011).

In spite of that, we consider that Romanian wellness potential and its resources are insufficiently utilized through their capitalization.

2. Methodology

The research which was conducted is a quantitative pilot research based on a survey which contains closed questions with simple and multiple responses. The surveying period was June-December 2015 and the answers were centralized and processed with the help of the IBM SPSS 20 statistical analysis program.

The survey group was formed from 278 subjects from the areas of Vrancea, Ialomița and Bucharest, with an average age of 43,69. The survey was distributed online and face to face, with a pretest on a group of 15 subjects (July 2015). The esurv.org facility was used for online distribution with an IP filter setting. This way multiple responses from the same person were blocked. The survey link was distributed by means of a database previously created through the LinkedIn and Facebook social networks and by e-mail. 450 requests were sent and 120 surveys were returned because of the inability to use them, with a response rate of 26.6%. There were 200 physically conducted surveys. 158 of these were processed, with a success rate of 79%.

The survey consisted of two parts: identification questions (5 questions): age, gender, work field, education, status on the labor market and the other one related to the research topic. The second part (5 questions) has the main objective of asking the respondents to identify the advantages of wellness tourism in rising the quality of the lives of senior citizens.

As far as the subjects' structure goes, 66.3% of the questioned persons are women and 33.7% are men. 85.9% of them have an active status on the labor market, 7.4% are unemployed or housewives and 6.7% are retired.

Most respondents have higher education: 45%; they are followed by those with postgraduate education (24.2%) and those with high-school education (19.3%). Respondents with lower secondary and post-high-school education levels have a low share: 3.7% and 7.8% respectively. The respondents' fields of activity or their past fields of activity in the case of pensioners are shown in the figure no. 1.

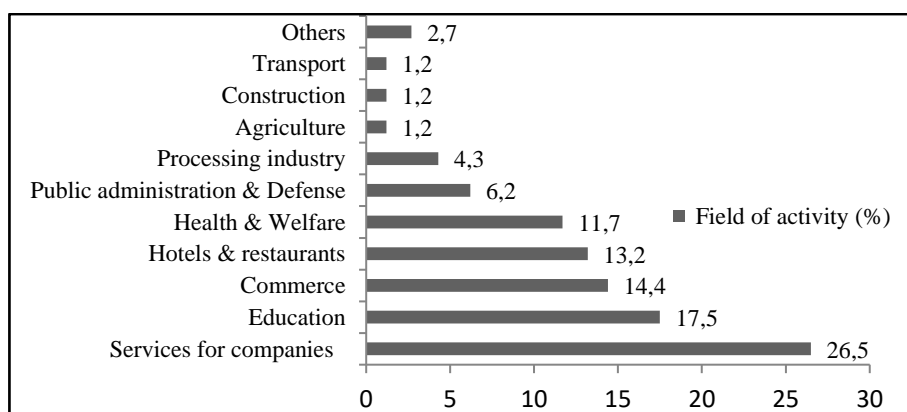


Figure no. 1: Respondents' fields of activity (%)

Source: Made by authors based on the research conducted in June-December 2015

Most participants to this study worked in the field of services for companies (architecture, research and development, IT) -26.5%, followed by those who work in education -17.5%/, commerce -14.4%, hotels and restaurants -13.2%- and health and welfare -11.7%. Shares under 10% were registered for those who work in public administration and defense -6.2%, the processing industry -4.3%, agriculture -1.2%, constructions -1.2% and transport -1.2%.

3. Results and discussions

Considering the primary hypothesis on which the research is based (the aging of the European population) a first question included in the survey was "Do you consider that the ageing of Romania represents a problem of national interest?" and had the role of pointing out what is the European citizens' degree of knowledge on this phenomenon. Thus, 87.77% of the respondents answered that they were aware of this issue in the context of the European Union.

Awareness regarding the demographic situation on a European level comes from the economic effects it generates. Forecasts regarding the demographic ratio show that Romania will reach 100 in 2055 (Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Protection and Elderly, 2014). The current situation thus catches the attention of both the authorities and those directly affected by this issue.

Regarding the opinion of those who took part in the study regarding the possibility of using spa treatments on a large scale in the context of the rising share of retired people, 96.8% have stated that they would propose spa treatments as a solution for improving the health of the elderly. Furthermore, a positive correlation (table no. 2) of average intensity ($r=0.304$) was identified, with the Pearson coefficient showing that for a confidence level of 0.01, one is enabled to state that those who consider spa treatments beneficial for the elderly would recommend them as a solution for improving health.

Table no. 2: Correlations

		Do you think that spa treatments performed in resorts once a year could help the elderly become healthier?	If you could propose solutions for improving the health of the elderly, would spa treatments be among them?
Do you think that spa treatments performed in resorts once a year could help the elderly become healthier?	Pearson Correlation	1	0,304**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,000
	N	278	275
If you could propose solutions for improving the health of the elderly, would spa treatments be among them?	Pearson Correlation	0,304**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	
	N	275	275

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Made by authors based on the research conducted in June-December 2015

For achieving the main objective of this research, which was to see in what degree do respondents associate wellness treatments with the possibility of treating certain illnesses

and maintaining an elevated quality of life, respondents were questioned about the benefits of wellness tourism. The question had multiple choices (table no. 3). The choices were channeled in two directions: one targeted the benefits for the active population, like relaxation and the recuperation of work strength and one targeted the elderly: prevention and maintaining a high quality of life.

Table no. 3: The benefits of wellness tourism

What do you think are the benefits of wellness tourism?		Percent
Valid	Relaxation	4,3
	Recovering work strength	7,2
	Prevention	6,1
	Maintaining the quality of life at old age	17,3
	All choices	25,2
	Recovering work strength, prevention and maintaining the quality of life	7,2
	Prevention and maintaining the quality of life	6,8
	Relaxation, prevention and maintaining the quality of life	5,8
	Relaxation and Recovering work strength	2,5
	Relaxation, Recovering work strength and prevention	2,2
	Relaxation and prevention	1,8
	Relaxation, Recovering work strength and maintaining the quality of life	4,7
	Recovering work strength and maintaining the quality of life	6,8
	Relaxation and maintaining the quality of life	2,2
Total		100,0

Source: Made by authors based on the research conducted in June-December 2015

Most respondents thought that the advantages of wellness tourism are especially related to prevention (regarded as preventing or delaying the development of certain pathologies linked to ageing) – 6.1% and maintaining the quality of life at an advanced age – 17.3%, while 25.5% checked all choices. Apart from these situations, 37.5% made other combinations of choices which included prevention and maintaining the quality of life. Those who did not include these choices, choosing only benefits related to relaxation and recovering work strength (which target the elderly population in particular) had a share of 14%: relaxation – 4.3%, recovering work strength – 7.2% and both answers – 2.5%.

The high share of those who appreciate spa benefits with the elderly is due to the fact that spa treatments are associated with pensioners. This is because spa tickets are subsidized on a national level.

Considering the respondents' origin, a EU member state where spa treatments are subsidized for a certain category, that is, the intention was to discover what their attitude was regarding the subsidizing of spa treatments for the elderly (table no. 4). The answers choices included aspects such as: the modernization of wellness tourism, services competitiveness, natural resources and the effects on the consumers of such products.

Table no. 4: Subsidizing spa treatments

How do you regard the subsidizing of spa treatments?		Percent
Valid	I do not agree, as they hinder the modernization of wellness tourism	4,0
	I do not agree, as through the subsidizing of tickets, services and not competitive	3,2
	Wellness tourism should be free of charge , because it makes use of resources located on Romania's territory	9,0
	I agree, considering the health benefits and the savings achieved through improving health and preventing certain illnesses	73,0
	I agree, as savings are being made through improving health and preventing certain diseases. Furthermore, it should be free of charge, considering that natural resources are being used.	9,4
	Other reasons which make me agree to subsidizing	1,4
Total		100,0

Source: Made by authors based on the research conducted in June-December 2015

Most respondents – 73%, stated that they agree to subsidizing spa services, as they contribute to the improvement of people's health and to making savings in the state budget through their preventive role. 9.4% justified their positive answer through this reason, adding that it should be free of charge, not only subsidized, especially when natural resources found on the country's territory are being used. 1.4% stated that they agree with subsidizing, but for other reason than those put forward. There were also respondents which do not agree with the social side of this type of tourism: 4% justified their answer through the fact that this hinders the modernization of the infrastructure and 3.2% said that subsidizing reduces services competitiveness.

The negative answers came on the background of Romanian spa resorts' infrastructure which was seriously obsolescence in the last 25 years. The lack of investment in the field has led to wellness tourism being perceived as an underperforming sector, where exploiting resources of resources does not generate any economic effects.

Subsidizing spa treatment tickets must take into account the number of people for whom these treatments were effective, in reference to those over 65, as well as those who are getting close to this age. This is in reference to the fact that in the case of many resorts, the subsidized type of transport (e.g.: train) is not very well represented. This has repercussions on the entire cost and negatively influences decision-making on access to spa treatments. It is a well-known fact that the level of the average pension in Romania is 198 euros/month (National Institute of Statistics, 2015), which influences decisions on employing wellness services. Furthermore, the low comfort (e.g.: minibuses) taking into account their special needs makes it impossible for the elderly who require spa treatments to benefit from them.

Conclusions

The research that was undertaken took two main aspects into account: the macroeconomic challenge that the EU member states face – population ageing and finding a solution to diminish the negative effects of this process.

Reviewing the specialty literature revealed the fact that the increase of the share of people over 65 is a common aspect both within the European Union and Romania. On the other hand, integrated countries which are confronted with this problem individually and also on a union level, have a way of ensuring independence for senior citizens. Spa potential is a successful method of alleviating diseases, offering the possibility of successfully using spa treatments in order to treat certain illnesses linked to old age, as well as for prevention. One of the member states that equally finds itself in both situations – declining active population (with contributions from immigration included) and high spa potential – is Romania. Here, using natural factors has a long history and wellness tourism in a preventive and healing practice recognized by the state.

The quantitative research conducted revealed that the 278 respondents who took part in this research have shown that they are aware of the demographic problems confronting the EU, which their country of origin is part of and see the wellness practices as a real solution for improving the health of the elderly. Most participants to this study associate spa treatment with the benefits for people over 65, approving their subsidizing. Considering the current causes of this age segment of which we can give as an example: concern like the rising costs of medicine, the rising rate of hospitalization for senior citizens, the social implications of family members who are taking care of an old person or the payment of supplementary allowances, spa treatments might represent a response for the demographic situation in Romania and other EU member states.

The study of specialized literature has led to the confirmation of the hypothesis according to which both the population of the EU and that of Romania are ageing. On the other hand, the presence of an insufficiently valued wellness potential in Romania (spa resources, technical base, specialized personnel) was noted, at the moment only having a traditional offer of Romanian spa resorts. This year, Romania will host the World Congress of Balneotherapy and as far as benefits go, we consider this event to be an opportunity to integrate the Romanian wellness offer in the European and global offers.

It was also noticed that the Romanian wellness offer is insufficiently promoted both on a national and international level. This is mostly due to the insufficient informing of potential European clients in specialized fairs and to ineffective marketing campaigns. By implicating external trading offices, taking part in specialized fairs in other countries, taking advantage of the World Balneology Congress, which will take place in Bucharest in 2016, an adequate promotion and an integration of the Romanian wellness offer on a European level and perhaps even a global level may be achieved. Devising a development strategy and a marketing campaign would produce beneficial economic effects in: using spa resources in Romania, ensuring jobs for specialized personnel (doctors, chiropractors, auxiliary medical staff), growing the attractiveness of the spa and wellness specialization, encouraging the active population to remain in the country, using food resources, encouraging the crafts and souvenirs segment and developing supporting activities such as transports or constructions. Thus, the Romanian wellness offer for the senior segment allows Romania's integration in the group of countries that offer services to the ageing population of the European Union. Its main advantages are the spa potential, the trained personnel and a capacity to offer specialized services, which at the moment exceeds internal demand.

Taking the results of the research into account, the two hypotheses considered – (h1) the population of Romania is predominantly ageing and (h2) the recognition of the benefits of

spa treatments for senior citizens among the questioned population *are confirmed* and the results of the pilot study reinforce the proposed solution: the use of spa treatments for alleviating health problems common among people over 65 years old.

Regarding research limits, one of the most significant is represented by areas of origin of the respondents – Vrancea, Ialomița and Bucharest, thus not examining the points of view of citizens from other areas of Romania. Also, another limitation is the small number of participants (278), which renders the research not a statistically representative one, but a pilot study. This endeavor represents the beginning of an extensive research in the field of wellness tourism which links the results of spa treatments to the current demographic context.

Considering the benefits of spa treatments for people over 65, Romania can integrate itself on the European market and satisfy demands on an international level. Our country can thus find a place among suppliers of services dedicated to senior citizens for all countries who are challenged by the rising share of this age category in the total population of the European Union. In conclusion, all these will give rise to a custom offer of Romanian spa tourism which, consider the segment it is addressed to, may and must also be integrated in the European tourist offer.

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