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THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PROMOTION CENTERS IN CREATING THE IMAGE OF TOURIST DESTINATION: ROMANIA

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Abstract

The expansion of tourism at regional and global levels requires considerable efforts from those involved, if tourist-destination management is to be optimized. In that context, the purpose of the work underpinning this article has been to emphasize and quantify the roles and functions that responding examples of Romania's Tourist Information and Promotion Centers play and serve, as they seek to create and promote for their country the image of attractive tourist destination. Indicators taken account of in the work relate to tasks set out in the domestic legislation put in place to accredit the said National Tourist Information and Promotion Centers. Results obtained using the questionnaire method, though limited quantitatively (to just the 35 out of 110 Centers that responded positively to the research team's request), are suggestive in qualitative terms, providing valuable information that successfully reflects the role and importance of Centers of this kind in outlining and developing the image of Romania as a destination for tourists.

Key words

promotion center • tourism destination • local tourist products • destination imaging • Romania

Introduction

Tourist destinations are territorial entities possessing infrastructure (accommodation units and gastronomy outlets, settings for

treatment and leisure, and auxiliary amenities) and having well-defined tourist functions in the territory, that are capable of attracting and retaining potential tourists for a longer or shorter time (Tamma 2002; Dela & Aria

2016). The genesis, evolution and dynamics of tourist destinations depend on a number of factors, not least transport infrastructure (Bieger & Wittmer 2006; Ilieș & Grama 2010; Więckowski et al. 2014; Matoga & Pawłowska 2018; Rosik et al. 2018), tourist infrastructure (Khadaroo & Seetana 2008; Kapera 2018), the weather (Martin 2005; Lindner-Cendrowska 2013), the perceptions of tourists (Beerli & Martín 2004; Cracolici & Nijkamp 2009; Ilies et al. 2017; Toral et al. 2018; Wendt et al. 2019), and competition between destinations (Fyall et al. 2012; Ilies et al. 2012; Dwyer et al. 2014; Mendola & Volo 2017; Sainaghi et al. 2017; Gómez-Vega & Picazo-Tadeo 2019). All these defining factors – and the mutations to which they are subject – lead to evolutionary transformations of tourist destinations (Saarinen 2001, 2004; Mariani 2014).

Against this background, an important role in depicting tourist destinations and shaping specific images thereof is that played by centers charged with providing tourists with information and engaging in the promotion of tourism. In the Romanian context, “the national Tourist Information and Promotion Centers are specialized services which function under the guidance of local and county councils and, if the case, in cooperation with the Ministry for Small and Medium Enterprises, Commerce, Tourism and Liberal Jobs” (as legislated in Order 1096 of 2008, indented line 1.3). In turn, the law provides that their tasks are: “(a) general information regarding the tourist offer and the local, regional or national tourist attractions; (b) providing tourists with local, regional or national promotion materials; (c) to inform, as a free service, about the local accommodation offer; (d) to inform about the possibilities to book transportation tickets, as well as about the local, national and specialized tourist guides; (e) organizing tourism exhibition activities on local and regional levels and general activities of internal and external marketing with a role in increasing the local and regional tourist flow; (f) providing advice regarding the choice of various local, regional and

national tourist products, as a free service; (g) cooperation with local and regional institutions on tourism issues (local public administration authorities, chambers of commerce, the Agency for Regional Development etc.); (h) cooperation with the central public authority for tourism and providing, at its request, statistical data referring to the local and regional tourist flow, data referring to events with a role in increasing the tourist flow which are accomplished on local and regional levels, as well as providing other information referring to tourist activities and tourist offer on local and regional levels; (i) carrying on market research activities on local and regional levels, activities of analysis, planning, structuring and elaborating proposals for local and regional tourism development and tourism marketing, in cooperation with authorities of the local public administration and with the central public authority for tourism; (j) providing information regarding the competent authorities in solving the locally registered complaints regarding the quality of tourism services” (Order 1096 of 2008, indented line 4.1).

The successful pursuit of the tasks listed above, by staff involved in information management and the promotion of tourist destinations, constitutes a special aspiration with implications for the influencing of tourist behaviour (Tierney 1993; Fesenmaier 1994; Connell & Reynolds 1999; Cai et al. 2004; Wong & McKercher 2011). Analysis of relevant specialist literature reveals how tourists are variously motivated as they exert a demand for information on tourist destinations. The most frequent aspects to be noted are nevertheless: the identification and evaluation of options prior to purchase (Moutinho 1987); the enhancement in terms of quality of the act that tourism represents (McIntosh & Goeldner 1990); optimized allocation of available resources (Gitelson & Crompton 1983; Capella & Greco 1987; Fodness & Murray 1997, 1999; Ilieș et al. 2010), etc. Thus, “tourist information centers represent the interface between the tourism industry of a tourist destination and tourists” (Chașovschi et al. 2016: 21).

Under the above circumstances, and taking as its starting points such a theoretical interface role, as well as the existence of a bond between tourists and tourist destinations, and the tasks structures of the Promotion Center have in promoting tourist destinations, the current study can be considered to stand out both quantitatively and qualitatively. In essence, the working hypothesis present from the outset has been that, in line with attributions it is there to fulfill, a Tourist Information and Promotion National Center (TIPNC) is indeed a key factor in the creation and promotion of the image of a tourist destination from a certain area, with the destination in this case being Romania. To this end, an attempt at an evaluation of the role and importance of such Centers has been made.

Work methodology

The work described here draws on the results of consultations run between 1st October 2017 and 20th April 2018 with representatives of Romanian Tourist Information and Promotion Centers financed through the Regional Operational Program 2007-2013; Priority axis: 5. Sustainable development and tourist promotion; Major intervention domain: 5.3. The promotion of tourist potential and the creation of necessary infrastructure, in order to increase the attractiveness of Romania as a tourist destination. The relevant measure related to the creation of Tourist Information and Promotion National Centers (TIPNC) and their equipping.

With a view to the established research objectives being achieved, the study detailed here resorted to questionnaire-based social inquiry, as a quantitative method by which to gather and analyse data (Chelcea 2007; Babbie 2010; Bryman 2012; Bar et al. 2016; Ilieș et al. 2015, 2016, 2018; Oneț et al. 2018; Tătar et al. 2018; Sabău et al. 2018). The questionnaire referred to was of 10 items, relating to local tourist attractions; local tourist promotional materials; accommodation in the vicinity; the possibility of reservations for public transportation being made; the

possibility of contact being made with tourist guides; the organization of tourism-exhibition events at local level, or of other internal or external marketing activities seeking to increase tourist flows locally or regionally; recommended local tourist products; local tourist traffic; "market research activities on local and regional level, activities of analysis, planning, structuring and elaboration of local and regional tourism development and tourism marketing proposals, in cooperation with authorities of the local public administration and with the central public authority for tourism" (Order 1096 of 2008); and the existence of tourist destinations. Consultations with representatives of the Centers on these topics involved Centers and Contact Persons being invited to provide necessary information by accessing the said questionnaire, referring to "the role and importance of Tourism Promotion and Information Centers in creating the tourist destination image".

In passing, but also in some sense crucially, it may be noted that the information referred to above, albeit requested in a more comprehensive or exhaustive manner, is of the kind that Center employees are expected or indeed required to provide to anyone requesting it. It may thus be of particular relevance to note that, out of the 110 Tourism Promotion and Information Centers contacted, only 35 responded positively, i.e. just 32% of the total. It is thus by reference to the 35 Centers which did respond that results are considered and analysed in what follows (Fig. 1).

Results and discussion

Tourist attractions obviously constitute an important element as the image of a tourist destination takes shape, albeit along with other aspects relating to tourist services (in accommodation, restoration, animation and entertainment), the economy, the socio-cultural circumstances, etc. This fact made it necessary to analyze local tourist attractions promoted via the Centers studied, in terms of the number, type and defining features of those attractions. At the level of Romania

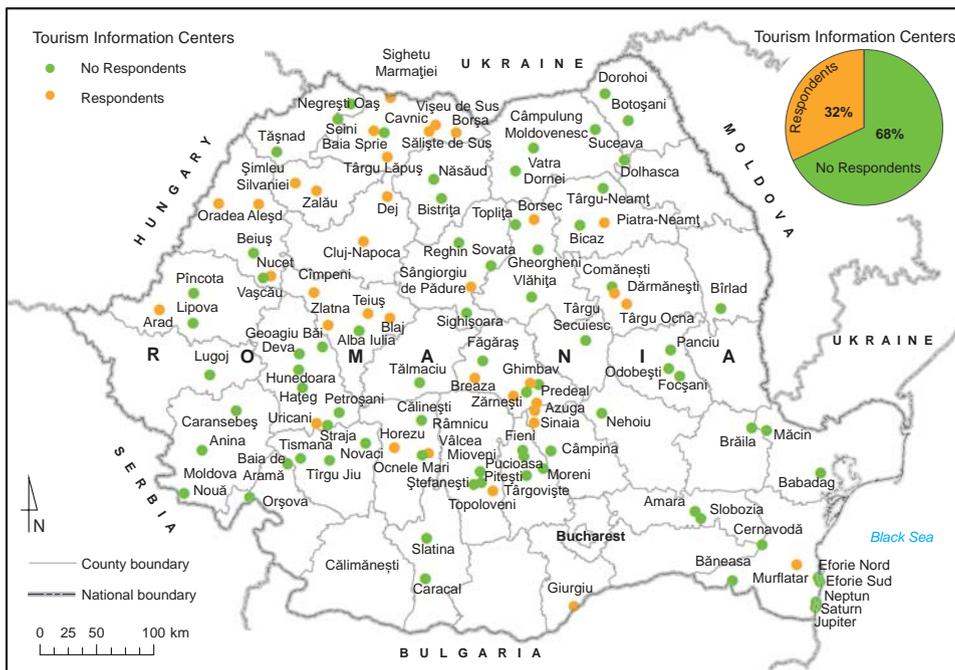


Figure 1. The consulted Tourism Promotion and Information Centers responding or failing to respond

as a whole, the information obtained from the questionnaire pointed to the existence of some 289 local tourist attractions that are the subject of promotion, with 204 (71%) of these being of an anthropic type, while 85 (29%) are natural (Fig. 2).

Analysis of the distribution of such local tourist resources that are promoted in turn indicates that there are (at least) 4 Tourist Promotion and Information Centers dealing with more than 15 local tourist resources. Specifically, these are the Centres serving Topoloveni (17 resources), Arad County (17), Horezu (16) and Breaza (16). At the opposite end of the scale are the 10 Centers together promoting just 34 tourist attractions (12 natural and 22 anthropic), i.e. with less than 5 local attractions each (Fig. 2).

Spatial consideration of the natural-anthropic ratio characterizing TIPNC-promoted local tourist resources reveals significant differences. Thus, the greatest number of natural tourist resources (8 each) gain promotion thanks to the Zlatna and Bihor Centers, while

the aforesaid Topoloveni and Horezu Centers were promoting 17 and 13 anthropic resources respectively, at the time of study (Fig. 2).

Tourism promotion is an essential indicator, having major roles and functions when it comes to outlining and defining Romania's tourist destinations. Under Romania's Order 1096, regarding the approval of methodological norms for the accreditation of Tourist Information and Promotion National Centers, the Centers in question are further tasked with providing tourists with local, regional and national tourist information and promotional materials.

Consultation with the responding Centers in regard to the existence and typology of local tourist information and promotional materials implies a well-managed situation. The most important promotional tools made use of prove to be: tourist maps (35%), flyers (26%), brochures (23%), DVDs (8%), tourist guides (7%) and magazines (1%) (Fig. 3).

A defining indicator where the image of a tourist destination is concerned is the

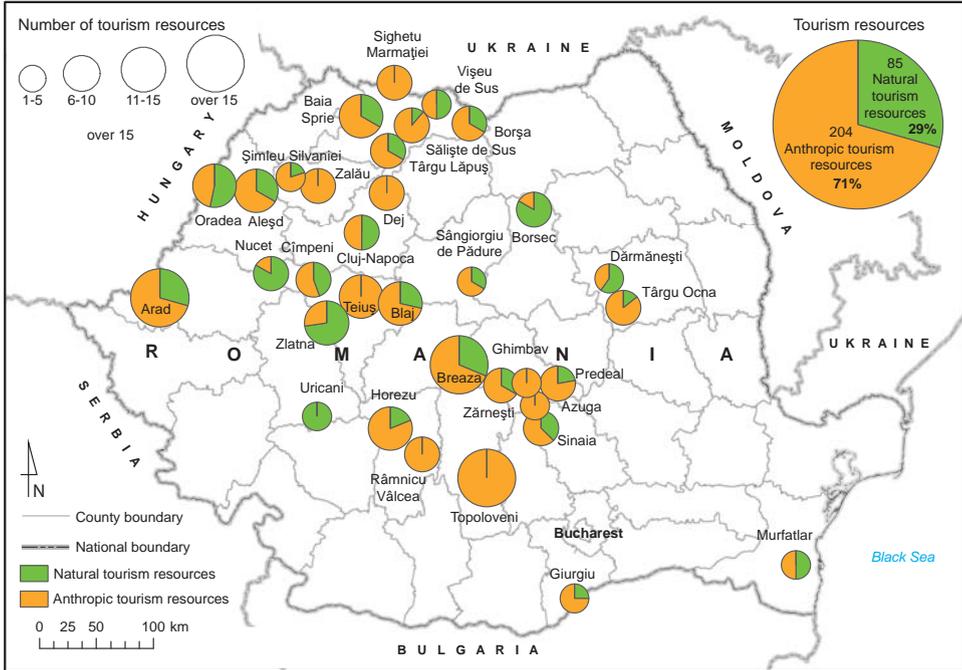


Figure 2. Ratios characterizing the local tourist resources promoted at TIPNC level

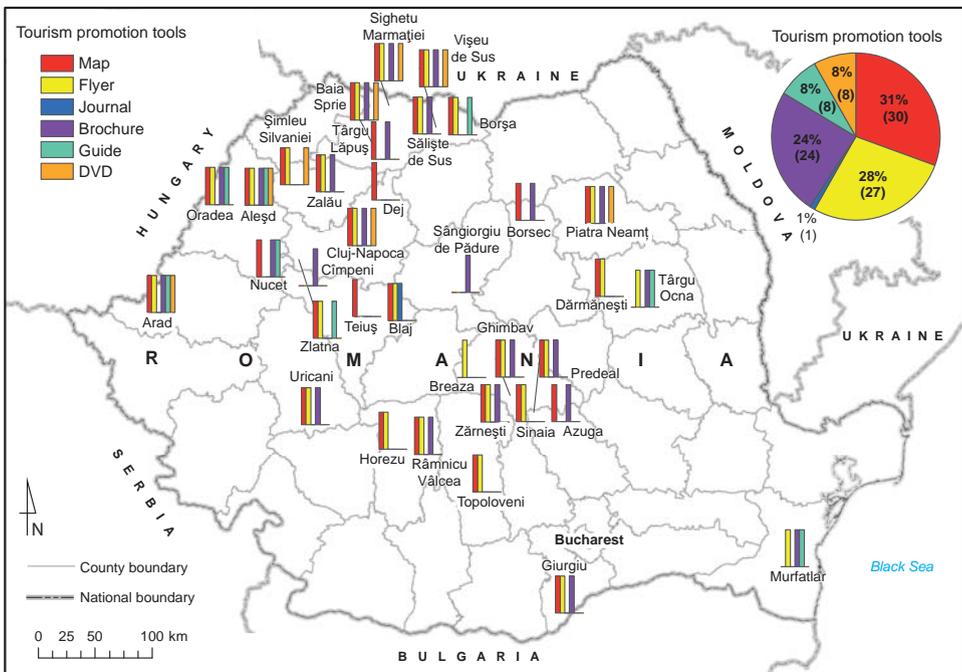


Figure 3. Techniques TIPNCs use in promoting tourism

nearly accommodation infrastructure Tourist Information and Promotion Centers promote. Overall, this was found to comprise 207 accommodation units, with a breakdown into boarding houses (53%), hotels (34%), villas (4%), motels (3%), cabins (2%), hostels (2%), camp sites (1%), and rental rooms (1%) (Fig. 4).

The above units were found to be the subject of promotion, albeit in various proportions, by 25 of the studied Tourist Information and Promotion Centers (i.e. 77% of those willing to participate in the achievement of this research) (Fig. 4).

The existence of means of public transportation, and of options to make necessary reservations, are meant to facilitate the act that is tourism, thus contributing to both the process whereby a tourist destination is outlined, and actual tourism-based local economic development (thanks to the creation of jobs and improvements in economic wellbeing). Analysis of questionnaire responses makes it clear that Romania is still lacking in this regard, with only 51% of the Tourist Information and Promotion Centers having a capacity to make reservations for people on different means of public transportation (Fig. 5).

Tourist-guiding activity in turn represents an image vector which contributes to the genesis and dynamics of tourist destinations. Those responsible for the activity are tour guides who mediate between the tourist request and the offer, respectively between tourists and local communities, at the same time having essential roles and tasks in ensuring sustainable and responsible support for the local economy (Tătar et al. 2013, 2017; Herman et al. 2017; Ilie et al. 2017). As of 2016, 4335 licensed guides were doing this kind of job in Romania, with most (75%) being of the national type, as followed by local guides (20%) and specialized guides (5%) (Tătar et al., 2017). By virtue of Order 1096 of 2008, indented line 4.1, Tourist Information and Promotion Centers inter alia have the task of providing information as regards such local, national and specialized tour guides. However, in response to Question 5: "Is there

the possibility to contact tour guides? If yes, please provide us with the name and contact data for each tour guide", just 21 centers – or 62% of the total – gave the positive response, i.e. "Yes, there is the possibility to contact tour guides" (Fig. 5).

Exhibition tourism events are meant to increase the visibility of a tourist destination, and tourist traffic, by promoting local tourist products. Indeed, a large share (74%) of Romania's Tourist Information and Promotion Centers are involved in actions such as local and national festivals; town days; Christmas Fairs; Easter Fairs, tourism fairs; tourism exhibitions, etc. (Fig. 5).

Recommended local tourist products represent the main element giving substance to tourist destinations, and ensuring their economic importance. We cannot talk about Romania the tourist destination unless we can talk about tourist products specific to that destination. Nevertheless, to Question 7: "Which are the main local tourist products you recommend to us?", a response in the affirmative was received by 19 representatives of Centers (54% of all respondents). Analysis of each answer they gave helped emphasize how 50% of Tourist Information and Promotion Center representatives are not aware of the true meaning of the "tourist product" concept, tending to confuse this with structural elements, which is to say with tourism-related resources, services, activities, etc. (Fig. 5).

Local tourist traffic represents a dynamic component of tourism (comprising all those who travel from their place of residence, from the transmitting area, towards the receiving area or tourist destination), and it has considerable implications for tourist-destination structure and functionality. Under these circumstances, knowing about tourist traffic, its intensity, direction and seasonal nature is a matter of importance that offers defining indicators vis-a-vis local, regional and global tourism. Despite this, answers from representatives at Centers made it clear that Romania as a tourist destination is deficient in this respect. Only 43% of Centers declared

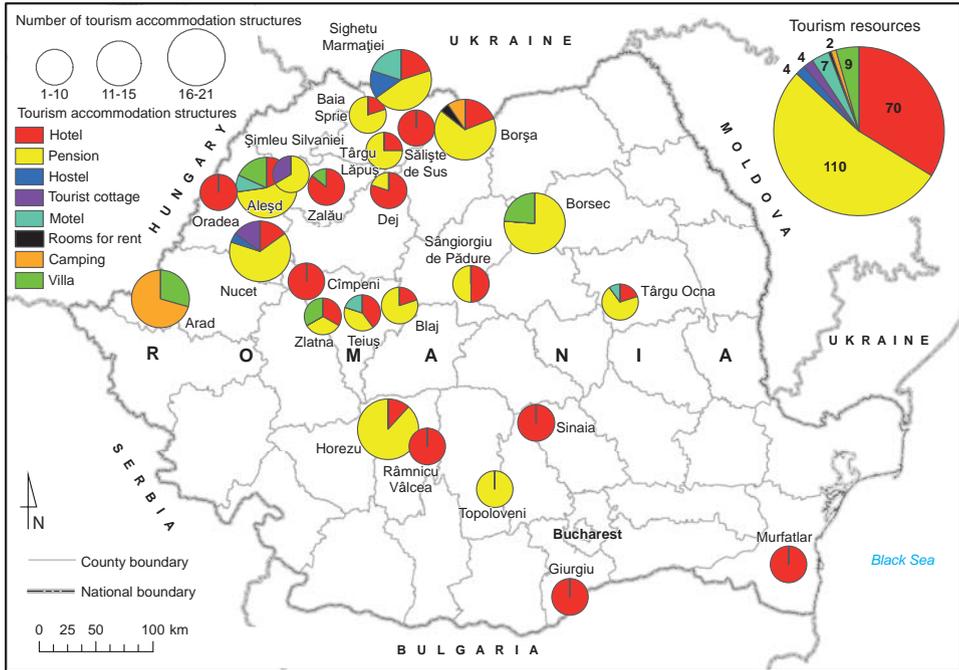


Figure 4. The numbers and percentages of local accommodation structures that are subject to promotion

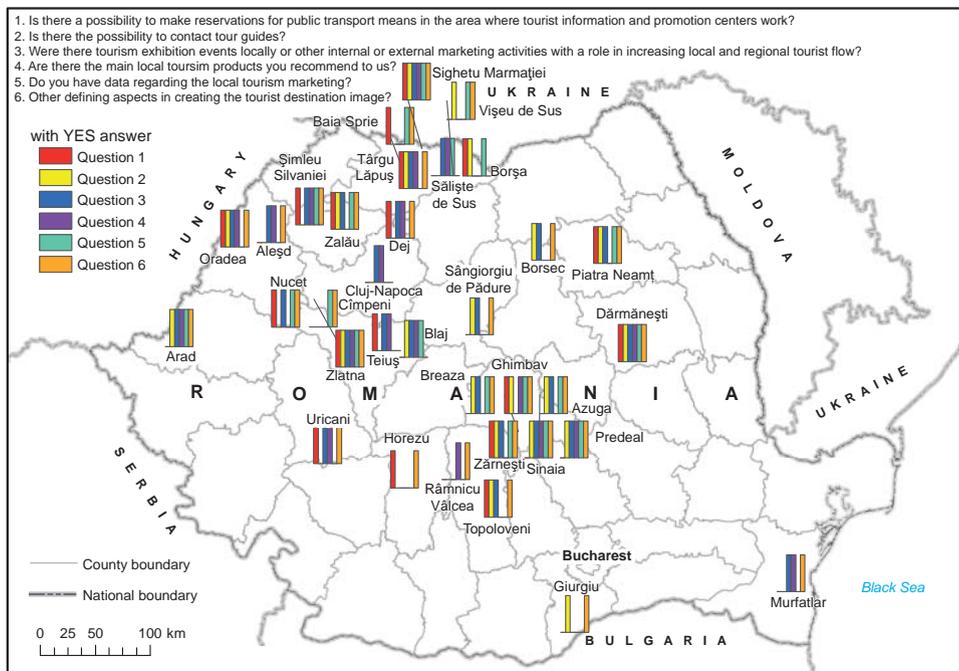


Figure 5. Other defining aspects in creating the image of the tourist destination

that they were in possession of information on local tourist traffic. Among these, only 30% (6 Centers) provided full relevant data for the most-recent 5-year period, with the remaining 14 Centers possessing incomplete data only (Fig. 5).

Also studied, as defining aspects shaping the image of a tourist destination, were certain "market research activities on local and regional level, analysis, planning, structuring activities, elaborating proposals for local and regional tourist development and tourist marketing activities, in cooperation with the public local administration authorities and with the central public authority for tourism" (Order 1096 of 2008). Answers on this provided by Center representatives again point to Romania being deficient – given that only 16 of the 35 Centers were able to confirm engagement in activity of this kind (Fig. 5).

Detailed analysis at the level of each individual answer serves to emphasize the prevalence of activity relating to proposals

for the development of local or regional tourism (10 occurrences), followed by that revolving around market research at the local or regional levels (8), or else tourism marketing (6) (Tab. 1).

Conclusions

The presented study concerned with the role and importance of Romania's Tourist Information and Promotion Centers in creating the image of that country as a tourist destination emphasizes certain dysfunctions relating to both spatial distribution and ways of functioning (i.e. pursuant to tasks set out in Order 1096). At the outset, the fact that just 35 out of 110 such Centers even responded to our request (notwithstanding their all being financed to "promote the Romanian tourist potential by improving the country image in order to promote it abroad and to increase its attractiveness for tourism and business" (Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism

Table 1. Listings of Tourist Information and Promotion Centers against the activities they engage in

No.	Activities engaged in at Tourist Information and Promotion Centers	Centers
1.	Market research at local and regional levels	Zarnesti National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Alesd National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Borsa National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Borsec National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Arad County National Tourist Information and Promotion Center National Tourist Information and Promotion Center from Sângeorgiu de Pădure Horezu National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Bihor National Tourist Information and Promotion Center
2.	Proposals for the development of tourism at local or regional levels	Târgu Lapuș National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Sighetu Marmatiei National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Breaza National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Zarnesti National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Alesd National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Borsa National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Predeal National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Uricani National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Azuga National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Bihor National Tourist Information and Promotion Center
3.	Tourism marketing	Târgu Lapuș National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Dej National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Zalău National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Borsa National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Horezu National Tourist Information and Promotion Center Bihor National Tourist Information and Promotion Center

2012: 2) by facilitating “the information exchange in tourism between institutions and information centers within the tourist areas” (Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism 2012: 3) is in and of itself a clear wakeup call regarding a failure to achieve set objectives.

A similar story (if with some honourable exceptions) arises from answers Centers provided when asked about the role they played in creating an image for Romania as a destination. Analysis of the answers Center representatives supplied point to certain problems, most especially with activity relating to research, analysis, planning and tourism marketing (at 55% of the Centers), the possibility of reservations for means of public transportation being made (at 49%); recommended local tourist products (at 46%); possessed information on local tourist traffic (at 43%) and the possibility of tour guides being contacted (40%). The only better situations were those identified in relation to promotional materials, where percentage shares of problem centers were 0% and 3% respectively. On the basis of answers provided by representatives, Romania’s percentage quantification of the role and importance of Tourism Information and Promotion Centers is at the

level of 69%. This is to say that information provided by (just) 35 out of 110 TIPNCs suggests a fairly minor role (at the level of 69%) in the creation of Romania’s image of tourist destination. More optimistically, there are certain individual Centers to be noted in which the role is nevertheless a major one. These Centers would be the ones in Arad County (achieving a value of 100%); Sighetu Marmatiei (also 100%); as well as Predeal, Zarnesti, Sinaia and Bihor (all on 90%).

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Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors’, on the basis of their own research.

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