

THE COMMUNITY OF FRENCH AND FRENCH-SPEAKING STUDENTS IN IASI AND ITS IMPACT ON DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL TOURISM

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the impact on local, national and international tourism of the French and Francophone community that has been present in Iași for the past fifteen years or so. This community consists mainly of French medical students, who now represent the second-largest group of foreign nationals residing in Iași after Moldovan citizens. The impact on the tourism economy is evident in terms of airport traffic (to and from France), accommodation (hotels and private lodgings), restaurants, cafés, clubs, shopping centers and various shops. This community consists of young people who go out a lot and enjoy visiting Iași's tourist and leisure spots. They also travel within the country (Bucharest, Transylvania, Bukovina...) mainly by train, and abroad by plane, particularly to return to their home countries (France, Morocco, Tunisia, Belgium) but also to other countries. These French and French-speaking students also influence their families and friends who visit them in Romania, thereby becoming ambassadors for tourism in Iași upon their return to France.

Key words: *French and French-speaking students, impact on tourism, local tourism, domestic tourism, international tourism.*

JEL Classification: Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

The city of Iași, located in north-eastern Romania, is one of the Romanian cities with the richest history and tradition of Francophone and Francophile culture. A cultural and university city (with nearly 300,000 inhabitants and 55,000 students), it is currently characterized by a resurgence of this Francophonie, following a period of 'drought' in enthusiasm for the French language and a low profile for the French presence in the public, geographical and socio-cultural spheres.

Indeed, over the last ten years, the French community has been the largest foreign community in the city, after that of citizens of the Republic of Moldova. It consists mainly of French students studying general medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine, who have been living there for at least six years; alongside them, there is also a community of French-speaking students, mainly from Morocco and Tunisia, who merge with the French community and expand it in terms of the number of French speakers.

In this study, we define the Francophone community as a group of people from countries where French is an official language and/or who have French as their mother tongue, spoken and used in their daily lives. The community of Francophone students includes students from Francophone countries,

generally African nations that were formerly French colonies, as well as (albeit rarely) from Switzerland or Belgium. The reason we have chosen to bring French and Francophone students together in the same group, within the same community, is that, apart from their shared linguistic identity, these young international students have the same status as students and study together at the same universities and on the same degrees, most of which are also provided in French.

Furthermore, even though they hold different passports and may or may not have European citizenship, they belong to the same linguistic and cultural sphere and have much in common: age, medical studies, concerns and interests, social and cultural life, leisure activities, sport, etc.

Finally, when they gather in various public spaces in Iași and communicate with one another in French during various activities, it is practically impossible to tell who is French and who is not. Indeed, in recent years France has increasingly become a multicultural country, with a population of very diverse origins. In 2023, 21% of the French population were either born abroad or had at least one immigrant parent. Dual nationals account for 5% of the population of mainland France aged between 18 and 50, 90% of whom are immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

The French and French-speaking community in Iași perfectly reflects this diversity, comprising many people with dual nationality and from families on both

sides of the Mediterranean Sea.

II. THE FRENCH-SPEAKING SECTION AT THE UMF IN IAȘI: THE ORIGINS OF TODAY'S FRENCH AND FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

The success of the French-language section at the UMF in Cluj (established in 2000), Romania joining the European Union (in 2007), and the presence of French-speaking communities in the city and at the University of Iași led to the creation of a French-language section at the ‘Gr. T. Popa’ University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iași in 2009. Initially, it offered 90 places in the Faculty of General Medicine and 90 places in Dentistry.

Since then, the number of French-speaking students has grown exponentially. Many students who failed their final first-year medical exams in France hope to be given a second chance and a fresh start by enrolling in Romania, particularly in Iași. Every year, the number of applicants is rising and the French and French-speaking student community is expanding. But this young community comprises not only students rejected by the French university medical system, but also an increasing number of young A-level graduates, both male and female, who choose, with their families' support, to apply directly in Iași for their first year of study at the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy. Romanian medical studies are thus enhanced by their language of instruction – French – and the choice of these young French people to come to Iași to pursue them.

In 2014, the Faculty of General Medicine offered 150 places and the Faculty of Dentistry 90 places; over a thousand applications were received. That year, the Faculty of Medicine enrolled 116 French students (or French-Maghreb dual nationals), 29 Tunisians and 5 Moroccans. In 2016, the number of French students at the UMF reached 539, with 289 Moroccans and 236 Tunisians. In 2022, there were 841 French students, 355 Moroccans and 236 Tunisians. For the 2025–2026 academic year, the number of French students at the UMF is 1,153, Moroccans 162, and Tunisians 63; in addition, there are 29 Belgians, 10 Swiss and around ten other French-speaking Africans. (Information received from the Rectorate of the ‘Gr. T. Popa’ University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iași on 12 November 2025). These figures, to which must be added 290 French students studying veterinary medicine in English at the University of Life Sciences (USV Iași), reveal the existence for several years of a genuine French and Francophone community in Iași, the core being the community of students on the Francophone section at the UMF in Iași.

III. THE IMPACT OF THE FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITY ON LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL TOURISM: ACADEMIC EXPATRIATION

One of the basic operational concepts of our research is that of academic expatriation, which we define as a fixed-term academic migration. Students who are part of the French and Francophone community in Iași are therefore academic expatriates, long-term ‘tourists’ with a clearly defined duration. This duration covers their university education, the period of their medical studies, which lasts six years in Romania and in Iași.

This community directly influences tourism in the city of Iași. Indeed, these students regularly host family and friends visiting from France or other French-speaking countries, generating a steady flow of tourists throughout the year. These visitors explore the city's main tourist attractions, such as the Palace of Culture, the Botanical Garden, and the numerous churches and monasteries. This family visit tourism generates a source of income for local hotels, restaurants and shops. Furthermore, French and French-speaking students actively participate in local cultural life, attending festivals, celebrations and university events, as well as gatherings and activities organised by student societies or cultural institutions.

On the other hand, academic events organised by students (such as the ‘Médicis’ international Francophone medical congress) and university ceremonies regularly attract visitors from abroad or other Romanian cities.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Methodologically, we employed a method of mapping data obtained from various sources, notably based on numerous field surveys using questionnaires (a questionnaire administered to a sample of 100 French and Francophone students in 2024 and 2025). The questionnaire-based surveys were supplemented by interviews with French and French-speaking students, selected on the basis of a series of representative criteria (leaders, dual nationals, etc.). We analysed this data with the aim of identifying and highlighting the tourist activities of these students, within the region of Moldavia (and therefore around the city of Iași), within Romania (to other cities or regions renowned for tourism), as well as internationally, outside Romania, to neighboring countries (or the region).

The data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews were corroborated by other data collected using the participant observation method (specific to

anthropology: Maisonneuve, 1988), which involved our immersion in the activities of the subjects studied, through participation alongside them in numerous socio-cultural activities and gatherings. Finally, further data was obtained by analysing the social media accounts of several French and Francophone students and their associations, where their tourist activities were mentioned and detailed, alongside other activities.

The structure of the survey questionnaire was designed to gather information regarding the students' socio-cultural backgrounds, their places of residence and leisure, their role and presence in the social and economic life of the city of Iași, and their economic and tourist contribution. It includes questions regarding identity, gender, age, origin in France, parents' occupations, the students' socio-cultural profile and their geographical origin; questions regarding their geographical distribution within the city, based on the location of university premises, their accommodation and leisure venues; questions regarding their budget and personal means of subsistence, and the management of this budget; questions regarding their social and community life, their cultural life, and their tourist activities; questions regarding their interest in the Romanian language; and questions assessing their life in Iași.

Here are the questions relating to tourist activities: "Which towns or regions of Romania have you visited as a tourist? Which cities or regions in Romania have you considered visiting as a tourist? Which foreign cities and countries have you visited from Iași? Which foreign cities and countries do you plan to visit from Iași? To do so, did you use a plane, train, bus or car?"

The interviews (or individual structured interviews) were supplemented by group interviews. In a 2022 article, Luc Albarello highlights the advantages of using the latter: "The group interview thus allows one to draw on a dynamic of exchange regarding a particular theme to gather contrasting information, to benefit from the expression of contrasting practices and opinions, with a view to obtaining a particularly dense and complex overview of situations and perceptions relating to the research subject and for a specifically defined group" (Albarello, 2022, p. 271).

These interviews were conducted using a framework that covered roughly the same aspects as the questions relating to tourist activities in the survey questionnaire, but expressed in much more general terms, or, in the words of Luc Albarello, "formulated in such a way as to allow for the freest possible discussion, with the more general questions preceding the more specific ones". (Albarello, 2022, p. 273).

Analysis of the responses obtained following the distribution of this questionnaire to well over a hundred French and French-speaking students, as well as the individual and group interviews conducted with the same number of participants, has enabled us to draw

several conclusions, which we will present below.

V. ECONOMIC IMPACT ON LOCAL TOURISM

Based on an analysis of the responses to a questionnaire distributed in 2025 to around a hundred French and French-speaking students, as well as several individual and group interviews (Albarello, 2022) (also around a hundred), that members of the French and French-speaking community spend on average at least €15,000 per year in Iași. This represents tens of millions of euros injected into the local economy. Part of these spendings directly fuel the local tourism sector: accommodation (private rentals, hotels), catering, leisure, culture, sport and transport. Furthermore, the regular visits from their families and friends, who come to see them and explore Iași during the start of the academic year, holidays, exams, graduation ceremonies and so on, generates further expenditure linked to local tourism. These visitors frequent, in fact, hotels in the city center, restaurants, shopping centers and iconic landmarks (Palace of Culture, Palas Mall, Iulius Mall, Botanical Garden, Copou Park, Cîrc, museums, churches and monasteries), contributing to the rise in tourist numbers, 16% of whom are foreign.

The immediate impact can be heard, seen and felt on the city's streets, where French-speaking students support local businesses over the long term. Throughout the academic year, all the venues in the center of Iași where one can eat or 'chill out' over a coffee or a beer are full of French students. Moreover, an increasing number of food spots and shops are adopting French names. In recent years, a large number of 'French-style' cafés have sprung up in the city center, where one can enjoy croissants, pastries and typically French confectionery such as *Bordeaux cannelés* and macarons, a trend directly linked to this demand.

In the weekend, this community explores the surroundings of Iași and Moldova. The monasteries of Bucovina, for example, benefit from visits by these students, who share their experiences on social media, acting as ambassadors for cultural tourism.

VI. THE VITAL ROLE OF IAȘI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Accessibility plays a vital role in the growth of tourism. Iași International Airport facilitates connections with numerous French and European cities. Since 2015, it has offered regular, direct flights to Paris-Beauvais Airport – a factor that has influenced many young people's decision to study in Iași. It recorded over 2.2 million passengers in 2025, representing a 2.2% increase compared to the previous year. In 2025 and early 2026, the city of Iași established itself as Romania's third-largest airport hub.

Although domestic tourism remains the dominant form in Romania (around 80%), the share of international tourism is increasing in Iași and is higher there, largely due to its medical faculties.

Two reasons can be put forward for this development: Romania's entry into the Schengen Area (air and sea) since 2024–2025 has considerably streamlined arrivals, making the destination more attractive; 'VFR' (Visiting Friends and Relatives) tourism (Backer, Leisch, and Dolnicar, 2017, pp. 56–64; Backer, 2012, pp. 74–79), a significant proportion of international tourism in Iași being generated by the families and friends of the 2,000 French-speaking students and expatriates. The top countries of origin for arrivals at Iași Airport (2025) are as follows: 1) Italy (Milan, Rome, Bologna, Venice); 2) United Kingdom (London Luton – flow of workers and students); 3) France (Paris Beauvais – steady flow of students and families).

The airport is a key gateway for French and French-speaking students and their visitors, providing direct access to the city. Air travel is the mode of transport used in 97% of cases. The passenger flows generated by international students thus help to maintain a steady demand for low-cost flights (Wizz Air, Ryanair) and strengthen Iași's connectivity with Western Europe. Currently, there are 13 flights per week (9 operated by Wizz Air and 4 by Ryanair). This high frequency confirms that this route is one of the most strategic for Iași Airport, driven mainly by strong demand from the student community and their families. With an average of nearly two flights a day, Iași is closer to Paris than some provincial French towns. This allows students to return home for a long weekend or their families to visit easily. Paris-Beauvais is, after London-Luton and Milan-Bergamo, the airport's most stable and profitable route, which explains why these 13 weekly frequencies remain constant despite seasonal adjustments. The busiest days are generally Mondays and Fridays, corresponding to the start-of-week and end-of-week flows of 'VFR' (Visiting Friends and Relatives).

The arrival and large presence of French and French-speaking travelers has thus influenced the local airport's strategy since 2015. The constant demand for Paris-Beauvais and other European hubs close to France (Mulhouse-Basel, Charleroi, Barcelona) is largely driven by the flow of students and their families. It is estimated that each student receives at least two visits a year. This represents thousands of hotel stays and restaurant meals generated by parents and friends, who take advantage of the airport's connectivity to explore the city. Similarly, each student travels at least two or three times a year to their country of origin or a third country.

VII. GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITY ON TOURISM

This influence extends beyond the city's borders and has a national and international reach, as we have just mentioned.

Members of the community help to foster a positive, dynamic and international image of Iași and Romania, far removed from stereotypes. Indeed, as previously mentioned, they act as ambassadors for Iași. After completing their studies, many graduates maintain a connection with Iași and help promote the destination in their home countries. Through social media, they help spread the image of Iași as a beautiful, cultural, modern, safe and welcoming university city.

The French and French-speaking student community in Iași is now a discreet yet significant player in the city's tourism development. Through family visits, cultural exchanges, the vibrancy of university life and the international appeal it generates, it helps to strengthen Iași's image as a university and tourist destination.

This French-speaking presence is therefore an asset for local, national and international tourism in Iași. These students have become key players in a new tourism ecosystem. (Hall and Page, 2006). They have transformed Iași into a cosmopolitan enclave where French is spoken on every street corner, thereby justifying the modernisation and development of certain university, leisure, transport (urban and airport) and tourist accommodation facilities.

Iași's hotel sector has evolved to meet the needs generated by this community. In the traditional hotel sector, the families of French-speaking students represent a clientele with high purchasing power who favour luxury establishments (4 and 5-star) located in the city centre (Piata Unirii). Peak occupancy periods coincide with the start of the academic year (September/October), exam periods and graduation ceremonies (July). It is worth noting that a parent whose child is studying medicine for six years becomes a regular customer, returning several times a year.

The massive influx of students each year puts pressure on the real estate market. This has encouraged the development of residences offering the comfort of an apartment with hotel-style services for the first few weeks after arrival, as well as Airbnb and holiday rentals. A significant proportion of the central housing stock is now dedicated to accommodating families or friends from the French-speaking community, ensuring a high occupancy rate even outside the traditional tourist season. It is also noted that French and French-speaking families stay longer (4 to 7 days) in these properties than typical tourists.

VIII. THE MOST POPULAR TOURIST ATTRACTIONS AND SITES AMONG FRENCH AND FRENCH-SPEAKING VISITORS IN IAȘI

The vast majority of students – who make up almost the entire community – live in the area between the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Life Sciences (USV) and the Palas Mall complex. Most of them rent accommodation in the city center in the area around Piata Unirii and Bd. Stefan cel Mare, which lie along this axis, or on Bd. Independentei, where the University of Medicine (UMF) is located.

This axis is also where they study and spend their free time visiting places, going for walks, shopping, eating out, playing sport (indoors or outdoors), socialising with friends, and attending cultural and religious events.

The most popular venues are:

1. The Palace of Culture. This neo-Gothic monument houses four museums, and the climb up the Clock Tower for a panoramic view is very popular with photographers. It is very popular with the families of French students.

2. The Palas Complex and its Gardens. Located just behind the Palace, this is the beating heart of modern tourism, offering a unique blend of luxury shopping, restaurants, clubs, cafés, French-style gardens, cultural events and an ice rink in winter. It is a favourite meeting place for young people, foreign students – particularly French ones – and their families.

3. Stefan Cel Mare Boulevard. Between the Palace of Culture and Piata Unirii, this boulevard is partly pedestrianised and boasts numerous cafés and clubs popular with students, as well as Iasi's historic and tourist monuments.

4. The Copou Hill district, much loved and frequented by French families and French students from the USV, which is situated near its summit. It stretches along Carol I Boulevard, with its clubs, cafés and restaurants. It is also home to 'Al. I. Cuza' University, Copou Park with its flower-lined paths and century-old trees, including the linden tree of the poet Mihai Eminescu.

IX. REGIONAL AND NATIONAL TOURISM

More than half of the respondents to our survey questionnaire have visited a town or region near Iasi, usually with friends, but also with their parents when they came to visit. In such cases, the impact on tourism was amplified.

More than half of the French and French-speaking students visited Romania's major cities or those renowned for tourism, including, in order of preference: Bucharest, Brasov, Timisoara, Cluj, Sibiu, Suceava and Sighisoara, always in small groups comprising friends or relatives from France, during their stay in Iasi. Captivated by the beauty of these

cities, they went on to visit other regions of Romania renowned for tourism, including Bukovina and Maramures (50%), Constanta, the Black Sea, Transylvania and the Danube Delta (30%). Domestic tourism has thus benefited from clear and unexpected growth, as it has unfolded over a long period, generally six years (the duration of studies in general medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine). As for the tourist reputation of the Romanian towns and regions chosen for their visits, they told us they found out about them online, on travel websites, or through word of mouth from senior colleagues, and not necessarily from tourist offices.

X. INTERNATIONAL TOURISM

Outside their home country, 47% of students visited a foreign country during their period of study abroad in Iasi. As for the foreign cities and countries they visited, 25% of them admitted to having chosen the city of Istanbul, in Turkey. This choice is motivated by at least two reasons, identified during face-to-face interviews and group discussions with well over a hundred French and French-speaking students. Firstly, this city is more difficult to reach from France, even by plane, and the cost is higher, whereas there are direct flights from Iasi. Another reason mentioned is the city's Eastern, Balkan and religious characteristics, which, in their imagination, possess a deeply subjective allure and charm, particularly for French and French-speaking students of the Muslim faith.

The other country they have visited or would like to visit is Hungary, which is geographically closer to Romania (this applies to 60% of respondents to our survey), particularly the city of Budapest. A minority (20%) would like to go to Moldova, specifically to its capital, Chisinau, by car, with friends, for a weekend. Only 9% want to go to Bulgaria.

French-speaking students are drawn to other destinations, mainly in Europe (60%), which are easier for them to reach from Iasi, thanks to Romania's membership of the EU, its entry into the Schengen Area and the many direct flights available from the international airport. The following countries were mentioned in the questionnaire responses (in descending order of preference): France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Spain and the Scandinavian countries.

For trips abroad, the preferred mean of transport is the plane, due to the facilities offered by Iasi Airport. As for travel within Romania, the preferred mean of transport remains the train (for 80% of those who choose to travel domestically), despite its slowness, and, occasionally, a rental car (25%), depending on their monthly and annual budget. Fewer than 3% own and use a private car.

XI. CONCLUSIONS

The presence in Iași, for the past dozen years or

so, of a genuine French and French-speaking community, consisting mainly of French and North African students, has undoubtedly had an impact on the tourism sector (accommodation, catering, transport, leisure, travel) at local, national and international levels.

A foreign community comprising of more than 2,000 young adults who need to find accommodation and make a living for at least six years away from their families and their home countries generates considerable expenditure. Each young member of this community is also connected to their family and friends who accompanied them, usually by plane, to apply to university, initially staying in a hotel (a residence or an Airbnb), going out to eat, and then looking for long-term accommodation, usually a flat to rent...

These parents will return to France or elsewhere, but will often come back to Iasi to visit their children, who will also receive visits from friends. For their part, the students will return to France every summer, but also for the Christmas and Easter holidays or on other occasions. Airport activity, the sale of flight tickets mainly to Paris-Beauvais, and the hotel and restaurant sectors are therefore influenced by this flow of students and their families.

Furthermore, the permanent presence for almost 10 months a year and for six years of a community of around 2,000 students – a figure that has been growing and expanding since 2009 – has a significant impact on the local, national and international tourism economy.

Beyond the tuition fees collected by the UMF and the USV (€15 million per year) and various daily purchases (food, maintenance, healthcare, etc.), other expenditure by French and French-speaking students benefits local tourism stakeholders: accommodation (€12 million per year), catering, transport, entertainment, culture, sport and travel.

In summary, the presence of the French and French-speaking community, which is primarily made up of students, has a direct influence on tourism and regularly leads to visits from their families and friends, who thus discover the city and its surroundings. These visits, often repeated over several years, generate additional tourist footfall, particularly in the accommodation, catering and leisure sectors.

French students, along with their visitors, contribute to the local economy and particularly to the tourism sector, by increasing airport traffic and spendings in hotels, shops, cafés, restaurants and cultural activities. Their presence also stimulates the provision of services tailored to French speakers (guides, tours, events), which enhances the city's appeal to tourists.

Iași's reputation as a French-speaking university city is spreading in France, particularly via social media and student testimonials. This attracts not only potential students, but also tourists keen to discover a Romanian city rich in history, with a French-speaking past and present, and a vibrant student life.

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