The favourable framework for youth travel development in Romania

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Abstract: Against the background of what is happening internationally, we analyzed at the level of our country the favourable framework and the prospects for the development of youth travel, a context in which we first identified the favourable factors (economic evolution, legal and institutional framework, diversity of tourist programs and facilities, actions undertaken in partnership with bodies from EU member states) and the factors whose influence restrict its development (demographic evolution, level of prices and tariffs for tourism products and services, service quality, etc.). In this context and in order to outline the development prospects of Romanian youth travel, we analyzed the influence of each factor and we identified the strategic objectives of its development, which should be focused on: reconsidering the place of youth travel within Romanian tourism; capitalizing better the tourism potential through youth travel; improving spatial accessibility of young tourists; increasing youth participation to domestic and international tourist traffic; identifying the strengths and weaknesses of youth travel; Romania’s integration on the European and global market of youth travel by extending cooperation and creating partnerships with various countries; promoting Romania as a destination for youth.

Key-Words: youth travel, young people, youth travel development, Romanian youth travel, strategic objectives of Romanian youth travel.

1 Introduction
Over time, Romania has given more or less attention to youth travel in terms of organization, programs or specific regulations. Currently, similarly to the situation in many other countries, youth travel is not receiving the deserved attention, there are no policies in this area or concerns for its development. In order to prepare a development strategy with the purpose of connecting to the trends in global and European tourism, it’s necessary to conduct an analysis of this component of tourism in terms of the main issues: legal and institutional framework, the supply in terms of specific infrastructure and products, tourist traffic as expression of real demand.

In connection with the developments at international and European level, our country has showed concerns for the development of youth travel. Thus, there are more investments in specific infrastructure (accommodation units such as hostels, tourism agencies aimed at young people), various governmental and non-governmental, national and international organizations have emerged and they promote tourism among youth, there are new regulations meant to encourage or to stimulate this form of travel, there are intense concerns to provide young people with facilities to practice tourism.

To young travellers who seek unique/new destinations with wild nature and genuine culture, Romania provides itineraries and places where they can live satisfying experiences based on authentic nature and landscapes (Carpathian Mountains, Danube Delta) and a unique cultural heritage (monasteries in Bucovina, wooden churches in Maramures), all pillared on the unique mixture of Latin and Byzantine cultural heritages, protected
areas and preserved traditions of one of the most rural European societies.

By analyzing the current state of youth travel, one can say that Romania has a great potential for development, but achieving this objective requires adequate policies and incentives, and the involvement and cooperation of the public and private sector by creating partnerships and a wider international openness.

2. The factors that influence the development of Romanian youth travel

In the context of the development of youth travel at European and international level, one can speak about a series of conditions that will favour the development of this type of tourism in Romania, among the most important being the economic evolution, the legal and institutional framework, diversity of tourist programs and facilities, actions undertaken in partnership with bodies from EU member states.

The economic crisis and recession have affected all areas of Romanian economy, including youth travel, but, according to the estimates of experts, it will most likely return to profit in the second half of this year (approximately 1.2% in 2011[1]). An economic growth will of course benefit youth travel in our country, especially if it is supported by investments made by private companies, by attracting new direct foreign investments, by increasing the absorption of European funds, as well as by structural reforms included in agreements with IFM and EU.

Economic growth may be expressed through the level and variation of synthetic indicators, such as production and consumption levels, employment and unemployment rates. One of the main indicators whose evolution provides information about economic growth is the real Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to economic forecasts [9], after a drop of 1.9% in 2010, Romanian GDP will record a real increase from 1.5% in 2011 to 4.7% in 2014. After the recession, the unemployment rate will continue to drop from 8% in 2010 to 7.8% in 2011 and 6.3% in 2014; it is also anticipated that the annual rate of inflation will drop from 5.3% in 2011 to 2.8% in 2014. All these developments will have beneficial effects on Romanian youth travel.

In a moderate scenario that takes into account the existence of major investments projects in infrastructure, agriculture or industry, easing monetary policies, reducing inflation and the unemployment rate, as well as a slower growth of individual consumption, we can set up the revival of tourism in our country and implicitly of youth travel.

Romania’s tradition in the area of youth travel is fairly rich, being reflected in the organization of tourism, meaning that there have been and there still are a series of specialized bodies, similar with those in other countries, which encourage the development of this type of vacation, as well as the existence of destinations that are well established on the youth travel market, and which provided numerous services and facilities to Romanian and foreign young tourists during their decades of existence. Currently, there is a growing interest in the development of this type of tourism, an interest that is supported by the growing number and complexity of the issues raised by the organization and management of tourism as a result of the participation of more diverse segments of young people to the tourism movement and to expanding the international exchanges in this area. Professional organisations primarily aim to promote the interest of the youth travel sector in relation to governmental organisations, and in terms of the relation with European states that have experience in this area, these organisations are also responsible of achieving other objectives, such as: signing partnerships regarding youth mobility and cultural and educational exchanges, providing expert advice, supporting young people to practice tourism, conducting studies and preparing publications, promoting Romania as a youth destination, etc.

The better the organizational framework is defined and promoted at local, regional and national level, the more we can talk about a favourable influence on the development of youth travel and specific policies.

In terms of legislation, the tourism activity in Romania is very well regulated and in the area of youth travel there are a series of legal documents with general and specific character that refer to the organization of activities, to the specific infrastructure or to the facilities offered to young tourists, which have a positive influence on the development of this type of tourism. Professional bodies can also influence the development of youth travel at national level by initiating legal regulations that regulate other aspects, such as training personnel for specific tourism units (receptionists, tourism entertainers, medical personnel, etc.), as well security and protection of children, young people and teachers during travel. It’s also required to impose minimum standards of service quality provided by suppliers and intermediaries in the Romanian youth travel related to tourism.
classification criteria. Future efforts should be made to improve and promote an adequate legal framework for the development of the youth travel movement.

As shown, the Romanian tourism offer for young people is relatively diversified and includes products such as rest camps and theme camps, cultural and educational exchange programs, tourism events, trips and tours. Of course, in order to face the growing competition on the European and international tourism market, in the future, an emphasis should be placed on diversifying tourism products and services for youth and implicitly, on the further development of the accommodation units’ network specific for this type of tourism that has seen a great expansion in terms of hostels. Or, Romania has the required conditions to develop and diversify the specific supply, namely: varied and rich potential that is suitable for the development of adventure, sports or cultural tourism, destinations for young people located in the mountains or the seaside, in the urban and rural area, such as Costineşti, Predeal, etc., a specific growing tourism infrastructure, available labour, etc. Currently, in Romania there are two adventure parks: the biggest is in Braşov, being the result of a partnership between the municipality, the Local Public Administration of Forests “Kronstadt” and a Swiss investor and is set up on an area of two hectares of forest and provides over 100 games divided on eight routes of progressive difficulty for young people of all ages, intensive training, safety equipments, as well as specialized assistance; the second park is located in Harghita Băi and has an area of 1.5 ha, providing nearly 100 games including the longest zip wire in Central and Eastern Europe (985 m). Romania could become an important European and international destination for adventure travel for young people because is has the necessary resources for setting up alpine trails for hiking and winter hiking, especially in the Meridionali Carpathians, canoeing routes [6] in Parâng Mountains and Mehedinţi or in the Apuseni Mountains, rafting on Jiu, Cerna, Nera, Crişul Repede, Someş or Arieş rivers, diving in the Black Sea, caves and glacial or barrier lakes and for other types of adventure (mountain biking, spelaeology, mountain climbing, paragliding, bungee jumping).

Another aspect that leaves a mark on the development of youth travel in Romania is the collaboration between the specialized organisations and institutions in our country with similar bodies in other countries, and the need to align our country to the European developments. These are materialized in a series of actions that are aimed at youth, namely: intercultural and educational exchanges that favour youth mobility, volunteer services, exchanges of good practice, partnerships between specialized NGOs, etc., all influencing in a positive manner the tourism activity.

In addition to the elements with a positive influence on Romanian youth travel, there are some restrictive issues that impact its development. They include the demographic evolution – namely, the population’s dynamic and structure -, the prices and rates of tourist products and services, service quality, etc.

On global scale, youth represents 30-35% of total population, being a demographic segment with a significant role in the development of youth travel. The same is not true in Romania where youth aged 15 to 25 represents only 14% [3] of the population and show a downward trend in the future.

According to the population’s number (21.462 million inhabitants on January 1st 2010 [11]), Romania is part of the medium sized countries of the world, and is ranked seventh among EU-27 countries, trailing behind Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Poland. According to a UNICEF study [10] in conjunction with EUROSTAT previsions, the population of our country will gradually drop from 21.378 million people on January 1st 2011 to 21.333 million in 2012 and to under 20 million people in 2020, fitting into the European demographic conjunction. Over time, the population’s decline will cause the restructuring of the activity of those involved in youth travel.

In Romania, the population’s structure by age groups has recorded significant changes as a result of the birth rate’s continuous decline starting with the 1990s and as a result of the negative external migration. The age pyramid for Romanian population during 1990-2010 [5] shows a slow, but continuous aging process. The share of the young population will decline while the share of those over 65 years old will increase. After 2005, the segment of the population aged under 14 included the less numerous generation born after 1990. Under these circumstances, the elderly population exercises an increased “pressure” on the young and adult population – which is potentially active – having major implications for the economic and social policies. In Romania, the share of young people was 13.9% of total population on January 1st 2010, which is approximately equal with the EU-27 average of 12.1%, which means that the aging process is more pronounced in Romania compared with the European Union.
Age distribution is of fundamental importance in socio-economic terms, because it determines the role and place of each person within the economic activity and, implicitly, in tourism. It is said that there is no field of activity that isn’t interested in knowing the number and structure of the population by age. Consequently, to define the trends of Romanian youth travel is necessary to analyze the main current demographic phenomena.

Another demographic indicator that negatively influences the evolution of youth travel in our country is the employed population. Employment rates are particularly low among young people (15-24 years old). In 2010, the youth employment rate in Romania was 25% out of 4.4 million employees at national level, compared to 34.2% in EU-27 [4] as the flexible forms of labour are only marginal on the formal labour market, even though they are regulated.

Young people are the ones facing the most of the risks of the labour market, namely: employment in the informal sector, working in households (subsistence agriculture), long-term unemployment, discouragement to enter the labour market and the impoverishment of employees; all these are aspects that only reduce the chances of earning incomes that will allow them to practice tourism. For example, the largest share of the total employed population working in the informal sector is recorded by young people aged 15 to 24, namely 19% compared to 9-13% of the employed population in other age groups (below 65 years old) [15]. Furthermore, adding together the characteristics associated with the risks regarding employment leads to a drastic drop in the chances to become employed (for example, when young people come from the rural environment, are women and are Roma, they have minimum chances of working in the formal economy).

In addition to other disadvantaged demographic segments, young people should be one of the target groups for employment policies whose priorities refer to creating new jobs, to raising employability (employment safety) through vocational training and lifelong learning, as well as removing barriers from entering or returning to the labour market especially given that the population employed in Romanian tourism reflects that it is a very attractive economic field for young people – over 50% of the population working in hotels and restaurants being young and very young, with ages between 15 and 35. The youth oriented towards tourism could be the future labour force for small and medium sized businesses in this sector.

For international tourism is necessary to know these trends at European level also given that Europe is still the number one destination of the world, where tourism is the third ranked economic branch after trade and construction. Based on market research regarding the image and attitude of potential tourists towards Romania, it can be said that many of the Europeans interested in visiting our country are part of specific youth age groups. Among the French respondents in one of these studies [14] who expressed interest in spending a vacation in Romania, 23% were aged 25 to 34. Potential tourists in Great Britain – meaning those that should be targeted by marketing activities in order to transform their interest into demand – are strongly oriented towards active tourism more than other forms of travel, and Romania has the required potential for such vacations. The market analysis in Great Britain shows the opportunity to target: explorers (independent travellers who seen unique destinations), adventure seekers and students [16].

The prices of tourist products and the level of tariffs practiced for services offered to tourists are another important aspect that influences youth travel in our country.

Amid rising prices in general, the purchasing power or Romanian people is eroded given the lower incomes determined by the economic recession, and, consequently, the consumption of tourism is also dropping. The average increase of prices on the whole (food products, goods and services) was 6.1% [12] in 2010 compared to the previous year, an increase that negatively impacted demand for this type of products and services in terms of limiting the budget for tourism. The paradox is that even if the prices of services dropped by 3.9% in 2010, including for services provided within Romanian tourism, the number of arrivals and overnight stays in accommodation units also dropped by 0.7 and 7.1% respectively compared to the previous year. Starting with January 2011, these indicators (arrivals and overnight stays) have recorded positive evolutions (+13.4% for arrivals and +11.5% for overnight stays [13]), including in terms of youth travel, amid a slight increase of the consumer price index for “Restaurants, coffee shops, cafeterias” and for “Payment of accommodation in hotel units” by 0.24% and 0.09% respectively in January 2011 compared to December 2010. However, Romania is still a relatively cheap destination compared to other European and international tourist destinations. This aspect can be argued by the tariffs practiced by Romanian suppliers or intermediaries for tourist products and services aimed at young people: their
average level in hostels ranges between 10 and 20 euro/person/day for accommodation and breakfast, and the young owners of the Youth Hostel card can benefit from 5% to 10% discounts; the price of a camp day that includes accommodation and full board varies between 10-15 euro/day/person for young tourists.

At last but no least, service quality determines the future evolution of youth travel. Currently, it can’t be said that all hostels and student camps provide high quality services, but there are trends of improvement.

3 Strategic objectives of youth travel development in Romania

At national level, in the context of growing concerns for tourism development, the elaborated strategies didn’t take into account youth travel very much. Therefore, the National Tourism Development Master Plan stipulates that the main necessary actions to revive Romanian tourism should be also applied in the field of active tourism and youth tourism, which are a market niche with large growth prospects.

Consequently, the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism in partnership with other governmental and non-governmental bodies that activate in the field, higher-education institutions, etc. should prepare a development strategy for youth travel at national level.

The strategic objectives of youth travel development in Romania should consider the following aspects:

- Reconsidering the place of youth travel within Romanian tourism;
- Identifying and knowing the evolution of market niches, where youth travel falls into, and their trends given that the tourism market evolves and changes continuously;
- The better exploitation of the tourism potential through youth travel in addition to the great variety of other forms of tourism that could be practiced in our country;
- Improving spatial accessibility of young tourists by firstly developing the general infrastructure;
- Increasing the participation of Romanian youth to the domestic and international tourist traffic;
- Identifying the strengths and the weaknesses of youth travel in order to develop the strategic directions regarding its future development in order to compete efficiently on the global market;

- Romania’s integration on the European and global market of youth travel by extending cooperation and creating partnerships with various countries;
- Promoting Romania as a destination for youth travel.

Given that no European country is identified as a main destination for young tourists, Romania could become such a destination because it provides a range of appropriate outdoor activities – both during summer and winter – it has an expanding program of music, sports and other types of events in Bucharest and in other parts of the country and it practices relatively low costs.

Our country has certain competitive advantages as a destination for youth travel, namely:
- It has an advantageous geographical location and easy access from the EU;
- It has natural areas suitable for adventure tourism;
- It is a cheap destination;
- It provides a favourable, hospitable environment, etc.

These are all attributes that attract young tourists and that can contribute to developing other forms of tourism aimed at youth (for example, adventure and sports tourism – mainly aimed at groups of young people).

In conclusion, it can be said that tourism evolves under the inter-correlated action of a set of phenomena, which has a direction and an intensity of influence that varies depending on time and space and which is materialized in the actuating of tourist traffic.

4 Conclusions

In line with development prospects, we shaped for Romania the strategic objectives for youth travel development, which take into account the following aspects: reconsidering the place of youth travel within Romanian tourism; the better exploitation of the tourism potential through youth travel; improving spatial accessibility of young tourists; increasing the participation of Romanian youth to the domestic and international tourist traffic; identifying the strengths and the weaknesses of youth travel; Romania’s integration on the European and global market of youth travel by extending cooperation and creating partnerships with various countries; promoting Romania as a destination for youth travel.
In Romania, youth travel shows great prospects, but their materialization requires a better exploitation of tourism, human and economic resources, as well as creating a favourable framework — legal, organizational, financial, for marketing, etc. Through a clear and viable strategy, accompanied by concrete measures and actions, this form of tourism could be positioned among the most important manifestations of the tourism activity, making our country an important destination that attracts young people from all over the globe.

References: