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## Article

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## Territorial and marketing strategies related to religious tourism in Northern Moldavia, Romania

Bogdan-Constantin IBĂNESCU\*, Alina MUNTEANU\*\*, Oana Mihaela STOLERIU\*\*\*

### Abstract

*Religious tourism represents an important segment of the present Romanian tourism market, with monasteries being constantly well ranked in the preferences of foreign or domestic visitors. Every year the number of religious tourists and pilgrims in Romania is increasing, as well as the number of religious events. In this context, religious destinations try to adapt to a dual orientation of the visitors' interests and practices: cultural tourism and pilgrimage.*

*This study aims to identify patterns in the strategies aiming to attract pilgrims and/or tourists, in reaction to an increasing national and regional competition. By mapping the results, specific spatial structures were identified, in relation with this dichotomy of practices and communication strategies. Major pilgrimage destinations demonstrate a remarkable adaptability of the experiences and services provided to tourists, while famous cultural and religious destinations tend to delocalise their marketing strategies towards regional and national institutions and tourism agencies.*

**Keywords:** religious tourism, pilgrimage, marketing strategy, Romania

### Introduction

Cultural tourism represents an important segment of the present Romanian tourism market, dominating the preferences of the foreign tourists visiting Romania (Vana and Malanescu, 2016). According to the Master Plan for the development of National Tourism 2007 – 2026 (RMRDT, 2007), cultural routes were the most appreciated tourism packages by the foreigners who visited Romania in the first part of the 2000's, overranging traditional health tourism destinations, the Danube Delta, cruises on the Black Sea, city breaks and the Black Sea coast. Cultural tourism attracted mostly German, Austrian, French, Spanish, British and Italian visitors with an average age over 55 years, and their interest was generally focused on the UNESCO labelled sites. Therefore, the clusters of

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monasteries located in famous Romanian tourism regions and representing twenty four of the thirty three UNESCO heritage destinations in Romania, are almost always included in the itineraries proposed to foreign visitors.

The number of cultural - religious tourists has constantly increased in Romania, as well as the number of pilgrims, religious destinations and events. Very often, tourists and pilgrims share the same tourism products: churches, monasteries and/or religious itineraries. This trend was sustained by a general orientation of cultural tourism and tourists towards tradition and authenticity, simultaneously with an increasing popularity of pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites and an increasing number of churches. Or most of the famous religious-cultural attractions are situated in the most important ethnographical tourism regions (eight in Nord-Eastern Romania, seven in Transylvania, eight at North (in the Maramures region) with strong identities and well preserved heritage. Beyond their high cultural value, some of these churches (especially the ones in Northern Moldavia) are traditional pilgrimage sites.

Furthermore, the general popularity of places of worship increased, a fact reflected by a general growth in the number of churches and monasteries (between 2006 and 2013 the number of monasteries went up from 519 to 647). Some of these places tend to develop a pilgrimage orientation, which sustains their visibility, while others tend to develop a cultural tourism orientation. Although the two approaches do not exclude each other, different approaches in promoting strategies are required.

In this context, dual territorial and marketing strategies are adopted by different religious destinations, in their efforts to consolidate a traditional, local social function, but also to adapt to a dual orientation of the visitors' interests and practices, related to cultural tourism and pilgrimage. Additional local, regional or national actors with different levels of power and benefits sometimes get involved in these strategies, differentiating the evolution of places with similar cultural or tourism value.

## **1. Religious tourism and pilgrimage – between conceptual confusion and practical overlapping**

The positioning of pilgrimage in the modern classifications seems one of Gordian Knots of tourism studies in the beginning of XXI<sup>st</sup> century. Confusion, inclusion, association or dissociation successively or simultaneously characterized the relation between pilgrimage and religious tourism in the scientific literature. But what really represent these two terms (pilgrimage and religious tourism) and how do they interact?

Technically, pilgrimage means *a ritual displacement to a holy or committed place* (Brunet, 1992) and it can exist at three different levels – local/regional, national and international. The typically holy place is a spiritual building (church, synagogue, mosque, or temple), somehow related to significant moments in the life of a religious personality (born, death, critical decisions), but sometimes it can be just a ruin, a spot, an entire region or a natural element. Spiritually, pilgrimage is seen as a self-searching journey, a moral purification or even a personal achievement, all these three meanings having different proportion according to the believer's personal scale. *The pilgrimage is a geographical and social separation from the mundane* (Carasco, 1996).

We witness today a significant growth of the pilgrimage phenomenon in the whole world, strongly supported by the development of the travel system which reduced the difficulties for the people living on different continents, sharing the same religion, to reach the pilgrimage sites (Reader, 2007). We can affirm that, according to the above definition, pilgrims practice a form of tourism, because they fit in the international definition of tourists given by the WTO: *travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes* (UNWTO, 1995). But the question is: if the pilgrimage is a form of tourism, is this a form of religious tourism, or a new, segregated one, with its own approach?

Generally, the literature makes a difference between these two forms of travel, based on the motivational factor. Many authors insist on the personal motivation and beliefs to make a strict difference between pilgrims and religious tourists, reasoning this classification mainly on psychologically elements (Swatos, 2006; Blackwell, 2007; Mu et. al., 2007). This delineation introduces a strong and difficult dichotomy, which allows very few manoeuvres for the epistemological approaches. The dominant reason for going on a pilgrimage is usually *to request some favour of God or the shrine divinity in return for simply having made the journey or for engaging in ancillary devotional exercises* (Eade and Sallnow, 1991, cit. in Rountree, 2006). We can name the pilgrimage as a double travel (*inside and outside*) unlike the “pure” tourism, which allows only an *outside* travel.

On the other hand, some authors consider that the separation between tourism and pilgrimage is somehow brutal and illegitimate, despite the motivational hiatus, so they prefer the composite phrase “pilgrim tourism” (Griffin, 2007), which describes better the phenomenon. Furthermore, a “reconciliation” and a re-evaluation of the pilgrimage – tourism relations are needed for cutting up the dichotomy, dichotomy which resulted only as a product of modernity (Collins-Kreiner, 2010a). In fact, both pilgrims and tourists are mainly motivated by the heritage, but each one chooses a different side (spiritual or cultural).

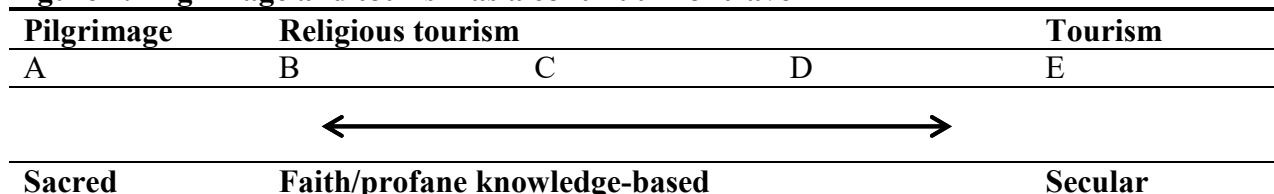
It seems that the two categories (pilgrimage and religious tourism) are more related and connected than the motivational argument would argue. They often overlap and often we see pilgrims taking benefit from their voyage to visit something else (Rocha, 2006) After all, *a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist* (Turner and Turner, 1978; Swatos, 2006).

Still, it is very difficult to chart a strict line between pilgrims and tourists. *Persons who go on pilgrimage, hence, are expected to have an underlying religious motivation for their action. Yet we also know [...] that all pilgrimages were events of mixed motivation.* (Swatos, 2006, p. 25).

A third acceptance is the one including pilgrimage in the religious tourism. It seems that the pilgrimage is nothing but a class in the big concept of religious tourism, which includes also the missionary or the leisure tourism (Blackwell, 2007). In fact, religious tourism represents the totality of the travels to the holy or religious important places, despite the tourists' motivation. Pilgrimage is the first form of religious tourism preceding historically all the other forms. The inclusion of pilgrimage in the religious tourism flows could be seen as controversial as the inclusion of business trips in tourism (different motivation, same effect), but nevertheless, this choice looks legitimate. Anyway, sharing the same visiting destination does not produce a competition between these two forms of tourism (Blackwell, 2007) but more likely a collaboration<sup>1</sup>, a productive symbiosis.

However, our present society is confronted with a new form of pilgrimage, which imposes the necessity to re-evaluate pilgrimage. There are two major forms of pilgrimage: the religious one, discussed above, and the secular one<sup>2</sup>. Despite the relative oxymoron, the second form has developed more and more in the second half of XX<sup>th</sup> century. It is about the pilgrimage associated with well-known personalities (such as the prison of Nelson Mandela, the grave of Jim Morrison from Père-Lachaise cemetery), patriotism related monuments or places (the web of revolutionary monuments from all around the China), stadiums hosting great sport events and even modern shopping areas (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; Rioux, 2010).

**Figure 1. Pilgrimage and tourism as a continuum of travel**



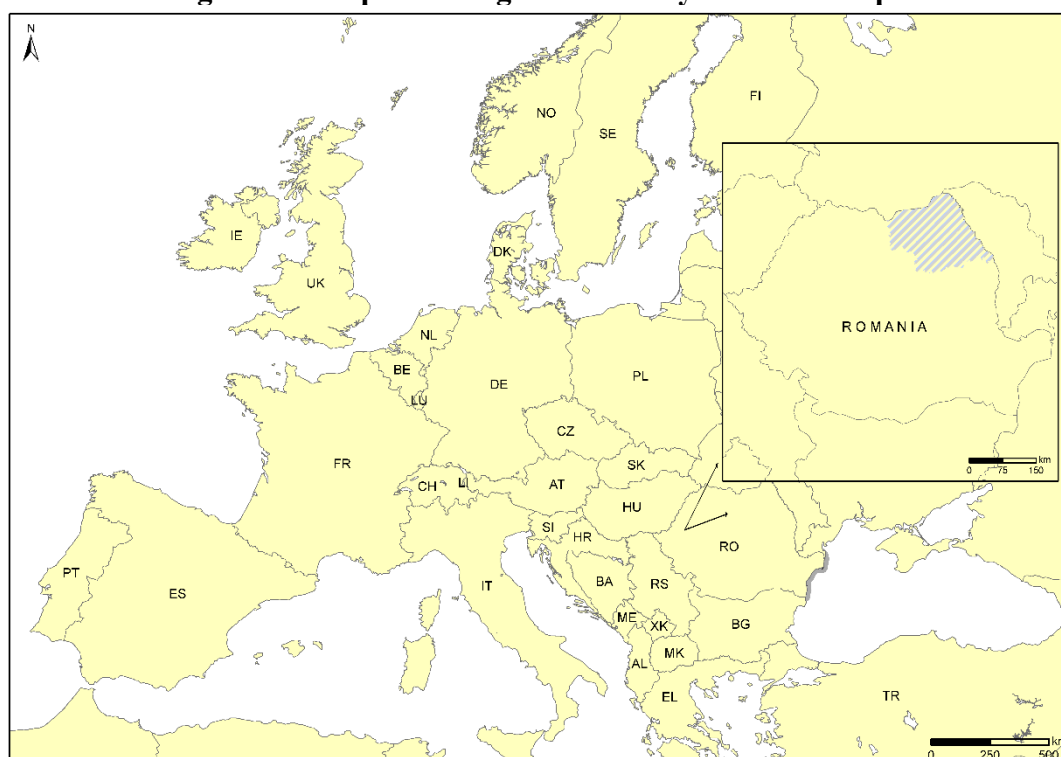
Source: after Smith, 1992

<sup>1</sup> A pure pilgrimage well-known destination transform itself in a trending cultural destination, the appearance of the second form of visiting being just the result of the first one's success.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the overuse of "pilgrimage" word which started in the '80s and its association with non-religious related terms had a major impact for the birth of secular pilgrimage (as a term, not as an activity).

The large variety of opinions considered, we decided to adopt a conciliatory and proper approach, based on the continuum of travel created by pilgrimage and religious tourism (Smith, 1992). This continuum of travel indicates the progressive relation between these two concepts (Figure 1). The “A” zone contains the pious (pure) pilgrims, the “B” zone refers to pilgrim > tourist relation, the pilgrims with a main faith related motivation, but scooted by other secondary motivations, the “C” zone designates a relative equality pilgrim = tourist, thus a double motivation, the “D” class applies on tourist > pilgrim relation, the opposite of B zone, with a secondary faith motivation, and at last the “E” zone, the secular tourist, without faith motivation, but only leisure or cultural one.

**Figure 2. The positioning of case study area in Europe**



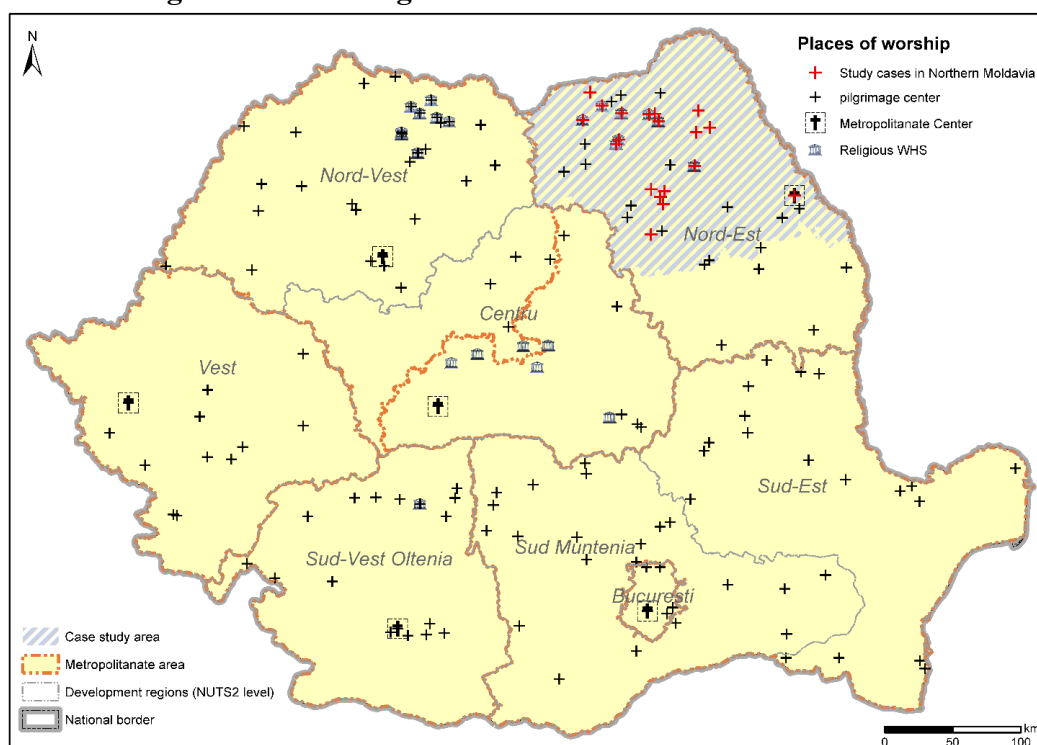
Source: own representation

This paper analyses different actors and strategies built around religious places and events in Northern Moldavia (Figure 2). While those strategies are built in order to deliver specific experiences to tourists and pilgrims, and also to increase the additional economic or social territorial benefits for both cultural tourism destinations and pilgrimage destinations, their approach tend to be rather different.

## 2. Research hypothesis and methodological approach

Our research hypothesis is that the pilgrimage-oriented destinations have built better territorial and marketing strategies in the last two decades, in comparison with the destinations with a stronger religious-cultural orientation, which have rather preferred to take benefit from supporting national and regional tourism strategies or development programmes. We believe that pilgrimage sites were motivated to develop better promotion tools compared to the UNESCO monasteries in order to compensate the lack of famous international labels or general national tourism popularity. They were helped in this aim by different other stakeholders interested in the high visibility of pilgrimage events. This paper analyses these different actors and strategies built around religious places and events, in the aim of delivering specific experiences to tourists and pilgrims, but also to increase the additional economic or social territorial benefits.

**Figure 3. Main religious tourism destinations in Romania**



Source: own representation

The study focuses on a sample of 21 representative religious destinations from a relatively continuous (historical and tourism) region – Northern Moldavia. The 21 case studies are the monasteries and churches of Arbore, Humor, Moldovita, Patrauti, Probota, Suceava, Voronet, Sucevita, Dragomirna, Putna, Metropolitan Church, Sihastria, Secu, Varatec, Agapia, Neamt, Sihla, Pangarati, Cosula, Zosin and Vorona - Figure 3.

The three main categories of religious destination from this region are represented in our case studies selection: 8 UNESCO sites, 12 major national/regional pilgrimage destinations and the most significant Moldavian pilgrimage centre, with a national polarization area and which coincides with the main religious administrative centre (the Metropolitan centre in Iasi). The sample is large enough to ensure a valid overview on national, regional and local practices related to religious tourism and diverse enough to reveal quality information about specific (local or regional) dynamics and strategies.

If the UNESCO sites are considered cultural masterpieces that are well-known nationally and internationally, the 12 main pilgrimage destinations were chosen not only because of their undeniable heritage, but also because of the pilgrim attraction. Multiple indicators were analysed in order to identify and delineate these specific territorial and marketing strategies, such as: public and private investment priorities in tourism, the role of religious tourism in territorial development strategies, specific destination management (organization, type of event, types of actors involved) and targeted audience.

For a higher clarity, we chose to use the generic term of monastery to designate all the religious places included in the case study: monasteries, convents and cloisters. They are in fact differentiated by religious importance or administrative organization, with low scientific interest in this analysis.

### **3. Actors and strategies related to Romanian religious tourism and pilgrimage**

Tourism (religious) places are *complex mixes of material objects, companies, workers, local civil societies, the local state with the co-presence of other forms of the state, and all kinds of practices, values, and multiple identities. They are shaped by the sequence of roles which each has played in the spatial division both of tourism and of other economic activities* (Gareth and Williams, 2004).

Different actors with different territorialities intersect public or private strategies or practices related to religious attractions and events, thus creating places with evolving identities. Within or outside the official administrative boundaries of regional development regions (NUTS 2), counties (equivalent of NUTS 3) and municipalities, new territories and synergies are shaped by church administration limits (metropolitan sees), pilgrimage sites and major tourism itineraries.



### **3.1 The place of religious tourism and pilgrimage in regional development strategies.**

#### **Public actors - tourism and planning**

Public stakeholders have different approaches and rankings for the role of tourism (and religious tourism in particular) within the general territorial development. Different strategies were elaborated at different administrative and geographical levels, approaching religious tourism in different forms, such as: territorial strength for future development, tourism motivation included or delineated from general cultural tourism flows, opportunity for increasing the attraction of a region and building a potential brand or, simply as a factor with no significant influence for the future territorial development, over ranked by other forms of tourism or by other economic and social factors.

The Master Plan for the development of National Tourism 2007 – 2026 (RMRDT, 2007) considers the religious heritage (namely the UNESCO sites and 12800 orthodox sites, including 380 monasteries and 2400 places with historical and architectural value) as an important asset (and a special chapter) of the national tourism potential. Still, this heritage is not related to pilgrimage and religious tourism, only to the cultural tourism flows. The only religious attractions mentioned in the national strategies are the UNESCO monasteries of Suceava County, associated with ecotourism in the National Strategy for the development of Ecotourism in Romania.

Significant differences in the approach of tourism and religious tourism were observed among the territorial development strategies set up for the 8 development regions (equivalent of NUTS 2) in Romania. For example, the importance granted to “tourism” in general<sup>3</sup> is higher in the strategies for the Nord-Vest, Sud-Vest and Centru Development Regions (with averages of 0.73, 0.71 and 0.62 occurrences/page), medium for the capital city region (0.42 occurrences /page) and it decreases to only 0.18 and 0.13 occurrences per page, in the case of Nord-Est (the region where the counties from the Northern Moldavia are included) and Sud Regions. For the Nord-Est Region, the elaboration of a specific tourism plan, a different strategy focused only on tourism development, could be an explanation of the low frequency values.

Excepting the Nord-Est and Sud-Vest regions, religious tourism is mentioned as a part of cultural tourism. Surprisingly, pilgrimage, as an individualized form of tourism is only twice mentioned in the strategy for Northern Moldavia (Nord-Est region), where it already represents a well-known tourism product.

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<sup>3</sup> Measured by the occurrences frequency of this term.

As for the rank attributed to *religious tourism* within all the tourist flows, this varies, if we look at the number of occurrences of this concept in the strategic documents: 3 references for Nord-Est and Centru Regions, where about 2/3 of the Romanian UNESCO heritage sites are located; 2 references for Bucuresti-Ilfov and Nord-Vest region, despite the presence of the UNESCO labelled wooden churches in Nord-Vest region and 270 churches in Bucharest alone; only one reference for the southern and western part of Romania (Sud-Vest, Sud-Est and Vest Regions); and no reference at all for Sud region.

*Religious tourism sites* are individually named in the case of the UNESCO labelled monasteries and churches (in Nord-Est, Nord-Vest and Centru regions), only vaguely mentioned for the Sud region (as “monasteries with ethnographical value”), never for Sud-Vest (even if declared a “land of monasteries and churches”, with the UNESCO labelled Horezu Monastery), Vest and Sud Regions. Interestingly, for the Bucuresti - Ilfov region, 240 churches are mentioned for the city of Bucharest and a mix of cultural, natural and *religious attractions* in the surroundings.

Regarding the religious sites from Northern Moldavia, in the Regional Tourism spatial planning plan, the importance of religious places is differently ranked (as occurrences) but not necessarily according to their international labels: higher for Moldovita (12 times), Voronet (10) and Agapia, Sucevita, Putna, Secu, Humor, Neamt (8-10 times) and lower for Probota, Iasi Cathedral, Pangarati or St. Ioan (1-4 times) (NERDA, 2017).

The importance of religious tourism in the regional development strategies is even more evident if we analyse its position in the existing tourism flows and potential and within the *regional development priorities and opportunities*.

Both Centru and Nord-Vest Regions count on cultural and nature based tourism (ecotourism and active sports) tourism for their future development and their orientations are supported by a rich and internationally labelled cultural heritage (UNESCO sites), diverse geomorphology, national parks and well-known national health tourism resorts.

Environment and ecotourism are the main development directions for Sud-Est and Vest; despite traditional tourism flows attracted by the Black Sea coast at Sud-Est or the cross-border (transit) tourism flows in Vest, both regions count on the capitalization of large natural protected areas along the Danube River. Secondly, niche markets are also targeted, by the focus on rural (ethnographical) tourism and, in the case of Vest region, the mountain (adventure or cave tourism) and health tourism. Even if it is the second region in Romania as regards to the number and significance of monasteries and churches, after Moldavia, the Sud-Vest region constructs its strategy also on the nature potential (mountains and the Danube), followed by the cultural heritage, especially that of rural areas.

Rural and nature based (eco) tourism, only differently ranked, are the main directions for Sud and Sud-Vest. The Danube is not seen as a major asset for the Sud Region, where mountain (and) weekend tourism flows are presently dominating. The regional development is focused on business and innovation growth, while ecotourism and rural tourism are only seen as secondary solutions to rehabilitate ecologic areas and to diversify the rural economy.

Both Bucuresti - Ilfov and Nord-Est regions mention the religious heritage as a regional strength and the cultural tourism as a general target. Still, the presence of Bucharest (even if associated with 270 churches) explains the additional focus on business tourism and the major orientation towards the place branding (Bucharest - Little Paris). Meanwhile, religious and historical tourism are the other priorities, for Nord-Est region, the only one choosing to consolidate the present tourism trends, and to additionally invest also in the development of alternatives such as nature based (mountain and sports), business and health tourism. Nord-Est is also the only region with a tourism focused development plan, which, based on the same assets mentioned above, proposes the development of niche segment markets and thematic routes for rural and active (sport) tourism. Seven of the 25 regional itineraries proposed are *Monasteries routes*.

**Table 1. The important types of tourism within regional territorial development strategies**

Region	Existing forms of tourism	Priority tourism directions
1. Centru	Mountain, cultural, sports and health tourism	Cultural tourism, ecotourism (mountains) and health tourism.
2.Nord-Vest	Health, mountain, cultural tourism (including rural and festivals)	Rural, urban, health tourism, niche tourism (active, nature), cultural tourism
3.Sud-Est	Coastal, mountain, cruise or rural (eco) tourism	Eco-tourism (along the Danube), rural economy
4. Vest	Frequent cross-border and transit tourism flows, Business tourism, ecotourism, cultural (rural and urban), health and wine tourism.	niche products: "mountains, protected areas, theme routes (ethnographic, <i>religious</i> , adventure), health and cave tourism"
5.Sud-Vest	Nature (mountain), historical, <i>religious</i> , tourism Health, rural and eco-tourism	Nature (mountain) and rural (cultural-historical) tourism Ecotourism, cruise tourism
6.Sud	Mountain and weekend tourism Cultural tourism (traditional rural communities)	Ecotourism and rural (agri)tourism
7.Bucuresti - Ilfov	Cultural and business tourism <i>Religious</i> attractions	Rebranding Bucharest (Little Paris);sustainable tourism in periurban and rural areas
8.Nord-Est a	Cultural, <i>religious</i> and historical tourism	Cultural, historical and <i>religious</i> tourism, Mountain tourism, sports, business and health tourism
Nord-Est b (Tourism Spatial Plan) (NERDA, 2017)	Cultural, <i>religious</i> tourism Rural, (agri)tourism, business, ecotourism and wine tourism	Niche tourism: rural (agri)tourism and active (sports) tourism

Source: author's representation after RMRDT (2007)

### 3.2 Local strategies within the Nord-Est region regarding pilgrimage and cultural tourism

Within the Nord-Est region the county authorities have different targets and orientations intended for the tourism sector. For example, both Neamt and Iasi counties mention monasteries and religious tourism as major tourism assets, together with the natural and cultural heritage in general<sup>4</sup>. For Neamt County, cultural tourism, agritourism (in rural areas) and ecotourism (in the mountains) are the new privileged orientations. In Iasi County, traditional forms of tourism (cultural and religious) are considered less important and over ranked by the capitalization of nature (through health tourism, ecotourism, active tourism or hunting tourism), ethnography and the border proximity.

As for the cities, local authorities (city councils) have also specific opinions regarding the tourism development. Despite the large involvement of the city hall in the organization and marketing of the annual pilgrimage at St Parascheva's relics, religious tourism is not a priority of the socio-economic development strategy for Iasi city "ORIZONT 2020"<sup>5</sup>. This proposes the development of Iasi as a "city of inspiration", reinforcing the cultural tourism image (as "cultural capital of Moldavia") complemented by other economic functions like: information technology, creative industries, regional services centre. The city has also a cross-border tourism strategy with the Republic of Moldova, focused mainly on the diversification of the present forms of tourisms: transit and cultural (history and festivals related). Even if religious tourism is considered again the second main territorial strength (after the diversified potential), the investment priorities favour business and cultural (conference) tourism for the city of Iasi and ecotourism and active tourism for the natural areas surrounding the city.

The tourism strategy for the city of Suceava<sup>6</sup> is built on traditional strengths like the natural, cultural and ethnographic potential. But the future of tourism in this city is not linked to the county or regional strategies; it sustains the development of new thematic (a Dracula route) and cross-border routes (with Ukraine), as well as the development of business, conference tourism and festivals. Religious tourism is not mentioned at all though 3 thematic tourism routes are proposed, each one including a case study monastery/church: Probota, Dragomirna and St. Ioan. It is intriguing that the county which benefits from 8 UNESCO Heritage sites does not chose to put forward this type of product in the county's tourism plan.

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<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.primaria-iasi.ro/imagini-iasi/fisiere-iasi/1471458467-ORIZONT2020.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Find out more at: <http://www.primaria-iasi.ro/imagini-iasi/fisiere-iasi/1471458467-ORIZONT2020.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> You can find it at: [http://primariasv.ro/portal/suceava/portal.nsf/35BBBB4116111EDEC2257BEC0023E123/\\$FILE/Strategia\\_de\\_turism.pdf](http://primariasv.ro/portal/suceava/portal.nsf/35BBBB4116111EDEC2257BEC0023E123/$FILE/Strategia_de_turism.pdf)

#### 4. Strategies for attracting pilgrims and tourists: staging tourism experiences.

##### 4.1. Religious actors and strategies.

*Local ceremonies – Parish fairs.* The annual Parish Fairs are local events, which temporarily gather a significant number of participants, pilgrims and simple visitors, attracted by both religious and lay attractions staged around the monasteries (churches). The popularity of these fairs differs and it is closely related to the administrative rank of the religious centre (regional - Iasi; local - Arbore, Pangarati, etc.), on its tourism marketing (national polarization for Voronet, Moldovita, Sucevita, etc.), on the importance of the celebration day (coincidence with the Easter or Christmas holidays, for Sucevita and Voronet monasteries) and on specific additional attractions factors: miracle-working icons (Neamt monastery), caves (Sihastria) or tombs (Putna, Secu). The audience goes from the local level (a few hundred people gathered at Pangarati, in 2010) up to a few thousand people (around 2000 in 2011 and around 5000 people in 2008 at Neamt Monastery) or up to several hundred thousands, during the pilgrimage in the city of Iasi (after 2010 the city of Iasi reports constantly over half of millions of visitors during the annual pilgrimage).

During the last few years, in order to increase the participants' number, most of the Parish fairs started announcing their events on the specialized channels like the national religious radio station (RADIOTRINITAS) but also in local newspapers. The most famous ones (from Suceava and Iasi counties) have a lot stronger publicity made by national TV channels and newspapers. Indirect publicity is sometimes made by diverse private actors using modern instruments such as Facebook (like in the case of an accommodation facility pre-booking for the Parish Fair of Dragomirna).

The core structure of the festivities is mainly the same: the ceremony generally lasts two days, beginning with an office in the evening preceding the celebration day and continues with a major religious office in the morning after, performed by important religious figures and a high number of priests (up to 40, at Sihastria, in 2010), all followed by a public meal offered to the participants.

In addition to that, specific strategies have been conceived in order to increase the impact and popularity of these events: bringing young students from local schools (at Moldovita, in 2009 and 2014; at Neamt Monastery, in 2008 and 2016) or theological schools (at Neamt Monastery, in 2008 and 2011), additional offices on other sacred places (like the cave of St. Teodora at Sihastria Monastery or the tomb of St. Casian at Secu), books launching (2 books launched at Patrauti, in 2011; one book launched and freely distributed to the participants at Voronet, in 2009), artistic manifestations performed by religious (at Voronet, in 2009 and 2012; at Neamt Monastery in the last

few years) or school chorus (at Moldovita, in 2009), canonizations (at Secu, in 2008), blessing of new mural paintings (at Putna, in 2010), offices performed in open air, on a special traditional platform (at Agapia or Iasi in 2015) and public processions with relics and icons on the city streets (in Iasi and Suceava), lasting a few hours and gathering a lot of people.

Quite a religious thematic park is built for a week every year in the centre of Iasi, around the city cathedral, during the pilgrimage at St. Parascheva's relics. The sacred space is extended beyond the cathedral's walls to: a small nearby square hosting a fair of religious objects; to the streets behind the cathedral, where the pilgrims are queuing for days in order to prey and touch the relics and, for half a day (the 14<sup>th</sup> of October), the main boulevard where a major religious procession takes place. Additional tourism services are delivered to pilgrims and other visitors in this sacred themed area: information points, food and refreshments, flowers to put at the relics but also exhibits and conferences/workshops on cultural topics related to religion (in different sparse locations).

*Relics.* Relics became a very important "asset" in the marketing strategy of religious sites. Every year, the pilgrimage in Iasi consolidates its image by "importing" other famous sacred relics brought by major official representatives of foreign orthodox churches. This strategy has been recently adopted by an increasing number of smaller (less known) churches, in order to increase their pilgrims' number and the general impact of their religious events. The increasing value of sacred relics explains strange facts like the theft of relics over money on a little Romanian church, in December 2011, where the relics of the spiritual protector of Banat region (in south-west of the country) and not the money were stolen.

More and more temporary regional pilgrimage routes with imported relics are organized by different metropolitan sees, as a new aiming to consolidate the image of local churches and to temporarily increase their pilgrims' number as well as people's accessibility to important orthodox relics. The metropolitan authorities establish the relics' itinerary.

Almost all the monasteries from the case study have **museums or collections** of religious art, old religious books or items for church service. The monasteries from Neamt County have some of the oldest religious museums from Romania, denoting a bigger and earlier interest (first museum ever built in a monastery in Romania made its appearance in 1927 at Agapia monastery; Neamt, Varatec, Secu, Pangrati have some old collections too). Curiously, the UNESCO monasteries have recent museums, despite their disposition to cultural tourism (Probota's museum was open only in 2009, Voronet's museum was proposed in 2008, Humor's museum has only a few years of activity). It seems that UNESCO monasteries copied a practice well developed by the pilgrimage based monasteries – religious museum attraction. In fact, besides the three monasteries of Sihla (the smallest

one from the case study), Arbore (UNESCO) and Suceava (UNESCO), all other monasteries from our case study have religious museums or collections.

The need for diversification pushed some monasteries to install new utilities like libraries (Neamt monastery), or to organise special events like painting workshops (Probotă and Sucevita), colloquies (Putna), conferences, symposiums, book releases (Putna). Although almost all events have a religious theme, there is a sign for the monasteries availability in supplementary activities, other than religious services. Even if it was impossible to obtain detailed statistics regarding this events, we observed a bigger frequency of them at prestigious pilgrimage sites (Putna, Dragomirna, Agapia, Varatec, Neamt), some of this monasteries disposing of special conference rooms, lodging and restoration facilities, and timidly at well-known UNESCO monasteries (Moldovita, Sucevita, Voronet, Humor).

#### **4.2. Local administration, lay events and economic strategies**

A major attraction factor is represented by additional *lay ceremonies*, usually separated from the religious ones by the (church) monastery's walls. For the monasteries in rural area Parish Fairs are traditionally associated with local gatherings, now with a modern and less religious touch: merchants, Ferris wheels, food and drinks, dances and music (i.e. Arbore or Putna) sometimes create powerful visual contrasts.

A complex organization of the lay festivities is associated with the annual pilgrimage in Iasi, initially meant to reactivate a local tradition from the inter-war period and evolved to a complex marketing strategy of the local administration. Since 1990, the tradition gained larger temporal and spatial dimensions every year, sustaining the construction of a temporary thematic park in Iasi, mixing religion and consumerism. A whole City Festival was progressively developed around the date of October 14<sup>th</sup> (when the major religious event takes place), lasting up to 10 days, in 2008, under the slogan of "10 days of faith, culture, sports and leisure". In this context, entertainment and attractive surroundings are created: arts (exhibitions, cultural conferences and contests), sports (competitions), leisure (concerts, spectacles, parades) and trade occupy precise areas, following an already traditional urban functional zoning: the leather men' and folk artisans' fairs, the wine festival, the concerts and fireworks square etc.

*Private actors.* The transport industry is another actor adapting its strategies to the economic and territorial importance of religious tourism attractions and pilgrimages. Important public

investments are made in order to improve the quality of access routes and increase the visitors' number.

Transport services, both private and public, react to the opportunity of the temporarily increased demand caused by religious events. For example since 2010 the Parish Fair of Putna Monastery induced the addition of three more regional train connections for two days. During the annual pilgrimage in Iasi, the number of trains and (mini) buses converging to the city increases significantly.

Even potentially new flight connections based on pilgrimage are sustained by the major national public stakeholders (like sector ministries). Following the success of Iasi festivities in 2011 among a group of Macedonian official guests, the prefect of Iasi publicly announced the initiative to develop a flight connection between Romania and Macedonia (Iasi-Skopje), based on the high popularity of Saint Parascheva of Iasi among the Macedonian believers, where the saint is considered a divine protector<sup>7</sup>. About one month later, the ministry of tourism at that time announced a meeting between tour operators and airways companies from Israel and Romania, in order to create better (flight) connections between Israel and Romanian regions such as Bukovina, Transylvania and health tourism resorts<sup>8</sup>, the ministry supporting the creation of direct charter flights to Bukovina.

## 5. Tourism attractiveness of religious destinations in Northern Moldova

The counties of Suceava and Neamt are, as always, the traditionally visited sites for their unique churches and monasteries (Figure 4). Their long-time existence and their cultural and religious value are of prime significance for the pilgrim tourists. When analysing the dynamics of tourist arrivals in the last 16 years, these two counties have accommodated a relatively constant number of tourists. The presence of UNESCO sites in the county of Suceava, is a factor of enormous importance for international tourists, while the pilgrimage centres from Neamt county attracts a high number of national tourists.

Two different patterns of tourist distribution can be observed in the map: a uniform distribution can be observed on the western part of the studied area that overlaps Suceava and Neamt counties. Undeniably, their cultural heritage, as well as the specific landscape constitute de main attractions for tourists. For the rest of the analysed territory, there is a clumped distribution of tourists that rather

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<sup>7</sup> Find out more at: <http://www.jurnalul.ro/observator/exportam-moaste-si-importam-pelerini-cheia-afurisirii-saraciei-in-romania-593161.htm>, consulted 10 Oct 2017.

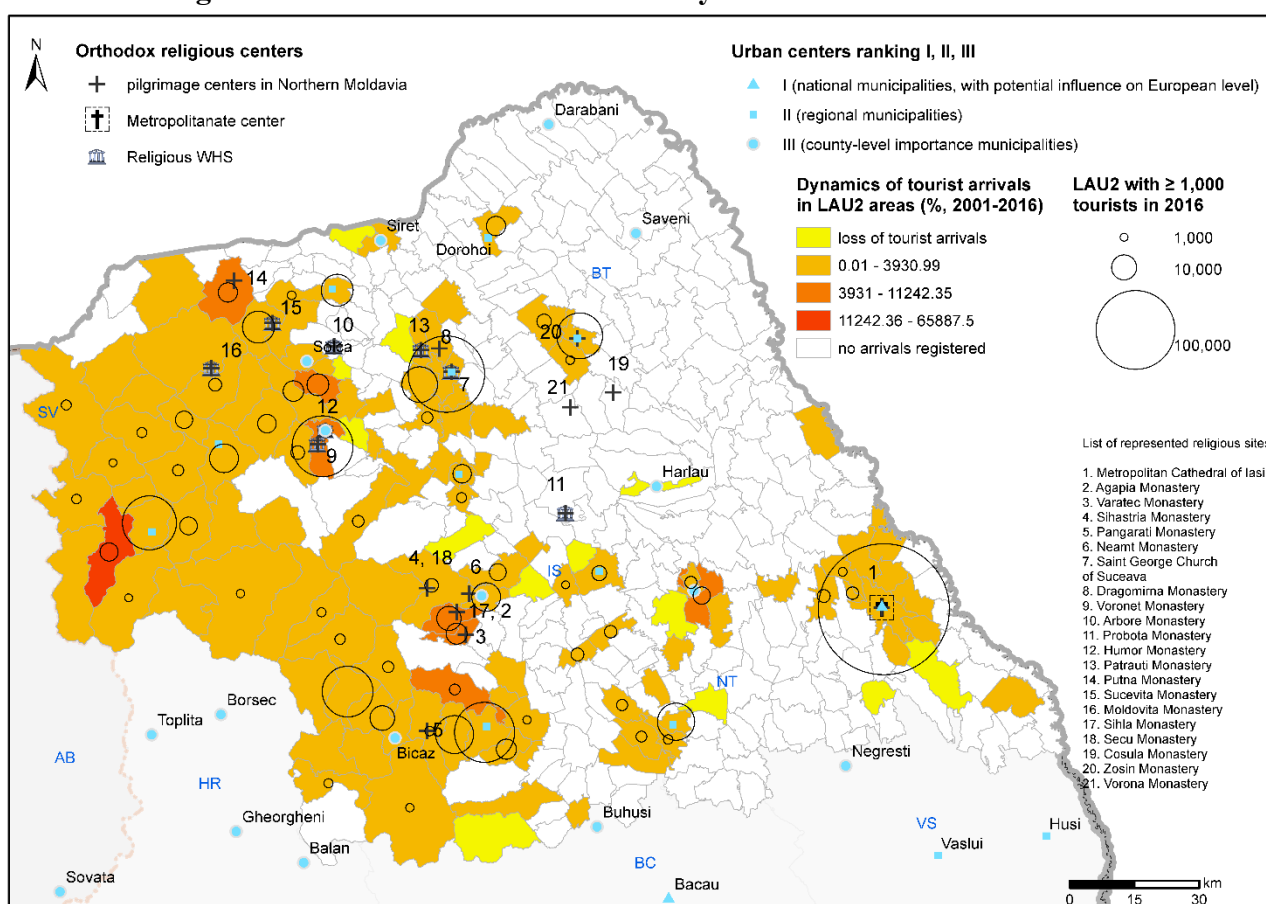
<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.gandul.info/news/udrea-vrea-sa-i-aduca-pe-israelieni-in-bucovina-transilvania-si-statiuni-balneare-9001669>, consulted on 3 May 2017



prefer to visit places within and on the outskirts of urban areas that can offer them diverse tourist attractions.

Most of the UNESCO sites have attracted a significant number of tourists during the analyzed period of time, especially since the year 2007, when Romania has been integrated within the EU's structure. But the real boom in tourist arrivals has been registered in areas away from any UNESCO site, but mostly close to important monasteries with strong heritage and symbolism (the case of Putna, Agapia).

**Figure 4. Tourist arrivals and tourist dynamics in Northern Moldova**



Source: own representation

On the other side, the religious sites of Botosani have not been able to develop tourist activities in order to attract and hold on to the tourists. In most of the county, no tourist arrival has been registered during the last 16 years. The rural profile of Botosani and the poor state of the transport infrastructure have much inhibited tourist travel towards the main religious centres within Botosani County and, overall, towards any potential tourist attraction.

Significant differences of visibility, specialization (cultural, pilgrimage, ethnographical), polarization area and territorial impact can be observed for example between UNESCO labelled

churches and pilgrimage centres with higher regional impact of UNESCO labelled monasteries, but a stronger local impact for pilgrimage destinations. However, the importance of individual strategies is overruling the label or the main type of visitors, for example the strong popularity and polarization differences between Voronet and Arbore Monasteries, both UNESCO labelled and separated by only 36 km.

## Conclusions

Overall, the study confirms the initial research hypothesis. The 18 religious places included in the case-study confirmed the fact that Romanian religious destinations tend to elaborate different territorial and promotion strategies, trying to better capitalize their assets (such as the UNESCO label) and shaping their main orientation (to cultural- religious tourism or pilgrimage).

All religious destinations generally have a significant territorial impact, reflected into and by the emergence of complex and mixed development and marketing strategies, with multiple stakeholders and target groups. Public and private actors, from different domains intersect their actions and interests in order to consolidate the image of a religious destination and to deliver specific experiences to a mostly dual targeted audience: pilgrims and tourists. The impact goes from temporary changes in landscape (territorial extension, functional zoning, contrasting territorial practices), to a long term evolution of attitudes and popularity (tourist and religious) and significant financial investments.

Still, the element missing from all these overlapping strategies and interests is integration. The simultaneous use of different channels, instruments and priorities in the capitalization of similar territorial resources and opportunities still has a low positive impact, at least at larger, regional level and in relation with the real potential of this area. Two major orientations were observed. On one hand, major public stakeholders adopt a rather traditional approach (punctual tourism information centres), restricted to administrative borders and instruments (investments in large projects) and with slower (long term) territorial effects. On the other hand, individual management and marketing strategies with precise, short term targets and faster visible effects are stimulated to further develop.

Specific individual approaches are conceived focusing on the development and capitalization of competitive advantages and strategies, between different religious sites. Thus, the monasteries lacking high level tourism labels (UNESCO) or an old tourism tradition, are much more motivated to adopt new, innovative marketing strategies (such as niche specializations, pilgrimage, specific events

etc), to create or highlight additional attractions (like new sacred relics, specific processions to other sacred places – caves, tombs).

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