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# Perspectives of Sustainable Development of Tourism in the North-East Region of Romania

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**Abstract:** In this paper we propose to highlight the tourism evolution and its intensity in the North-East region of Romania, compared to two regions with similar touristic potential from the Eastern European Union: Subcarpathia from Poland and Central Slovakia. We analysed if the EU attachment of Romania, Poland, and Slovakia had some effects on tourism development in the three regions mentioned. Issues arising from the analysis of the current situation of tourism will allow us to draw some sustainable development directions of tourism in the North-East region based on conserving and capitalizing the uniqueness of the area. We will consider the experience of the other two regions, trying to adapt them to the situation of the North-East region. Based on the analysis we have made, we consider that other countries can inspire us by authorities’ initiatives in supporting tourism, good human resources training, entrepreneurship stimulation, and assistance in accessing financial resources, including EU ones.

**Keywords:** tourism; North-East region; sustainable development; rurality; European Union

## 1. Introduction

The continuing expansion of the EU has deepened, more and more, the inter- and intraregional development disparities. As a result, the EU regional policies, which aim at reducing the development disparities, have gained greater importance by having been allocated significant sums of money from the community budget. Even though a certain reduction of these disparities has been noticed, this requires a longer period of time because these differences are high. There are fields for which each region has its own development prerequisites in a sustainable way. Sustainable development is defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development, since 1987, as the development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [1]. This approach can be explained by using the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental [2]. The notion of sustainable tourism only later became engrained in the policy statements and planning documents of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) [3] (p. 43). “Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life” support systems [4] (p. 30). Tourism is one of the fields that has registered a considerable growth in the last decades worldwide [5]. However, the tourism increase cannot continue in any possible way; there must be a balance between development and sustainable tourism [6] (p. 10).

As a result of our previously conducted research, we have found that, generally, within the economy of Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, tourism has not had a significant share and the level of

tourism intensity is not very high. However, the three countries, as well as the area that they are part of, Central and Eastern Europe, represent a tourist market characterized by high development potential.

The North-East (Nord-Est) region of Romania has areas which can fit into different types of tourism and is similar, from many points of view, to the Subcarpathia (PL32-Podkarpackie) from Poland and Central Slovakia (SK03-Stredné Slovensko) regions (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The location of Central Slovakia (SK03), Subcarpathia (PL32) and North-East (RO21) regions. Source: [7], with changes.

These three regions have a relatively low GDP compared to the national average, an increasing average tourist activity, and facilities for mountain tourism.

In the North-East region, an intense tourist activity takes place, especially in the three western counties with mountainous relief—Suceava, Neamț, and Bacău—due to their touristic potential: great natural scenery, clean air and water in the mountainous areas, and rich cultural and religious heritage. We should also mention the touristic attractions specific to the area: traditional Moldavian gastronomy and customs. The most important tourism types are cultural, religious, rural, recreational, therapeutic spa, and sports; their development can contribute to the increase of revenues and stimulation of some related economic branches. Moreover, the cultural-religious tourism has an excellent representation in the Bucovina monasteries, which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. They could also enter the touristic European circuit, provided that they get an effective promotion.

Subcarpathia has a varied relief, including high hills and plains in the northern part, and mountainous surfaces in the southern part. A few national parks (for example: Bieszczadzki National Park, included in the UNESCO international list of biosphere reservations) and several nature reservations can be found here. The region has a rich natural and cultural potential, being an attractive tourist destination for mountain tourism and winter sports, but also for recreation

(especially by the farmhouses), as well as for religious and cultural tourism (Church of Haczowa from the 15th century, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, wooden traditional houses, historic Orthodox chapels and churches, outdoor ethnographic museums, and palaces and castles). Rural tourism and agritourism have successfully developed in the region because tourists want vacations away from urban agglomerations, in a pleasant atmosphere, spent actively and at reasonable prices.

Central Slovakia has a mainly mountainous relief, with an increasing altitude from south to north, where lie the Tatra Mountains, the altitude being lower only in the south, especially in the river valleys. Tourism has favorable conditions for development especially in the northern mountainous part, where there is the most intense tourism activity, and the main attractions are the resorts with mineral waters, winter sports, and fishing. The tourism potential also includes natural parks from the Demänovská Valley and Súlov Rocks where there are caves. All of these contribute to the uniqueness of the area.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This part of the paper will present the evolution of tourism in the North-East, Subcarpathia, and Central Slovakia regions.

It is known that a certain territory cannot develop tourism activities homogeneously. It does not have a uniform representation, even in the three regions under discussion. The tourism development possibilities are also ensured by the way in which the regions are administratively organized. We will present the way in which these three regions are organized, according to the NUTS classification, applied in the EU. The NUTS classification (the Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is a hierarchical system that divides the economic territory of the EU, being established for the collection and harmonization of European regional statistics, as well as for EU regional policies framing [8]. A state (NUTS 0) is divided into one or several major socio-economic regions (NUTS 1), which includes one or several basic regions for the application of regional policies (NUTS 2), the latter comprising small regions for specific diagnoses (NUTS 3). The three analyzed regions contain NUTS 3 territorial units, as follows: two in Central Slovakia, four in Subcarpathia and six in North-East. The NUTS 2 regions of Romania are not vested with administrative power, as in the case of counties (which are also NUTS 3 territorial units). Romania has a fairly high level of centralization compared to Slovakia where the NUTS 2 regions comprise self-governing subregions, and Poland, where the NUTS 2 regions have self-government.

We intend to analyse if the decentralization level can contribute to tourism development and if the tourism activity has increased in the context of EU accession.

As a result of EU accession, the new EU Member States recorded a significant increase in the number of tourists from the older EU countries, the enlargement offering new perspectives on some specific destinations from the eastern part of Europe [9] (p. 135).

EU countries have experienced influences on the tourism sector brought by the EU accession process, such as [10] (p. 455):

- Positive effects on the general image of the member countries, indirectly reflected on the increase of tourist number and tourism receipts;
- New investment in communal infrastructure, contributing to the preservation and long-term protection of space as a prime tourism resource and the increasing tourism attractiveness of the country;
- Introduction of effective controls in preservation of valuable space from potential degradation.

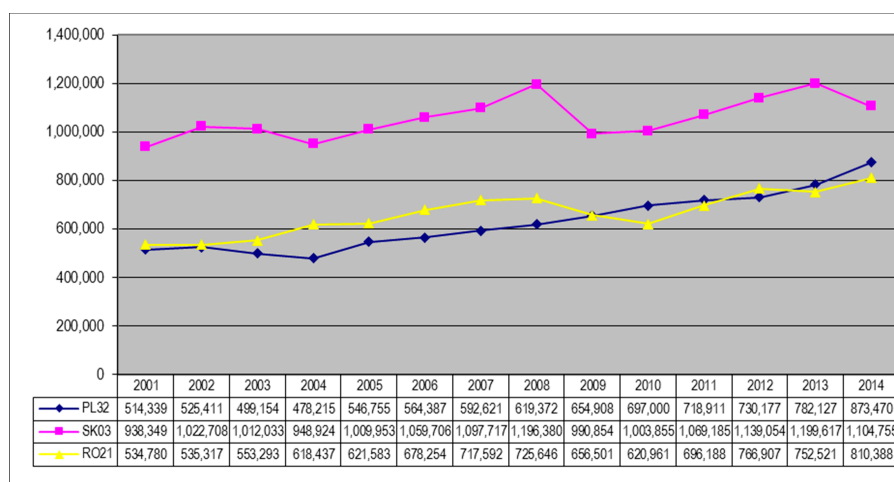
The EU accession effects were also analyzed and quantified in the case of other countries: for example, in Estonia, the tourism industry benefited from recording increases of one third in two years [11].

Additionally, the analyses regarding tourism changes in Malta, Cyprus, and Slovenia in the context of EU accession showed that new tourism strategies for sustainable development have been adopted, and also tourism receipts growth has been recorded [10].

Analyzing the tourist activity at the regional level, we observed that in Slovakia and in some regions of Poland, most tourism indicators record higher values compared to the ones of Romania. As a result of studying the evolution of tourism indicators, our opinion is that the EU integration had positive effects on tourism in Poland and that the relatively stagnant trend in Slovakia is due to the fact that, in the frame of the tourist market of Slovakia, foreign tourists have had already a great share, even before the country's accession to the EU [12]. Additionally, some residents may have replaced domestic destinations with some from the EU, as a result of people's freedom of movement within the EU. Regarding Romania, tourism activity has not registered a significant increase in most of the regions after the EU accession. Tourism activity can be measured by a series of indicators. We will take into account the evolution of the number of arrivals, overnight stays, and tourism intensity. For carrying out this analysis, we used data from secondary sources, namely official statistics published by Eurostat—the statistical office of the European Union, Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, and the National Institute of Statistics (Romania).

Although there are some similarities among the three regions regarding tourism potential, the accommodation capacity expressed in places is much higher in SK03, compared to the other two regions analyzed. After 2000, there were some increases and decreases in the case of PL32 and SK03, but the RO21 region managed to raise its accommodation capacity almost to the level of PL32.

The first indicator examined, the number of arrivals, which quantifies the arrivals at tourist accommodation establishments, increased between 2001 and 2014, except for 2009, when there were some circumstantial decreases (Figure 2). The upward trend resulted in: +69.82% in Subcarpathia, +17.73% in Central Slovakia, and +51.53% in the North-East region. We need to point out that Central Slovakia registered much higher values than the other two regions. In order to compare the tourism activity evolution before and after EU accession, we calculated the evolution indices for symmetrical pre- and post-accession two-year intervals. Poland and Slovakia joined the EU on 1 January 2004, so the period 2001–2003 contains exactly the two years before the entry (31 December 2001–31 December 2003), and 2003–2005 includes the first two years after the accession (31 December 2003–31 December 2005). Romania joined the EU on 1 January 2007, so the ante and post-accession periods considered are 2004–2006 and 2006–2008, respectively. According to indices (Table 1) there is a positive trend for PL32 during the post-accession period (with an evolution index of 109.54%), compared to the previous years (97.05%). In RO21 there were smaller increases (6.99%, post-accession, compared to 9.67%, before accession), and in the SK03 region there was reported a stagnation (from small increases to holding the same values).



**Figure 2.** Number of arrivals in the PL32, SK03, and RO21 regions (2001–2014). Source: own elaboration based on the data from [7,13,14].

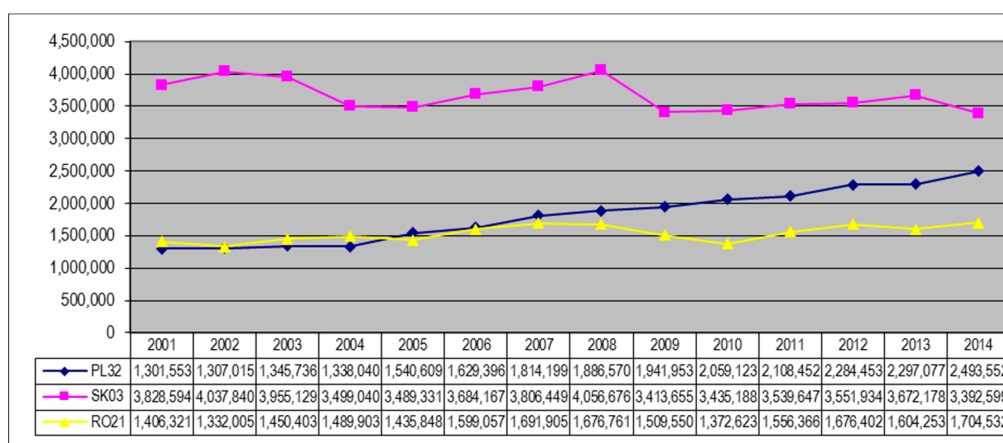
**Table 1.** Evolution indices for number of arrivals in collective accommodation establishments in the PL32, SK03, and RO21 regions.

	2001–2003 Evolution Index	2003–2005 Evolution Index	2001–2014 Evolution Index
PL32	97.05	109.54	169.8238
SK03	107.85	99.79	117.7339
	2004–2006 Evolution Index	2006–2008 Evolution Index	
RO21	109.67	106.99	151.5367

Source: own elaboration based on data from [7,13,14].

In PL32, the attraction of new tourists from the EU, by proper promotion and quality services, has contributed to this positive evolution. This is not the case for RO21, so the number of foreign tourists rose slightly. Some cases of increases in the number of tourists were noticed in PL32 and SK03 in the following years, too (2006–2008) (Figure 2).

Another important indicator in the tourism activity quantification is the number of overnight stays (nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments). Statistically, each night a tourist spends or is registered in a tourist accommodation establishment is considered to be a night spent. The evolution of the number of overnight stays has been analyzed for the period 2001–2014 and we can notice that SK03 has a greater number of overnight stays, approximately double, compared to RO21 (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Number of overnight stays in the PL32, SK03, and RO21 regions (2001–2014). Source: own elaboration based on the data from [7].

The increases registered between 2001 and 2014 were 91.58% for PL32 and 21.20% for RO21, while in SK03 there was a decrease of about 11% (Table 2). Despite a small decline in the number of overnight stays in SK03, this region continues to register much higher values than PL32 and RO21, although its surface is similar to that of PL32 and much smaller than that of RO21.

**Table 2.** Evolution indices for number of overnight stays in collective accommodation establishments in the PL32, SK03, and RO21 regions.

	2001–2003 Evolution Index	2003–2005 Evolution Index	2001–2014 Evolution Index
PL32	103.39	114.48	191.5828
SK03	103.30	88.22	88.61214
	2004–2006 Evolution Index	2006–2008 Evolution Index	
RO21	107.33	104.86	121.205

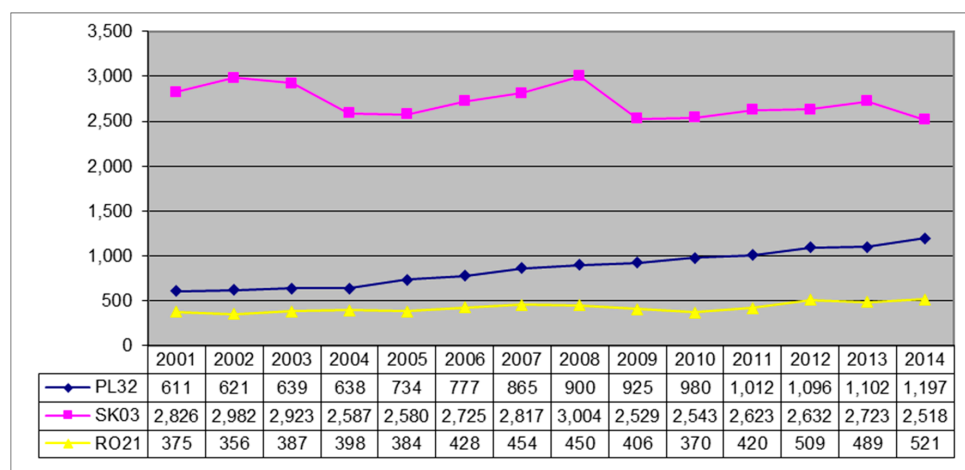
Source: own elaboration based on data from [7,13].



Considering the evolution in the number of overnight stays pre- and post-accession, the PL32 region has registered a much higher increase in the number of overnight stays after 1 January 2004, compared to the previous period (+14.48% versus +3.39%). This growing tendency continued in the following years, too (Table 2). The SK03 region, during the first two years after the accession, revealed an involution of this indicator, but the values increased in the coming years. Thus, considering the trends mentioned above, we can infer that the accession had a positive impact on the number of overnight stays, especially due to the tourists coming from the older EU States who were interested to discover the tourist attractions from the new Member States. The RO21 region did not register a significant progress in the number of overnight stays and preserved its rising trend (+7.33%, before accession and +4.86%, after accession) (Table 2).

This trend is similar to that of arrivals and is explained by the inefficient employment of tourism resources, corroborated with poor promotion of tourist destinations.

The three regions analyzed in this article are not identical in terms of surface or population. This is the reason why we need to point out some aspects referring to the relative importance of tourism in the three regions, by using the indicator tourism intensity (the ratio number of overnight stays per 1000 inhabitants). The evolution of this indicator between 2000 and 2014 is shown in Figure 4, where we can notice that the SK03 region has the highest number of overnight stays per 1000 inhabitants (almost five times higher compared to RO21). The industry development and the foreign investments in Slovakia have also contributed to these high values, due to the extent of business tourism.



**Figure 4.** Tourism intensity in the PL32, SK03, and RO21 regions (number of overnight stays per 1000 inhabitants) (2001–2014). Source: own elaboration based on the data from [7].

Although Subcarpathia has smaller tourism intensity compared to Central Slovakia, the Polish region registers a double value compared to the North-East region. Between 2001 and 2014, this indicator recorded an upward trend in the regions PL32 (+95.87%) and RO21 (+38.86%), and a downward trend in SK03 (−10.89% in SK03) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Evolution indices for tourism intensity in the PL32, SK03, and RO21 regions.

	2001–2003 Evolution Index	2003–2005 Evolution Index	2001–2014 Evolution Index
PL32	104.58	114.87	195.8728
SK03	103.43	88.27	89.1082
	2004–2006 Evolution Index	2006–2008 Evolution Index	
RO21	107.54	105.14	138.8606

Source: own elaboration based on data from [7,13].

Concerning the pre- and post-accession periods, tourism intensity has a development similar to the number of overnight stays (on which it is calculated). In PL32, tourism intensity had a tendency to increase after accession (from +4.58% to +14.87%). The North-East region maintained a slowly increasing pace (from +7.54% to +5.14%), while in SK03 there was a slow decreasing pace (from an increase of 3.43% to a decrease of 11.63%) (Table 3). However, we need to mention that the Slovakian tourism market worked at a high level even before EU accession, and so the recorded decline did not have a serious negative impact.

Consequently, as in the case of the number of overnight stays, the post-accession evolution is good in the PL32 region, mainly due to the potential exploitation offered by the country's integration in the Union and to the attraction of new tourists from the older EU Member States. They showed interest and curiosity to discover and visit the new EU Member States. People's free movement facilitated the access of tourists that perceived Eastern European new destinations as being more secure once integrated into the EU. Joining the EU also contributed to the introduction of new flights, including low-cost ones which boosted the tourist activity. Of course, the evolution of the tourism indicators were also determined by some other factors (for example: economy evolution, consumers' patterns), that are sometimes harder to quantify, but surely EU accession had an influence on the economic sectors (including tourism) of the new Member States. Romania did not satisfactorily use the opportunity of joining the EU, experiencing a stagnation trend, especially because of insufficient promotion measures and poor satisfaction of foreign tourists' potential demand. Regarding the SK03 region, the recorded slight decreases are not a problem because this indicator (as for the other indicators) shows values that are significantly higher compared to the other two regions (PL32 and RO21). The efficient promotion of the area and the existence of satisfactory services for foreign tourists has contributed to a more intense tourism activity in the SK03 region.

### 3. Results and Discussions

Analysing the indicators, we have noticed that Central Slovakia has an intense tourism activity and that Subcarpathia registered significant increases. In this part of the paper, we intend to find the causes for the evolutions registered and to draw some future development directions for the North-East region, based on the experience of Subcarpathia and Central Slovakia regions.

#### 3.1. Considerations on the Organisation of Tourism in Romania, Poland, and Slovakia

In the frame of the socio-economic policies of many EU member states, one can also find a tourism regional policy which aims at the best possible capitalization of tourism resources. The existence of tourism potential for the conduct of tourism activities is the prerequisite for elaborating a tourism regional policy. This policy should be composed of three elements: objectives, instruments, and incentives, as well as stakeholders (organizations and entities responsible for the creation and implementation of the tourism regional policy) [15] (p. 475).

It can be deduced that tourism in Romania did not benefit from a proper organizing and coordinating policy. However, the elaboration of the *Master Plan for the national tourism of Romania 2007–2026*, in collaboration with the UNWTO is to be noted. This plan came up ten years later, after the elaboration of a similar document whose objectives were not carried out satisfactorily. The Master Plan constitutes an "overall policy framework for the development and sustainable management of the tourism industry, in terms of natural and cultural resources" [16] (p. 2).

The National Tourism Authority is a public institution subordinated to the Ministry of Economy, which took over activities and specialized structures belonging to the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism. It is coordinated by the Delegate Minister for small and medium enterprises, business environment, and tourism [17]. The main competencies of the Authority are the implementation of the national strategy for tourism development, tourism products and destinations development, as well as privatization and post-privatization in the tourism field. It also proposes the development plans for tourism infrastructure, organizes the promoting of Romania's tourism and various events, authorizes

structures, personnel, and diverse field-specific activities, keeps track of heritage tourism, according to the law, seeks the enforcement of, and monitors compliance with, regulations in the field, and monitors the conduct of investments for tourism projects funded by the ministry.

In Poland, because of the existing self-government, a development strategy has been elaborated and a development regional policy implemented. To carry out this process, not only regional authorities have contributed, but also local autonomous administrations, the governor, NGOs, higher education institutions, and economic and professional organizations. The objectives, priorities and measures can be found in the *Development Strategy of Subcarpathia Region for the years 2007–2020*, the most important document of regional planning. The tools for this strategy implementation are financial (direct and indirect) tools and planning (regional operational programs) ones [18]. In 2015 the Polish Council of Ministers approved the *Tourism Development Programme until 2020*, which comes after *Directions for tourism development until 2015*. The tourism contribution to Poland's GDP is about 5%–6%, thus contributing to economic and social cohesion [19]. Tourism development is considered a part of the regional policy, important for increasing areas competitiveness. This programme, coordinated by the Polish Ministry of Sport and Tourism, is an integrated approach, which is part of the overall development policy.

In Slovakia, the Ministry of Economy established the Slovak Tourist Board in 1995, an organization financed by the State Budget and now, it is a governmental agency under the competence of the Ministry of Transport, Construction, and Regional Development of the Slovak Republic [20]. The Slovak Tourist Board markets national tourism, promotes Slovak tourism destinations, and informs the public about these destinations. It also represents the country abroad, having offices inside and outside its borders. Slovakia, too, had the development of tourism as a top priority; thus, a reference program was the *Strategy for Tourism Development in the Slovak Republic until 2013*. This program aimed at making better use of the existing potential to reduce regional disparities and create jobs [21]. Slovakia has enough potential for tourism development, but largely this is unexploitable as a product, which is why tourism cannot be considered a sector with a significant contribution to the economic efficiency increase [22]. However, tourism has an undeniable contribution to creating jobs and reducing inter-regional disparities.

### 3.2. Future Directions of Sustainable Tourism Development in the North-East Region Based on the Experience of Subcarpathia and Central Slovakia

In the period that followed the collapse of communism, the tourist activity in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has decreased due to several reasons, including because of the decline of social tourism, organized in a centralized manner by some companies and syndicates before 1990. After switching to the market economy, the social tourism share declined because, in the new conditions, it could not be funded anymore. Even if after 1990 tourism had a downward trend, this activity has increased, especially in Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia [23] (p. 68).

In all three regions, tourism declined after 1990, because in that context the population's purchasing power decreased and the number of tourists from Eastern and Central Europe, which were the main source of foreign tourists, diminished. Since the population can no longer afford long or expensive stays, the number of resident tourists has no chance to equalize the numbers in 1990. Thus, for the revival of tourism in the Eastern European countries it is necessary to attract foreign tourists, especially those from the EU. Prices and wages also increased in the Eastern European countries due to EU integration, but both are still lower than the ones in many EU countries, a fact which has potential to attract tourists, but also investments, both in tourism and in other fields. In the countries that joined the EU the share of tourists from the Member States of this community increased, but not all Eastern European states have capitalized this opportunity of attracting tourists from the EU. Tourism development in SK03 and PL32 regions are due to:



- (1) services quality,
- (2) services diversification,
- (3) proper promotion,
- (4) use of Structural Funds, and
- (5) initiatives taken by central and local authorities.

These aspects are deficient in the North-East region, thus preventing a proper development of the tourism sector.

The elaboration of various plans and strategies should take place with the involvement of different economic agents and organizations, along with regional and local authorities. To have consistency, any strategy should include an analysis of the current situation, a presentation of the main development aspects and an elaboration of key objectives.

According to the aspects found in the documentation conducted, the main causes of the less intense tourist activity from the North-East region are [12]:

- (1) inadequate transport and communications infrastructure,
- (2) systematic inadequate planning, and
- (3) insufficient collaboration between local and national authorities (the promotion sector included).

All of these causes make the offer be fragmented and not very well-known abroad. The domestic tourism development is also hampered by: people's low purchasing power, high unemployment, and prices too high compared to the quality of services.

We also found out that private initiatives in tourism, especially in rural areas, are faced with:

- lack of training,
- innovative spirit, and
- financial resources.

For this reason we consider that it would be very useful to conduct some training and technical assistance programs. On the other hand, we believe that various forms of financial support (easier access to credits, discounts for interest and taxes) or supporting different forms of tourism (e.g., rural tourism) by the state would help many people start up tourism activities. However, those involved in the field also perceive as necessary a greater cohesion among all levels of government for the conduct of some training and integrated territorial marketing programs [24] (p. 161).

The development and diversification of tourism products, together with a high degree of satisfaction of tourists' demands, help to attract them and increase their length of stay. The tourism product may also include certain leisure activities, such as: hiking, practising sports, cultural visits, etc., in the context of promoting sustainable tourism [25]. The supply of a broader range of activities is considered a certain generator of solid benefits for the local agents [26] (p. 1109). The diversification and flexibility of a basic tourism product are considered better choices than the introduction of some alternative forms of tourism [27] (p. 251). Along with the above, the following directions have particular importance: enhancing the promotion—especially abroad—of the main destinations in the region, building touristic brands (e.g., Bucovina), and entering new markets, especially in the EU (as Poland and Slovakia have done).

The intensification of the tourism activities in Subcarpathia and Central Slovakia was made possible by several factors, among which we can mention: the involvement of regions in the implementation of regional development programs and accessing EU funds within operational programs (which provide strategies' implementation). Additionally, the central level involvement was welcomed and highlighted by the elaboration of rural and regional development programs and tourism inclusion in strategic documents, as a prerequisite for obtaining national and community financial support. The state has projects of great importance in its area of jurisdiction, such as investments in infrastructure and country promotion as a tourist destination.

Local authorities, by using their own resources and those attracted to support tourism, have a major role in implementing various initiatives, components of strategies and programs for tourism sustainable development. The implementation of some projects with European funding, through which the promotion of the products and traditions from Bucovina was carried out, contributed to an increase in tourist activity.

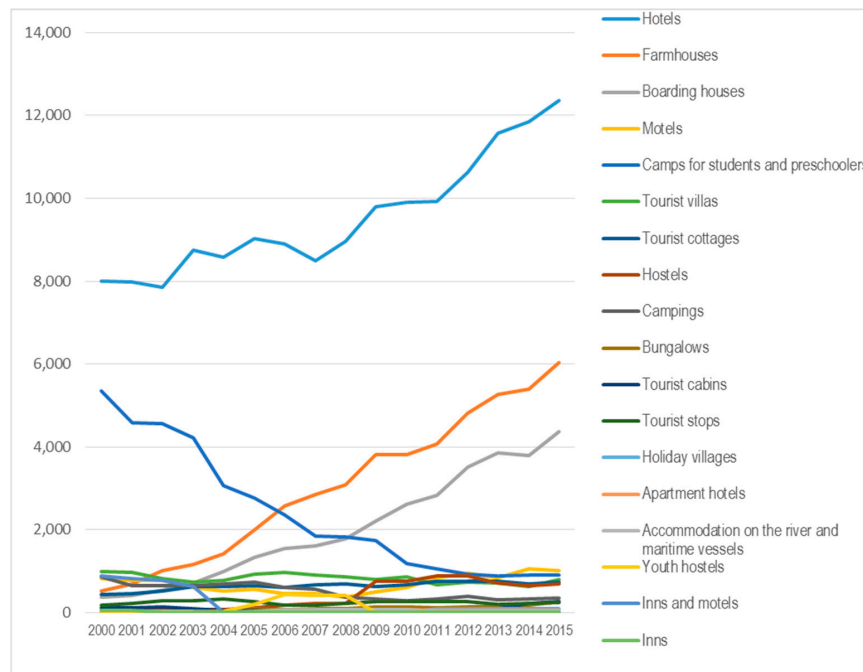
The competitive advantage of the North-East region, especially on the foreign market, is the authentic and archaic rurality, an aspect which is not very well acknowledged by the inhabitants of the rural areas. The members of certain local communities, particularly in less developed countries and areas, did not have access to tourism, either as entrepreneurs or as tourists, and this situation prevented them from understanding correctly the impact on tourism and its benefits, so they were not aware of the existence of their own tourism potential [28] (p. 76). The rural tourism marketing product depends on the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional way of life, which is to say on the existence of a sustainable tourism. This is tourism development that protects the environment so that the local community and future generations can obtain economic and social benefits from conducting tourism activities [29].

The EU Member States have included in their legislation provisions regarding the obligation to consider the impact that the most important investment projects (including in the tourism field) have on the environment. Additionally, various measures have been implemented to prevent the environmental degradation and use the tourism potential rationally. The efficient use of tourism resources requires their preservation, but also of the environment, and in this respect in Romania it was created a legal and administrative framework (between 1996 and 1998) regarding the conduct of tourist activity. Thus, there were elaborated rules concerning the delimitation of touristic zones in order to protect the environment and the tourism potential. Sustainable tourism development is supported by laws (e.g., the Law No. 137/1995) which oblige economic agents to elaborate viable projects to protect tourism resources. However, at the construction of a new tourist unit, it is mandatory to prepare an environmental, social, and economic impact study, but also to obtain an environmental permit. The concern for a sustainable tourism is a permanent one, existing measures for the sustainable capitalization of the cultural heritage and natural resources with touristic potential, these also being complemented by other measures to improve the quality of tourism infrastructure of accommodations and entertainment in order to increase the attractiveness of the regions, to develop the local economies [30] (p. 116). Rural tourism respects sustainable development principles, as it means protecting the natural environment, and preserving the traditions and the culture of the area.

Although in rural areas a certain backwardness has helped to preserve a traditional way of life, the process of modernization cannot be stopped. In such contexts, one will face the problem of preserving rural traditions in the conditions of modernization and establishing its limits in order not to affect the cultural component of rural areas [31] (p. 495). The future evolution of tourism is also conditioned by natural environment protection. For this reason, tourism management associated plans should not neglect the qualitative dimension in favor of the quantitative one, overcrowding a destination, which may cause the loss of its tourist attractiveness [32] (p. 69). The economy of rural areas is influenced by tourism activities [33]. Rural tourism and agritourism do not have the characteristics of mass tourism, but are able to bring income to people who implement such activities. It is also important to note that, if tourism is among the few activities that can be developed in an area, locals could accept any project that would bring them some prosperity, despite some destructive effects and the incompatibility with sustainable development. Some studies [28] (p. 72) argue that grouping tourist activities and attractions, in the case of underdeveloped areas, stimulates cooperation and partnerships among communities within a region or neighbouring regions, contributing to economic development through tourism. The demand for rural tourism is growing, so the North-East region may follow the example of Subcarpathia, in terms of stimulating the creation of small boarding houses and farmhouses.

There are premises for a more intense tourism activity in the North-East region, as well as in Romania, given the existing potential from the natural and cultural heritage viewpoint. Thus, rural

tourism occupies an important place in terms of tourism types and develops in the neighbouring areas of mountainous tourist resorts as well as in culturally important places. Rural tourism refers to stays spent in accommodation units from rural areas. The prerequisites for the development of this tourism form are: the existence of some well organized activities and the right framework for their deployment (accommodation units, rural roads, hiking trails, bike lanes, etc.). Central and Eastern Europe, for the potential it has, is an area suitable for rural tourism development, which also fits in the peripheral areas, contributing to the reduction of socio-economic disparities. In Figure 5, it can be noticed that the number of accommodation places in farmhouses and boarding houses has increased significantly, these shares being exceeded only by hotels.



**Figure 5.** The evolution of the number of accommodation places in the North-East region, based on types of accommodation units (2000–2015). Source: own elaboration based on the data from [14].

In the North-East region, we can notice that rural tourism already registers increases as the number of places in the boarding houses and farmhouses has increased significantly in recent years (from a 5% share to over 36% of the total number of places in the period 2000–2015).

Practicing rural tourism is based on the following main motivations: natural potential, cultural potential, and the wish to escape from the urban agglomeration. Hence, rural entrepreneurs can capitalize this opportunity by grouping various tourist services.

The positive impact of tourism is not only on services, but on the whole economy. In this regard, several regions from Eastern and Central Europe have important possibilities of development [34] (p. 30).

#### 4. Conclusions

The three regions with similar tourism potential have generally registered positive evolutions in terms of tourism activity and the indicators have had an upward trend since 2001. The values of the tourism indicators show that Central Slovakia has more intense tourism activity compared to the other two regions.

Academics and researchers have focused on sustainable development, emphasizing two approaches [35–40]: environment-sensitive tourism, which reduces the environmental effects and

increases sustainability; and, second, environment-dependent tourism, which represents one of the main inputs for tourism that must be preserved to guarantee long-run success. Due to its characteristics, tourism is perceived as an appropriate solution for pursuing sustainable economic growth.

The tourism evolution before and after EU accession was relatively different in the three regions. Thus, the tourism activity in the Subcarpathia region has showed some progress, also determined by the integration of Poland in the EU. Such effects were less noticeable in Central Slovakia, which already had an intense tourism activity before the country's integration in the EU. The impact of accession upon tourism was not very visible in the North-East region because the opportunities offered by EU membership have not been sufficiently exploited. The EU represents the most important source of foreign tourists for Romania, as well as for the other Eastern Europe countries. The EU integration of new states has helped them attract tourists from the older EU Member States, eager to discover new tourist destinations, with access also being facilitated by the people's free movement. Along with the EU accession, the tourist activity evolution has been influenced by other factors, such as economic evolutions that are sometimes harder to quantify.

In our opinion, through a greater administrative autonomy one can better take into account the local specifics and needs, facilitating socio-economic development so that the power transfer from the central administration to the local one would be beneficial for local development.

Our study has revealed the main problems that tourism faces within the North-East region and systematized some of the solutions needed, and various ways to implement them. We believe that Romanian tourism could use the experience of other countries that went through similar situations. In this regard, some of the measures implemented in Poland and Slovakia can be also successfully applied in Romania: a thorough elaboration and implementation of development plans, the transfer of certain abilities towards regions, service quality improvement (quality standards, certification), promotion of national products representative for the country, and creation of new tourism products.

To conclude, as there is a well-known link between tourism development and overall development, we believe that tourism activity intensification would lead to benefits in potential touristic areas of the North-East region.

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