

The development of rural tourism through the NRDP funds in Romania: a spatial perspective

ANA-MARIA OPRIA¹, ALEXANDRA CEHAN¹ & CORNELIU IATU¹

¹"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Contacting author: opriaanamaria@yahoo.com

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Objectives | Tourism development, at local, regional, and national levels, is dependent on efficient strategies and policies implemented by the responsible authorities. An important instrument in ensuring the efficiency of such strategies and policies is represented by the European Union Funds, which are aimed at, among many directions, contributing to the development of local or regional tourism economy (Panasiuk, 2013). The financial support granted through European funds is in many areas considered the main driver of tourism (Ballesteros & Hernandez, 2016) and a factor for overall economic development especially for less-favoured regions (Hjalager, 1996, Bull, 1999). This is because European funding and tourism largely contribute to the diversification of the rural economy (McAreavey & McDonagh, 2010).

In light of the previously stated facts, this paper aims to provide a spatial perspective on the role that European Union funds had on tourism development through NRDP 2007-2013 and NRDP 2014-2020. As such, three main objectives have been formulated:

1. Identifying the NRDP projects with a tourism focus;
2. Assessing the relationship between the tourism potential of beneficiary rural areas and NRDP funds absorbed for tourism-related projects;
3. Analysing the contribution brought by the tourism-focused NRDP projects in the evolution of tourism indicators.

Methodology | The methodology is based on statistical and spatial analysis tools (i.e. Cluster analysis, Grouping analysis etc.) and capitalizes on the database provided by AFIR on projects, financed through NRDP funds. Our focus was on identifying the tourism-related projects from the total number of projects supported at the national level through the NRDP funds (160.000 projects). We analysed the number of tourism projects supported at the LAU2 level (2.861 communities), their typology, and the number of funds absorbed for each of the 2 funding periods that have taken place so far. This data was used for identifying the spatial patterns and appreciating the evolution of beneficiary communities from one funding period to the other when it comes to the number of projects implemented and the amount of funds absorbed. Also, tourism

data related to tourism resources, tourism demand, and tourism infrastructure has been employed to analyse the relationships between the destinations' characteristics and their predisposition for accessing EU funds.

Main results and contributions | The main result consists of the identification of two operational typologies of LAU2 in Romania that used the NRDP in the development of tourism projects. The typologies are based on the outcomes of each of the 2 funding periods and the study highlights the differences from one funding period to the other in the behaviour of the beneficiary communities. A total of 5 types of communities were built for each of the 2 funding periods, as follows: declining communities (low absorption capacity and no. of projects), stagnant type I communities (constant absorption capacity and no. of projects), fast growing communities (growing absorption capacity and no. of projects), stagnant type II (slowly declining absorption capacity and no. of projects) and slow growing communities (slowly growing absorption capacity and no. of projects). The typologies, as well as the concrete examples extracted from them, allow an integrated diagnosis of how the Romanian communities capitalized on the NRDP for tourism development, with implications and recommendations specific to each type of rural territory for the next funding period.

Limitations | At present, the lack of a thorough analysis of local tourism projects obtained through a more qualitative approach, respectively through discussions with residents and project beneficiaries, is the main limitation of the study and implicitly an important direction for further research. Such an approach could better highlight the qualitative contribution of these projects in the beneficiary rural communities and could provide more insights to explain the differences observed between the territories.

Conclusions | The NRDP has played an important role both in the emergence of tourist destinations in areas with potential (e.g. the case of the slow growing type of communities in the North-West Development Region) and in the expansion of tourism activity in already established destinations (e.g. the case of the fast-growing communities in the Central and București-Ilfov Development Regions). This highlights the success of the programme in diversifying rural economic activities, which is a step towards sustainable development of rural areas. However, the financial support offered to rural tourism projects is quite small and cannot generate a noticeable change in Romanian rural tourism, as shown by the evolution of the main tourism indicators.

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