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## RESEARCH ON THE PLACE AND ROLE OF TOURISM IN THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE BANAT MOUNTAINS, CARAȘ-SEVERIN COUNTY

### ABSTRACT

In the paper we aimed to carry out comparative research on the general state of tourism in Romania, in the mountainous Banat and some Balkan countries, from which it results that Romania is far below the level of competing countries in terms of tourism development. There are many reasons for this situation, out of which two are decisive: the absence of a national strategy for the medium and long-term development of Romanian tourism and the absence of tourism among the development priorities of the Romanian economy branches, even though Romania's natural tourism offer is exceptional. In addition to these two determining causes, there is a poor state of infrastructure of all kinds and, what is more unfavourable, an extremely weak and ineffective promotion of Romanian tourism at national and, above all, international level, as well as the existence of a large number of ecological problems and touristic sites left in ruins, all of which are detrimental to the development of mountain tourism. The removal of causes that generate the current state of tourism in Romania and in the Banat Mountains of Caraș-Severin County might be the main way of local development.

**Keywords:** mountain tourism, rural tourism, rural development, tourism strategy, tourism promotion.

JEL Classification: Q01, R10, L83.

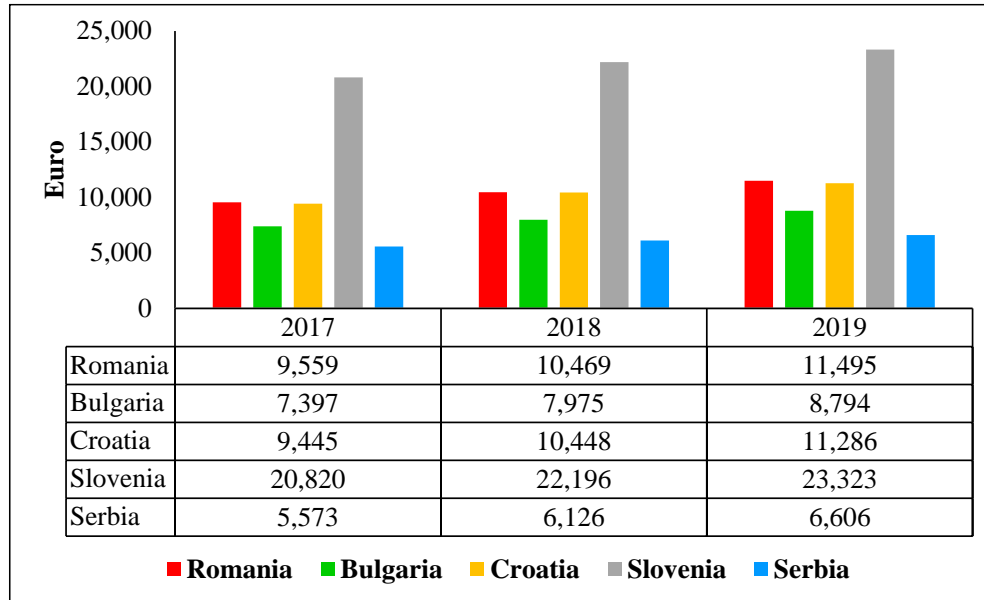
### 1. INTRODUCTION

The economic and social development of a county, including tourism, is strictly linked to the general economic development and evolution of Romania, both in a national and regional or international context. In order to position, as correctly as possible, the contribution of tourism to the rural development of the mountain area of Caraș-Severin county, Romania's general economic situation, including tourism, in comparison with neighbouring countries and, at the same time, competitors in terms of tourism: Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia, is presented below.

In the regional context, Romania, in terms of overall economic development<sup>1</sup> (GDP/-capita), ranks second after Slovenia, on a par with Croatia (that joined the

<sup>1</sup> All economic data from national and European (Eurostat) statistical sources are from before the Covid crisis (2020–2021).

EU later than Romania) and above the development level of Bulgaria and Serbia (Figure 1).



Source: Eurostat, NIS.

Figure 1. Gross Domestic Product *per capita* (euros).

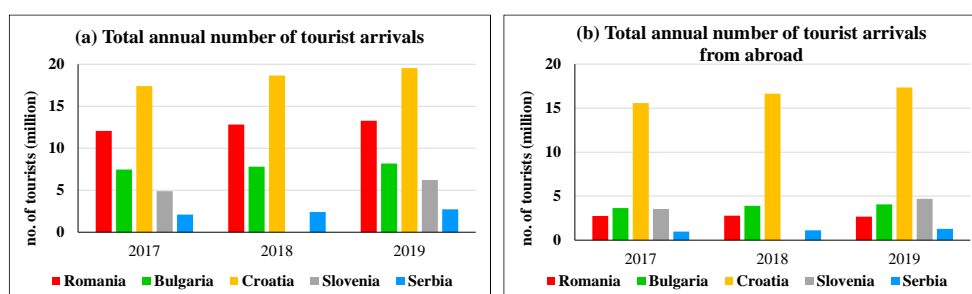
A mountainous county, such as Caraş-Severin, with an exceptional natural tourism potential, has the chance of real rural tourism development only under the conditions of a strong economy and an infrastructure that facilitates and supports tourism activity. In turn, tourism, as an economic activity generating jobs and new added value, must contribute, through feedback, to the overall economic development of the county.

From an economic and social point of view, in Caraş-Severin county, unfortunately, the vicious economic cycle has manifested itself with a maximum negative effect: *poorly developed economy* → *economic underemployment* → *even more poorly developed economy* →...etc.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The national tourism activity of the five countries is presented, at first, by several indicators: a) total annual tourist arrivals (Figure 2a); b) total annual tourist arrivals from abroad (Figure 2b); and c) share of international arrivals in total arrivals (Table 1).

Among the five analysed countries, Slovenia shows the highest number of tourist arrivals (from 17.41 to 19.55 million in 2017–2019), followed by Romania (from 12.06 to 13.28 million in the same period) (Figure 2a). On the other hand, the image changes significantly when analysing the second indicator, tourist arrivals from abroad: while Croatia shows again the highest values (from 15.58 to 17.35 million in 2017–2019), Romania ranks penultimate (from 2.67 to 2.79 million in the same period) (Figure 2b).



Source: Eurostat, Romanian National Institute of Statistics (NIS).

Figure 2. Tourist arrivals – total annual number (million).

When looking at the share of tourist arrivals from abroad in total tourist arrivals, one can notice that Croatia shows the highest shares (about 89%), followed closely by Slovenia (more than 72%), while Romania comes last (less than 23%) (Table 1).

Table 1

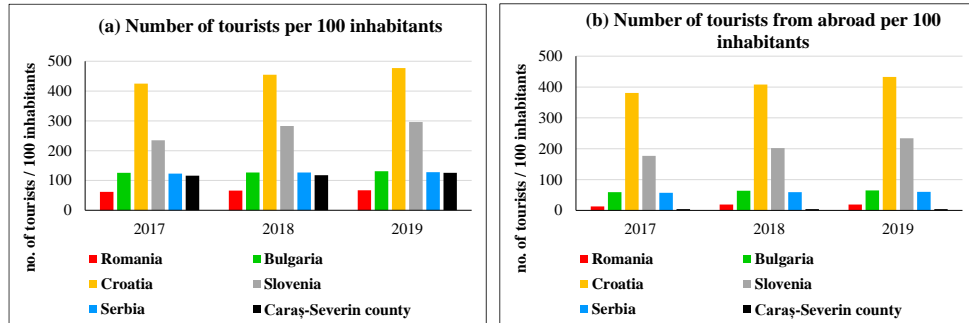
Share of tourist arrivals from abroad in total tourist arrivals (%)

Country	2017	2018	2019
Romania	22.8	21.7	20.1
Bulgaria	49.0	50.1	49.7
Croatia	89.5	89.2	88.7
Slovenia	72.4	n.a.	75.5
Serbia	46.4	46.8	46.9

Note: n.a. = not available.

Source: calculations based on Eurostat and NIS data.

In order to determine the intensity of tourism in each of the analysed countries, (as well as in Caraş-Severin county), the following indicators were calculated: a) the number of incoming tourists per 100 inhabitants (Figure 3a) and b) of which from abroad (Figure 3b).

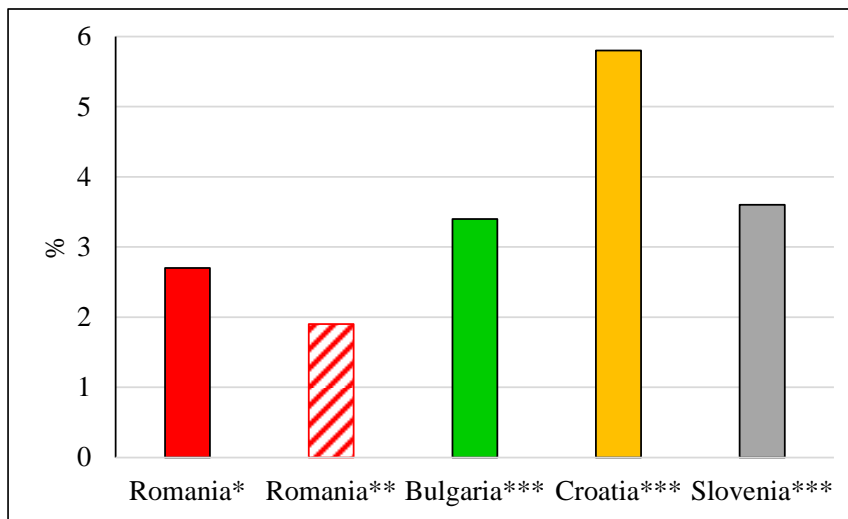


Source: calculations based on Eurostat and NIS data.

Figure 3. Number of tourists per 100 inhabitants.

The indicator ‘number of tourists per 100 inhabitants’ shows close values for Bulgaria, Serbia and Caraș-Severin county, almost double as compared to Romania (Figure 3a). The second indicator, ‘number of tourists from abroad per 100 inhabitants’ shows the very low inflow of tourists from abroad in Romania and in Caraș-Severin county.

Using the Eurostat and NIS data on ‘number of overnight stays’ and ‘standard price of a tourist night’, the indicator ‘contribution of tourism to GDP’ (tourism receipts) was calculated for Romania (Figure 4).



Source: \*NIS; \*\*author's calculations; \*\*\*Eurostat.

Figure 4. Share of tourism in GDP (2019).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Caraş-Severin county has an area of 851,976 km<sup>2</sup>, being, from this point of view, among the largest counties in the country, ranking third, after Timiș county (869,665 km<sup>2</sup>) and Suceava county (855,350 km<sup>2</sup>). Geographically, Caraş-Severin county is the “most mountainous” county in Romania, with more than 80% of its area falling within the mountainous area, according to the classification regulations of local authorities for mountainous areas. The mountainous structure of the county, granted by the mountain massifs, most of them of medium and low altitudes (Semenic, Muntele Mic, Almăjului Mountains, Locvei Mountains, etc.) and their mineral wealth have favoured, over time, a complex economic development in mining, metallurgy, steel, fruit growing, agropastoralism, and particularly tourism.

On the other hand, Caraş-Severin county, in terms of population, is among the least inhabited counties, with 275,181 inhabitants (NIS data, 2019), ranking 36<sup>th</sup> in the country. Regarding the population density (inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>), it ranks last in the country: 32.2, as compared to 80.7 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> in Timiș county or to 79.7 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, the national average).

Massive structural changes in the county’s economy (predominantly industrial, but largely single-industry before 1990) have caused significant reductions in the employed population: consequently Caraş-Severin county has one of the lowest employment rates, together with one of the highest shares of unemployed and retired people in the country. At the same time, Caraş-Severin county “exports” the highest number of young and middle-aged women for home care services and housekeeping in Austria, Italy, Germany, etc. As a result, one of the most negative social phenomena arises: the second highest level of school dropouts in the country (3.4%), due to the fact that children are left in relatives’ care while their parents are working abroad.

The active population of the county, according to statistical data provided by NIS, has the following structure: agriculture, forestry & fisheries 28%; industry 24%; administration, health & education 12.5%; trade 12.0%; services 8%; constructions 7%; transport-warehousing 6%; *tourism, hotels & restaurants* 2.5%. The extremely high proportion of the population employed in agriculture (for a non-agricultural county such as Caraş-Severin), almost one third of the county’s active population, is questionable, in the author’s view, given the mainly subsistence and semi-subsistence character of the county’s agriculture.

In Caraş-Severin county, according to the latest statistical data (NIS, 2019), the number of employees is 54,400, i.e., 19.8% of the total population of the county, and 70.0% of the active population (77,700 employees + declared farmers). A simple calculation shows that the working population (wage earners and declared farmers) represents only 28.3% of the total population of the county (275.2 thousand inhabitants), although the potential working population of the county is 150.2 thousand inhabitants (54.5%, between school age and retirement age).

From these data, an alarming demographic-employment conclusion emerges for Caraş-Severin county, as it has one of the lowest employment indicators in economic and social activities.

Another worrying demographic phenomenon for the county's overall economy is *depopulation*, both urban and, especially, rural. Since Romania's accession to the EU in 2007, the county's population has declined both through migration (mainly external), and naturally, by 70,700 inhabitants (from 346.9 thousand in 2007 down to 275.2 thousand in 2021).

The causes of this negative demographic phenomenon are many, but mainly the particularly low level of general economic development, due to the absence of a strategy in line with the county's potential, determined by a precarious economic and social reconversion and, above all, the existence of successive county administrations (in almost all mandates after 1990) of poor quality in all aspects: conception, involvement, concern, cooperation and collaboration with central and local authorities, etc.

The place of Caraş-Severin county in the Romanian economy and its level of economic development – with special reference to the development of tourism – are presented through the following synthetic economic indicators: county GDP, GDP/inhabitant, foreign investments and county exports for the period 2017–2019, in national and regional context (Caraş-Severin county is part of Vest Development Region, RO422 at NUTS III level).

In terms of general economic development (GDP, GDP/capita, turnover, profit, foreign investment, export), Caraş-Severin county is among the least developed counties in the country (ranking 30<sup>th</sup> out of 42 counties) and it is on the last place among the counties of the Vest Development Region, although in the inter-war period it was among the top three industrialised counties in the country, and before 1989, due to industrial activity, it was among the top 10 counties in the country.

In terms of gross domestic product per inhabitant, the main synthetic economic indicator that expresses performance, average productivity of the employed population, Caraş-Severin county ranks 21<sup>st</sup> among the Romanian counties, with EUR 8,873 million, as compared to EUR 10,666 million the national average or to EUR 15,344 million in Timiş county (NIS, 2019) (Table 2).

The poor economic position of Caraş-Severin county can be explained by the extremely poor economic and social reconversion after 1990, the lack of attractiveness for both Romanian and foreign investors, and the low contribution of the county's economy to Romanian exports; all these negative economic results have been generated, for the most part and in all mandates, by a political administration of poor quality and morality.

A county such as Caraş-Severin, with such a high range of natural resources (wealth) and an exceptional tourist offer, attracts negligible amounts of foreign investment, about EUR 200 million / year, that is ten times less than the national average (EUR 1,965 million /year), and also very low as compared to EUR 4,386 million /year in the neighbouring Timiş county, 2019 data).

As regards the *annual export of goods*, Caraş-Severin county ranks 30<sup>th</sup> among the Romanian counties. In the year 2019, it exported products worth EUR 360 million as compared to EUR 6,226 million by Timiş county or EUR 1,643 million, the national average.

Among the four counties in the Vest Development Region, Caraş-Severin county is at the lowest level in all economic indicators (Table 2, Table 3).

Table 2

Ranking of Caraş-Severin county in all Romanian counties by main indicators (2019)

County indicator	Top two counties in Romania		Caraş-Severin county	Last two counties in Romania	
	First	Second		Penultimate	Last
Area <i>km<sup>2</sup></i>	Timiş (869,665)	Suceava (855,350)	Rank 3 (851,976)	Giurgiu (352,602)	Ilfov (158,328)
Population <i>(no. of persons)</i>	Iaşi (792,131)	Prahova (725,515)	Rank 36 (275,181)	Covasna (203,504)	Tulcea (195,626)
GDP <i>(EUR million)</i>	Cluj (11,641)	Timiş (10,822)	Rank 30 (2,408)	Covasna (1,742)	Giurgiu (4,841)
GDP / capita <i>(EUR)</i>	Cluj (16,466)	Timiş (15,344)	Rank 21 (7,866)	Botoşani (6,182)	Vaslui (5,433)
Foreign Direct Investment <i>(EUR million)</i>	Ilfov (5,188)	Timiş (4,386)	Rank 30 (196)	Mehedinţi (19)	Gorj (3)
Annual exports of goods <i>(EUR million)</i>	Timiş (7,307)	Argeş (6,226)	Rank 30 (360)	Giurgiu (73)	Gorj (68)

Source: NIS.

Table 3

Main indicators of counties in Vest Development Region

Indicator	County	2017	2018	2019	Rank among Romanian counties (2019)
GDP (EUR million)	Caraş-Severin	2,087	2,164	2,408	13
	Hunedoara	2,964	3,236	8,671	21
	Arad	4,128	4,539	5,055	30
	Timiş	8,525	9,615	10,822	41
(GDP/capita EUR)	Caraş-Severin	7,478	7,866	8,873	22
	Hunedoara	7,550	8,328	9,564	30
	Arad	9,782	10,830	12,114	34
	Timiş	12,209	13,707	15,344	41

Source: NIS.

Table 4

Main economic indicators of the county companies

County	Turnover (EUR million)	Profit (EUR million)	Turnover per employee (EUR)	Profit per employee (EUR)
Caraş-Severin	1,442	116	47,183	3,786
Hunedoara	771	220	44,089	3,507
Arad	6,814	465	75,994	5,166
Timiş	16,335	1,221	76,695	5,730

Source: NIS.

The economic and social situation of Caraş-Severin county, seen in a national context, as well as the general economic situation of Romania, analysed in a South-European regional context, lead us to a conclusion that calls for a deeper analysis of the causes of the precariousness of Romanian tourism, in general, and that of Caraş-Severin county, in particular.

Comparative data (pre-pandemic data, 2017–2018–2019) of South-Eastern European countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia) show that Romania's overall tourism activity (qualitative and quantitative) is far below the level of neighbouring competitor countries, as well as below the natural potential offered by our country. Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia have much smaller areas and populations than Romania, and Bulgaria and Croatia have a GDP per capita below that of Romania. Despite that, as compared to Romania, Croatia has a tourism intensity (measured in annual number of tourist arrivals from abroad) 6.5 times higher, Slovenia 1.8 times and Bulgaria 1.5 times higher (Figure 2b). Even Serbia, a non-EU country, which was left landlocked after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, has a tourism intensity indicator (share of tourist arrivals from abroad in total arrivals) well above Romania's level.

For the same indicator, in Romania, there is an extremely high county dispersion. Based on the tourism intensity data presented above, Figure 5 shows a map of the zonal tourism development in Romania. Its main features are as follows:

- **The Danube area** (with the exception of Caraş-Severin and Tulcea counties) show extremely low tourism activities in Teleorman county (3.4 tourists per 100 inhabitants), while counties such as Olt, Călăraşi, Giurgiu, Ialomiţa, Dolj, Galaţi and Brăila show an average of less than 15 tourists per 100 inhabitants. Although the tourist potential of the Romanian Danube (fishing, hunting, sailing, sports, beach, etc.) is high, the general state of touristic use is far below potential due to the lack of the necessary facilities for civilised tourism and minimal national and international tourism promotion.
- The average in the **Moldavian area** is less than 25 tourists/100 inhabitants (Vaslui and Botoşani counties have 13.7 tourists/100 inhabitants each; in Vrancea, Bacău, and Iaşi counties there are about 40.0 tourists/100 inhabitants: tourism has a low intensity (reaching only 40% of the Romanian average, although there is a large and varied number of touristic offers in this area: wine-growing in Vrancea and Iaşi counties; Ceahlău mountains in Bacău county, while Iaşi is a wonderful old university city).
- **On the other hand, the Subcarpathian area of Muntenia**, with Prahova, Vâlcea and Argeş counties, have touristic activity well above the Romanian average.



- **The Dobrogea area**, namely Tulcea county, with the Danube Delta, and Constanța county, with the Black Sea coast, is a noteworthy attraction, especially for Romanian tourists.
- **The Transylvanian area** (with Cluj, Bihor, Mureș and, in particular, Sibiu and Brașov counties) is the region with the most intense touristic activity.

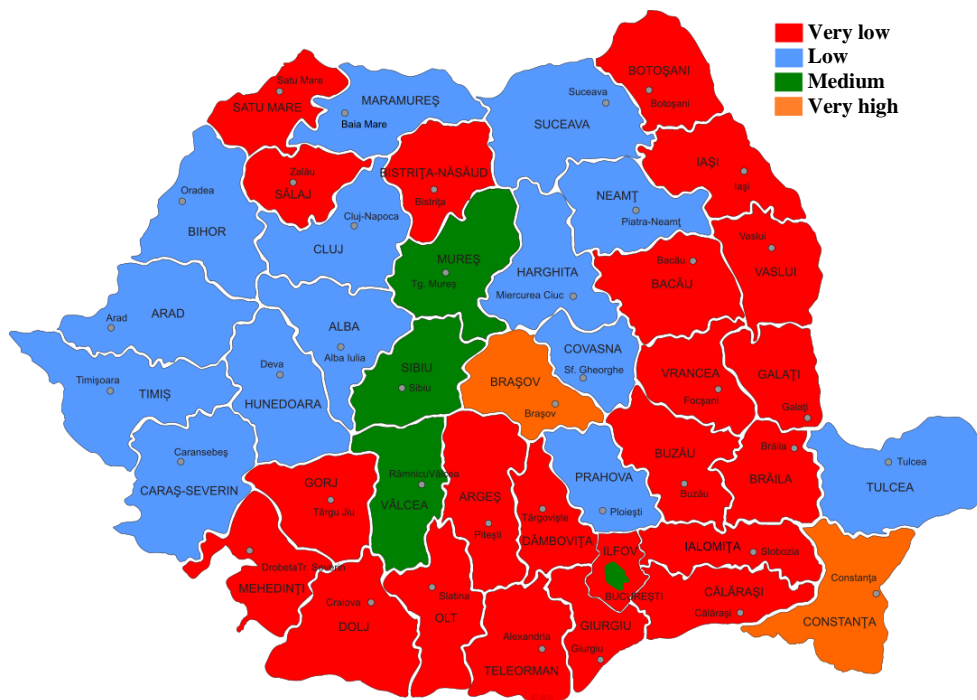


Figure 5. Map of tourism development by Romanian counties (tourist arrivals per 100 inhabitants).

In the *Vest* Development Region, Timiș and Arad counties, with lower natural potential (as opposed to Hunedoara county), are close to the national average. Caraș-Severin county, having an exceptional natural tourist offer, shows a touristic intensity higher than the average of the region (90.1 tourists per 100 inhabitants). This figure for tourism intensity qualifies Caraș-Severin county as a touristic county with high potential, which is still used far below its natural potential.

In addition to the slow economic development and poor demographic evolution of the county, described above, other (major) factors such as the huge anthropic ecological problems and the large-scale tourist devastation restrict the development of tourism in the most favorable areas of Caraș-Severin County: the Danube Plain and the Almăj Valley.

The indicators that lead to the assessment of the general state of Romanian tourism, as “*inadequate*” are: *intensity of tourism (number of tourists per 100 inhabitants)* and *share of foreign tourists in total arrivals*, because even the most intense Romanian counties and tourist areas do not come close to the neighbouring and competing countries: Croatia and Slovenia. Even Bucharest, Romania’s capital city (111.2 tourists/100 inhabitants), where most business, scientific and diplomatic tourism is concentrated, has a tourist intensity below the average of Bulgaria (131) and even Serbia (128 tourists/100 inhabitants).

The only counties with a higher tourist intensity, close to that of Slovenia and above the average of Bulgaria and Serbia, are Constanța (204.9 tourists/100 inhabitants), with summer tourism on the Black Sea coast mainly for Romanian tourists, and Brașov (257.4 tourists/100 inhabitants), particularly for winter tourism (skiing), but also for leisure and hiking in summer.

Romania’s situation in terms of share of foreign tourists is even more precarious (even dramatic), far below the level of neighbouring competitor countries (Table no. 6) and the worst results in the EU. Even countries with a natural tourism potential far below that of Romania, such as Hungary, with its vast pine forest area, have higher foreign tourist arrivals than Romania.

Table 5

Foreign tourists per 100 inhabitants

Country	2017	2018	2019
<i>Romania</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>19</i>
Bulgaria	59	64	65
Croatia	381	408	433
Slovenia	177	202	234
Serbia	57	59	60
<i>Caras-Severin county</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>

Source: NIS.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The overall general conclusion is that the main factor of touristic attractiveness, although significant (as the national and local authorities largely believe for convenience), is not the *country’s natural potential*, but the way in which the requirements of efficient and civilised tourism are met: *tourist environment, hospitality, infrastructure, including the financial factor*. Suffice it to say, as an argument confirming the above statement, that the counties considered the most attractive for tourism, namely Brașov, Constanța, Sibiu, Bihor, Vâlcea, Suceava, Maramureș, including Caras-Severin county, have a very low number of foreign tourist arrivals. And, if one refers to the share of foreign tourists in total

tourist arrivals, the figures of the touristic counties are still unworthy to qualify them as the most important ones in the country (Braşov 13.4%, Prahova and Maramureş 13.1%, Tulcea 12.3%, Suceava 12%, Constanţa 4.8% and Caraş-Severin 3.4%).

The highest shares of foreign tourist arrivals are found in counties (and cities) with strong economic, administrative and academic potential, where, in fact, the main forms of tourism are business, scientific, academic and diplomatic tourism (as in the case of Bucharest). The counties Iaşi (18.3%), Cluj (20.3%), Timiş (30.4%) and, obviously, the capital city, Bucharest (56.3%) fall into this category.

To sum up, analysing the data on total and foreign tourist arrivals in Romania, the receipts resulting from the number of overnight stays and the contribution of tourism to GDP, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the current state of Romanian tourism in general and mountain tourism in Caraş-Severin:

- as shown by the national tourism intensity data (Figure 2), Romania is well below Croatia and Slovenia and even halfway between Bulgaria and Serbia. On the other hand, in terms of the total annual number of tourists entering the county per 100 inhabitants, Caraş-Severin county has a higher intensity, even double the national average of Romania, which expresses a higher tourist activity and potential of the county, compared to the national average level;
- the current (strategic) conception and development of Romanian tourism is totally inadequate compared to the requirements of modern, efficient and extensive tourism and Romania's exceptional natural tourist offer. The fact that Romania has about 2% of GDP revenue from tourism is the most telling figure that demonstrates the *tourism precariousness* of our country;
- on a national scale, on the map of the country, the level of tourism development is extremely dispersed. Of the approximately EUR 4.5 billion in tourism receipts in Romania in 2019, more than half is concentrated in five counties (Constanţa, Braşov, Bihor, Vâlcea, Prahova) and Bucharest. Each of these five counties has at least one area (point) of important tourist attraction, such as the Black Sea coast in Constanţa, Băile Felix in Bihor, ski areas in Braşov, the Olt Valley and monasteries in Vâlcea, the Prahova Valley in Prahova.
- although the touristic counties in the country, namely Maramureş, Suceava, Tulcea, Sibiu and Caraş-Severin, have exceptional natural (and to some extent anthropic) tourist offers, they contribute only by 17.1% (EUR 110 million of Romania's tourist receipts). Although these counties have a substantial tourist offer: tradition in Maramureş; monasteries and the Dornelor region in Suceava – Bucovina, the Danube Delta in Tulcea, European Cultural Capital – Sibiu (in 2007) and Timişoara (in 2023);

Herculane Baths and the Danube Gorge in Caraș-Severin, their exploitation is still far below potential;

- there are eight counties in Romania (a quarter of the country's counties) where tourism is practically non-existent from an economic point of view: Teleorman, Giurgiu, Călărași, Vaslui, Vrancea, Olt, Botoșani and Sălaj, with annual receipts from tourism of less than EUR 4 million (less than 100,000 overnight stays per year in the county);
- at the current level of tourism in Caraș-Severin county (relatively good numerically, 90.1 tourists/100 places), 10<sup>th</sup> place in the top of the counties, an important remark should be made about the distribution of tourists by tourist destinations. Of the 244.6 thousand tourists registered in the period before the pandemic in Caraș-Severin county, more than 50% went to the Băile Herculane resort, 26% to the ski areas of Semenic and Muntele Mic and only about 20% to the other 25–30 forms of tourism practiced in the Banat mountain area.

Alarmingly for Caraș-Severin county, rural tourism and agritourism are practically non-existent. Compared to Suceava and Maramureș counties, agrotourism in Caraș-Severin is very poorly represented. While in Caraș-Severin county the (nominal) accommodation capacity in rural guesthouses and tourist agripensions represents 22% of the total county capacity, in Suceava county it is double (41%). In Suceava county, for example, there are six communes: Dorna Candrenilor, Mănăstirea Humorului, Gura Humorului, Șcheia, Sucevița and Vama with more than 300 accommodation facilities in the commune, while in Caraș-Severin county only three communes: Văliug, Brebu Nou – Gărâna and Poiana Mărului fall into this category. However, while in the communes of Suceava county the majority of rural pensions are *agri-pensions*, in Caraș-Severin county, specifically in the communes Văliug, Brebu Nou – Gărâna and Poiana Mărului, there are no agri-pensions, as tourism here is concentrated on the specific activity of “holiday villages”.

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