

CAPITALIZING THE TOURIST POTENTIAL IN CARAŞ-SEVERIN COUNTY AS A PREMISE FOR REGIONAL ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. In the context when tourism has become a widespread phenomenon, there are many global concerns in this regard, with reference to the plans to protect the world's cultural and natural assets, and to stimulate the sustainable development of this sector. Touristic, cultural and scientific bodies develop comprehensive strategies, initiating Conventions, drawing up plans and periodically preparing reports. Romania has a large number of tourist attractions, ranking 46th in the top based on this criterion, distinguishing itself also grace to the attractiveness of natural objectives, the total number of protected areas, the number of cultural objectives and the number of objectives in terms of oral and intangible heritage. Taking into account all these indicators, Romania may be proud of a vast touristic potential, which offers wonderful premises for starting a business in tourism, for the expansion of entrepreneurship and for the development of natural, cultural and anthropic resources. Each region and area of Romania has diverse and special particularities and characteristics, and we have to underscore their ability to become true business poles grace to the high level of their attractiveness, being capably of developing actual hospitality industries. The recognition of their existence and value obviously contributes to a very large extent to the promotion and inclusion of cultural objectives into various global rankings, actions that lead to an increased interest among tourists, and implicitly contribute to attracting a large number of visitors and generally have a significant media impact. In this respect, this paper highlights international and domestic coordinates related to the sizing and capitalization of tourism potential, analysing theoretical coordinates

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and statistical data. In addition, we also forward the results of a survey carried out in order to identify the prospects for capitalizing on the Romanian tourist heritage and the manner in which the highlighting of the Romanian touristic and cultural objectives can be a starting point for generating prosperous future business and can develop the business milieu in all areas, including in the regions experiencing a steep decline, like Caraş-Severin county.

Key words: touristic sight, tourist attractions, business, hospitality industry, entrepreneurship

JEL: Z32, L26

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Introduction

The development of tourism or, rather, its relaunch, is currently one of the most popular topics in the world, especially in the context in which the Coronavirus pandemic has put on standby much of the activity in this sector. Many regions have suffered the negative effects of the health crisis and the question is how they can be revived and how they can continue to be sustainable, given that an economic recovery in general is both difficult and unpredictable in terms of duration.

Uncertainty is a predominant feeling, a state of affairs that has been induced in the context of recent events, although it is known that Romania has a rich tourist supply, which can list multiple objectives, both natural and anthropic, cultural, spa, religious, mountainous etc.

Adequate development and, moreover, a relaunch after this difficult period of pandemic, would require first of all a thorough knowledge of the resources that can be capitalized, as well as a deep understanding of how they can be highlighted in the most appropriate way, while ensuring

long-term sustainability. Drawing a logical connection between the current state and the objectives to be reached becomes an imperative given that many valuable areas or objectives are currently in an advanced state of degradation, “victims” of the many factors that have contributed over time to the decline of this sector. However, a clear vision is needed in order to ensure an optimal state of health of the tourism sector on the national level, and it is desirable to draw up a realistic and ambitious strategy, as well as a sustainable and coherent action plan.

Theoretical background

Globally, many countries can be successful examples of how to manage and capitalize on resources. They have established for years effective strategies for development (Anghelache et al., 2017) and promotion and the growing number of tourists have established them as representative poles in this field, true “pillars of the economy” (Akrivos et al., 2014). However, the continuous development is the consequence of the implementation of coherent sustainable strategies, implying at the same time the capitalization of the entrepreneurial potential.

The European Union supports these initiatives in the field of tourism, and documents and communications are regularly drawn up by the European Commission promoting strategies to stimulate the “competitiveness of the tourism industry” (2007), as a premise for positive changes in the labour market. There is even talk of a “sustainable tourism” or a “durable tourism”, as they acknowledge “the fundamental role of tourism in the economy of the European Union”. However, on closer inspection, we can see that success in tourism, as well as its competitive and sustainable nature is due in most cases to a mix of elements combined with reason and inspiration, fuelled by both an efficient and lasting planning, as well as the adaptation to the zonal specificity, the capitalization of the opportunities, of the know-how, as well as a strong and continuous promotion. In this respect, according to Eurostat, “competitiveness, sustainability and quality of tourism on the regional and local level” are supported by the European Regional Development Fund.

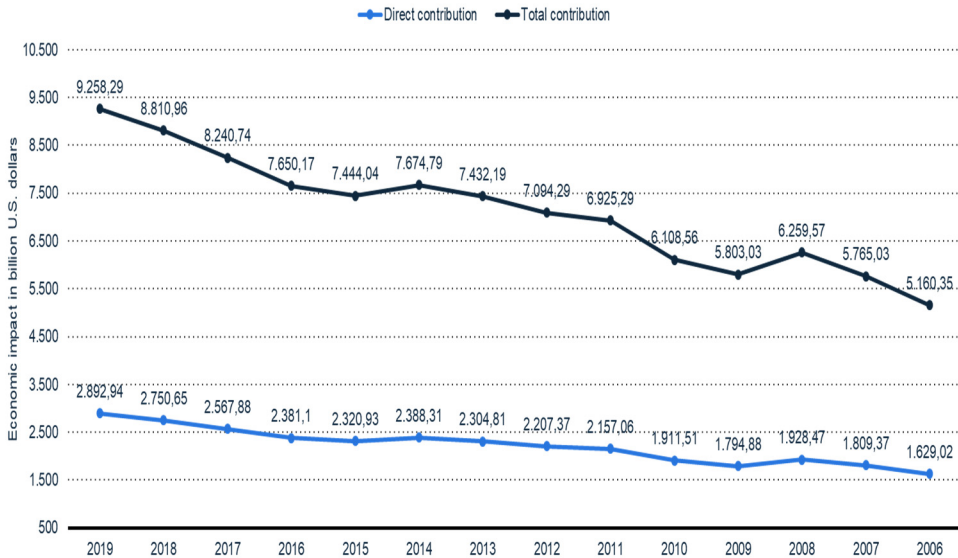


Fig. 1. The direct and total contribution of the tourism sector to the global GDP (billion dollars)

Source: Statista

The positive consequences of the development of the tourism sector cannot be denied, business development in this field bringing “economic benefits for any country” (Biswas & Mamum-Or-Rashid, 2018); in this respect we can study the direct contribution of the tourism sector to GDP worldwide. From the graph above, taken from the Statista database, we can see that over the 2006 - 2019 period the contribution of this industry has increased significantly worldwide, going up from 1629 billion dollars in 2006 to almost 2893 billion dollars in 2019. At the same time, it is an important generator of jobs (Fu et al., 2019), especially in countries that ensure their economic survival with the help of this sector, greatly stimulating the development of small and medium enterprises (Akrivos et al., 2014). The contribution of the latter has also been studied by other authors in the literature, Gregoric & Kovac Pajic (2016) emphasizing the role of SMEs as “generators of entrepreneurial development”, also pointing out the role that investments have in stimulating this- Peters et al (2009) also grant a fundamental character to them, complemented by the approach of Aquino et al. (2018), according to which tourism businesses

acquire “a critical role in delivering desired community development outcomes”, especially in rural areas (Jaafar et al., 2015). Small businesses are also considered a “catalyst” (Chuvakjina et al., 2018) of community forces, as well as a means of capitalizing on resources and transforming them into established tourism products.

Obviously, in the field of tourism there are specific characteristics of entrepreneurship, and we remark also the classic attributes, starting from the importance of correctly identifying opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2015). Forouzandeh et al. (2015) indicate as factors that influence the level of entrepreneurship development: environmental factors, resource management, cultural factors, political, technological, demographic factors, and networking activity. In consideration of all the above, entrepreneurship itself becomes a factor in the sustainable development of tourism, Lordkipanidze et al. (2005) establishing a clear link between these concepts, but nevertheless identifying an opposition position in which the two can be placed.

Globally, tourism is an important economic activity (Sotiriadis, 2018), and the inclusion of monuments and tourist attractions in certain rankings has been a turning point in terms of increasing popularity, bringing along recognition. An increasing number of people have turned into tourist activities the curiosity to find out information about the respective sights, and at the same time boosting entrepreneurship, encouraging the local industries, the manufacture of objects with local specificity, as well as the services sector. Although entrepreneurship in tourism can be perceived as likely to bring about many challenges (Butkouskaya et al., 2020), it acquires a vital role (Jose, 2019), and becomes a driving force in the tourism and hospitality industry, and an important source of jobs (Ciochină et al., n.d.)

In this sense, we can exemplify the UNESCO patrimony, in which Romania also has included a series of objectives, known on the national level, but which, by being included in this list, have benefited from the increase of notoriety also at international level. According to Statista, Romania has currently 8 world heritage sites. The UNESCO website presents the, as follows: the Danube Delta, the Churches of Moldavia, Horezu Monastery, the villages with fortified churches in Transylvania, Dacian fortresses of the Orăştie Mountains, the historic Centre of Sighişoara,

the wooden churches of Maramureş, the ancient and primeval beech forests of the Carpathians. Of these, two are natural and six are cultural sites.

Tourism in Romania can be characterized primarily from the perspective of diversity, being a country with diverse cultural traditions, each area of the country being distinguished by a different specificity. From natural resources, represented by mountains, forests, waters, biodiversity reserves to anthropogenic objectives and monuments, created by man, we can say that Romania is a country with a generous tourist potential, largely undervalued. In addition to the hydrographic network, flora, fauna, spas, mountain resorts, we find monasteries, archaeological sites, cities, buildings that can present to visitors the centuries-old history of our country.

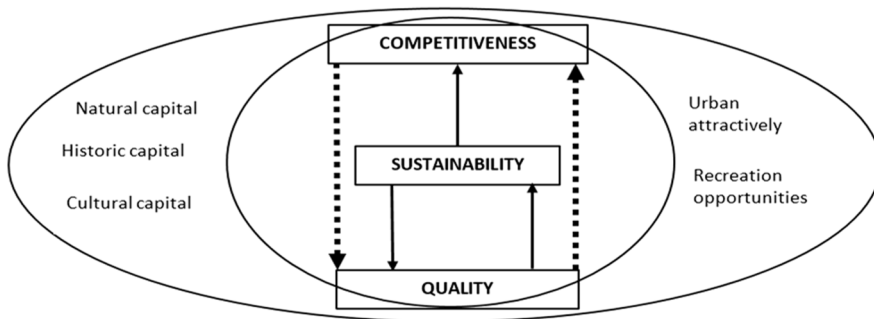


Fig. 2. The relationship between competitiveness, quality and sustainability

Source: Elaborated by the authors, apud the information provided by Eurostat

According to the Romanian Tourism Development Strategy, the main indicators according underlying the assessment of the activity in the field of tourism in Romania are the number of enterprises in the hotel, accommodation and food sector, the volume of investments made in this field, the number of employees and production value. Croitoru (2011) mentions the importance of calculating an index of competitiveness in tourism, for the determination of which several factors are taken into account, namely: legal regulations in the field of tourism, infrastructure, business environment and resource use (natural, human, cultural), each of these elements subordinating other secondary factors of influence.

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In this regard, The World Economic Forum elaborates The Travel and tourism competitiveness report, which presents first of all a regional analysis and regional profiles, while also creating country/economy profiles. Thus, it is very important to study and asses these findings, in order to objectively identify the real entrepreneurial potential of a country in the field of tourism. For this to be accomplished, we still need a good benchmarking strategy, in order to identify the real value of the local environment and to properly raise awareness of the touristic potential.

According to the report mentioned above, the preservation of natural and cultural resources represents a real “challenge”, that “the industry must overcome” (WEF, 2019). Also, the same source show us that while “the number of UNESCO cultural and natural sites, as well as intangible cultural heritage listings, keeps growing”, it becomes necessary to develop a “greater commitment to preserving some of the key attractions driving people to visit destinations” (WEF, 2019). While studying the individual country/economy profiles, we concluded the following aspects regarding the positions occupied by Romania:

Table 1. Romania – a country profile

	Issue	Rank	Score
1	Overall rank – the travel and tourism competitiveness	56/140	4
2	Subindex A – Enabling environment	51/140	5,2
3	Subindex B – Travel and tourism policy and enabling conditions	64/140	4,5
4	Subindex C – Infrastructure	70/140	3,5
5	Subindex D – Natural and cultural resources	49/140	2,8
6	Pillar 1 – Business environment	76/140	4,4
7	Pillar 2 – Safety and security	29/140	6
8	Pillar 3 – Health and hygiene	36/140	6,1
9	Pillar 4 – Human resources and labour market	73/140	4,5
10	Pillar 5 – ICT Readiness	55/140	5,2
11	Pillar 6 – Prioritization of travel and tourism	101/140	4,1
12	Pillar 7 – International openness	46/140	3,9
13	Pillar 8 – Price competitiveness	51/140	5,6
14	Pillar 9 – Environmental sustainability	48/140	4,4
15	Pillar 10 – Air transport infrastructure	72/140	2,7
16	Pillar 11 – Ground and port infrastructure	83/140	3,1
17	Pillar 12 – Tourist service infrastructure	54/140	4,6
18	Pillar 13 – Natural resources	56/140	3,2
19	Pillar 14 – Cultural resources and business travel	44/140	2,3

Source: World Economic Forum Report, 2019

Thus we can observe that the position occupied by Romania varies depending on the pillar that we analyse. Some positions are very good, indicating a higher level of development, while others can be considered weaknesses and criteria in need for improvement. However, all of these have to be taken into consideration when developing a strategy of entrepreneurial development of a region.

Research methodology

In order to study the respondents' perception regarding the possibilities of capitalizing on the tourist potential in Caraş-Severin county, a research was carried out, having as main tool an online questionnaire. It was applied using a Google Forms template between 05.01-05.02.2021 to a sample of 226 persons residing in Reşiţa, Caraş-Severin county. The distribution of the sample according to the identification criteria is indicated in the following table:

Table 2. The sample of respondents

Criterion	Total number of respondents	Variables	Absolute value	Percentage
Gender	226	Male	42	18%
		Female	185	82%
Age	226	Under 25	38	17%
		25 – 35 years of age	50	22%
		35 – 45 years of age	95	42%
		45 – 55 years of age	38	17%
		Over 55	5	2%
Occupation	226	Pupil / Student	56	25%
		Employee	138	61%
		Unemployed person	27	12%
		Pensioner	5	2%
Studies	226	High school	20	8.85%
		Post-secondary education	12	5.31%
		Higher education	194	85.84%

Source: developed by authors

In the present research, we proposed the following objective:

01 – identifying the respondents level of knowledge towards the touristic potential of Caraș-Severin county

02 – identifying the frequency of touristic activities carried out by respondents

03 - identifying the respondents' perception regarding the places in Caraș-Severin that are most likely to be developed

04 - identifying the respondents' perception regarding the need for a more intense promotion of tourism

05 - identifying the respondents' perception regarding the main aspects in need to be improved.

Results and discussions

The idea of this survey started from a personal research project, ample in terms of directions to be followed, started in the academic year 2020-2021, intended to determine the degree to which Caraș-Severin county can be developed by capitalizing tourist resources. In a previous article (Tănase et al., 2020), the authors pointed out the importance of tourism for the direction of entrepreneurship development in the region, the study focusing in the first phase on arguments in favour of entrepreneurship development in the Danube Straits. Starting from the premises stated in that research, from the conclusions obtained from the centralization and interpretation of the results, and by drawing future research directions, we set out on a longer path in studying this issue, continuing to focus on the manner in which an adequate valorisation of the natural and anthropic resources in the county could contribute to the acquisition of a growing notoriety of this region. In this respect, the hypotheses formulated in the didactic activities helped us to a great extent, by consulting the students and master students in the specialising in business administration, without necessarily formalizing the discussions in the form of focus groups. The outlined ideas materialized in a questionnaire that was applied online, given the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 crisis, the questions urged respondents to identify the extent to which they share our perception of the real potential of the county.

As only a local popularization in the media often proves inefficient and taking as examples of good practice other countries, we considered it appropriate to debate the idea that the county would benefit from greater notoriety if some of the tourist attractions would gain an international recognition, being included in the UNESCO patrimony for instance.

From this perspective we have found that not all of the respondents are familiar with these international classifications. Therefore, if such a recommendation were to be applied in practice, future strategies should focus in part on “educating” the consumer of tourism products, updating existing information and bridging all possible gaps in knowledge. Most respondents, although not strangers to concepts such as “UNESCO monument” or “UNESCO heritage”, do not have a broad set of knowledge in this regard. 35% of respondents indicate an average level of knowledge on this issue, while the opinions of others are divided. Whereas about 38% consider that they have information to a high and to a very high extent regarding the international rankings in the field of tourism, being at the same time concerned or even passionate about travel, a significant segment of people, namely about 27% of the total have not heard at all about these issues or have only minimal knowledge in this regard. However, in order to be able to present a clearer picture of the answers provided, it is necessary to study the level of representativeness of the answers given by the subjects. Thus, when it comes to the first question, we can calculate, based on the available data, an average level of representativeness, indicated by the coefficient of variation, which has according to the table below, the value 43.59%, which shows a relative degree of homogeneity.

On the national level, as it results from reports and specialized studies, there are various areas that have managed to stand out by inclusion in such rankings. In this regard, the respondents were asked if on the national level they have knowledge about such tourist attractions, which an international recognition has helped contribute to a positive evolution of their area. This question came as a natural continuation of the previous one, and the answers provided by the subjects only strengthen the belief that most regions are in dire need of continuous promotion even on the national level, especially since the level of popularity is not high enough. A significant percentage of respondents (about 23%) have

no knowledge of sights included in international rankings, while over 75% have partial knowledge and could, according to their own statements, provide at least one such example, and a very low percentage, only 2%, consider themselves specialists in the field, being able to indicate most of the Romanian tourist objectives listed in international rankings. Even if, at least partially, the names of the objectives in Caraș-Severin county are known to them, the respondents do not have knowledge regarding the inclusion of any of them in the international tops or rankings.

The tourist activity of the respondents is quite low, especially in the context of the last year, which has greatly limited travel. However, in terms of the volume of this activity, we find that respondents make time at least for weekend trips, occasionally. A very small percentage indicates actions of visiting the tourist objectives in Caraș-Severin county monthly (10%) or several times a year. This may be due, as mentioned earlier, to the difficult situation created by the context of COVID 19, which made it difficult to initiate holidays and other trips, and in providing answers, respondents referred in particular to the experiences of the last year. However, a percentage of about 58% of respondents declare at least one trip to the county during the last 12 months.

It is a known fact that the county cannot develop all its areas equally at the same time. There are differences between the mountain area, respectively the Danube Shore (*Clisură*) area or the Băile Herculane Spa area. Each of them exhibits a different degree of evolution, depending on the concerns of the authorities, respectively on the entrepreneurial initiatives that have materialized in more successful or less successful projects, over the last years. There are many voices claiming that the county, through its natural and anthropogenic tourist objectives, could be a major competitor among other regions of the country, if the opportunities were properly exploited. We were therefore curious to find out which of the three areas mentioned is considered to have a greater potential for development in the future. In this sense, the mountain area was preferred by most subjects, Semenice and Little Mountain (*Muntele Mic*) areas being selected by about 56% of respondents, while 41% opted for the Danube Straits area, only 3% declaring a high level of optimism regarding the spa part of the county, namely Băile Herculane. Of course, this short survey on the location most likely to be developed is not a sufficient argument to support one direction of development or another, but it highlights

the current perception of potential tourists. Also, in order to get the big picture, the study could be completed in the future with other regions in Caraş-Severin, namely those that represent the part of nature reserves or urban tourism.

On a Likert scale from 1 to 5, regarding the need to implement much more solid promotional actions, with national and international dissemination, the majority of respondents (about 80%) agree with the idea of the need for active campaigns in this regard, granting scores of 4 and 5 and identifying an increased degree of this need on the county level. Only a small percentage, i.e. 14%, consider this aspect of medium importance, and the remaining almost 6% grant it a low or very low significance, assessing it with 1 and 2. From this point of view, we find an increased level of representativeness of the answers offered by the subjects, the value of 21.45% of the variation coefficient showing a high level of answers homogeneity. Consequently, in this respect a more active promotion strategy is required, so that the tourist sights in our county could acquire their deserved recognition, both nationally and internationally.

However, we cannot ignore some of the critical nature of the answers provided by respondents. In order to be able to promote the area beyond the mere existence of these objectives, it is important to ensure the most appropriate access conditions, which are currently lacking on the whole. The quality of infrastructure has been much discussed over the years, often being blamed for attracting a too low number of tourists. Being asked to evaluate this criterion, the respondents had divided opinions, so we could identify positive opinions, as well as some less or not at all favourable. However, the percentage of those who consider the infrastructure to be satisfactory to a high extent remains quite low. Thus, out of the 226 respondents, on a scale from 1 to 5, only 3.1% assign it a maximum score, appreciating the infrastructure as very good. In addition, about 17.7% of respondents indicate a good quality for it, and most respondents tend to indicate an average level (45.57%). The remaining 33.63% of respondents mention a low level of infrastructure quality, scoring this criterion by 1 and 2 points. We must also mention in this respect the homogeneous nature of the answers given, deduced after calculating the variation coefficient, which at this point has a value of 32.24%, again indicating the representativeness of the answers given by the subjects.

The tourism development strategy must thus necessarily include concrete, clear provisions regarding the rehabilitation of the access infrastructure to the tourist objectives, as long as this aspect is vital and can greatly influence the opinion of tourists about a certain area.

The fact that until recently there had been no special concerns for ensuring a progress of Caraș-Severin county in terms of tourism led to the neglect of infrastructure issues, postponed or even forgotten, which, as a direct consequence, has led to the impossibility adequate capitalization of some areas. We were interested in whether the respondents consider that in Caraș-Severin county we have or not undervalued or underutilized areas, precisely in order to be able to create the premise according to which an inclusion in the international classifications proved to be beneficial. Thus, the respondents are not at all satisfied with the degree of capitalization of the existing potential, stating that there is room for improvement, especially in certain situations. The tourist sight considered by the respondents as the least capitalized at its fair value is considered to be Băile Herculane Spa, a resort currently in an advanced state of physical degradation and forgotten at the same time by the national tourist map. Although the history of the resort is impressive, dating back hundreds of years and being compared to the resort of Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic, the current state has led to its oblivion both in terms of tourism and economy, rehabilitation projects being insufficient and / or inefficient. A revitalization of the area could include, beyond the physical restoration of buildings and the historical restoration of the resort, bringing its potential to its fair value, creating a story, a framework meant to contribute to the sale of tourism and more active and fair media coverage.

Respondents demonstrate an increased level of receptivity to tourism in Caraș-Severin county. However, their interest could be actively stimulated if, in addition to improving the quality of infrastructure, entrepreneurship development strategies on the county level would consider, on the one hand: the creation of a framework meant to ensure easier access to the major tourist sight, the diversification of the forms of tourism practiced, from gastronomic to religious, ethnic or adventure tourism, the practice of pricing policies accessible to all categories of customers. Asked what are the main factors that would direct them to our county to the detriment of other areas of the country, respondents

did not hesitate to mention the attractiveness of sights, namely the diversity and quality of traditional dishes, which can be capitalized through successful entrepreneurial initiatives.

We must not forget that worldwide tourism is seen as an engine of the economy, playing an active role in regional development. So what would prevent Caraş-Severin county from becoming an example of good practice in this regard? Although industry has been the basis of the county's development in the past, can tourism become a foundation for future development?

Attachment to the idea of home would cause a large number of respondents to recommend acquaintances to visit Caraş-Severin county. The percentage of those who share this opinion is high - over 85%.

And even though we concluded at the beginning of the study that a relatively low number of respondents have knowledge of international landmark assessment rankings, a significant number of respondents say they would recommend that landmarks be included in various rankings or even UNESCO heritage if this would bring benefits on multiple levels. Over 75% of the subjects would make such a recommendation, considering that at present most of the areas in the county are not properly known or exploited. And what is partly a paradox due to the advanced degree of degradation, although from the perspective of the historical past is not a surprise, in a top of the objectives worthy of inclusion in the UNESCO list they ranked first Băile Herculane resort, for which such a distinction can contribute in the future to a clarification of the destiny of the resort, and to its complete rebirth. Also among the most valuable anthropic resources they mentioned the Anina - Oravița railway, considered a treasure of the county.

On a scale from 1 to 5, the respondents were asked to what extent a suitable marketing, along with a distinction of inclusion in the UNESCO patrimony would influence their decision to visit the county more often. In this respect, the opinions were mostly favourable, almost 50 of the respondents stating that these elements would determine them to promote, in their turn, tourism in Caraş-Severin to a higher extent. A similar percentage indicates a strong intensity of this desire, very few respondents declaring a contrary opinion. It seems, therefore, that inclusion in international rankings would also show effects in

terms of popularity of targets. However, the respondents also formulate a series of expectations in terms of infrastructure, the adaptation of the entrepreneurial activity to the needs of the tourists, the increase of the quality of the services etc.

The calculations related to the statistical verification of representativeness are detailed in the table below:

Table 3. Statistical verification of representativeness

Criterion	Total number	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Dispersion	Standard deviation	Variation coefficient
Level of knowledge on inclusion in the rankings	226	1	5	3.19	1.9339	1.3906	43.59%
Need for more active promotion	226	1	5	4.18	0.8061	0.8978	21.45%
Quality of infrastructure	226	1	5	2.86	0.85108	0.9225	32.24%

Source: calculations made by authors

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the answers provided by the respondents, we notice that the opinions and results vary depending on the question asked, respectively on the level of knowledge regarding a certain topic. For the questions to which the answers were offered using Likert's scale, we could also calculate the indicators of variation, to check if the answers offered are representative and if the results could be generalized to a larger population.

In this sense, regarding the three items specified in the table above, we note that a higher level of homogeneity is registered in the case of answers aimed at the need for a more active promotion of tourism in the county, respectively the need to develop infrastructure quality, as a support for a future development of entrepreneurship in the county. We observe relative homogeneity in the case of the question aimed at identifying the level of knowledge regarding the inclusion in various rankings.

It is a recognized fact that the main premise for a future sustainable development is represented by the identification, knowledge and capitalization of the real tourist potential, to these being added the capacity to initially outline a coherent strategy at county level, respectively at individual level. Thus, it becomes essential to correctly identify the opportunities, to correlate the activities in time, in the spirit of capitalizing on the regional potential, all of these being important considering the fact that the development of entrepreneurship in tourism brings numerous advantages, of which we can mention the creation of new jobs, developing a higher level of national and international awareness and increasing the popularity of local brands.

Caraș-Severin is a county with great potential. It is up to us to decide how we chose to capitalize it.

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