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Article

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The Religious Tourism – An Opportunity of Promoting and Developing the Tourism in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians

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Abstract Religion has been and continues to be a major component for the ecumenical travels. A main factor in the development of this phenomenon is also the existence of a vast and diversified religious tourism potential (monasteries, convents, churches etc.). Although the analyzed region is noticed due to the development of the climateric and balneary tourism, the religious tourism could contribute, in the future, to increase the number of tourists, as well as the economic growth. The study aims to analyze precisely this opportunity, unexplored enough, because the existing religious attractions, although known in the whole country, have not been included in the travel programs. An object of the paper is to make an assessment of the religious tourism potential in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians area, analyzing the ways and opportunities for the recovery and development of this potential, and also the perception of tourists on the religious attractions and the satisfaction degree for the offered services.

Key words Religion, religious tourism, tourist motivation, pilgrimage

JEL Codes: O12, Q26, R10, Z32

1. Introduction

The religious tourism is one of the oldest types of tourism and often involves, people travelling from a sense of duty than those traveling for pleasure and leisure (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2005). The religious spaces have become ones of the most popular destinations in the world, not only for believers, but also for other tourists. For the believers, these places can evoke strong feelings, while for the non-religious tourists; such places can satisfy some curiosity. Religion is an important part of the culture, closely related with many elements of people's lives (Poria *et al.*, 2003).

The religious journey is the oldest form of travel, since over 3,000 years ago (since the time of the Egyptian civilization), when masses of people were participating in the religious rituals. Later, during the years of the 1st and 2nd millennium, the religious travels have been synonymous, for a long time, with the pilgrimages to different locations (Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Canterbury, Jerusalem), which have become the top destinations of the religious trips in the past times (Simon *et al.*, 2009). Previously, the tourism caused by the religious, spiritual reasons or associated to the religious cultural heritage and the pilgrimages were seen as a largely domestic phenomenon (Stefko *et al.*, 2013; Kavouri and Katsoni, 2014). In the past 3 decades, the believers have changed their customs to spare money, preferring to buy tourism packages of a high quality of the products and services. The religious tourism in the 21st century does not evolve only pilgrimages or missionary travels; it also embraces other types of holidays, such as: pilgrimages, religious missions (missionary), religious cruises, conferences/conventions, Christian camps, volunteer vacations, holidays for students/youth (Wright, 2007).

The pilgrimage was defined as an external and internal journey that occurs for religious reasons, to a holy place, having spiritual purposes (Barber, 2003). The pilgrimages have political, economic, social and cultural implications, representing primary economic activities for some countries or cities (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

Currently, the studies show that the pilgrimages tend to turn into tourist activities, thus redefining the boundaries between a tourist and a pilgrim. Although tourism is a relatively new economic phenomenon, its roots are linked to the activities of pilgrimage activities (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The religious tourism is that form of tourism that capitalizes the religious edifices with spiritual implications.

In Romania, there are about 3,000 religious monuments, dating from the Middle Age and postmodern period, pointing out the influences of the Byzantine art and Western art. The UNESCO World Heritage in Romania includes in its list of religious monuments: the Saxon settlements with fortified churches in Transylvania, the Horezu Monastery, the churches of Moldavia, and the wooden churches of Maramureş (UNESCO-Romania). In the recent decades, there has been tried to exploit the Romanian values at the widest level, a great emphasis being put on the cultural – religious values. Between tourism and religion, there is an interaction, closely linked to the desire of tourists to relax. On the other hand, some people try to bring the importance of the faith and religious side to the front, which, in time, have moved away from this side.

We have chosen this study for this reason, because the individual wants to combine the moments of physical with those of mental rest, offered by the silence of the church and faith. In the recent years, it can be noticed, at national level, an

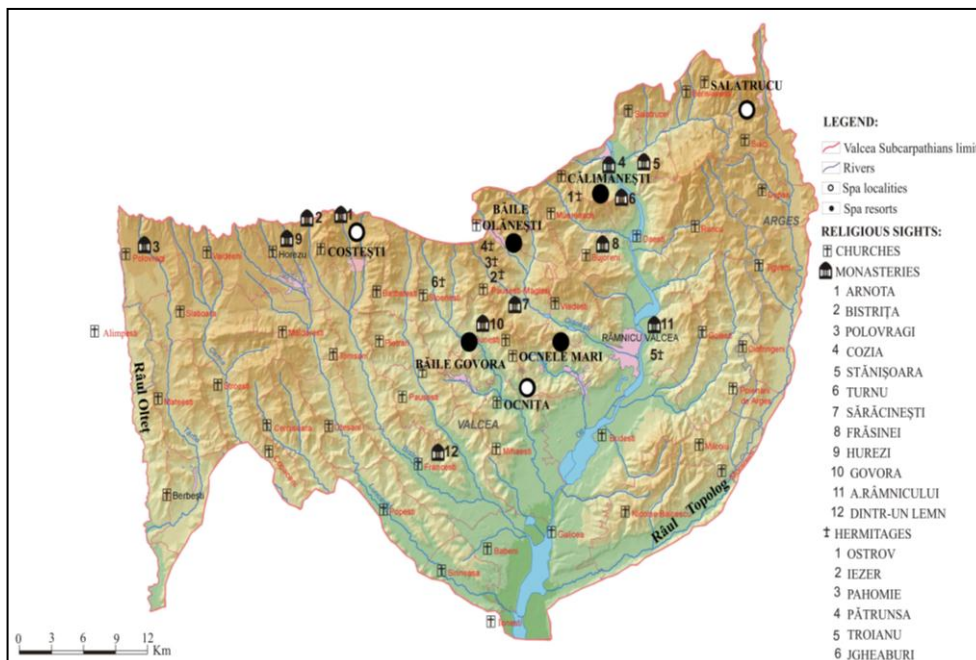
increase in this type of tourism development, the authorities wanting to promote it. Although today, the main way to promote is the church (through the existence of pilgrimages), another way can be the media, both the TV commercials, newspapers and especially the Internet, the travel agencies, the local authorities etc.

2. The religious potential of the Vâlcea Subcarpathians

The cultural sightseeing is significant for the analyzed region and the trend is towards the religious edifices in this region. The study region is characterized by a number of 50 communes and towns in the counties of Vâlcea, Argeş and Gorj, where at least one little church can be found.

The cultural heritage of the region is related to the Brâncoveanu style, architectural style also found in most of the Orthodox places of worship in the area. The religious heritage of the Vâlcea Subcarpathians consists of Christian Orthodox objectives, particularly complex. The maximum concentrations are mainly in the Northern and Central part, and overlap the localities: Băile Olăneşti, Băile Govora, Călimăneşti, Ocnele Mari and Costeşti (Figure 1), and among these religious objects, we have chosen to present, briefly, the most important ones. The *monasteries* are architectural ensembles, with religious and habitat purposes, but also with numerous and attractive tourist values derived from the age of the buildings, the architectural styles and the heritage value that they host.

The *Hurezi Monastery* (located at the Romanii de Jos) was built between 1691 and 1693 and it was initially called Huhurezu Monastery, founded by Costantin Brâncoveanu, nowadays, this monastery being under the protection of



UNESCO. This monastery was a large training center for copyists, grammars etc.

The painting school from Hurezu gave birth to the Brâncoveanu style, another representative element of the area (Bogan and Roman, 2013). The monastery church dedicated to "St. Constantine and Helen" was built in triconical plan, with ample porch in the West and a valuable iconostasis. In the church, there are also votive paintings of the royal families of Basarab, Cantacuzino and Brâncoveanu. They stand out by the expressiveness and artistic mastery of

drawing, color and paintings with religious themes made by the Greek painter - Constantinos (Câdea et al., 2012).

Figure 1. The distribution of the main religious objectives in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians

The monasteries on the Olt Valley attract tourists to another complicated world, the spiritual one. The *Turnu Monastery* – a monument of the eighteenth century was built in 1776, during the reign of Prince Duca (1673-1678), being built on the place of a much older church. The name comes from the Mount Turnu or the "Tower of Traian", a point reinforced since the Roman times. Even today, one can see traces of the old fort guarding the Roman road. The proof of the point guard tower is also demonstrated by the original name of the house "the monastery after the tower." The monastery is visited every year by a large number of tourists, representing a starting point for the Cozia Massive, on several marked and well-maintained trail" (Roangheş-Mureanu, 2012).

The *Cozia Monastery* was built between 1387 and 1388 by Mircea cel Bătrân and restored in 1517 by Neagoe Basarab. The painting was done in 1390-1391. Here lies the tomb of Mircea cel Bătrân and also a museum with religious objects. The Cozia Monastery Church retains the original form with century frescoes in the narthex from the 14-th century and from the 17-th century in the rest of the church. The *Stănişoara Monastery*, built at the Hermitage place in Nucet was raised at the monastery title by high monks in 1747. The monastery patron is St. George and the old church dates back to 1832 and was repainted in 1836.

Near Băile Govora, one can find the *Govora Monastery*, founded in the early fifteenth century, rebuilt by the rulers: Vlad Călugăru and Radu cel Mare (in the late fifteenth century), and then restored by Constantin Brâncoveanu in 1710-1711. Later, Matei Basarab installed a press, with which it will be printed the Rule of Govora in 1640. This is the oldest collection of laws printed in the Romanian Country.

The "*One Wood*" *Monastery* (at Frâncești), founded by Matei Basarab in 1635-1636, it is an interesting building made of rectangular beams, covered with shingles. In the courtyard of the monastery, there is a small church, being the original one and bearing the same name. The legend says that at its construction of the small church, the creator used the wood of a single tree, this being the meaning of the church.

The *Frăsinei Monastery* is a particularly objective, preserving an old painting from 1763, made by Teodor Zugravu (the old church). Women are not allowed to enter this monastery and meat is not cooked there. The *Arnota Monastery* where is buried the Prince Matei Basarab, is another religious masterpiece from the Vâlcea area.

Of great importance is the *Church of Ostrov from Călimănești*, which is dedicated to the Birth of Virgin Maria, this being founded by Neagoe Basarab and his wife - Despina (1518-1522). The building was made of river stones and bricks, being decorated only with icons. After 1980, the park that existed around the hermitage has disappeared, this being because of the Olt Valley hydro-electric dams. After this year, the island was raised by 6 m and the hermitage and park were rebuilt.

On the Cheia Valley, near the village Cheia from Băile Olănești, there was founded in 1559, the *Iezer Hermitage*, the works of this being completed in 1567-1568. The church collapsed in 1700, being rebuilt afterwards, while its bell tower was built between 1865 and 1870 and the cells were repaired, the last improvements being made in 1870 by the Râmnic and Argeș Episcopacy.

The *Pahomie Hermitage* is a monastic settlement located at the southern foot of the Buila – Vânturarița Mountains, under a limestones wall, overhanged, where a powerful spring comes out, being one of the most visited religious objectives. From the historic documents, it seems the hermitage was built in 1684, during Constantin Brâncoveanu's rule. The Justinian Patriarch rebuilt the hermitage, a church being built in 1956, similar to the original one, the church built in rock, having a water fall in the near area (Roangheș-Mureanu, 2012).

The *Surpatele Hermitage* built in early eighteenth century by Lady Maria, the wife of Constantin Brâncoveanu is located near Băile Govora. And *Cetățuia Hermitage* on the hill with the same name, in the northern part of Râmnicu Vâlcea, is included in this category of monuments, dating since 1677 and being restored between the years 1850 and 1853, the painting being done by Gh. Tătărescu. The Bradu Hermitage is found at Gurguiata, and was reconstructed in 1784, on the site of an old wooden hermitage dating from the early eighteenth century.

Among the great religious buildings, we must mention the Râmnic Diocese, an important place of worship in the region. Built in 1851, it was completed only in 1856, the wooden of the church being the original one and consists of the main church and the chapel, both being surrounded by high stone walls (Roangheș-Mureanu, 2012). These are some of the ecclesiastic assemblies, a complete list being published by the Ministry of Culture (<http://www.cultura.ro/lista-monumentelor-istorice>). All these buildings also preserve the graves of rulers (Cozia - the tomb of Mircea cel Bătrân, Arnota - the tomb of Matei Basarab), museums (Cozia, Arnota, Hurezi), or hold particularly important objects of worship and some relics.

The management of these destinations should ensure the sustainable development of the local economies and should respect the traditions and customs of the host populations (Királová and Straka, 2013). The strategic planning of the sacred places and events is essential for the sustainable development of the religious tourism in an area, especially if one takes into consideration the added complexity of these places and events where religion is similar to tourism (Ambrosio and Pereira, 2007).

3. Methodology of research

In order to determine the perception and satisfaction of visitors/tourists on the religious objectives, and the tourist services offered in the studied area, there has been submitted a questionnaire. The research was conducted between August-September 2015, on a sample of 150 people who visited the most representative religious objectives of the analyzed region. The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts. The first part consisted of general information about the age, sex, marital status and place of origin. Of those surveyed, 38% are male and 62% are female, and in terms of the age of respondents, the proportion is 12% under 20 years, 21% aged between 20 and 40 years, 48% between 40 and 60 years and 20% aged over 60 years. Regarding marital status, 55% are married, 6% are unmarried, 8% are divorced and 31% are widowed. The second part of the questionnaire aimed the religious nature of the visit, and the third aimed to determine the importance of promoting the existence of the religious tourism.

4. The perception of visitors on the religious objectives

Of the people questioned about the presence at the religious objective, 30% said they are tourists, 53% said they are in pilgrimage and 15% in transit (Figure 2). As about the distribution of the types of tourism for the study area, the results are as it follows: 52 % of respondents considered the *balneary tourism* to be representative, 18% voted for the *religious tourism*, 28% *did not know* to answer or what to answer, while 2% of the respondents voted for *other forms of tourism* (Figure 3).

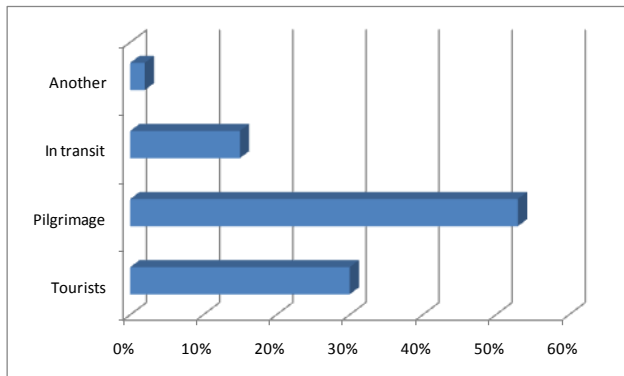


Figure 2. The purpose of the visit at the religious objective

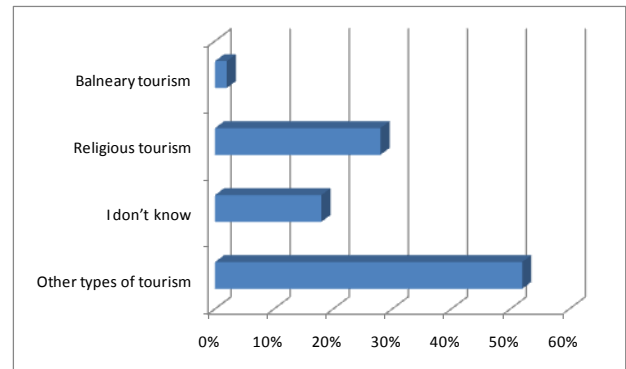


Figure 3. The perception of the types of tourism developed in the region

At the question *Do you consider that the Vâlcea Subcarpathians present a significant cultural – religious tourism from the tourist point of view?*, 86% of the respondents answered Yes, 11% answered No and 3% did not have any option.

At the question *Does this religious objective responds to your expectations?* 76% of respondents believe that yes, 19% - *do not know* how to respond or what to expect, and 5% *are not satisfied* (Figure 4). The latter respondents were asked to specify why they are not satisfied and the result of this solicitation stated that the respondents have been recommended these objectives as very beautiful and hospitable, which was not proved to be quite so because the rooms for rent were few in number and the accommodation was severe to the tourists unused to such conditions in a church. This percentage can also be seen in terms of the perception and satisfaction of the services quality (79% of respondents are satisfied, 15% do not know and 6% responded not satisfied) (Figure 5).

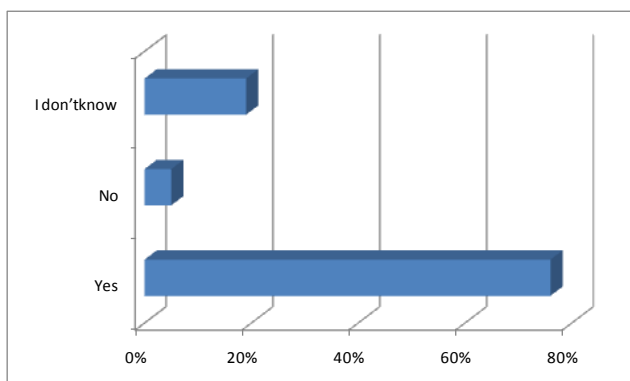


Figure 4. Does this religious objective respond to your expectations?

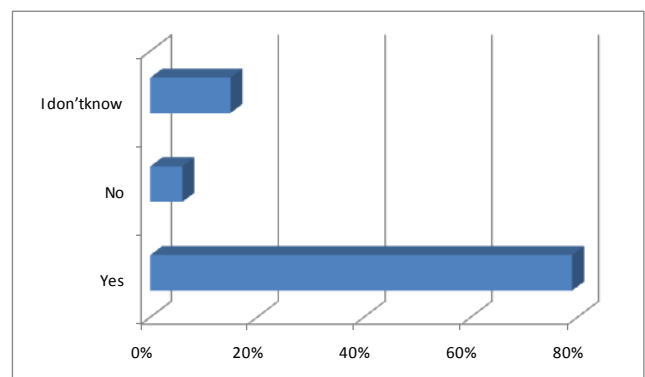


Figure 5. The perception on the services quality satisfaction

How often do you visit this objective? was a question to which the respondents reported a rate of 63% - 2 or 3 times a year, 25% - once a year and 12% - several times a year. At the question *How many days do you allocate for this stay/pilgrimage?*, 46% of the respondents granted 1 day, 39% granted 2-3 days and 15% said *more days* (Figure 6).

Another important aspect in the population determination of visiting the religious objectives may be the reason or the expectations they have when they visit such an objective. 43% of respondents believe that the peace of mind is important, and 48% of respondent believe that forgiveness is fundamental to God, 8% hope to rest and 1% came from other reasons.

The ways through which the respondents found these religious objectives are: the church - 42%, 19% - from acquaintances, 15% - from media, 16% - by chance and 8% from other sources (Figure 7).

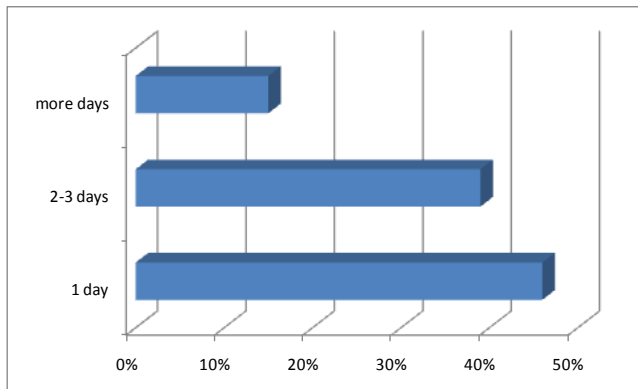


Figure 6. The number of the allocated days

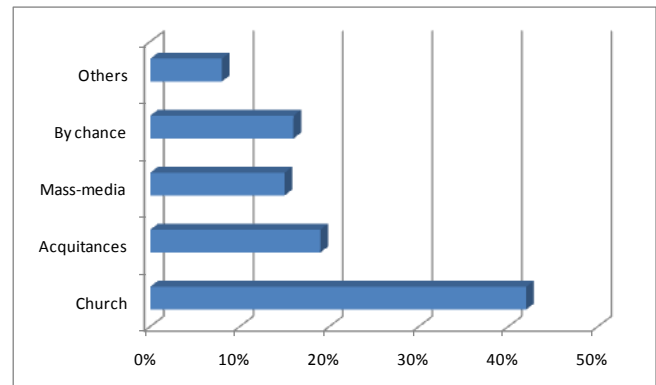


Figure 7. The ways of information about the existence of the religious objective

The necessity to promote the religious tourism in this region is pointed out by the positive responses of the respondents (86%), 10% of them do not consider it necessary, and 4% do not know or have no opinion on this question.

Regarding the method of promotion, 57% of respondents believe that through the media would be easier to find out the Romanian values, 41% maintain their perception that the church plays an important role and 2% state that they have no opinion.

As a result of the field study, at the level of the religious objectives, it can be appreciated their importance both for the locals and for the tourists, but especially for the authorities (either we talk about the Local and County Councils or about those churches, which would be able to attract a large number of believers and would increase their own revenues).

The religious promoting and communication has grown in Romania after 1989, unfortunately, this being achieved especially within the church and not within other ways which could attract a larger number of tourists. The need to promote the religious tourism emerges from the diversity of such objectives, but it is also driven by the desire for knowledge, cultivation of the human, while the pilgrimages and the religious tourism are included in this category: cultural tourism.

The methods of transmission of these religious messages and promoting the religious tourism are: television, radio programs, travel agencies, cultural and religious centers, internet etc. The press was and still is one of the ways to promote tourism. The press in Vâlcea focuses on the existence of various forms of tourism and is trying to bring into front the need for amplification and development of the services offered by the tourism activity. Through the Internet, there are promoted a number of religious objectives (monasteries, churches etc.), and how these might attract the highest attention among tourists.

The Local and County Councils also contribute to the promotion of the religious structures existing in the region. In the recent years, there have been developed a number of projects on the development and promotion of the religious tourism, such as: *Promoting the clerical tourism potential in the Municipality of Râmnicu Vâlcea* (for the period 2007-2013) and *The cultural religious tourism in the Olt and Vâlcea County* - both projects being funded by the Regional Operational Programme, priority 5 "The sustainable development and tourism promotion", Major field of intervention 5.3. "Promoting the tourism potential and creating the necessary infrastructure in order to increase Romania's attractiveness as a tourist destination." If the religious activities combined the tourist activities and those of promoting them in different ways, it could manage to attract a greater number of tourists in this area (religious tourism), and it could be a beneficial method of religious tourism development in Romania and also in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians.

5. Conclusions

The status of the representative religious objectives is mostly good, and this advantage must be exploited. Although there are concerns from the authorities, however, the higher promotion of the existence of such cultural - religious objectives and possibly of the traditions and events in each area are necessary etc.

The lack of implementing a strategy at regional level to promote the religious tourism through the valorization of the religious objectives, which, fortunately exist, but which, unfortunately, are not valued at their fair value, represents a mistake of the policy perspective of promoting Romania and the study area images, but also of the economic perspective.

Designing and implementing a realistic strategy for the religious tourism development is more than necessary, and the motivation can come from any area of the socio-economic domains.

In order to develop the religious tourism in the Vâlcea Subcarpathians, it is absolutely necessary the cooperation between the church, the local authorities, the NGO's and the government, cooperation after which a series of projects and legislations on tourism and media, a more effective promotion of the travel agencies should result. Thus, a functional development strategy will contribute decisively to the right exploitation of the religious objectives of the area, providing the funding for the restoration and preservation of these objectives, making possible the economic development of the area.

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