




GROȘI, MARAMUREȘ: AN ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

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ABSTRACT. In Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic determined the development of rural areas and consequently, the evolution of rural tourism, one of the most important contributors to sustainable tourism. The current study examines the rural tourism potential of a village in North-Western Transylvania (Romania), Groși. The main goal of this study is to evaluate the potential for sustainable growth by means of rural tourism in this commune. This assessment also considers the potential impact on the social and economic aspects of the destination, as well as the factors that could positively or negatively influence this entire process. The data was gathered using the survey-based inquiry. Therefore, a questionnaire including 32 questions, consisting of three parts in all, was developed. The first part included questions used by the researchers aimed to gather information regarding the respondents' orientation towards remote rural destinations. The second part of the questionnaire was designed with the end goal of establishing to what extent the respondents are familiar with the resources of Groși, respectively to assess to what extent the destination can benefit from the development of hospitality services. The last part of the survey

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enabled researchers to collect identification data regarding the 117 respondents of the self-implemented survey. The main conclusions of the study highlight that respondents are mostly pleased or very satisfied regarding rural tourism in the region under analysis. Among the benefits that certainly are to everyone's liking were found to be tranquility, beautiful landscapes, fresh air, important sights, and local gastronomy. In the end, the main disadvantages of the area and the opportunities of developing rural tourism in Groși commune are presented.

Keywords: rural tourism, sustainability, Groși, Maramureș County, COVID-19

JEL classification: L83, Z32, L80.

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Introduction and literature review

The global health crisis that was faced since the end of 2019 and continued to be faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the restrictions imposed by it, have a significant influence on all forms of tourism. Among the main forms, one may recall rural tourism, leisure tourism, cultural tourism, sports tourism (sports events), business tourism (professional meetings), commercial tourism (conferences, congresses, or business), religious tourism (seen as pilgrimages to various religious tourist attractions, but also as cultural activities involving religious sites), etc. From among these, rural tourism holds unquestionable advantages which minimize the risk of infection, i.e. reduced human interaction, low population density, unpolluted air, easy social distancing, and smaller lodgings. Particularly, in this context, Romania as a tourist destination, has the advantage of its main characteristics emphasized by the national tourism brand *Explore the Carpathian Garden!*. Thus, the stress falls on four aspects: the intact nature, the authenticity, the unique culture, and the safety of local destinations. While these features were initially identified with the purpose of focusing on international tourists visiting Romania who come from the nation's target markets, the new global health context has put national rural destinations on the maps of Romanian tourists as well. Moreover, researchers found that the personality of the brand should emphasize traits like goodness, purity, greenery, and innocence while highlighting the tourism brand's central ideals of spirituality and discovery, and a nice and simple life. As a result, Romania's differentiation features are related

to its untouched natural beauty, distinctive cultural history, and genuine rural lifestyle. Six types of tourism are prioritized to be further developed and promoted abroad: travel routes, rural travel, pristine environments and parks, wellness and beauty travel, action-packed travel, and city-breaks, capitalizing on four widely recognized features: authenticity, rurality, hospitality, and sustainability (MRDT, 2011; Coroș, 2015: 491-492; Ministry of Tourism, 2019).

Regardless of the form of tourism practiced by tourists, in most cases they are real threats to the environment, sustainable tourism being the only type of tourism able to provide a balance between visiting the sites and respecting nature and the environment. Basically, sustainable tourism mitigates for the reduction of pollution, the destruction of goods within tourist attractions and destinations but also for the reduction of the consumption of natural resources. In addition to the negative effects underlined, the authors can also highlight some positive ones, such as the generation of material resources for locals, the acceptance and tolerance of other cultures, and the existence of opportunities to discover new crafts, musical instruments, and to practice non-intrusive activities, etc. (Iorio & Corsale, 2010; Coroș & Gică, 2016). Sustainable tourism aims at long-term goals, with its main objectives being related to bringing to a minimum the degradation of the cultural heritage, of the natural environment, and of providing long-lasting opportunities for the growth of the economy at a local level. Under the umbrella of sustainable tourism in the countryside, rural tourism can be found.

Utilizing three coordinate systems: people, space, and products, numerous people are drawn to tourism in rural destinations and spaces that serve as recreational areas, and also guarantee cultural, spiritual and environmental development. This happens mainly because of the unique characteristics of the landscape, as well as due to the abundance of resources at a local level (Baldacchino, 2015). Additionally, the tourist is polarized in a preferential way by the usual locations of production in a certain area in order to understand local production methods and systems, learn about cuisine, discover material evidence (heritage sites, authentic buildings, etc.), to immerse themselves in the local culture (folk art, crafts, cuisine, etc.), and to access resources that define the concept of territorial identity (Matlovičová & Pompura, 2013). In the same line, Woods (2012) describes rural tourism as “touristic activities that are focused on the consumption of rural landscapes, artifacts, cultures, and experiences”. Like Haven-Tang & Jones (2012), Privitera et al., (2018) bring up the importance of the connection between culinary heritage, agricultural goods, and tourism which facilitate tourists’ involvement in local supply chains for food and beverages, enriching their rural experience but also their direct support of local development.

Rural tourism refers to a type of tourism that can undoubtedly enjoy sustainable development, and which creates a perfect balance by capitalizing

on the cultural heritage of destinations and by also ensuring the conservation of the natural environment. When rural tourism is discussed, one finds the idea of spending holidays in rural areas, an idea that includes the tourists' participation and immersion in various recreational and entertainment activities, the consumption of local products specific to the area, or the involvement in farm-specific activities, included under the umbrella of agritourism. The pandemic context has put a stronger emphasis on the importance of local development and consumption. Thus, rural destinations have gained a privileged position on the market. On one hand, due to the limitations regarding the free movement of people during lockdowns, they have understood that consuming local goods benefits both communities by enabling them to sell their products and end consumers, as they gain access to fresh and more affordable products.

Three key pillars are at the base of sustainable development in tourism. They are the environment, economy, and sociocultural development. All of them are highly dynamic and produce a direct impact on any destination's competitiveness (Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Lee & Jan, 2019).

Some of the most important categories of sustainable tourism as mentioned by Jugănaru et al. (2008) include tourism that is responsible, equitable, green, rural, and eco-friendly. Other researchers (Pan et al., 2018) outline under the concept of sustainability in the tourist industry future-oriented techniques including community-based tourism, ecotourism, rural tourism, historical tourism, and nature-based tourism.

The goal of sustainable tourism is to enhance destination sustainability by contributing directly to the enhancement of the local population's conditions of living and standards, by ensuring the thin balance between the safeguarding of natural resources, the environment, economic gains of the community, social justice, and cultural heritage conservation and valorization (Rodríguez Díaz & Espino Rodríguez, 2016).

As noted by Lane & Kastenholtz (2015) and Coroș (2020), during the 1970s, rural tourism gained popularity; furthermore, the same authors also focused on examining its development and growth in Romania. However, communist Romania failed to capitalize on the nation's rural heritage. It was only after 1989 that rural tourism truly began to develop in Romania. In fact, this only happened after the mid-1990s. Over the past nearly 30 years tourism-related activities in Romania's rural regions have increased significantly in many destinations. Several case studies covering various Romanian destinations have been elaborated on and presented in the literature dedicated to rural tourism. Some focused on the various destinations of Romania (Naghiu et al., 2005; Popescu et al., 2014; Bălan & Burghilea, 2015; Coroș, 2020; Coroș et al., 2021a; Coroș et al., 2021b), while others discussed the development of countryside lodgings

(Pop et al., 2019; Pop & Georgescu, 2020). Maramureș has been investigated by many scholars, with Muica & Turnock (1999) and Turnock (2002) being among the first to discuss its rural tourism potential, while Hall (2004) brought up the issue of sustainability in rural destinations. More recent studies have continued to discuss sustainability issues in Romanian rural tourism (Bran et al., 2010; Dorobanțu & Nistoreanu, 2012; Andrei et al., 2014; Matei (Titilina), 2015; Gică et al., 2021), and also in the case of Maramureș (Dezsi, et al., 2014).

Worldwide, and also in Romania, the orientation of tourists towards authentic experiences has become a post-COVID-19 trend. However, not many studies have yet captured this interest. Attempting to address this gap, Dobre et al. (2023) assessed the increased interest of Romanians towards rural tourism experiences and focused on the potential of authentic/vernacular rural tourism. Another increasing sector in terms of tourist demand is that of ecotourism, as a particular form of rural tourism. Thus, ecotourism destinations have started to be commonly visited in Romania. Viewed as a part of rural tourism, it makes sustainable contributions to the development of rural areas, and therefore of the local communities. Undoubtedly, this form of tourism has received the main impulse for its development at the national level and has been increasingly and constantly supported especially by the Romanian Ecotourism Association (AER). Ecotourism promotion publications (i.e. *Discover Eco-Romania yearly Catalogue*, *Discover Eco-Romania: 10 Destinations for Ecotourism, Wild Carpathians – Dare to explore*) in Romania have been concerned with promoting the main rural destinations, such as Marginimea Sibiului, Danube Delta area, Hațeg area, Dornelor area, Băile Tușnad area or Maramureș destination.

Mateoc-Sîrb et al. (2022) analyzed tourists' perceptions of Maramures tourist villages, i.e. Săpânța, Breb, Ieud, Giulești, Desești, Botiza, and Bârsana. Since tourists can appreciate both the positive and the negative aspects of a place, they revealed their desire to visit each time an ecological village built on sustainable principles where they can observe the unique way of life in the countryside and actively participate in rural activities. On the other hand, tourists appreciated most of all their experience in villages from Maramureș, considering it a memorable one. It can be pointed out that the advantages of Maramureș villages and their future business card are originality, naturalness, and distinctive local aspects.

Besides the Maramures area, among the most important regions of rural tourism in Romania presents more rural destinations, among which the most important ones are the following: Rucăr-Bran-Moeciu area, Bukovina, the Saxon villages, Transylvania, Mărginimea Sibiului, Szekler Land, the Danube Delta, and the renown Maramureș. Undoubtedly, Romanian rural tourism's focal point is its uniqueness, enriched by its well-preserved heritage, traditions, and cuisine.

Romania abounds in rural destinations, and among them, of particularly great interest are those located on the territory of Maramureș (Michelin, 2011). Located in the North-Western region of the country, this area separates Romania from Ukraine, it is a depression crossed by rivers, isolated by mountains. The destination is a genuine open-air museum known across borders. The county is rich in oak and fir forests. Due to the wood-based crafts and arts, it is also called the Land of Wood. The locals are skilled in the art of carving, and the masterpieces that have made the destination renowned are the wooden churches with sharp and high bell towers and also the carved gates. The landscapes of the area reflect the fact that the people of Maramureș have preserved ancient traditions and artisanal crafts. This is best drawn in the four valleys that form the historic Maramureș, i.e., Cosău, Iza, Mara, and Vișeu. These are the soul of the region, inheriting the customs, architecture, music, folk costumes, and traditions. There are almost 100 wooden churches in Maramureș, and the wood culture covers a larger area than the churches, with magnificent houses with steep roofs and carved porches. The high gates of the peasant households express the fact that the people from Maramureș own land and have a sense of self-respect that goes beyond material wealth.

The charm of this area is not only represented by the sceneries but also by the fact that despite the pressure of modernity, Maramureș has kept alive the old soul of Europe. The area is very rich in tourist attractions, local gastronomy, fresh air, and hospitable hosts. Its strength as a destination is the lifestyle of the village, which includes crafts, folk costumes, and especially, the traditions that tourists can take part in and build great memories, which in time, make them return to the area. Overall, Maramureș is among the most visited places in Romania, attracting both international and national visitors.

The current study examines the rural tourism potential of a village located in Maramureș, namely Groși. The village is located 7 km away from Baia Mare Municipality, in the Western-Central part of Maramureș County, on the road towards Târgu Lăpuș. The relief is represented by hill-specific forms in the Baia Mare depression, with a mountainous area. The commune of Groși comprises three villages: Groși, which is the residence of the commune, Ocoliș, and Satu Nou de Jos. In 1946 it became a parish. Groși village is a hospitable place full of traditions and history. From among the most relevant and well-known tourist attractions located in the village of Groși, the authors emphasize the Habra Monastery (located on the Harul Hill in Groși), the home of Dumitru Fărcaș (the one who brought the taragot/tároगतó to Romania for the first time and made it known all over the world; his memorial house is a place of pilgrimage for tourists), respectively the loft of the well-known taragot/tároगतó-player Dumitru Dobrican (Primăria Groși, 2023).

Given its rich cultural heritage, the authors consider that rural travel is bound to have a successful development in this rural area from Romania. Thus, the goal of this study is mainly to determine and assess rural tourism's potential to grow sustainably in Groși commune, while also considering any potential impact on the destination's social and economic life, as well as the elements that might have an influence on this entire process, either positively or negatively affecting it.

The subsequent sections of the paper are organized as follows: the second part describes in depth the employed research methodology, while the research findings are presented and discussed in the third one. Finally, the most important research findings are summarized in the last section of this paper.

Material and method

Aiming at understanding whether Romanian tourists acknowledge the rural tourism potential of the resources available in Groși given the new context brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the authors opted for the survey-based inquiry as a research method. Consequently, a questionnaire was developed; it comprised 32 questions and was composed of three parts in all. The first part consisted of questions by the means of which the researchers aimed at gathering information regarding the respondents' orientation towards remote rural destinations. The questionnaire's second part was thought of with the end goal of establishing to what extent the respondents are familiar with the resources of Groși, respectively to assess to what extent the destination could benefit from the development of hospitality services. The last part of the survey enabled the researchers to gather identification data about the 117 respondents.

Both structured and unstructured questions, open-ended questions, multiple-choice, Likert-scale and dichotomous questions were all employed. The questionnaire's length was taken into consideration when it was being developed, and the researchers made sure that the responses were as accurate as possible and could be gathered in a timely manner using a self-administered online survey tool. The research was conducted shortly after the 2020's spring declaration of the state of emergency and took more than four months to complete. The social-distancing measures imposed by the authorities made it impossible to directly interact with the respondents. Furthermore, given the context and the research topic, it was rather complicated to reach a larger number of respondents. The goal of the questionnaire-based research was measuring respondents' perceptions of potential holiday destination choices in this specific rural region as well as to identify the benefits and drawbacks of

Groși commune from a tourism viewpoint. Aiming at achieving valid responses, the sample members were randomly chosen.

Briefly, the analyzed sample's structure is further described. Out of all respondents, 62% of them are female and 38% are male. Regarding marital status, 73% are in a relationship or married, while 27% are single. The majority of those who completed the survey, 55% of respondents, do not have any children, while a quarter of them have one child, and 19% have two children. Only 1% of those surveyed have more than two children. In the case of the respondents who have children (45%) there is a clear agreement regarding the fact that destination choice is influenced by the age of their younger family members; thus, in most cases, when deciding upon holiday destinations, parents consider the comfort of the lodgings and also look for a multitude of activities for children to undertake on vacation, so as not to reach monotony. Almost a quarter of the respondents have grown-up children (over 18 years old), a fact that influences the average age of respondents. Further, among the children of the respondents, 10% are between the ages of 10 and 15. The youngest children are found in a percentage of 3% (children under 2 years), which certainly limits the choice of the parents in terms of holidays and travel for leisure tourism.

Another important aspect regards the respondents' behavior to travel individually or in groups. Thus, 67% of respondents choose to visit different tourist attractions in groups of up to four people. A larger gang is preferred by a quarter of respondents, namely, these are accompanied by about 5 people on a vacation. The study reveals that only 7% of the respondents choose to go in a group of more than 6 people, while only 1% travel unaccompanied. Most of the tourists often spend their holidays with their family and only 2% have no family or never go with their family on vacations. Regarding children, only a low percentage choose to spend the holidays without children, while regarding the group of friends, 15% of the individuals surveyed opt to travel on vacation with their pals often, and 10% of them rarely do so.

In terms of the respondents' age categories, 30% of the investigated persons are youngsters, aged between 24 and 35 years, and 29% are young active adults, between 46 and 55 years old. Another 7% aged less than 23 years. Furthermore, another 9% belong to the active adults' category (aged 56 to 65 years), and only 5% are seniors (over 65 years old). As other studies have shown, young people and younger generations prefer autonomous travel and isolated rural places, consequently, the research respondents' predominance of young sample members is not necessarily biased (Cozma et al., 2021). Most of the respondents are rather young and educated, thus, one may notice that such visitors opt for rural travel, stating certain plausible expectations, wants, and expectations about quality, particularly with regard to infrastructure and

telecommunications as well as hygiene. This is in fact a dynamic majority, which also has the capacity of revitalizing Romania's rural tourism.

Destination choice is also influenced by the respondents' occupation and revenues. The occupation and/or profession always define one's schedule and often set one's financial limits. For example, an entrepreneur or freelancer will apparently have much more freedom when making vacation plans. On the other hand, those who are employed in the private or public sectors must consider more limitations, related to the moment when they can take days off, this being not only their choice but in most cases a group decision, involving holiday scheduling for more employees. Nearly one-third of the respondents are employed in the private sector, while another 35% of them hold jobs in the public sector. Entrepreneurs, self-employed, and freelancers together represent a percentage of 18%. A small part is represented by students (both employed and unemployed categories), who only add up to 7%. Few of the respondents are retired (6%), and fortunately, only 1% are unemployed.

The majority, accounting for 78% of the respondents, have graduated at least undergraduate (55%) and post-graduate studies (23%), which presumably opens the horizons in terms of knowledge, expectations, and sophistication related to tourism. Only less than a quarter of the respondents are still undergraduate students or persons without graduate studies. Thus, the sample tends to consist of rather highly educated persons.

Another factor of influence is the residential environment. This is particularly important under the circumstances of the pandemic situation. Certainly, when living in a large city, the trend is to try to visit as many destinations as possible. In fact, more travel opportunities open up for people in larger cities, on the one hand, due to the presumably higher revenues and also due to the highly diversified offers provided by travel agencies and travel services providers. Moreover, the highly intense city life is also one of the triggering factors that determine the demand for remote and quiet destinations. The large majority of the respondents live in a large city (69%), followed by people living in smaller towns (24%), and in the countryside (7%). The majority of the respondents originate in Cluj County (around 65%), with many others living in other counties from Transylvania (Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Brașov, Hunedoara, Satu Mare, Sălaj, and Sibiu), respectively in other areas of Romania (București and Ilfov, Argeș, and Constanța), or even abroad (in Spain).

The respondents' financial situation at the moment of the investigation, revealed that 18% were earning less than 2,500 lei per month, 41% had revenues between 2,500 and 4,000 lei per month, 33% were gaining between 4,000 and 7,000 lei, respectively 8% were making earnings worth more than 7,000 lei per month. Overall, the respondents are representatives of the middle-

upper economic class, educated young active adults, with established families, living in Cluj County or in other Transylvanian areas, having well-paid jobs, and earnings above average.

Results and discussions

One of the initial findings concerns respondents' inclination with regards to certain types of holiday destinations. In order to better capture this aspect, a Likert-scaled question was inserted, ranging from very often (5) to never (1). Out of all respondents, most have opted for short-term trips in the country, anytime during the year, most of them opting to spend their spare time in a rural area rich in popular traditions in Romania (Figure 1). Next in the list of preferences follow the mountainous areas of Romania and the Romanian seaside. These results indicate positive perspectives for Romanian rural tourism development with local destinations being the most commonly chosen. A lower interest towards external destinations can also be noted.

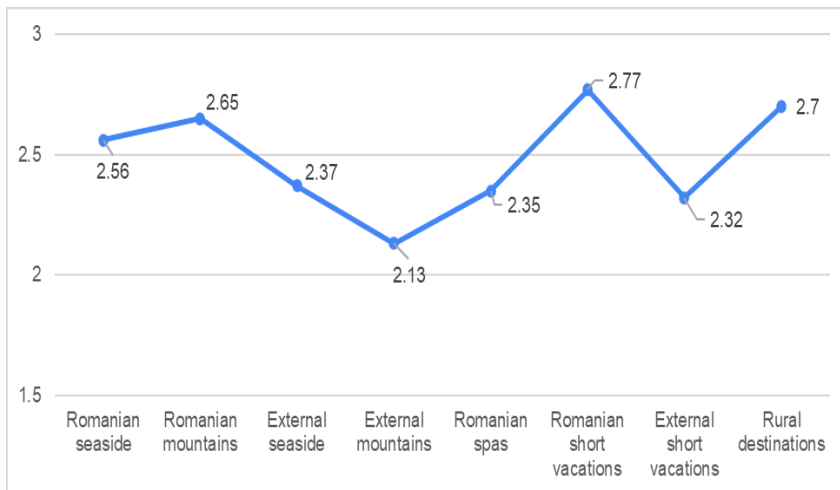


Figure 1. Holiday Destination Preference (Assessed on a 5-point Likert scale)
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

Another finding relates to the frequency of respondents' choice of rural and traditional tourist destinations in Romania over the past five years (Figure 2). Thus, from the total number of investigated persons, around 39% indicated the fact that they normally opt for rural and traditional areas 2-3 times annually,

while almost 23% have opted for such destinations at least once a year, nearly 25% do not at all opt for such destinations or have chosen one less than once a year; close to 9% have mentioned that they select these destinations more than 3 times annually.

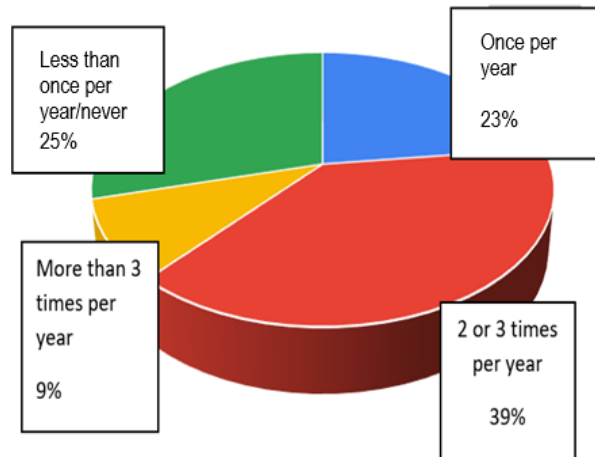


Figure 2. Orientation towards Romanian rural destinations over the past 5 years
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

When asked to analyze and indicate the most traditional Romanian destinations chosen over the most recent past 5 years, the interviewed individuals' answers point, without any doubt, towards their association of well-preserved heritage with the Maramureș region, which encompasses Groși commune (Figure 3a). Indeed, the County has many rural areas where traditions are still kept alive, and this differentiates it from the rest of the counties. Next in the respondents' list follow Bucovina and cumulated, other areas, well ranked in the top of areas rich in traditions, crafts, hiking, and pure mountain air. Mărginimea Sibiului and Transylvania have turned out to be the 3rd, respectively the 4th option but they have not been chosen that often by the interviewed people, even if they enjoy a similar richness in terms of areas abundant in traditions and traditional crafts.

Remarkable is the fact that Maramureș seems to have always been perceived as the destination managing to best preserve its heritage (Figure 3b). This indicates either greater notoriety of the destination among the respondents or a well-established brand image built exactly on the idea of heritage conservation and valorization.

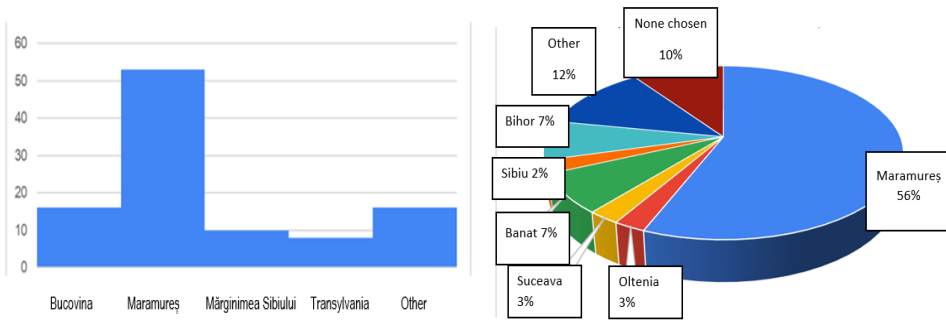


Figure 3. The destinations that best preserve traditions in the respondents' perception based on the destinations chosen over the past 5 years (a) and more than 5 years ago (b)
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

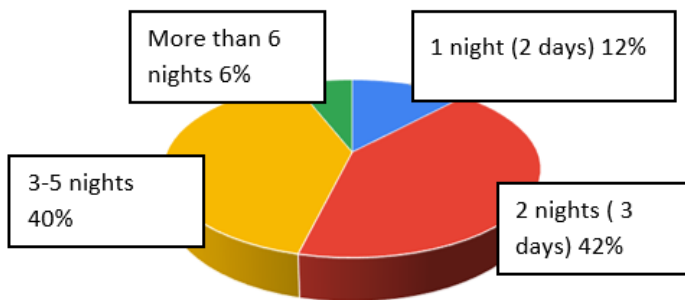


Figure 4. The average length of stay in rural destinations
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

As revealed by the data in Figure 4, the typical duration of stay in rural areas rich in traditions is relatively evenly split between short and longer stays. Therefore, out of all respondents, 42% had accommodated for a minimum of 2 nights during a holiday in such an area. These are the majority because most of Romania's population has a free weekend, so these short stays, most likely take place during the weekends. Overall, this is perhaps one of the main reasons why rural destinations face overcrowding. Another 40% have stayed longer, indicating breaks of 3 to 5 nights. This is, in fact, the most desired situation which can generate benefits for both established and emerging destinations, as during longer stays (of more than 3 nights) tourists get involved in more activities at local level, explore more locations and activities, thus contributing to local spending; implicitly, this also determines destinations to develop more amenities and to

diversify their offer. Trips of only one night, most probably transit tourism, are not necessarily a top choice of the respondents, registering only a percentage of 12%. At the same time, holidays involving longer stays, of more than 6 nights are, apparently, in most cases, either a luxury or something unrealizable, from different points of view, such as due to financial barriers, to the lack of available time but also due to the insufficiently diversified options at destination level.

Given the circumstances generated by the pandemic, the next question aimed at enabling the researchers the possibility of identifying the areas in which the respondents would be willing to spend their holidays. Furthermore, another goal was that of understanding what aspects are taken into consideration by the respondents when deciding on the next holiday destination (Figure 5).

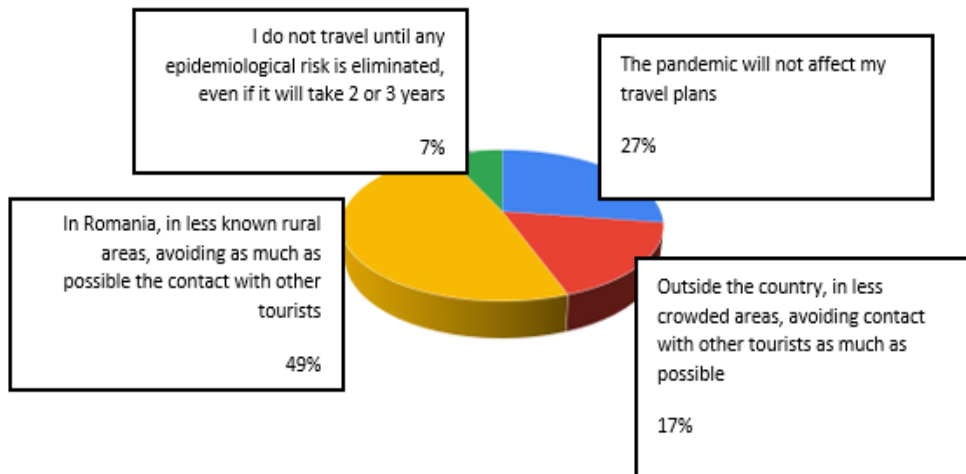


Figure 5. The impact of Covid-19 upon respondents' travel plans
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

Taking into account interviewed individuals' perception regarding the pandemic, 49% of them indicated that for the coming 2-3 years they would choose Romanian travel destinations, pointing towards a clear preference for less known rural areas, where they would be able to avoid as much as possible the contact with other tourists, maintaining the already adopted social distancing measures. If in the previous years, a large part of the Romanian tourists would have opted for a vacation in crowded places, in the new context, their orientation towards mass tourism destinations has clearly changed. With around 27% of the respondents declaring that they are immune to the effects generated by Covid-19 and their travel plans would not be affected, one may undersee a positive attitude towards traveling. However, the statement must also be regarded as

wishful thinking rather than fact, due to the lack of control among people relative to governmental and international travel policies and rules. Around 17% of the surveyed individuals would choose destinations outside the country, in less crowded areas, avoiding contact with other tourists as much as possible. At the time, vaccination was not yet available so it was unclear how travel policies would evolve, wherefrom the reluctance expressed by 7% of the respondents who would no longer want to travel until all epidemiologic risks would disappear, even if that would have lasted up to 3 years or more.

The research paper’s results depict that, in the event that they were to take a vacation during the Covid-19 epidemic, 27% of respondents would favor rural tourist sites over those located abroad. Further, almost 22% of the sample members were even categorical on this subject, while for 28% of them, the choice was somewhat indifferent. Only 13% indicated a categorical denial and pointed towards no intention of choosing a Romanian rural destination, but rather of orienting towards an external destination (Figure 6).

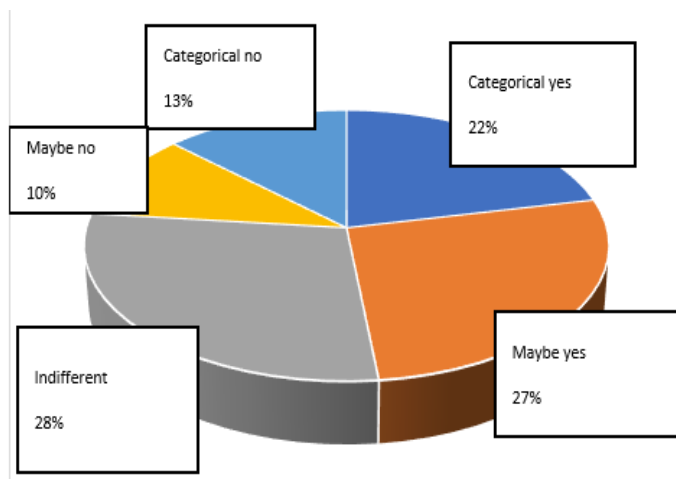


Figure 6. The influence of Covid-19 on the orientation towards Romanian rural destinations

Source: authors’ own processing based on survey data

When asked about the activities they prefer to get involved in when traveling to rural areas, most of the respondents indicated the following main triggering factors for rural destinations (Figure 7). By far the highest factor that determines destination choice is the quietness and tranquility of the destination.

It turns out that more than half of the respondents look for destinations that feature relaxation opportunities, away from the noise and city life typical agitation. Next, they indicate curiosity, which is associated with gaining knowledge related to both traditions and crafts. Fortunately, Maramureș is one of the top destinations in this respect, with many lodgings and hospitable hosts who involve tourists in various activities of this kind. Of high interest are other activities, too. Among these, spending time outdoors and relaxing in the fresh air, practicing hiking and tracking, respectively enjoying local gastronomy. Given the still developing infrastructure, bicycle riding is at the end of the preferences but gaining interest. In the pandemic context, the shift away from mass tourism destinations becomes obvious. One may conclude that the respondents are quite eager to opt for holiday destinations in the fresh air, seeking relaxation opportunities that also facilitate cultural enrichment.

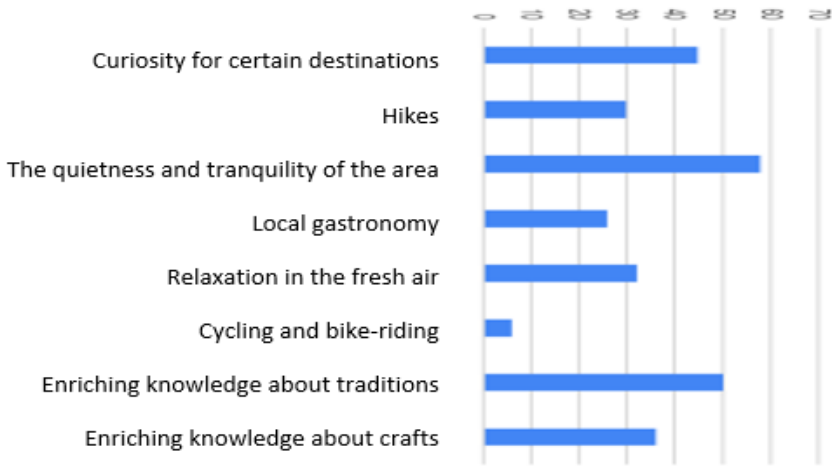


Figure 7. Respondents' preferred activities in rural destinations
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

Not surprisingly, the feature that the respondents appreciate most is the destination's peacefulness and tranquility, looked for and found in the various rural areas they had visited. Hospitality is also a key factor, with many respondents declaring that they enjoyed and appreciated the hospitality of their hosts, considering their interactions to have been qualitative ones. This is also in line with the typology of the lodgings in most destinations of Maramureș and with the orientation of the tourists towards small and remote facilities. The hosts' hospitality can also be regarded from the perspective of the supplied amenities

and goods. The novelty of the places fascinates other respondents. Among the most appreciated aspects is also the conservation and featuring of folk arts and crafts. Next in line come the host, the local gastronomy, and the beautiful and varied landscapes. The quality of the accommodation facilities and that of the hiking trails appear among the least appreciated factors as indicated by the tourists.

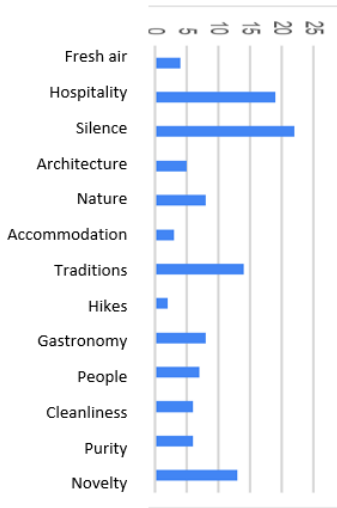


Figure 8. What respondents appreciated in the visited rural destinations
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

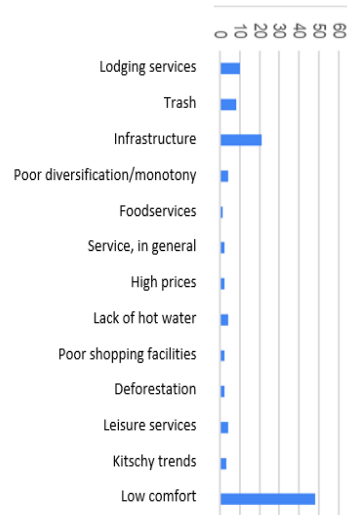


Figure 9. What respondents disliked in the visited rural destinations
Source: authors' own processing based on survey data

When asked to refer to the less pleasant elements recalled relative to their previous holidays in rural areas, the respondents found the low level of comfort to be the most disturbing one. This low level of comfort must be further discussed from various perspectives. A gap may exist between the expectations of the tourists and the provided services; in fact, some tourists might expect upper-scale hotel services in rural destinations, which is rather an unrealistic expectation. However, hosts should also understand that preserving authenticity can be also done with increased care for the provided sanitary services (with a focus on modern and tidy bathroom facilities, quality toiletries, and towels) and also of lodging services (cases in which, tourists mainly focus on the quality of the mattresses, pillows, and blankets, on the tidiness of the bedsheets, and overall, practical, and nice room amenities); kitchen facilities also need to be properly prepared in order to please those tourists oriented towards self-catering services.

Furthermore, destination infrastructure can and must be improved, falling under the responsibility of the public authorities. One of the most disturbing elements pointed towards by tourists is waste management and the presence of trash at destination level. Again, an area that clearly needs coherent public policies, solutions, and law enforcement. Gastronomy was also mentioned as a less-appreciated fact by some respondents. An already acknowledged weakness of many Romanian rural destinations is the poor diversification of leisure services and destination-based amenities. The missing souvenir shops and the poor shopping facilities are also a drawback indicated by some respondents. These are all areas that impose the intervention and involvement of both the public and private sectors. Given the Covid-19 worldwide epidemic, the lack of access to basic products was perceived as an important negative aspect by those tourists oriented towards self-catering services.

Overall, the very large majority of the respondents express a very good (49%) and good (48%) opinion relative to their previous rural experiences and indicate high trust in such Romanian destinations and openness towards novel rural tourism sites. Only very few (3%) dislike rural sites and do not (re)consider them. The same respondents were also asked to mention whether under normal travel conditions, they would or not opt for Romanian rural destinations. Again, the large majority indicated their preference for national rural destinations (61%), followed by those who would split their vacation and have one abroad and one in Romania (31%), and leaving only a low percent (8%) of the respondents to clearly chose international destinations if possible. Furthermore, Maramureș enjoys the leading position as preferred destination (47%), being followed by Transylvania (22%), Bucovina (16%), Moldova and Dobrogea (6%, each), and other (3%).

When asked about how much they would be willing to spend for a night (2-days stay) in a Romanian rural destination, the respondents indicated in average 330 lei per night for a double room, respectively a total of 1,307 lei for a 5-night stay in a double room. These amounts are consistent with the prices at the moment of the survey, indicating a realistic perception among the respondents and an orientation towards mid-upper scale small lodgings.

The next part of the survey aimed at assessing the notoriety of Groși as a destination and its capacity to develop into an attractive tourist destination among the surveyed respondents.

Unfortunately, however expected, a very high percentage (76%) of the respondents proved to be unfamiliar with Groși commune from Maramureș County. Perhaps, the main reason is its absolute lack of notoriety and the total absence of any promotional efforts both from a tourism and cultural perspective. In this regard, certain actions can be undertaken by the local authorities aiming at attracting more visitors and, thus, increasing the local economy and reducing

the unemployment rate of the settlement. Some of the directions to be developed include the development, implementation, and advertisement of a program designed to educate and inspire travelers to visit this location, making it more attractive and bringing up-front the local heritage, particularly the quality folk music that makes this place special.

Furthermore, looking through the lens of a tourist, the most important aspects that could contribute to the attractiveness of the commune include the development of local folk festivals, along with the growth of accommodation and of food services, all supported by appropriate infrastructure and by the notoriety building and destination promotion. The effort is worth as the gains of the destination are translated into attracting educated tourists who are willing and can afford to spend higher budgets in rural destinations, which they highly appreciate.

On the other hand, a small interview was also realized with some persons who are familiar with the resources of Groși aiming at a better understanding and assessment of the commune's resources and potential. The aspects that best describe Groși are the rich folklore hearth, the clean air, and the tranquility of the community, which by no means faces over-tourism. Folkloric festivals should be organized with the involvement of the locals in hosting participants and in providing unique cultural interactions, by immersion in various local traditional and agritourism activities. An example of such a festival that creates beautiful relations between tourists and hosts can be found in the case of Sâncraiu, Cluj County.

As for the tranquility and fresh air, they can be harnessed through lodge-type accommodations in hilly areas with beautiful views or by organizing trekking activities to enjoy nature and its richness in the surrounding areas. Aiming at proposing various solutions in order to make the commune more attractive, the respondents were asked what they would improve to add value to the commune. They unanimously indicated the need to promote the commune's cultural heritage but also the need to develop lodging and foodservice units. By means of events, the traditions and the folklore hearth would be brought before the tourists and thus the commune would gain positive notoriety and would eventually become attractive as a tourist destination.

Another identified advantage of the commune is its location, which enables the visiting of many objectives in the area, but also an easy access to get to the municipality of Baia Mare and of spending the night out in the city and enjoying city life. Finally, the tourist attractions concentrated in this area represent another advantage. Fortunately, quietness and cleanliness are also points that attract tourists in destination choice. The hospitality of the hosts is another important aspect. Traditions such as Christmas caroling, the cornflower, the "Danțul la Șură" are small pastimes of the locals that can immerse visitors into the authentic atmosphere and create great experience-based tourism activities.

Conclusions

The present paper reinforces the existing literature, which highlights that among the increasingly central forms of tourism in Romania nowadays is rural tourism. Fortunately, almost all respondents (97%) have a positive impression of the rural touristic areas that exist in our country. The feedback of these respondents is relevant in our analysis and can be used constructively to improve the less pleasant or less developed aspects in any rural touristic destination in Romania.

Most of the respondents turned out to be interested in discovering the local cultural and natural attractions, in discovering the local gastronomy, but also spending time outdoors, cycling, and going hiking. Overall, tranquility and destination peacefulness and quietness, along with its fresh air are the most important triggering factors of Romanian rural tourists.

This research highlights the opportunity that the rise of rural tourism represents in Maramureș county, in the Groși commune. This is a great place to spend one's vacation, because there is a lot of tranquility, beautiful landscapes, fresh air, important sights, and local gastronomy is most probable main goal of our study. On the other hand, creating opportunities in this parish is relevant, as it opens tourists' horizons to ideas that help in the development of Groși parish. From among the opportunities that can create feelings of belonging to tourists in the sphere of the commune of Groși, cultural and folklore events ought to be emphasized.

Obviously, the Coronavirus pandemic influences Romanians' decisions regarding tourist destinations. An interesting finding of our study is that over 50% of the individuals surveyed will choose a traditional Romanian village for their future vacation, which is a real advantage for the Romanian hospital industry affected very much nowadays. Nevertheless, 31% of the respondents chose the middle way, namely, they want to share their vacation between Romanian villages and abroad. Fortunately, only 8% of respondents will want to go on holiday abroad, which again, is an advantage for Romania's hospitality industry.

The present research highlights that the shortcomings of the travel industry in the Groși parish are exemplified by the subsequent main disadvantages: lack of promotion of this touristic area and the existence of promotion of other similar areas in the Maramureș county. Obviously, with various marketing and promotion strategies, this threat can also be mitigated, and promotion can also become a strength of the municipality of Groși.

Unfortunately, in the village of Groși there are no official accommodations, such as hostels, motels, or cottages for rent, but the villagers are always eager and hospitable, so the tourists who announce themselves are always welcome and treated with the utmost respect and friendship by the hosts.

In conclusion, around all these sights, village histories, customs, crafts, and dates can create many tourist packages, which would certainly be very appreciated by visitors.

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