



## TOURISM IN BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

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### Abstract

Tourism is one of the most emerging activities with social, economic and environmental impact and requires serious efforts by researchers to identify the mechanisms that govern this phenomenon. The present study aims to be an inquiry of the 2019 trends in tourism in Bihor County (Romania), seen as basis for delineating perspectives in this regard. We collected data from 118 representatives of various accommodation structures by applying face to face questionnaire, seen as main actors in the genesis, evolution and dynamics of local tourism. The results shaped the trends for tourism in Bihor County at the level of year 2019, as a support for the prospects to be followed on short term horizon (2 years). Both, results and conclusions of the study highlighted the existence of dysfunctions in terms of trends and prospects for tourism in Bihor County.

### Key words

Bihor tourist destination, trends, perspectives, tourist services, tourism.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism represents a complex economic sector, in full expansion and diversification, and is one of the priorities for the contemporary society due to the multitude of benefits it generates. Among these, the psycho-social (cure and physical and

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mental recovery, recreation and leisure, escape from everyday life) and economic benefits (development of local economies) stand out. Regardless of its spatial dimension, the complexity of tourism is generated from the specifics of this activity that harmoniously integrates and exploits all environmental components. Each of these components is "dependent upon other parts for success in attracting, servicing, and satisfying the tourist" (Mill and Morrison, 1985). Studies on the implications of tourism on destinations have been discussed around issues such as destination marketing (Dawson et al., 2011; Dezsi et al., 2014; Ilieș et al., 2017), destination image (Govers et al., 2007; Matlovičová and Kolesarova, 2011; Chakrabarty and Sadhukhan, 2020), destination competitiveness (Morgan et al., 2004), local business network (Morgan et al., 2003), and destination planning (Formica and Kothari, 2008).

Given this aspect, to which others which concern the need for environmental conservation and protection are added (Ianoș et al., 2012; Ilieș et al., 2018; Andronache et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2019a,b; Andria et al., 2020; Nesticò and Maselli, 2020), also doubled by the need for a sustainable exploitation in order to develop local economies and communities (Drăghici et al., 2015; Herman et al., 2017; Grecu et al., 2019; Gilliland et al., 2020), the need to identify and know trends as basis for perspectives in a tourist destination area stands out. Because tourist destinations are unique areas due to their identity-constitutive elements, identifying and establishing trends in tourism are particularly difficult and complex operations that require time, resources and specific methods of scientific investigation (Ilieș et al., 2016; Safarov et al., 2020). The tourism policy makers, destination organizations and service providers have to be set up such that they seek to provide high-quality visitor experiences that are profitable to destination stakeholders while ensuring that the destination is not compromised in terms of its environmental, social, and cultural integrity (Goeldner et al., 2000).

In this context, the knowledge of the tendencies and perspectives of a tourist destination area represents a major coordinate with a fundamental role in the crystallization of tourist strategies to be followed on a short-medium term horizon. A lot of studies limit their attention only on communities and there is a lack of theoretical approaches to guide a researcher to develop an understanding of a tourist destination from an integrated, multiple, different time frame (Hanpachern and Chatkaewnapanon, 2013). To conduct the present study, we consulted representatives of accommodation services, as direct exponents with important roles and functions in shaping and defining tourist destinations. Both internal aspects of the organization (tourism services and programs, staff, promotion system and the average occupancy rate) and external ones (tourists and their requests) were investigated. The image of the tourism in the analysed destination and the cognition of its trends served to easily foreshadow the perspectives, based on the



vision of tourist service providers and starting from their intentions (regarding the development of new tourist programs and services), expectations (of the local and central public authorities), perceptions (regarding the local tourist heritage), and proposals they have (the development of tourism in the immediate future - next two years).

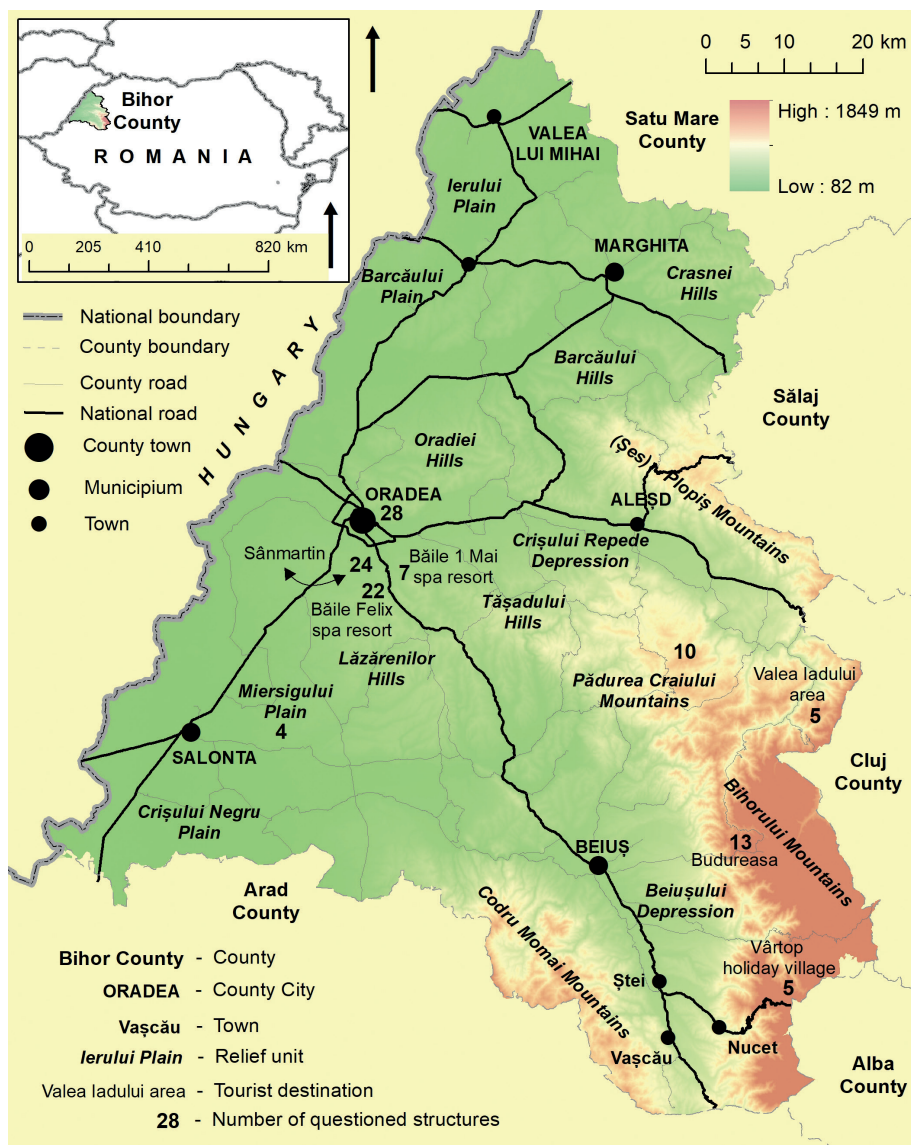
The literature review regarding trends in tourism highlighted a series of problems that targeted tourists (Gabor and Oltean, 2019; Law et al., 2019; Ketter, 2020), the promotion system (Matlovičová et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020), the management system (Matlovičová and Husárová, 2017; Ryan, 2018; Labanauskaitė et al., 2020), the economic efficiency (Baker et al., 2016; Balli et al., 2018; Belke et al., 2018; Gozgor and Demir, 2018; Tsui et al., 2018; Dogru et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Just as the past represents the foundation and the insertion element that gives specificity to tourism, so the trends are guidelines according to which the perspectives of tourism in a given area are drawn. Considering this, we aimed to capture the current trends of tourism in Bihor county (Romania) based on data collected from accommodation service providers. Together with other public and private actors, they are directly involved in the insertion, evolution and dynamics of tourism in the studied destination (Herman et al., 2019c,d). Creating a real image of the present tourism situation in a given destination, by identifying and knowing its trends, represents an informational support with role in outlining the perspectives of tourism in the analysed area.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study area**

Bihor county, located in the north-western part of Romania, on the border with Hungary, is one of the most complex tourist destinations (Figure 1). In this sense, a contribution has the large and varied number of tourist resources, both natural and anthropic. The territory of Bihor county is presented in the form of a natural amphitheatre with an opening to the northwest, which rises from the Crișurilor and Barcău Plain, over Crișana Hills, to the highest peaks of the Apuseni Mountains (Cucurbăta Mare peak - 1849 m), offering a variety of superlative tourist attractions, among which some of them are unique such as karst forms and phenomena, as well as numerous possibilities for relaxation, recreation and leisure. The mountain area, represented by the Plopiș Mountains, Pădurea Craiului Mountains, Vlădeasa Mountains, Bihor Mountains, Codru-Moma Mountains fascinates with the variety and attractiveness of the landscape: valleys with wild gorges guarded by strong cliffs, karst plateaus which shelter caves and impressive potholes, waterfalls, lakes, mineral springs, flora and fauna preserved in protected areas etc.



At the foot of the mountain, the meandering rivers and the multitude of anthropic lakes complete the variety of tourist attractions and, as such, the offer for leisure activities. To all this richness of thermal mineral waters is added, which are exploited in nationally and internationally popular spas. The anthropic tourist attractions (cultural-historical, technical-economic, and ethnographic) enhance the



attractiveness of the natural environment and, at the same time, provide new recreational attributes to the area. Dacian and medieval fortresses, archaeological sites, museums, public and private collections, memorial houses, theatres and libraries, buildings with various architectural styles, wall and wooden churches, houses with traditional architecture, crafts and customs, all these are just a few of the human creations that give identity to the place. Tourists visiting Bihor county can discover balneoclimateric resorts (Băile Felix, Băile 1 Mai, Stâna de Vale), cultural destinations (Oradea, Salonta, Beiuș), mountain areas (Pădurea Craiului Mountains, Vârtop area, the karst plateau of Padiș, Boga Valley, Sighiștel Valley), protected natural areas (Apuseni Natural Park, Cefa Natural Park, various nature reserves and Natura 2000 sites), rural settlements preserving traditions and customs (localities on Crișul Repede Valley, Crișurilor Plain, Ier - Barcău area, Depression of Beiuș) etc.

### **Data analysis**

Our research was conducted based on a sociological survey and data were collected by applying a questionnaire using face-to-face technique (Bryman, 2012; Chelcea, 2007; Wendt et al., 2019). Data were collected between April and May 2019, and the questionnaire was applied to 118 representatives of the most important tourist accommodation structures in Bihor county (Oradea city, Băile 1 Mai and Băile Felix spa resorts, Sânmartin locality, area of Crișurilor Plain, Vârtop holiday village, Pădurea Craiului ecotourism destination, Budureasa commune, and Valea Iadului area). The questionnaire was structured on thirteen questions regarding the trends (services and leisure programs, staff, tourists and their requests, accommodation services and the promotion system used) and perspectives of tourism in Bihor county (in terms of tourism attractions and services, the level of involvement of local and central public authorities in tourism development, as well as specific proposals coming from accommodation providers). Five identification items for the consulted providers were also used (name of the unit, type of unit, comfort category, number of rooms and accommodation places).

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

In order to identify trends and perspectives for tourism in Bihor county, 118 accommodation providers were consulted, which represents 26.4% of the total number of accommodation service providers, and 39.2% of the accommodation capacity (Table 1).



**Table 1** Information regarding the consulted accommodation providers

Tourist destination	Type of accommodation structures					Comfort category Stars/daisies			No. of rooms	No. of places	No. of questioned structures
	Hotel	Pension	Rooms to let	Tourist villas	Other categories	1-2 **	3 ***	4 ****			
Oradea city	17	7	2	2	0	5	13	10	768	1430	28
Sânmartin locality	2	14	5	2	1	6	18	0	268	613	24
Băile Felix spa resort	9	9	1	2	1	3	16	3	1419	2776	22
Budureasa commune	0	9	1	0	3	8	5	0	124	295	13
Pădurea Craiului ecotourism destination	0	6	0	0	4	5	5	0	78	185	10
Băile 1 Mai spa resort	1	5	1	0	0	2	5	0	114	238	7
Valea Iadului area	0	5	0	0	0	2	3	0	59	131	5
Crișurilor Plain	1	2	1	0	0	2	1	1	46	88	4
Vârtop holiday village	1	4	0	0	0	1	4	0	87	196	5
Total of consulted subjects	31	61	11	6	9	34	70	14	2963	5952	118
Total for Bihor county*	54	212	109	35	38	149	279	20	7448	15199	448

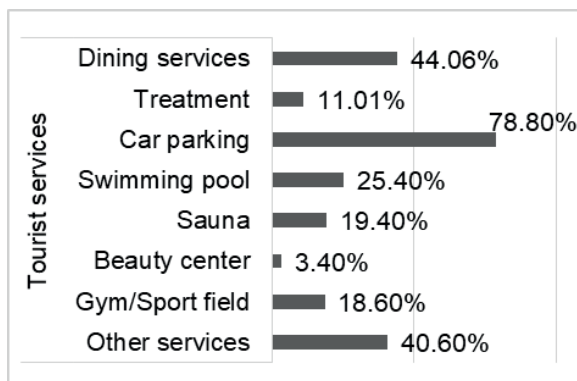
\* Source: \*\*\* (2019). *Classified tourist accommodation structures (LSPTC)*,  
<http://turism.gov.ro/web/autorizare-turism/>.

\*\*\* 2019. Structurile de primire turistică cu funcțiuni de cazare clasificate (LSPTC) [Classified tourist accommodation structures (LSPTC)]. Available at: <http://turism.gov.ro/web/autorizare-turism/>.

## Trends for tourism in Bihor county

In order to capture the specific trends for tourism in Bihor county our investigation followed some specific indicators, namely: tourist services provided, leisure programs, staff, tourists and their requests, average occupancy of accommodation structures and the promotion system used.

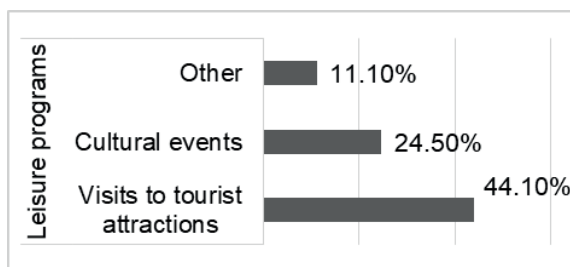
Taking into consideration that tourist services represent an important segment of the tourism economy in Bihor county, with effects towards the increase of tourists' satisfaction in this area, we investigated all related services offered by accommodation providers. Data analysis outlines the following results: the most common services are those related to car parking (78.8%), followed by dining services (44.06%), swimming pool (25.4%), sauna (19.4 %), gym (18.6%), treatment (11.01%) etc. Therefore, the primary needs, accommodation and food, are a priority, followed by those aiming the safety of goods (car parking), relaxation (sauna, swimming pool, etc.), and physical and mental recovery (treatment) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2**  
Proportion of tourist services (%)

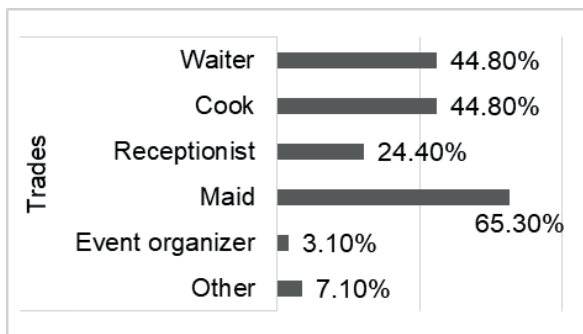
The analysis of leisure programs highlights the concern of accommodation providers to diversify the offer for leisure tourist activities. Thus, 44.1% (52 respondents) of the analysed tourist structures organize, individually or in partnership with other entrepreneurs, visits to various tourist attractions; 24.5% (29 respondents) facilitate the access of tourists to various specific cultural events, and 11.1% (13 respondents) offer other types of leisure programs (Figure 3).

The staff involved in tourist services and its management is one of the greatest challenges that the economic sector of tourism faces and must overcome. This conclusion emerges from the professional characteristics of employees in tourism, on the one hand, and from tourism specificities, seen often as a seasonal activity, on the other hand. Thus, 83.1%, respectively 98 accommodation providers declared that they have difficulties in recruiting employees. Bihor county as a tourist destination requires qualified trades, among which: maid (65.3%), waiter (44.8%), cook (44.8%), receptionist (24.4%), event organizer (3.1%) and others (7.1%) (Figure 4).



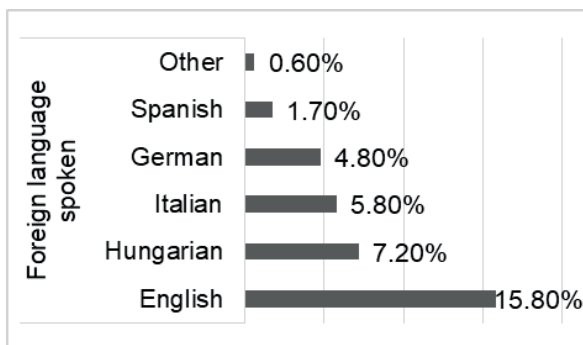
**Figure 3**  
Tourist leisure programs organized individually or in partnership with other operators (%)





**Figure 4**  
Tourism trades with deficit on the labour market (%)

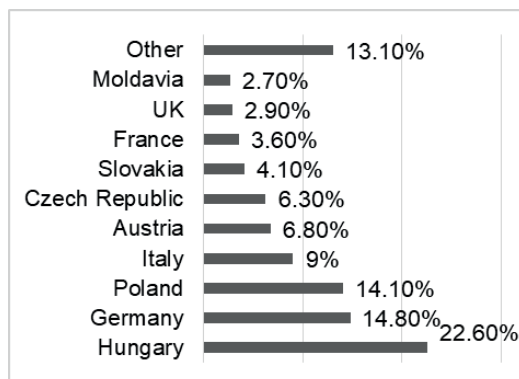
The analysis of employees' ability to communicate in a foreign language outlined that fact that they are not ready to welcome tourists from all over the world, because only 15.8% of them understand and speak English, followed by employees who speak Hungarian (7.2%), Italian (5.8%), German (4.8%), Spanish (1.7%) etc. (Figure 5). Therefore, Bihor is not an open and a European destination from this point of view, because the staff involved in tourism sector does not have the necessary skills to communicate with foreign tourists, which, according to respondents, would represent a percentage of 22.92%.



**Figure 5**  
Foreign languages spoken by employees in tourism (%)

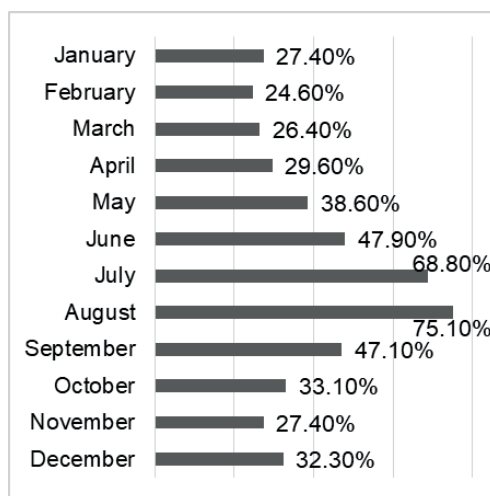
The analysis of tourist circulation by countries of origin reveals the following aspects: the neighbouring country, Hungary, is the main source of tourists for Bihor county, with a 22.6% of the total international arrivals. Next, there are tourists arriving from Germany (14.8%), Poland (14.1%), Italy (8.9%), Austria (6.7%), Czech Republic (6.3%), Slovakia (4.1%), France (3.6%) etc. (Figure 6).





**Figure 6**  
Tourists by country of origin (%)

The analysis of the occupancy rate of the tourist accommodation structures, at the level of year 2018, shows the existence of an evolutionary trend defined by four time intervals (two increase, two decrease) separated by two periods of maximum activity (August and December) and two periods of lower activity (February and November). The first growth interval is longer (six months), from March to July, while the second growth interval is shorter and overlaps over December, when, the second peak of activity is also registered. As for the decreasing periods, they overlap over September and October (the first period of decrease), respectively over January, the second period of decrease (Figure 7).



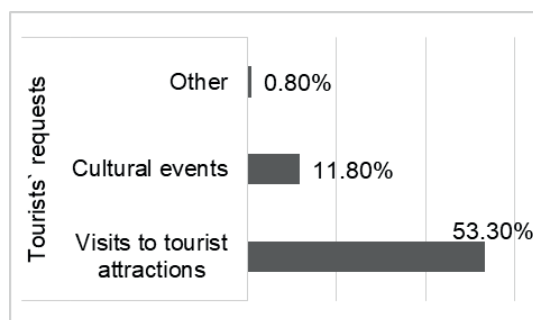
**Figure 7**  
Occupancy rate for tourist accommodation structures in Bihor county in 2018 (%)



In 2018, the average occupancy rate in Bihor county as a tourist destination was of 39.8%. At provider level, the existence of oscillations in time and space by typological categories (hotel, hostel, tourist pension etc.) was observed. Thus, the analysis of this indicator in 2018 by typological categories highlights the increase of the occupancy rate in hotel structures (52%), followed by tourist pensions (29.1%), hostels (24.2%) and other categories of accommodation structures (19.3%), while the analysis of the occupancy rate at the level of tourist destination highlights some defining particularities for each tourist destination.

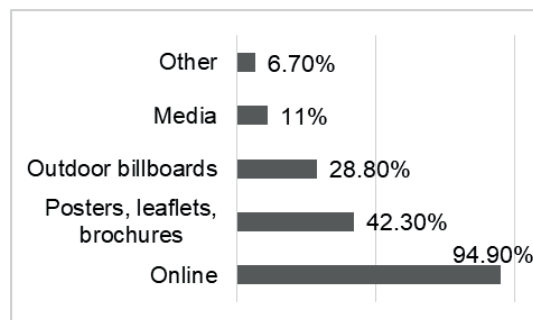
The analysis of tourists' requests (from Romania or abroad) presented to the accommodation providers refers to their needs to visit tourist attractions (53.3%), participation in various cultural events (11.8%) and other requests (0.8 %) (Figure 8).

Regarding leisure programs offered and organized individually or in partnership with other operators, there is a growing demand from tourists for activities which facilitate visits to various tourist attractions, while for participating in local events and other services is a low interest (Figures 3, 8).



**Figure 8**

The most frequent tourists' requests addressed to the accommodation service providers from Bihor county (%)



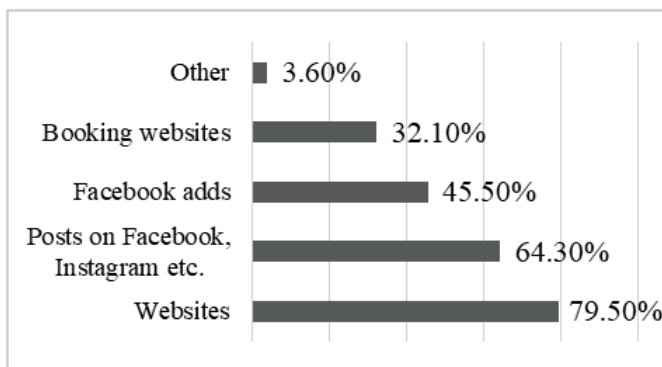
**Figure 9**

Marketing strategies for tourist services (%)



Promotion is an extremely important variable for tourism, and is a key element in the process of construction and strengthening the image of a tourist destination. Research on ways to promote tourism in Bihor county highlights the prevalence of the online environment (94.9%), followed by promotion through leaflets, posters and brochures (42.3%), billboards (28.8%), media (11%), and others (6.7%) (Figure 9).

The most common ways of Internet marketing are own websites (79.5%), posts on social media (64.3%), social media advertising (45.5%), booking websites (32.1%), as well as other methods (3.6%) (Figure 10).

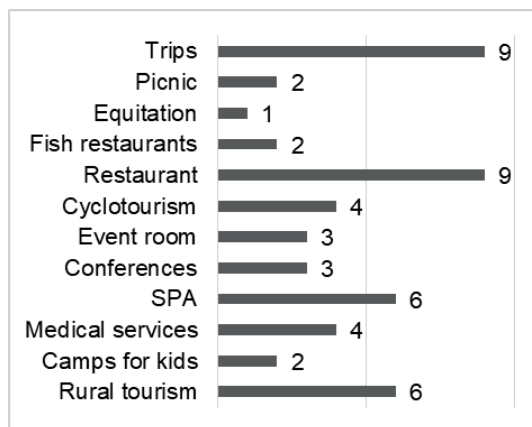


**Figure 10**  
Online marketing strategies (%)

### Perspectives for tourism in Bihor county

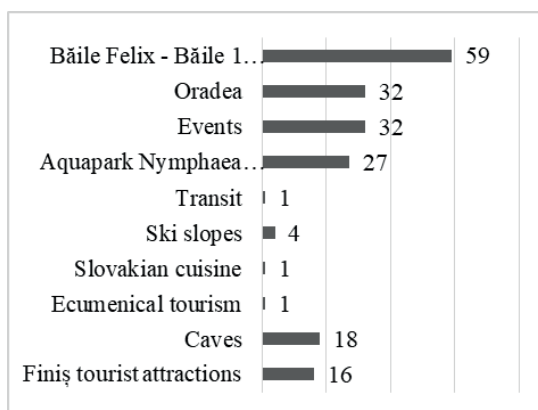
Considering the current trends of tourism in Bihor county, we can easily foreshadow its perspectives based on the analysis of the intentions, expectations, perceptions and proposals of the accommodation service providers from the investigated tourist destination.

The intentions concern the tourist services that respondents intend to establish and promote in the next two years. The analysis reveals these intentions only in the case of 34 providers (28.8%), grouped by value classes as follows: small (45%), medium (27%), high (11.8%), very high (15.7 %). Among the tourist services that they intend to develop in the future are those related to serving meals and organizing trips to various tourist attractions, followed by SPA services and those related to rural tourism (Figure 11).



**Figure 11**

Services that tourist providers intend to develop and promote in the next two years  
(number of cases)



**Figure 12**

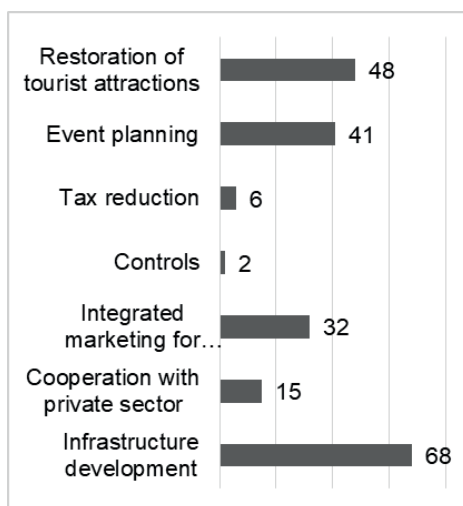
Tourist attractions, events and activities that draw tourists to Bihor county  
(number of cases)

The perception of tourist attractions, events and activities that draw tourists to Bihor highlighted the following situation presented by typological categories: small (24%), medium (20.9%), high (12.6 %), very high (42.5%). According to accommodation providers, a major importance in attracting tourists to Bihor has Băile Felix - Băile 1 Mai spa area, Oradea and the events that take place here, Aquapark Nymphaea Oradea, while, at the opposite pole, we find the ecumenical tourism, Slovak cuisine and transit tourism (Figure 12).

The expectations of the accommodation service providers (84 providers, 71.2%) regarding the involvement of central and local public authorities grouped respond-

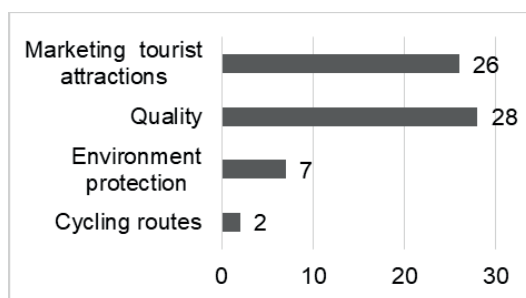


ents in the following categories: small (13.2%), medium (19.8%), high (12.6%), very high (42.5%). The highest expectations were related to infrastructure development, restoration of tourist attractions, event planning to draw tourists and an integrated marketing of accommodation and dining structures. At the other end, we find the cooperation with the private sector, tax reduction and controls in order to avoid the tax-free economy and unfair competition in tourism (Figure 13).



**Figure 13**

Service providers' expectations in relation to public authorities (number of cases)



**Figure 14**

Proposals on tourism development (other than those related to public administrations) (number of cases)

Only 40 providers (33.8%) offered proposals on tourism development, and the number of these proposals was also relatively low (64 proposals). Proposals coming from the accommodation providers from Bihor referred to increasing the



quality of tourist services, intensifying efforts to promote tourist attractions in the near future, the need to protect the environment and exploiting local tourist offer through cycling (Figure 14).

## CONCLUSIONS

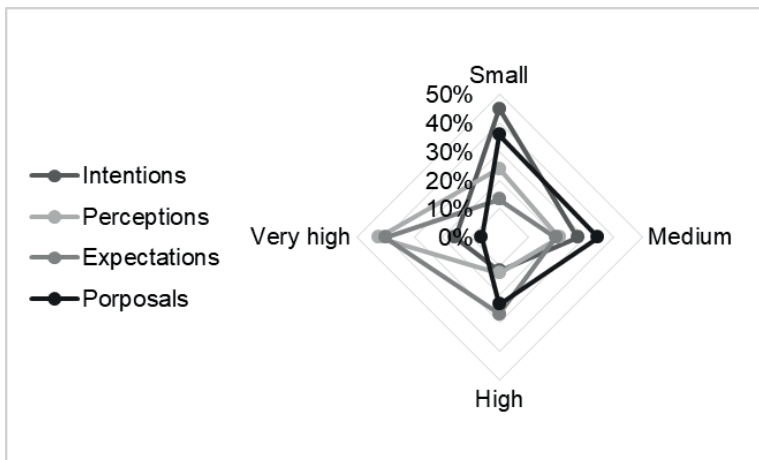
Bihor county is one of the emerging tourist destinations at national level, where balneary, balneoclimateric, cultural and mountain tourism are intertwined in a balanced way. In order to capture the trends and perspectives of tourism in Bihor county, 188 accommodation providers were consulted from all tourist micro destinations (Oradea, Băile 1 Mai and Băile Felix spas, Sânmartin locality, Crișurilor Plain, Vârtop holiday village) Pădurea Craiului ecotourism destination, Budureasa commune and Valea Iadului area).

In order to analyse trends, we consulted accommodation service providers regarding related services and tourist programs they offer, staff employed, tourists and the promotion system used, while the perspectives emerged from the analysis of respondents' intentions for the next two years, their expectations (regarding the involvement of central and local public authorities in tourism development), their perceptions (related to tourist attractions, events and activities that could draw tourists in Oradea city and Bihor county), and their proposals on tourism development, other than those related to the local and central public administrations.

Among the defining trends for tourism in Bihor county we can outline:

- the major share of tourist services related to primary needs (accommodation and food), followed by those aiming security (such as car parking), relaxation (sauna, swimming pool etc.), as well as physical and mental recovery;
- preoccupations regarding the organization of visits to tourist attractions in the area in order to diversify and prolong the time tourists spend in the investigated destination, doubled by tourists' requests in this regard;
- economic agents in tourism face major difficulties in recruiting competent staff;
- the need to identify new solutions and mechanisms to reduce tourist pressure during the peak season, from July and August, for certain tourist areas and providers;
- the major importance of the online environment, respectively of own websites and simple posts on social media (Facebook, Instagram) in order to promote Bihor county as a tourist destination.

The perspectives of tourism in Bihor county, based on current trends, also emerge from the weighted analysis of the intentions, expectations, perceptions and proposals of the accommodation service providers from Bihor. Thus, we can state that the consulted providers have low intentions in designing, diversifying and promoting tourism services in the next two years, and relatively moderate proposals on tourism development, while they have high expectations from central



**Figure 15**

Relationship between intentions, perceptions, expectations and proposal

and local public authorities (regarding infrastructure development, restoration of tourist attractions, event planning to draw tourists, and the integrated promotion of accommodation and public catering structures), and high perceptions related to the capacity of tourist attractions, events and activities to draw tourists in Bihor county (Figure 15).

The stakeholders of tourism and hospitality may boost their business in the light of findings uncovered under the empirical lens of this study. From the predictive analysis of the trends and perspectives of tourism in Bihor tourist destination for the next two years we can see an exacerbation of the problems regarding the human resource involved in tourism, as well as the two opposite moments - the peak seasons (July-August), when because of the large flow of tourists the services decrease considerably in terms of quality, and the off-season when the tourist activity proves to be economically unprofitable, for most of the consulted units.

Among the measures that need to be taken we mention the strengthening on cooperation between local public authorities, representatives of tourism service providers and the University of Oradea, in order to prepare future graduates who will be involved in the local tourism labour market. In this sense, this study is a support of future scientific approaches that will aim to identify the needs of the local tourism labour market and to adapt the educational instructional process, starting from the realities found on this study. The peak-season, off-season and the periods between them, have been extensively analysed not only in scientific writings but also by the local and regional statistical institutions reports. However, given the high degree of complexity of tourism, imposed by local and regional determinants, particular analyses are required for each area in the future, some-





times for each service provider, to identify the best solutions which can be taken in order to reduce the amplitude between peak-season and off-season and achieve a sustainable tourism.

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