

## THE TOURISM MARKET IN THE NORTH-EAST REGION OF ROMANIA. CASE STUDY: TOURISM AGENCIES AND OTHER RESERVATION AND TOURIST ASSISTANCE SERVICES

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### Abstract

*The tourism industry regained its growth trend after the sanitary moment of crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The important structural transformations within the tourism market and the tourists' pattern of behavior requires a detailed updated analysis of the new context. The specific research objective is the analysis of the tourism market in the North-East Economic Development Region of Romania, with a focus on the activities of touristic nature as listed in the National Economy Activities Classification (CAEN) under Code 79. The result of this analysis is the emergence of the characteristics of the tourism offer and demand mechanisms, as well as the current behavior of the typical tourist visiting Romania, and particularly the North-East Economic Development Region of Romania, key values necessary for the future planning of the local travel agencies. The identified present-day opportunities will be subsequently utilized by organizing, intermediary and online travel agencies, as well as by owners and managers of other enterprises related to the tourism industry. The case study represents a foundation for further research regarding the adaptation strategies of the tourist enterprises currently having a business presence in this region.*

**Key words:** *tourism market, travel agencies, tourist behavior, tourism network, tourism exhibitions*

**JEL Classification:** *D21, D47, D90, L11, M30, O19*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most significant sectors of the world economy (Herrero, Laso et al., 2022, p.2), with the highest growth rate at global level (Kadir & Karim, 2012, p.1090), as demonstrated by the evident annual growth rate index of approximately 3,40% up to 2019 (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche & Istituto di Ricerca su Innovazione e Servizi per lo Sviluppo, 2019, p.XIX).

Information on the size of the tourism sector (Harries, 2021, p.5), on the main domains of activity and on the employment numbers pertaining to this sector at global level reflect its importance throughout time. Tourism has positive effects on a country's economy, notably by increasing income revenue, job numbers and investments related to tourism infrastructure, as well as improving national budget balances. It also carries a negative impact, such as environment degradation, increase of power consumption and invasive impact on the local population (De Siano & Canale, 2022, p.1).

Data from the tourism sector (international tourism earnings, taxes and fees, degree of labor employment) confirm its contribution to the economic growth (Luamba, Blye et al., 2021, p.430) of all

countries, making this sector a strategic factor of national economic development (Li & Chuan, 2012, p.671).

The importance of tourism is as far as the contribution to GDP (gross domestic product) has been estimated at 9,9% in 2019, total labor force in 2019 was 11,6%, while "over 99% of all tourism-oriented companies registered in the EU were small and medium enterprises". In relation to these findings at world level, according to the European Court of Auditors, Romania holds an unflattering ranking in Europe when it comes to tourism's contribution to the national GDP and labor employment opportunities (ECA, 2021, pp.7-8). At the same time, tourism in the North-East Economic Development Region of Romania continues to be at a low level of development compared to the other regions of the country (Arionesei, Hapenciuc et al., 2016, p.575), taking into account the tourism competitiveness index (Cozma, 2014, p.176). The direct contribution of the tourism sector to Romania's GDP was 1,6% in 2014, with projected growth of up to 3,8% by 2025, according to EU (2016, p.9), while directly generating 207,000 jobs (3% of total labor market) and a volume of 7,6% of total investments.

Taking into account the evolution of tourism-related activities and the previous research on the matter, the purpose of this study lies in the novel

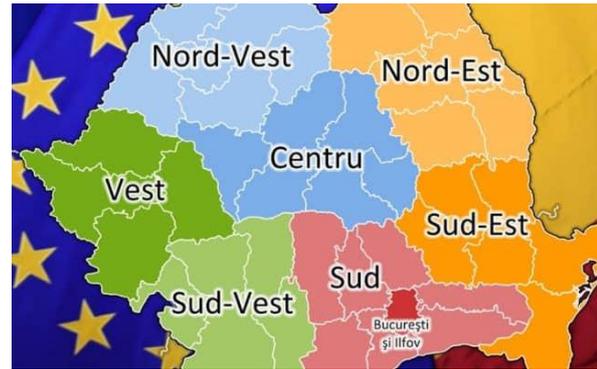
approach concerning the creation of an analysis of the tourism marketplace in the NE Region of Romania. Since such a study has not been realized beforehand, it can be an important contribution to the resource database in this field.

The study is structured as follows: the first part introduces the research methodology; the second covers the available information materials and resource literature pertaining to Romania's NE Region tourism marketplace specifically; the third section presents the most significant results and discussions about the local tourist marketplace. The final section of the document focuses on the study's conclusions and their role as the foundation for future research on the topic of marketplace adaptation strategies for the local travel agencies.

## II.METHODOLOGY RESEARCH

For the purpose of reaching the set research goal, a variety of methods have been used to gather the relevant data concerning a quantitative (Matei, 2021, p.140) and descriptive analysis study. For the first category, relevant studies have been identified within the available academic, printed and online resources on the subject of business administration and tourism. For the second category, statistical data collected by county, regional and national and international institutions was accessed and used. In reference to the statistical information, effort was made to collect it from several recognized sources, such as the National Statistics Institute (INS), the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the Entrepreneurship and Tourism Ministry (MAT), the National Office for Statistics (BNS), the National Commerce Registry Office (ONRC), the North–East Regional Development Agency (ADR Nord – Est), National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), EU (European Union), in order to increase the relevance of the performed analysis. The process followed the identification and synthesis of tourist data related to the percentage of labor employment, GDP contribution, investment levels, statistics concerning travel agencies and their role within the tourism industry, tourist arrivals, booking numbers, tourism earnings, data on tourist related consumption behavior, specifics on travelling patterns and types of tourism encountered.

The study follows the tourism marketplace analysis for the North-East Region of Romania (Fig.1), comprised of six counties: Bacău, Botosani, Iași, Neamt, Suceava and Vaslui. The North-East Region of Romania shares a border to the north with Ukraine, to the east with the Republic of Moldova, and has the South East, the Central and the North-West Regions of Romania as the remainder of its neighbors.



**Figure 1 - The North - East Economic Development Region of Romania**

Source: Bîrsan, 2020

Scutariu, Nastase et al. (2016, pp.2-9) have identified that the tourist activity in this region is facilitated by the cultural and religious heritage, by the natural environment and the purity of the air in the mountains regions, by the local cuisine and traditions of the rural communities, as well as by the physical treatment water therapy offerings and the outdoors sports opportunities. At the same time, the main roadblocks preventing the further development of tourism in the area have been identified by the authors as follows: the inadequate level of transportation and telecommunications infrastructure, the poor planning and insufficient collaboration between the local and national authorities, and also, at rural level, the private initiative struggles with low-qualified tourism staff and financial shortages.

## III.LITERATURE REVIEW

Up until the end of the XIXth century, the concept of travelling as a leisure had not existed. From this perspective, Matsushita (2002, p.5) has found that the first travel agencies in Italy were listing as domain of activity “intermediary activities” between the emigrant labor force and the new destinations offering new life opportunities. Similarly, Köksal & Aksu (2007, p.830) have identified that travel agencies have a vital role in the services industry, particularly in countries whose budget relies heavily on tourism. Furthermore, Herman, Ilieș et al. (2020, p.136), showed that Romania, from this point of view, is a country in which “the tourism industry has all the necessary characteristics to grow and become an engine of the national economy”.

### 3.1. Travel agency, tour operator reservation service and related activities

In Romania, according to the form of administration and in accordance with the current legislation, as published on the Entrepreneurship and Tourism Ministry's website (MAT, n.d., accessed 10 March 2023), the registered travel agencies categories

are: travel agencies operating as intermediary (CAEN code 7911), as organizer (CAEN code 7912), and as providers of other types of reservation services and tourism assistance (CAEN code 7990), which exclude the types of services provided by the former two categories as well as the right to organize and manage events (meetings, conventions, and conferences as described by CAEN code 8230). the CAEN code 7990 class of permissions includes the following: other reservation services related to travelling (transportation, hotel, restaurant, car rental, entertainment, sports and leisure, etc.), time-share activities, sales of theater, sports and other entertainment and leisure events, visitor travel assistance services (providing information to visitors), tourist guide activities, tourism promotion activities.

Per ministerial decree no. 1179 of October 10, 2018, pertaining to the modification and completion of methodological Norms concerning the issuance of the classification certificates for the tourist entities whose activities include tourist accommodations and public restaurant services, of the tourism licenses and permits, accredited in accordance with the National Authority for Tourism presidential order nr. 65/2013, "the travel agency is a specialized form of an economic operator, carrier of a valid tourism license issued in accordance with the law".

The organizing agencies are specialized agencies also known as tour-operators. According to Pencarelli, (2019, p.2), these are generally small and medium enterprises, they can access and connect with every component of the tourism system, including the tourists. The tour-operators aim to identify and aggregate the offers of all the active providers in the tourism sector and to create packages for the end-user consumer.

During the last few decades, the domains of activity of the tour-operators and of the intermediary agencies have become nearly the same, Matsushita (2002, p.14) considering that any agency can combine these activities, in accordance with the organizational capacity and the requirements of the targeted market.

The evolution of technology and of digital means of communication led over time to a change in the pattern of behavior of all economic activities. Specifically, the tourism sector had to face important structural modifications both at the level of economic operators, as well as at consumer level (Valzelli, 2018, p.9). The digital transformation in the field of traveling raises two major preoccupations according to the EU (2021, p.16): the first one considers that the traditional roles are becoming confusing and less relevant, while the second describes the operational processes of a tour-operator. They can be completely automated, rendered digital or remotely managed via online platforms. The use of modern systems of tourist information contributes to the improvement of marketing campaigns in the tourism industry (Bähre, Fergen et al., 2013, p.13).

Consequently, the organizing agencies or the intermediary agencies, per Decree no. 1267 of December 8, 2010 pertaining to the issuance of the classification certificates, of the tourism licenses and permits, and, in the second part, to art. 10 of the ETM's executive order no. 1179 of October 10 2018, pertaining to the modification and completion of the methodological norms concerning the issuance of the classification certificates for the tourist entities whose activities include tourist accommodations and public restaurant services, of the tourism licenses and permits, on Romanian soil, "have the right to conduct economic activities of providing services and/or bundles of tourism offers, including by way of networks and means of electronic communication, partly or completely digitized, web-sites, or similar venues, in observance with the current legislation on electronic commerce, solely based on the issued tourism license, and/or, under certain circumstances, based on a license issued by the accredited public institution".

Besides the travel agencies, the travel guides have an important role in the promotion of local and national tourist destinations. Their activity is regulated by the Decree no. 305 of March 8 2001, concerning the licensing and use of travel guides (updated by date of June 11 2003), which defines the travel guide as "the person which leads and guides a group of tourists or visitors, by providing the necessary explanations related to the visited places, and who ensures the proper management of the contracted tourist agreement"

### 3.2. Tourism market

The tourism marketplace is the common ground where the tourism offer meets demand (Butnaru, 2017). Thus, the tourism offer comes through the travel agencies (intermediaries who sell the tourism packages put together by the tour-operators in exchange for a commission) and through the tour-operators (the ones who create the packaged tourist offers). These agencies represent the bridge between the tourism services providers (the entities supplying the accommodations, the restaurant services, the transportation, the entertainment providers) and the tourists, respectively (Marin-Pantelescu, Tachiciu et al., 2019, p.656).

#### 3.2.1 Tourism Offer

The tourism industry in Romania accounts for 3.5% of the total number of 1,176,237 economic agents registered as active at the end of 2022 (Oficiul Național al Registrului Comerțului - ONRC, 2022), comprising 41,233 companies with authorized activities in the field of tourism, among which travel agencies registered on Romanian soil making up 6.61% (Table 1).

The offer submitted by the travel agencies, depending on the type of tourist activity and on the visited tourist destinations, allows for the classification of the travel agencies in three categories: incoming (or inbound) travel agency, internal travel agencies and

outgoing (or outbound) travel agencies (INS, 2021, pp.611-626).

**Table 1. Types of companies in the tourism sector in Romania authorized by MAT**

No.	Categories authorized	Number	Percent (%)
1	Stay accommodations	20,695	50.19
2	Public restaurant	9,397	22.79
3	Accredited guides	6,600	16.01
4	Travel agencies	2,724	6.61
5	Travel destinations	953	2.31
7	Public tourist beaches	380	0.92
8	Homologated ski slopes	229	0.56
9	Resorts	147	0.36
10	National tourist information and promotion centers	108	0.26
	<b>Total</b>	<b>41,233</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: based on data from MAT 2023

According to the data provided in Table 2, a statistical research paper published in the Romanian statistical yearbook provides some information on travel agencies, whose activity covers 85% of their revenue. Of particular interest is the predominance of the internal tourism, followed by the outbound type, while the inbound tourism has a lower contribution. In countries with an important tourism sector, such as Italy or Spain, there is balance between the numbers of national tourists versus international (ECA, 2021, p.9). The importance of the revenue streams in international tourism is provided by the level of the amount recorded of 1.453 million euros, as well as by the positive effect of inbound tourism on the local economy, which led to the necessity to adopt government policies meant to encourage the inbound activities of the travel agencies (MAT, 2022). The purpose was to increase a tourist's average stay in Romania (from 2 days to 3,3 days by 2035) and, implicitly, of related expenses (MAT, 2022b, p.45).

**Table 2. The tourism in Romania organized by travel agencies according to tourist activity**

Year 2019	Number of tourists (total)		
	Incoming	Intern	Outgoing
Tourist activity			
Tour-operators	104,861	1,064,115	1,007,298
Intermediary agencies	1,229	231,340	117,680
<b>Total number of tourists (total)</b>	<b>106,090</b>	<b>1,295,455</b>	<b>1,124,978</b>

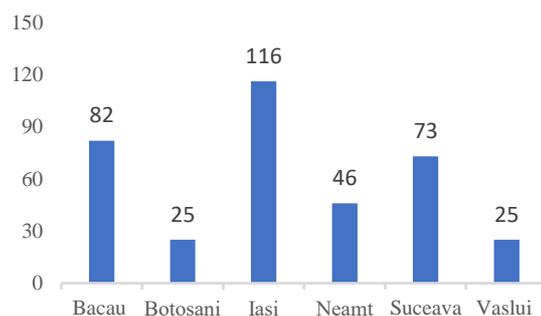
Source: based on data by INS 2021

The National Statistics Office (BNS, 2022, p.4) defines three categories of tourism: internal tourism (movement of residents within the country), national tourism (type of tourism which groups together internal tourism and outgoing tourism) and international tourism (which includes incoming tourism and outgoing tourism). China has become the largest market worldwide for outgoing tourism, shows a study realized by ADR NE (2017, p.73), recording the highest growth in the world (European Parliament, 2022, p.4). EU has therefore decided to promote lesser known destinations to improve the traveling and

tourism experiences, to encourage economic cooperation and progress in relation to facilitating visa issuance and flight connections. The most significant incoming tourism destinations globally (ADR NE, 2017, p.74), based on international tourist arrivals and earnings from international tourism are: France, USA, Spain, China, Italy, Germany, UK.

Herman, Ilieș et al. (2020, pp.97-130) considers that in Romania, the incoming-outgoing travel hubs can be split in two types: the first, of greatest importance, is to be found in the mountains region, the Black Sea shoreline and around Bucharest, while the second is generally located in the areas with under-developed infrastructure and tourist destinations, which leads to a low stream of tourists. According to the authors' analysis, the NE region of Romania holds the second place as tourist generator with the capacity to benefit from the travel agencies' services, only behind the Bucharest region, and last place in number of travel agencies of the national total. The lodging accommodations capacity and the low quality of the services (Cozma, 2014, p.170) in the NE Region places it in direct competition with Romania's Central region.

According to the analysis performed by ADR NE (2017, p.58), there are few travel agencies promoting the NE Region of Romania as a tourist destination, particularly the spa-resorts located in the Suceava, Bacau and Neamț counties, and the monasteries from the Bucovina area. The offers provided by the agencies generally cater to the interests in the spa and mountain-related activities in their bundled packages. Also, the existence of a reduced number of travel agencies in the territory (367 agencies), representing 13% of the total number of agencies at national level, spread over the six counties making up the region (Fig. 2).

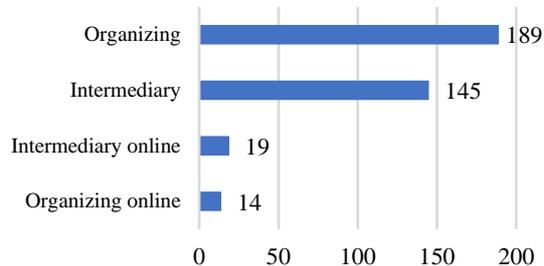


**Figure 2: The distribution of the travel agencies in the NE Region of Romania, 2023**

Source: ETM, 2023

The online travel agencies (Fig.3) are attempting to adjust to the changes in the consumers' behavior and digital evolution, even though they are still at an early stage or growth, lagging with 9% behind the national average of 10,5% of the total number of travel agencies with a presence in Romania (Băltescu, 2020, p.45). Of the travel agencies in Romania, 40 have activated the incoming section in the declared domain of activity (InfoTravel România, 2014), while the NE

Region only recorded 2 tour-operators specialized in the official inbound network designed to attract the flow of international tourism (Incoming România, n.d.) from target markets such as Germany, Spain, France, Israel, UK and Poland (MAT,2022).



**Figure 3 Travel agencies in the NE Region of Romania, 2023**

Source: ETM, 2023

### 3.2.2 Tourism Demand

ISTAT (2022, p.9) estimated that in the EU-27 countries in 2019, the visitors at least 15 old vacationing or on business travels with night stays in inbound structures within the country's borders or abroad, have spent an average of 118 euros per day. The average expense by a tourist coming to Romania in 2019 was 541 euros and has dropped to an average of 475 euros after the pandemic period, while the forecast for 2035 shows an estimated expense amount of 650 euros per tourist (MAT, 2022b, p.45).

In Romania, the most important outbound and inbound center for tourism is Bucharest (Herman, Ilieș et al., 2020, p.136). The visitors come primarily from the urban areas (Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Brașov, Timișoara, Oradea, Galați, Craiova, Ploiești, Pitești), while the tourist destinations are represented by the urban areas and by the famous spa-resorts such as Mangalia, Sinaia, Băile-Felix (the Felix Baths), Băile 1 Mai (1 May Baths) and Eforie-Nord (North Eforie County).

**Table 3. Arrivals, night stays and variation 2022 to 2021 in tourist accommodations with lodging capability for Romanian and foreign tourists**

Year 2022	Arrivals	Overnight stays
Romanian tourists	9,718,046	20,860,755
Foreign tourists	1,581,065	3,458,858
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,299,111</b>	<b>24,319,613</b>

#### Variation

2022/2021	Arrivals	Overnight stays
2022/2021	+21.80%	+17.80%
Romanian tourists	+15.20%	+10.80%
Foreign tourists	+88.10%	+89.20%

Source: based on data by INS, 2022

The arrivals and overnight stays in the tourist accommodations with lodging capability registered a

growth in 2022 compared to 2021, as shown in Table 3. The number of Romanian tourists represented 86% of the arrivals and overnight stays total, while the foreign arrivals made up the remainder 14% of it (INS, 2022, pp.3-4). The monthly distribution of the tourists visiting Romania shows that July and August were the most popular months both for visiting nationals and foreigners (European Union, 2016, p.9).

The main sources of foreign tourists in Romania in 2022 are from the European Union (Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Germany, Poland, France, Spain, etc.) and other European countries (Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Turkey and UK). A less numerous presence is recorded for the tourists from Asia, America, Africa and Australia (INS, 2022, p.7).

### 3.3 Tourist behavior

The travel agencies and other operators in the tourism sector take into account for the creation of the tourism products and services the consumer's behavior, which may be a passive or an active individual, with an interest in personalized products/ services, niche or mass products/ services (Dall'Aglio, Nazzaruolo et al., 2011, p.25). The current tourists has different desires and economic capabilities than in the past and chooses personalized offers meant to satisfy his/her travel needs (MiBACT, 2016, p.37) in a new form of tourism, "new tourism", entirely different from the mass tourism (Iorgulescu & Răvar, 2013, p.512).

Cohen (1984, pp.376-378) categorized the tourists after the Second World War, based on the travel destination, into international tourists and domestic, respectively, and later broke them further into 4 types: tourists practicing mass-organized tourism, mass-tourism individuals, explorer tourists, and traveling tourists or "drifters". Using this classification, Prince (2017, p.2) considers tourists as being either institutionalized or non-institutionalized.

The definition of the tourism consumer's behavior elaborated by Fratu (2011, pp.119-121) describes him/her as representing "a collection of actions, attitudes and decisions concerning the purchase of tourist products and services, the way in which they are consumed and the tourists' post-consumption reactions". The author breaks down the consumer behavior according to personal, social situational and economic criteria. Depending on the family life cycle and its income levels, the tourists are grouped as follows:

- non-married individuals, single with modest, with a strong preference for traveling;
- couples without children, with higher incomes, with a moderate preference towards traveling;
- couples with children less than 6 years old with modest incomes, with a strong preference towards traveling;
- couples with school-aged children, with high incomes and a low inclination towards traveling;

- mature couples with dependent children, stable from an income perspective and with a moderate preference for traveling;
- mature couples without dependent children, with high incomes and a strong preference for traveling;
- couples of advanced age, professionally active, stable from an income perspective and with a strong preference towards traveling;
- retired couples with modest incomes and with a strong preference towards traveling;
- single retired individuals with modest income and with a low preference towards traveling.

Fu, Okumus et al. (2022, p.1) studied the two-way relationship between tourism and an individual's well-being in order to better understand the way in which traveling and personal life influence each other. Traveling is interpreted in the context of life, and individual life is described thru traveling, as a solution for resolving human development crises, classified based on age groups: school age 6-11, teen age 11-20, young adult 21-39, adult 40-64, adult 65+.

The offerings in the tourism sector depend on the customer, on his/her desires and behavior (Patterson & Pegg, 2009, p.269), who becomes ever more responsible. Generation X (Generation Net) and Generation Y (Millennials) will be the main source of demand in the following period, representing more than half of the population willing to travel. A high percentage choose international vacations and higher incomes than those of the other generations allow them to book at least three vacations per year (YouGov, 2021, p.27). The Millennial consumers will account for half of the total travelers by 2025, according to MiBACT (2016, p.37). They will use the internet and the social networks to get information, make reservations, to share and review tourism experiences based on the quality encountered, providing feed-back about local specialties, such as food and wine, as well as ease to connect with the locals. A satisfied tourist, says Bouaru (2006, p.41), will recommend the tourist destination to at least five other potential tourists, while an unhappy one has the capacity to negatively influence 10 potential tourists.

The statistics data from the ADR NE (2017, pp.45-53) provide the following about the tourists in the NE Region of Romania:

- The majority of visitors are Romanian, while the foreign visitors made up roughly 13%, in 2016, the region placing itself below the national average of 23%.
- The breakdown of the foreign tourists per major countries of origin in 2015 was as follows: Germany - 17%, Italy - 14%, France - 9%, Israel - 7%, Spain - 7%, Republic of Moldova - 4%, Netherlands - 3%, UK - 3%, Ukraine - 2%, USA - 3% and others (33%).
- The Romanian tourists come mainly from Bucharest, but also from Constanța and Cluj.
- The Romanian tourists tend to choose leisure tourism, seconded by the religious and business tourism, while the foreign tourists opt for the cultural, leisure and rural tourism.

- The national tourists have ages between 35-49, while the foreign tourists may also be over 50.

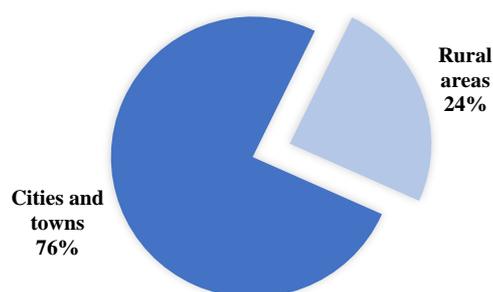
- The majority of the Romanian tourists are families with children, while the foreign tourists arrive in organized groups.

- The Romanian tourists arrive by car, while the foreign tourists rely mainly on buses first and car second as means of transportation.

- The visitors practice a week-end, occasional or transit type of tourism, particularly in the peak months from the point of view of tourism frequency (July, August, September), with an average stay of 2 nights per foreign tourist.

- The main arrivals were in 2015 in the rather large cities and towns, and less notable in rural areas (Fig. 4), fact that supports the theory that these areas may have a significant development potential for the foreign tourist who prefer this type of tourism.

According to Matei (2021, pp.150-155), the main motivation for the tourists visiting the NE Region of Romania is in observance of the environmental protection and conservation conditions (ecotourism), as they mainly choose these forms of tourism: itinerant, rest and recreational, rural and agro-tourism, scientific, spa-resort therapy and sports-oriented. Furthermore, the author identified three distinct tendencies at regional level determined by the Covid-19 pandemic: (1) the extension of the stay in rural guesthouses (owing to the elevated quality of the services provided, to the possibility to tailor the tourism services to suit individual needs, to the higher level of security and to the natural environment), (2) the rural tourism allows for early booking and cancellations and last, but not least, (3) the rise of the internal and regional tourism as a result of the restrictions on trips abroad.



**Figure 4 - Tourism frequency in the NE Region in urban/rural areas(%)**  
Source: ADR NE (2017)

Similarly, Georgica (2015, p.1600) has identified that "slow" tourism (regional cuisine, local agriculture, traditional methods of food preparation, mountain biking, trekking, horse riding, canoeing, underground cave exploration, bird watching etc.) is a form of tourism much appreciated internationally,

being a trend born in Italy. This form of tourism can be presented on the Romanian market both to both local and foreign visitors, as it underscores the relationship with gastronomy, with family, with diverse populations and with other local cultures.

Another type of tourism with great potential in this region, proposed by Racasan & Gaman (2016, p.133), is medical tourism, the results being indicative of a positive context in the counties of Suceava, Bacau and Iasi, based on the considered indicators, chief among which was the number of ground mineral water sources.

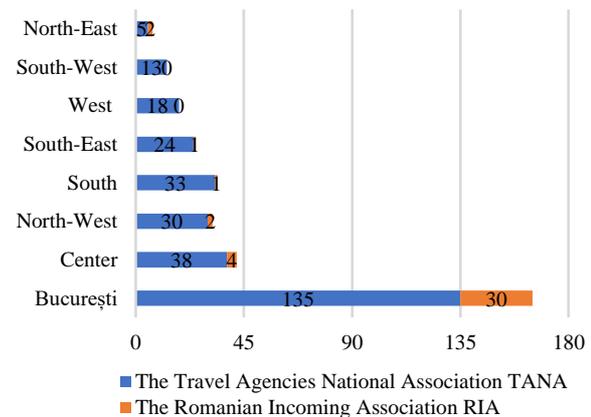
### 3.4. International network and exhibitions

The networking and the participation to the tourism international fairs have become a key factor in the promotion of the small and medium sized enterprises at international level, and consideration should be given to marketplace adaptation strategies (Musso & Francioni, 2015, p.341). As far as the large tour-operators are concerned (Yevstafyev & Yevstafyev, 2015), establishing long-term partnerships with travel agencies represents a major pathway towards geographic expansion.

The collaboration between the travel agencies and the other tour-operators generates a constant stream of ideas and is essential for the good performance and the growth of the entire tourism industry (Valeri & Baggio, 2021, p.1). According to the authors, there are two kinds of relations between two businesses in the tourism industry: formal and informal. The structural analysis of the network of travel agencies has identified the existence of some informal communities which proved to be both useful and efficient. The informal networks, on top of the traditional approach related to business administration and the qualitative knowledge of the tourism system, have the role of offering a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the system.

Yachin (2020, p.1) considers that the networks have “the potential to identify the opportunities and to compensate for the lack of resources and competences”, At the same time, they have the role of “incorporating social and commercial connections based on common interests”, with the goal of increasing performance. The benefits generated by the networks for the travel agencies include activities coordination, identification of market opportunities, access to resources and knowledge databases, financial support, cost reduction, practical help, competence learning and development, and not least emotional support. When it comes to emotional support, the tourism entrepreneurs rely heavily on close contacts and develop a sense of security through personal relationships and informal networking, while the repetition of positive interactions builds up the trust with other network agents. Throughout time, as they progress and develop with the business, the tourism industry networks expand and may end up including

other connections from different business sectors and activity fields.



**Figure 5 – The Distribution per regions of the travel agencies as members of tourism associations in Romania**

Source: ANAT & AIR (2023)

Figure 5 presents the distribution per development regions of the Romanian travel agencies. The NE Development Region is represented in the national association by 5 travel agencies, out of a total of 302 travel agencies. As to the presence of the NE Region in the Romanian Incoming Association, only two travel agencies have been identified in Suceava and in Iasi counties.

Lupu & Marin-Pantelescu (2008, p.146) consider that the travel agencies and the tour-operators cooperate at international level with the services providers, so that the consumers can benefit quickly and under optimum conditions of their vacation package “consisting of several categories of services (transportation, lodging, restaurant, entertainment, guide). In that regard, Bruzzone (2022, p.11) considers that the participation to the tourism fairs is essential because it enables the creation of partnerships with the world leaders in the industry. According to Cagnoni, (2022, p.14) these meetings contribute to an increased performance when they manage to bring together “industry and category associations, the productive side and the institutions responsible for the international business development. At the same time, they must be able to offer business instruments meant to facilitate the contact with the international business communities. They must act as vectors towards the foreign markets, in search of new commercial opportunities”. Romania’s participation in 2023 at the international fairs is supported by the industry-specific associations and by the local public authorities (The Romanian Incoming Association - AIR, The Travel Agencies National Association - ANAT, The Association for the Promotion of Timisoara, The Romanian Eco-tourism Association, The Brasov Guides Association, Cluj-Napoca City Hall, Busteni City Hall, The Prahova Tourism Promotion and Development Association, The Karpaten for a Long-Lasting Development

Association, Transilvania Hills, Constanta County Council, Maramures County Council, Suceava County Council and City Hall) on the following European markets: Germany, Spain, France, Israel, Italy, UK, Poland and Romania (MAT, 2023).

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given its favorable geographic position, the superior quality of its human capital (Croitoru, 2011, p.127), the wealth of its natural and cultural resources, Romania demonstrates an elevated tourism potential, despite the comparative studies at international level, which highlight a poor performance of this sector (Cozma, 2014, p.170). On the perpetually developing international marketplace, Romania and the NE Development Region rely mainly on the internal tourism. The region provides a significant supply of tourists at national level, who need support and advice concerning vacation travel destinations, and the travel agencies have a key role in this regard. They are concentrated in the major counties (Iasi, Bacau and Suceava), but are facing difficulties arising from the evolution of digital technology and from the modifications of the consumer behavior, whose travel decisions are more and more made based on information available online. Also, the reduced presence of the travel agencies specializing in incoming tourism, as well as the absence from the international tourism fairs, could be correlated with the small number of foreign tourists in the region.

The statistical reports reviewed take into consideration the importance of the travel agencies in the context of the promotion of internal tourism, of incoming tourism and of outgoing tourism, and they provide valuable information related to arrivals and overnight stays in the receiving accommodation units. However, as Saluveer, Raun et al., (2020, p.2) have

mentioned, one of the identified limitations with regard to this data is represented by the inability to provide additional information concerning the unofficial tourism, such as visiting of the relatives and friends, or overnight stays undeclared for fiscal reasons, as well as benefits related to taxes and fees. This difficulty could be overcome with the use of emerging digital techniques of analysis and data interpretation (*big data*).

#### V. CONCLUSION

The depth of study of the tourism market in the NE Region of Romania, at travel agencies' level, arising from this analysis is centered on the investigation of the manner in which the local travel agencies are promoting their offers on the marketplace, with the goal of satisfying the demands and expectations of a consumer whose behavior is in constant change. The performance of the travel agencies is reflected in their results, observed through the lens of the afore-mentioned indicators, as their impact greatly influences the local development and its promotion as an international tourism destination. The case study may be relevant as a foundation for future research on the analysis of travel agencies' marketplace adaptation strategies and for the identification of the most efficient strategies leading to the development of tourism in the NE Region of Romania.

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