

## SILVER TOURISM AS A POSSIBLE FACTOR FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT. A CASE STUDY IN THE SOUTH-EAST REGION OF ROMANIA

Violeta PUȘCAȘU

University "Dunărea de Jos" from Galați, 800001, Romania

violeta.puscasu@ugal.ro

### Abstract

As a result of the growing ageing, senior tourists will become a powerful group in the near tourism future. According to this statement, our research assesses that the silver tourism could represent, in the next years, a real instrument for the regional development. The aim of our study is to highlight the opportunity of capitalizing the aging phenomenon by the administrative institutions and local tour operators that might regenerate economically the southeast Romanian region. Methodologically, we used a survey based on two questionnaires. The first one was applied to a group of seniors enrolled at the University of Third Age Galati city. For now, this type of structure is unique in Romania. It provides a valuable dimension of touristic perspective because their relevant demographic characteristics - 156 respondents aged between 55 and 85 years. The questionnaire applied was the same as the one adopted by the National Institute for Research-Development in Tourism, as part of the European project consortium EUROSEN. The second questionnaire containing a single question was applied to four categories of actors possible to be responsible and/or involved in the developing regional tourism process. The results reveals the connections existing between the main options of elderly and the forms of tourism developed at regional level, one the one hand, and the very minor attention paid by the local factors to it, on the other hand.

**Key words:** silver tourism, south-east region, survey, third age

**JEL Classification:** Z13, Z32

### I. INTRODUCTION

All people want to live a lot, even if actually no one wants to get old in the proper sense of the word. And that is because old age is associated with a multitude of unwanted issues such as health problems, loneliness, inactivity, social marginalization or uncertainty. It is not less true that in the elderly cohorts from today there are enough people who seem to contradict the rule of aging, showing lively longevity, and under the circumstances of technological, medical and informational dynamics, the elderly of the future might no longer face the same restrictions that affected their parents.

Whatever would be the case the demographic figure is changing, and the share of elderly people will increase, and this situation will lead to consequences on most levels of the society. According to data provided by World Atlas, at world scale, Japan is the country with the highest share of elderly people over 65 from the total population (26.3%), a situation that is not surprising anymore, knowing the increased life expectancy in this country. The surprise comes from the fact that on the following places in the ranking of the countries with the largest ageing population, up to the 25th place where Romania is located, all the others are European countries (Table 1).

**Table 1. The most aged countries in 2016**  
(source: <http://www.worldatlas.com>)

| Rank | Country        | % of population over 65 years old |
|------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1    | Japan          | 26.3 %                            |
| 2    | Italy          | 22.4 %                            |
| 3    | Greece         | 21.4 %                            |
| 4    | Germany        | 21.2 %                            |
| 5    | Portugal       | 20.8 %                            |
| 6    | Finland        | 20.5 %                            |
| 7    | Bulgaria       | 20.0 %                            |
| 8    | Sweden         | 19.9 %                            |
| 9    | Latvia         | 19.4 %                            |
| 10   | Malta          | 19.2 %                            |
| 11   | France         | 19.1 %                            |
| 12   | Denmark        | 19.0 %                            |
| 13   | Croatia        | 18.9 %                            |
| 14   | Estonia        | 18.8 %                            |
| 15   | Lithuania      | 18.8 %                            |
| 16   | Spain          | 18.8 %                            |
| 17   | Austria        | 18.8 %                            |
| 18   | Belgium        | 18.2 %                            |
| 19   | Netherlands    | 18.2 %                            |
| 20   | Czech Republic | 18.1 %                            |
| 21   | Slovenia       | 18.0 %                            |
| 22   | Switzerland    | 18.0 %                            |
| 23   | Hungary        | 17.8 %                            |
| 24   | United Kingdom | 17.8 %                            |
| 25   | Romania        | 17.3 %                            |

As, for the next years, the European Union is going to be the macro-region the most affected by ageing in the world, there is the question of a real paradigm shift: what was a marginal issue becomes a main problem, and the uncertain becomes certain. The old people get not only more numerous, they are structurally different from previous the generations. They will represent a segment of consumers whose needs and choices cannot be ignored, due to their weight in the economic balance. The occurrence of the concept of silver economy is the evidence that more and more countries are concerned about this new dimension (Domonkos, Horvát et al. 2013; Leichsenring, K. and Schmidt, A.E. 2016).

Subsequently, silver tourism has already represented a rapid manner to materialize this trend (Alén, E. Dominguez, T. and Losada, N., 2017; Lohman and Merzbach, 1997, Zsarnoczky, David et al.2015). It touches simultaneously at least two dimensions – strictly the economic one and the psychosocial one. For the elderly, to travel becomes not only a way to keep them active, but also to reject isolation, a chance to extend friendship, to express their autonomy. From the economic point of view, this requires a conscious oriented approach that allows the full exploitation of the potential of this new market segment. However, in spite of the evidence that the senior tourism market witnessed a continuous increase during the last years, the phenomenon of silver tourism remains insufficiently known and studied by the researchers, both in terms of quantity and of quality.

## II. SILVER TOURISM, MICRO-TOURISM AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The silver tourism has become more prominent since the last decade of the last millennium, at about the same time as the theoreticians' concerns for micro-tourism have grown (Komppula and Reijonen, 2006; Neville, 2014). The two concepts, though significantly distinct in terms of content, also have numerous common points.

The microtourism is that form of individual or family tourism that focuses on capitalizing the unique attributes of a community, both the commercial ones (local farms, fairs, thematic itineraries, gastronomy) etc. as well as non-commercial ones (historical sites, flora and fauna, ecological resources and uniqueness, etc.).

A list of the elements that can be found under this microtourism label would include

**Table 2. List of elements for micro-tourism (Neville, 2013)**

|                       |                        |                          |
|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| something old         | interesting drives     | local storytellers       |
| something new         | interesting walks      | local arts               |
| strange faces         | something precious     | historically significant |
| peaceful places       | rarely seen            | simple magnificent       |
| deliciously different | in the farm            | private collections      |
| local produce         | novelty artworks       | local crafts             |
| local markets         | sensationally seasonal | natural wonders          |
| rural places          | simply beautiful       | waterways – lagoons      |
| open spaces           | best kept secrets      | stunning views           |
| nature artworks       | interesting people     | local flora and fauna    |

Therefore, we understand that microtourism represent all those existent and potential things, places and events we know almost nothing about but that can become reasons for tourism valorisation. The microtouristic potential is often unknown even to the community itself, so the less it has the opportunity to be known by the visitors. Following the same logic, where the economic development has a parallel role, but separated from the community economic development, we can also bring into question a role for the regional touristic marketing, parallel but separated from the community micro-tourism. These two levels have completely different perspectives and therefore should be managed separately, but, at the same time both are totally interdependent and mutually supportive. The linking element between the two could be the silver tourism.

In order to understand its functionality we should not forget that the elderly are as diverse as any other demographic segment and many seniors do not have the resources to travel. On the other hand, they are the easiest to mobilize for actions in the local or nearby area, therefore the connection of the two entities - the senior tourist and the regional/local offer in the form of microtourism could represent a real development engine with benefits for both suppliers and consumers of tourism. Certainly, we should necessarily know the characteristics of this segment, and in this respect the following generalizations can be made about the senior travelers:<sup>5</sup>

- They are more experienced tourists (due to their life experience)
- They spend more time to travel and leisure

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.ageplatform.eu/images/ESCAPE\\_Needs\\_and\\_expectations\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ageplatform.eu/images/ESCAPE_Needs_and_expectations_FINAL.pdf)

- Travelling often becomes a priority of their lifestyle and many of them are ready to pay on a regular basis for a trip..
- Generally, they have more savings and less debt agreements, especially the first years after their retirement.
- They are more flexible in terms of the period of travelling, often preferring to travel outside the peak seasons.
- Generally, they pay more attention to the touristic offer and ask for high quality services
- They are likely to be less influenced by additional facilities (playground, wi-fi, bar)
- Healthy issues can influence the choices of travel, especially for the very old tourists.<sup>6</sup>

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to identify the role that the silver tourism for the local development in the south-eastern region. In this regard, we focused mainly on the connections between the tourism potential and the practices/options of the seniors tourists, on one hand, and on the receptivity of the main local representatives - administration, transport/ tourism companies, economic operators, etc., towards the potential represented by the silver tourism - on the other hand. The assessment used two packs of questionnaires – one applied to a sample of seniors, the other one addressed to the administration and the economic operators. In order to identify the possible connections, the results of the questionnaires as well as some statistical correlations have been used.

In terms of methodology, the first survey questionnaire, named EUROSEN - Europe for Senior project was adopted by the National Institute for Research-Development in Tourism, as part of the European project consortium EUROSEN.

The survey consists of three parts:

1. The first part collects demographic information about the interviewee;
2. The second part approaches the general attitude towards travelling and tourism
3. The third part aims at the opinion concerning a new form of tourism and another way to spend the holidays abroad (annex).

The second questionnaire includes a single question and aims at the receptiveness and the availability of the operational actors on the tourism market in the region for silver tourism.

### IV. THE STUDY AREA

The study area is represented by the south-east development region. Covering 35,762 km<sup>2</sup> or 15% of

the country's total area; this is the second largest region from the eight regions of Romania. For completing its identification data we mention a population of 2,545,923 people, which represents 12.6% of the population of Romania, registered at the 2011 Census. During 1992-2011, the population of the region scored a continuous decline combined with a pronounced demographic aging and this tendency is still present. From the administrative point of view, the region has 35 towns and city municipalities and 355 communes. The tourism of the region is diversified and we find here all types of tourism: ecotourism agrotourism, seaside, mountain, cruise, cultural, business, balneary, leisure, week-end, sport fishing and hunting, water sport tourism. The tourism of the region is characterized by the existence of specific natural resources such as the Black Sea coast and the Danube Delta. In the region, there are also well-known spa resorts (Lacu Sarat, Techirghiol, Sărata Monteoru, Balta Alba, Soveja), and agro-tourist boarding houses (especially in the mountain areas and in the Danube Delta).

The cultural tourism is present in the region both through the multitude of archeological sites, museums, and memorial houses as well as by the range of monasteries in the northern Dobrogea or Buzău and Vrancea mountains. A characteristic of the region is the high touristic potential, provided by the existence of some natural lakes with therapeutic properties, the muddy volcanoes, the Danube Delta Biosphere reserve and the Black Sea seaside. The region concentrates approximately one third of the country's accommodation facilities, taking the first place both in terms of accommodation capacity (47.8% of the total national amount) and the number of tourists accommodated (28.8% of the total national amount).

From the touristic point of view, the south-eastern region is the richest in terms of natural diversity as we find here all the three forms of relief completed by the existence of delta and marine seaside.

In the collective consciousness, the image of tourism potential was often unbalanced by the weight and frequency of promotion of the natural resources of the region to the detriment of the anthropic ones. The latter, however, are rich and diverse enough to support and develop an extremely wide range of types and forms of tourism.

Beyond its touristic potential, the Southeast region has two more features that clearly differentiate it from the other development regions in Romania, namely the location in the vicinity of a heterogeneous macro-regional geopolitical area (Turkey, Moldavia, Ukraine) and the possession of a highly aged demographic configuration.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.acsedu.co.uk/Info/Hospitality-and-Tourism/Tourism/Senior-Tourism.aspx>, accessed 17.07.2017

## V. THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Although the southeastern region has well-known touristic resources, their use by means of programs and offers addressed to seniors is not sufficiently visible. Our study starts from the hypothesis that the seniors' expectations in terms of tourism would correspond to the existing potential in the region but not also to the real material offer. A questionnaire distributed in 2017 to the persons enlisted at the University of the Third Age (U3A) showed some aspects that can account for the creation of a new field of action in the regional tourism – the silver tourism.

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is an innovative project in the Romanian academic field. Institutionally, it had the form of a continuous training programme called "The University of the Third Age", created in 2016<sup>7</sup> and carried out within the Department of Continuous Training and Technology Transfer (DCTTT) of the university. In parallel, there is a research laboratory with the same name, within the Research Center for Law, Administrative, Social and Political Studies, focused upon the study of the demographic aging phenomenon, which foreran and prepared the creation of the mentioned study program. This double affiliation is the functionally attribute that makes U3A Galați a "Velass" type entity, after the model of the first university of the third age that was created in 1974 in Toulouse, France.

In the curriculum plan of the U3A program there are ten study subjects and tourism is one of them.

## VI. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND COMMENTS

The questionnaire was distributed, printed on paper, to a sample of 130 senior students out of the 160 enlisted to the courses of the U3A.

I. The demographic information revealed the following aspects:

The group of senior students consisted of a feminine majority (76,9%), while the age groups structure is much more heterogeneous, namely 48.7% are 55-65 years old, 38.4 % are 66-75 years old, 10.2% are 76-85 years old and 2.56% are over 85 years old. The structure according to the level of education shows an important number of university diploma holders, namely 69%, compared to only 31% seniors with secondary-school education. In terms of knowledge of one or more foreign languages, the questionnaire revealed (in a multiple answers type) a privileged position of French language (58% of respondents), followed by Russian (33%), English (30%), Italian (10%), Greek and Turkish (2.5% each), while 18% do not know any foreign language and 2% did not answer. The situation of social living is quite diverse, with half of the respondents living with their husband / partner,

while the other half is divided between those living alone (38%) and those living with relatives and the extended family, children or grandchildren (12%).

II. The general attitude towards travel and tourism has highlighted a series of aspects that give specific identity to this category of tourists. Thus:

- In terms of preferred destinations, over 50% have chosen Romania as a first option destination, followed by EU countries (35%), while non-EU countries attract only 12% of the respondents. It should not be surprising that among the latter, the most mentioned were Turkey and the Republic of Moldova.
- The length of stays places the seniors group in the short-term category of tourists (maximum 4 days - 20% of the answers and 8 days - 35% of the answers), although there are also longer periods, namely 14 days (19%), 2-3 weeks (15%) and even more than 3 weeks (11%).
- The motivation for the choice of the destination differentiates once more the senior's category. Culture, rest and relaxation are the motivations equally placed (24%) on top of the choices, followed by visits (17%) and health (13.5%). The religious reasons and entertainment are on equal positions (11% each). Less than 1% mentioned the business trip as a reason for travel.
- In terms of „travelling period” criterion, 39.5% prefer summer travel, followed by autumn travel (30%) and spring travel (18.5%), while only 12% choose to go in winter.
- Planning the trip is mostly done long before the departure date. Thus, 30% of the respondents plan their holiday 1-3 months ahead, 25% of respondents 3-6 months ahead, and 23% of them even 6 months ahead. The share of those who decide to leave less than a month earlier is 16%, and 4.6% of the respondents didn't answer this question.
- In terms of travel organization, 42% of respondents choose to manage the travel by themselves, 34% ask the help of a travel agency, and 24% rely on various other structures (church, associations, family). For those who choose the travel agency there is an interesting balance according to the type of travel, which equally divides the seniors between individualized options and ready-made package vacations.
- The source of information for the choice of the holiday is also a specific point of characterization of the seniors, who choose the internet and tourism agencies to the same extent of 9.24% each), the relatives and friends (19%),

the guides and magazines as well as the retirement associations influence each 14% of senior tourists, while media sources account for less than 6%.

- With regard to the number of persons a senior travels with, we find that travelling alone is specific for only 12.5% of the respondents. Most people prefer groups of acquaintances (27.5%), family (25%), only the partner (17.5%) or even groups of strangers (15%).
  - The plane and the car are equally preferred for a travel (30% each), followed by the train (25.3%) and the ship (14%), and 0.7% were non-answers.
  - The allocated budget group almost all respondents into the same category, as 80% answered that the daily budget was 50 up to 100 euros/per day, while 2,5 % pay less than 50 euros/ a day, and 17,5 % didn't answer the question.
  - With regard to the time allocated for relaxing in the hotel or walking alone, there are two major groups - those who totally identify with the group (50%) and those who have individual choices of at least one hour (24%) or even more (2-4 hours - 13% or half a day - 13%).
  - For travelling on short distances, 50% prefer walking, 24% driving, 17% the train and 4.8% the bicycle. There were 4.2% were non-answers to this question.
  - Quite mistrustful, the elderly prefer cash payment for services (59%), while card payment (30%) or bank transfer ( 8%) are less used. 3% chose not to answer.
  - Diet is an important factor in understanding the specific patterns of senior tourists. Only 30% of respondents answered that they do not have any kind of nutritional habits, while 35% say they follow a diet/ stick to a diet (5%), they are following a healthy diet (7%), they fast (2%) or they are vegetarian (2%). A fairly high percentage (15%) preferred not to give any clue about this.
  - The diet aspect is connected to the health status and the need for medical supervision: 60% said they did not have this need, while only 2% claimed this need. As for the rest of them, either they didn't want to answer (28%) or didn't know whether they needed or not medical supervision (2%).
- III. The third section of the survey reveals aspects concerning the forms of tourism that could be developed according to the options and the expectations of the target group.

The survey revealed that in the choice of destination certain themes are more important than others. In the assessment system provided by the questionnaire, the respondents chose for each theme

individually, according to a scale of interest increasing from 1 to 5.

Nature and landscape obtained the best scores because these matter very much for 64% of respondents, as well as the local culture, which is important for 51% of respondents which matter very much for 64% of respondents, as well as the local culture, important for 51% of respondents. For the other themes, the distribution of the degrees of preferences is extremely variable, thus health matters „very much” for 38% and spirituality for 33%. We should notice the extremely low values of interest and the non-answer rate recorded by two topics – the oeno-gastronomy and sport and leisure – which would have certainly got higher ratings from other categories of tourists.

For the question whether a combination of a big city and a visit to small towns, to experience traditional customs would be of interest, from the touristic point of view, 49% responded that they were very interested in this.

It seems to exist a high attraction for visiting the surroundings of the village communities (58,9%), for interaction with the natives (56,4%), for popular performances (53,8%) and local musical events (51,2%). But, direct participation in the musical events or in the preparation of certain local gastronomic recipes are almost unattractive reasons, these items having a high rate of non-response.

The fact that the seniors are not very interested in gastronomic aspects is also proved by the answers to the last question of the survey, with regard to the collection of information on local gastronomy and the possibility to learn how to prepare traditional recipes from the visited regions, to which only 43,5 % answered that they were very interested in the subject.

#### *Comments on the first survey*

The multitude and diversity of answers received in the questionnaire allow the outlining of at least three assumptions about silver tourism in the south-east region:

1. The preferences of the seniors questioned are largely intertwined with the available resources of the southeastern region (nature, landscape, culture, local diversity);
2. The relatively small distances and various travel possibilities within the region (car, train, ship, bicycle) comply with the requirements and the options of the senior tourists revealed by the survey;
3. Aspects such as costs, organization, or length of stay meet the needs of the elderly segment.

But we should ask ourselves why we cannot yet speak about a visible silver tourism in the southeast region. In this respect, we turned used a second survey which was applied in different ways (by phone, by direct meeting or by email) to a total number of 266 subjects (local authorities and local actors) located in

one of the south- east counties of the region (Galați, Braila, Vrancea, Tulcea and Constanța). The survey included a single question: to what extent do you

propose to offer / to support a product for elderly / senior tourists? The answers are centralized in table 2.

**Table 3.**

|   | Never | We will probably do | We will surely do | Already did it | Total answers/total surveys |
|---|-------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Tourism agencies  | 3     | 13                  | 33                | 14             | 63/63                       |
| Municipalities (through tourist information centres)  | -     | 5                   | 67                | 3              | 75/79                       |
| Small and Medium sized enterprises (including family business) from the field of public catering and services | 12    | 41                  | 12                | 5              | 70/79                       |
| Transportation companies  | -     | 8                   | 6                 | 3              | 17/20                       |
| Organizations, associations, foundations, NGOs  | -     | 3                   | 9                 | 8              | 20/25                       |

#### *Comments on the second survey*

The results of the second survey are extremely telling and highlight how unequal is the perception of the local actors about the senior tourism. The fact that two out of the five categories of surveys actors consider that they will never offer a personalized tourist product for seniors may explain, among other things, a traditional perception of the elderly as a difficult, risky consumer with no financial potential. The projective-type answers (probably/certainly) cover most of the answers and lead to two possible explanations. The first one would be that some answers were rather political, chosen not to offend or to startle (it would be the case for most of the „probable” answers) and to keep a good image of the organization/ institution. The second approach could be the promising answers – „we will surely offer” – that could be justified either by the revelation of a potential they have not thought of so far, or by a courtesy promise. The fact that there are enough situations where the local actors have already adapted to the demographic changes in the tourist market is a telling example that prospects are optimistic. It is not unimportant that the first ones that are already operating „the silver tourism” are NGO-s, foundations and parish associations that address mainly the elderly.

## VII. CONCLUSION

For several decades, the touristic phenomenon as a whole has been a distinctive attribute of the contemporary society, and its reactivity to the economic and political changes is already known. However, the combination of some dynamics specific to tourism with the variations of demographic structure is more recent, although these links are also natural and obvious. The silver tourism is the visible argument of these new social configurations on the tourist market.

Our study has linked the two dimensions – a growing potential demand and the specificity of the regional touristic offer. Without concluding the manifold interpretations that can be granted to the connection between the two forces, highlighted partly by the results of the surveys, the present study revealed some key elements:

- according to the regional demographic structure, the elderly segment can represent an important part of the regional touristic demand;
- considering the psychological and cultural features of the elderly, their choices in terms of tourism are often different from those of the majority represented by young people and adults;
- regional pattern/anchoring (expressed by options and preferred tourist themes) is a dimension hardly apprehended by the elderly
- the knowledge and the update of the resource map and of the regional tourist potential is an imperative that results from the modification of the demographic structure of the group of tourists.
- the silver tourism mingles largely with the micro-tourism as part of the tourism.

Our study has a contribution to substantiate a paradigm shift in regional administrative suprastructures, but also in the business environment. As tourism is an open and sensitive system, it was likely that changes in the demographic structure would have results in all societal components.

For the regions and communities to transform the threat of demographic aging into an opportunity, we need to know the characteristics of the elderly segment and receptivity of the institutional actors must increase.

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