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# THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM ON THE NORTH EAST REGION OF ROMANIA

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## Abstract

Every people have its own original place within universal culture. Nations must be able to take advantage of existent cultural potential and, if possible, to convert it into a source of development. From this perspective we admit that Romania possesses the privilege of some cultural peculiarities able to sustain positive economic dynamics. The outstanding historical and religious patrimony, prevailing in the North-East region of the country, most of it part of the UNESCO heritage, serve as clear evidence. Even so, all these native 'resources' have been insufficiently explored in order to acquire growth and economic development. Exploited with efficiency, the ecumenical vestiges might become an important source of regional prosperity, so the aim of the paper is to emphasize the remarkable potential of religious tourism in North-East Romania and moreover, its notable contribution to regional development prospects.

*Keywords:* economic potential, ecumenical tourism, regional disparities, development

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## 1. Introduction

Development and economic prosperity are undoubtedly major aspirations for every nation worldwide, especially for developing countries such as Romania. In such circumstances, things tend to become problematic when, within regions of the same country, economic growth is following the variable geometry principle. Romania is a developing nation with important intra-regional development gaps despite its European Union membership and its significant touristic potential. From a general perspective, meaningful development disparities between regions belonging to a certain nation might be explained in terms of natural factors, social, cultural, even policy judgments [1]. A more profound analysis emphasizes the determining impact of domestic causes, such as technical developments [2] and of native conditions of the country based on geographical, sectorial and cultural valences [Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Government of Romania - National

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Development Plan 2007-2013, available at <http://www.madr.ro>, accessed on 11 January 2013]. As we will see, both explanations are suitable for the particular case of North-East Romania. This region is faced with the poorest economic performances from all eight existent areas, regardless of its impressive natural and cultural potential. Beautiful landscapes and the outstanding ecumenical heritage could generate significant income able to compensate for the lack of competitiveness in terms of attracting direct foreign investments, innovation, economic productivity or distortions such as higher unemployment rates. Even so, all these 'resources' have been insufficiently explored in order to stimulate growth and welfare. For emphasizing the notable development potential of the ecumenical tourism in North-East Romania, the opening part of the analysis will be dedicated to a short presentation of the causes that determined growth discrepancies between the existent regions. In this context, particular emphasis will be given to regional characteristics that serve as an obstacle for religious tourism expansion and limit its contribution to local economic progress.

## **2. The origins of poor development in the North-East region of Romania**

Considering Romania's status of developing economy, the territorial organization in eight separate regions of development (North-West, Center, North-East, South-East, South, South-West, West, Bucharest and Ilfov) can be understood from the perspective of its European Union membership. The eight areas were created in order to facilitate and coordinate regional development projects sustained by European funds in both the EU pre-accession period and after 2007. The North-East region is the largest of Romania and is represented by 6 counties: Suceava, Botosani, Iasi, Neamt, Vaslui and Bacau [<http://www.madr.ro>, accessed on 11 January 2013]. According to Rey *et al.*, the region is considered not only the most populated one, with almost 3.696 thousand inhabitants, but also the poorest [3]. This position might be justified by considering some particular aspects such as geographical location, share of rural and urban population and other local conditions. Moreover, all these elements are able to provide a pertinent explanation on the situation incurred by the register of development gaps between all Romanian regions.

On the one hand, we admit the influence of geographical location. Undoubtedly, the Capital region and those located near the Western part of the country have benefited from large amounts of foreign direct investments, flowing originally from developed nations. As indicated by the National Bank of Romania, in 2011 Bucharest-Ilfov region captured 61.7% of the total share of FDI inflows, the West region 7.2%, while the North-East area was the less preferred one by foreign investors and attracted only 2.9%, mainly from countries such as The Netherlands, Austria, Germany, France or Italy [National Bank of Romania, National Institute of Statistics, Foreign Direct Investments in Romania in 2011, 2012, 21, available at <http://www.bnr.ro>, accessed on 11 January 2013]. On the other hand, the poor development level of the North-East region appears to be determined by the prominent share of 57.05% of rural

population [3]. In such context, the entrepreneurial climate or innovative projects and ideas have limited chances to develop. Even though the largest share of population, namely 43%, is activating in the services sector, agriculture also has an important impact, holding a percentage of 41.5% in comparison with the West region where agriculture has a share of 24.53%. All people located in rural areas have limited knowledge and resources, so they promote a subsistence agriculture that elucidates the dilemma of regional development [North-East Regional Development Agency, Socio-Economic Analysis, available at: <http://www.adrnordest.ro>, accessed on 12 January 2013]. It is important to emphasize that the share of occupied population in agriculture is superior to the regional share, of 41%. In such context, counties like Botosani, Vaslui, Suceava and Neamt overcome 44%, while counties like Bacau or Iasi might be characterized by smaller proportions of 29% and 37%, respectively. Transport infrastructure also raises significant problems in terms of accessibility for North-East counties which inhibits the positive effects of touristic activities. In spite of the enormous religious and cultural potential, all these circumstances discouraged the activity of foreign direct investors in the area, but conversely, they promoted the migration of young population and higher unemployment rates. In other words, the socio-economic context of the North-East region is highlighting the need for a profound transformation, where regional cultural and ecumenical patrimony plays a major role.

### **3. Ecumenical heritage of the North-East Romania – source of economic benefits**

Romania possesses the privilege of some cultural particularities able to sustain positive economic dynamics drawing on multiple areas, such as: history, customs, traditions inherited from past generations, geographical location, but mainly the prominent spirit of religiosity. Cultural tourist resources represent a main attraction for North-East Romania, where the ecumenical patrimony is prevailing. The region is famous for the authenticity of its religious heritage illustrated by churches and monasteries with impressive frescoes and mural paintings depicting scenes from the Bible, both interior and exterior walls, fortified churches with a remarkable artistic, age and historical value. This undisputable treasure which is unique in the world, some of it being part of the UNESCO heritage, emphasizes a meaningful touristic potential [4]. Extremely rich in terms of ecumenical attractions, the North-East region of Romania might have the capacity to offer proper conditions for religious touristic activities in the future. Hence, we might nominate different expressions of local religious tourism, such as: visiting holy places, religious camps for youth and mainly religious pilgrimage [5]. Pilgrims have the opportunity to discover memorable places, to visit sacred monuments with an original historical background and powerful spirit of religiosity. Practically, pilgrimage activity as part of the touristic act illustrates the dominant component.

All ecumenical ‘resources’ confer the necessary distinctiveness for the North-East region, especially for Bukovina and Neamt, where most medieval monasteries and churches are located. Monasteries such as Moldovita, Sucevita, Putna, Voronet, Humor, etc. were built in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and are surrounded by fortress walls bearing a profound historical mark [J. Tuck, *Bukovina: On the Monastery Beat*, Boston Globe Newspaper, Boston, U.S.A, May 17, 1980, 1]. They survived past experiences and remain an important landmark for Romanian culture and faith. Specific colours of the mural paintings like the blue of Voronet or the green of Sucevita point out a distinctive element that confers originality and specificity to regional religious patrimony [C.J. Williams, *Destination: Romania Romania’s Holy Treasure. A journey into the remote foothills of Bukovina to see five famous 16<sup>th</sup> Century churches – their outside walls covered with frescoes and little changes village life*, Los Angeles Times, April 16, 1995, 1]. Combined in a unique register of mural paintings, these colours shape important religious scenes or particular moments from the history of Europe such as the conquest of Constantinople painted at Humor monastery, the Genesis and doomsday at Voronet, or the scale of virtues at Humor).

### **3.1. Monasteries from Bukovina**

Religious edifices with museums that shelter heritage values, such as Putna or Voronet monasteries and the fortified fortress of Suceava are remarkable for this specific area [6]. Furthermore, Bukovina illustrates the most popular tourist area of the North-East region given the numerous churches and monasteries that are unique in the world, famous for the exterior and interior paintings. Among the most reputed monasteries from the county, we might nominate Voronet, founded by Stephen the Great in 1488, with interior paintings dating from the time of Stephen the Great. His fame is due to the exterior paintings done in an inimitable blue background which is famous worldwide as ‘the blue of Voronet’. Humor church, also known as the Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, is highly acclaimed for its exterior paintings depicting the doomsday. Moldovita monastery built by Petru Rares after 1532, also legendary for the exterior paintings, is surrounded by strong walls of six meters high. Sucevita monastery, that has the most remarkable fortification system of Moldavian monasteries, is known as the ‘legacy’ of Moldavian exterior paintings. It is built on seven overlapped registers. Dragomirna is striking through its overly large proportions when compared to its width. In fact, there are two superimposed churches limited by the girdle of torsade. At the Putna monastery that was built during 1466 and 1470 for the purpose of becoming a necropolis of the dynasty, there lies the tomb of Stephen the Great. The Roman Catholic church of Cacica is situated in the homonym village (county of Suceava) and was built in 1904 by the local Polish community. In 2000, recognizing the importance of Marian pilgrimages to this church Pope John Paul II named the church Minor Basilica. The ‘Lourdes Cave’ situated near

the church, which is a representation of the French cave, also illustrates a special resource for tourism.

### ***3.2. Monasteries from Neamt-Bacau Area***

Neamt County illustrates an important ecumenical tourist attraction, taking into consideration the large number of religious edifices located in the area. There are more than 50 monasteries and hermitages, most of them with a profound historical and cultural value [7]. Neamt monastery built during the reign of Stephen the Great in 1497 is a famous place of culture. Founded by the same voivode, Tazlau monastery is one of the most important monuments of the county. Agapia monastery was painted by Nicolae Grigorescu in 1858 and includes a museum of religious pieces of art dating from the XVI-XIX centuries. Secu monastery was founded by Nestor Ureche, the father of Romanian chronicler, Grigore Ureche, in 1602. The monastery has its own library which keeps books, valuable manuscripts and old prints. Other significant ecumenical places are Agapia and Almas monastery, Bistrita monastery founded in 1402 by Alexander the Good, Horaicioara monastery build by Stephen the Great, or the stone-walled Razboieni monastery built in 1496. It also serves as a mausoleum because the sanctuary and the pronaos graves shelter the relics of Moldovan soldiers who died in the battle of White Valley in 1476. The county of Bacau has the famous medieval complex which includes the Royal Court, the house tower and the Virgin church, considered to be the oldest intact building in the city that was built in the XV<sup>th</sup> century when Alexander, son of Stephen the Great, settled there. Simplicity, the geometrical elements and paintings specific to the Byzantine style confer the uniqueness of this building. Moreover, Rachitoasa monastery, Bodgana monastery and the church from Borzesti built during the reign of Stephen the Great are also important tourist attractions. Raducanu monastery, built by the great chancellor Nicolae Buhus in 1664, is the only church in Romania with a French text inscription. The church of the monastery hosts the tomb of the great scholar and revolutionary Costache Negri (1812-1876). In fact, the church possesses a rich collection of rare books, most of them transferred to the Academy Library.

### ***3.3. Monasteries from Iasi-Vaslui***

Iasi remains the historical and cultural capital of Moldova [<http://www.centruldepelerinaj.ro>; World Travel & Tourism Council, *Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2012 – Romania*, available at <http://wtcc.org>, accessed on 15 January 2013]. In 2000, during the celebration of two millennia of Christianity, Iasi was declared European city of pilgrimage with Thessaloniki (Greece), Trondheim (Norway), Edinburgh (United Kingdom) and Prague (Czech Republic). From this perspective, the relics of Saint Parascheva from the Metropolitan Cathedral were the major attraction. The cathedral is the largest Orthodox Church from Romania and hosts the relics of Saint Parascheva brought

from the Three Holy Hierarchs Monastery in 1889. Saint Nicholas church built in 1492 is the oldest religious edifice in Iasi, one of the most remarkable constructions of Stephen the Great. Golia monastery founded by Prince Vasile Lupu and his son was built during 1652-1662. In the eighteenth century, fortifications were added. The architectural style is a combination of Russian and Byzantine influences; from the 30-meter high 'Golia Tower' of 30 meters the panorama of the city of Iasi can be admired. Cetatuia and Galata monasteries are also nominated as important religious tourist attractions. The former was built as a fortified royal residence by Prince Gheorghe Duca between 1669-1672, with famous cellars, Turkish bath, a Gothic hall and a museum of medieval art. The latter was founded in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, it has fortifications and an impressive entrance tower. The county of Vaslui is also a significant location in terms of ecumenical vestiges. Floresti monastery founded in 1590 is one of the most important monasteries in the area and celebrates its feast day on Saint Ilie. Moreni monastery dating from the first half of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century was founded by Lupan Buznea, during the reign of Petru Rares. Bujoreni monastery illustrates an old religious edifice first documented on 27 March 1602, even though it was assumed that there was a monastic life even prior to that date. The church is built to take the shape of the cross. The Episcopal Cathedral of Husi which has the Holy Apostles Petru and Pavel as patrons of the church was built by Stephen the Great in 1495, within the royal court, and is also an important ecumenical vestige of the region.

As noted by Steiner and Reisinger, the existential religious authenticity might be perceived as a "remedy for the unpleasant loss of identity" [6]. The ecumenical tourism is a remarkable component of the cultural tourism of the North-East Romania. Abundant in informational content this tourism form motivates visitors to discover and explore the entire region.

Even though the inland touristic infrastructure was deeply damaged after Second World War and the Communist experience, when pilgrimage activity was discouraged, some studies pointed out that the ecumenical tourist potential of Romania still has the capacity to generate significant income and stimulate employment [7]. This aspect will be analyzed in the next section dedicated to the impact of religious tourism on the economic development of the North-East region of Romania.

#### **4. Religious tourism – a driving force of economic development in North-East Romania**

From an economic perspective, tourism in general and ecumenical tourism, in particular, illustrate the economic area with the highest potential in terms of international competitiveness for Romania. In other words, Romania has to benefit from it and convert the existing potency into a source of income. Despite our European Union membership, development performances of the North-East region remain unsatisfactory. In 2011 tourism had a contribution of only 1.4% to the Gross Domestic Product [World Travel & Tourism Council,

*Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2012 – Romania*]. Obviously, religious tourist share on GDP was insignificant, but we should also consider the fact that the contribution of travel and tourism to national GDP is expected to grow by 6.9% every year in the coming decade [8].

The success of religious potential exploitation in the region is strictly dependent on the authorities' capacity to attract significant direct foreign investments so as to modernize and create new infrastructure, promote cultural tourism, and assure European accommodation conditions for pilgrims and tourists [Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Government of Romania - National Development Plan 2007-2013]. Since 1999, religious tourism increased by 90%, especially after 2007. If the goals presented in the national development plan of Romania for 2007-2013 will be reached, there is a chance to multiply the positive effects of ecumenical tourism in the North-East area. At the moment, the results seem to be modest, but with an encouraging echo. According to the official statistics, leisure travel spending illustrated 69.7% of touristic direct contribution to GDP in 2011, in comparison with business travel spending, which had a 30.3% share [World Travel & Tourism Council, *Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2012 – Romania*]. In other words, there is a growing interest for traveling and visiting new places, including the religious patrimony of the North-East part of the country. Romania is seen as a touristic destination not only for businesses, but also for pilgrimage and natural attractions.

The impressive cultural potential ranks Romania the 66<sup>th</sup> in the world, with a competitiveness index of 3.84. From this perspective, Romania is comparable to Israel that occupies the 65<sup>th</sup> position, with a closer value index of 3.87 [World Economic Forum, *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011 – Beyond the Downturn*, 2011, available at <http://www.weforum.org>, accessed on 11 January 2013]. Taking into consideration the high reputation of Israel from the viewpoint of ecumenical heritage, we might admit that Romania enjoys a privileged place on the map of the world. Such rank strengthens the belief that cultural potential in general and religious potential, in particular, might have a major contribution to economic development, mainly in the North-East region, where religious patrimony prevails. Furthermore, the same competitiveness report pointed out that, in term of religious resources Romania is situated on the 41<sup>st</sup> place in the world hierarchy, with a competitiveness index of 3.33 [World Economic Forum, *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011 – Beyond the Downturn*]. This perspective places Romania in a better position than Israel, ranked 67 with a lower index of 2.47. Numerous monasteries, fortified churches and other ecumenical resources had a greater impact on tourist attractiveness than other places of the world. As we might observe, global reports offer promising perspectives related to the inland potency to stimulate economic growth and wealth in terms of religious tourism. All those statistics are signs that the existent potential was not sufficiently explored in order to acquire regional development, at least for the particular case of North-East region of Romania. Although ecumenical tourism illustrates an immature

sector of the North East area economy, such a situation might be explained by the fact that it is not yet perceived as an economic tool able to stimulate regional development [9]. Unfortunately, the same problem might be generalized at the national level. Future projections tend to be optimistic, taking into account that tourism share to Romanian GDP is expected to raise to 5.7% by 2022 [World Travel & Tourism Council, *Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2012 – Romania*].

The outstanding contribution of religious tourism to regional progress has several dimensions. On the one hand, exploitation of the ecumenical patrimony does not generate distortions on natural resources or the quality of the environment [10]. Consequently, this form of tourism is able to encourage and support sustainable tourism in the area. All strategic measures promoted by regional development agencies in order to improve the existent conditions are also designed to offer an additional protection in this sense [Government of Romania. Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, *National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Romania – Projections 2013-2020-2030*, Bucharest, 2008, available at <http://www.mmediu.ro>, accessed on 11 January 2013]. From such perspective, foreign direct investments and people's education are essential in terms of regional prosperity and development. On the other hand, ecumenical tourism activates the ability to harness not only religious vestiges, but also natural landscapes, water, climate or fauna of the region which would have been difficult to exploit in a separate context. Such touristic activity in the area will increase the effective use of local labour force, improving thereby the residents' life quality [11]. Moreover, organized pilgrimage actions designed to explore religious regional potential could absorb part of the unemployed that lost their job in the context of financial crisis. After all, religious tourism attraction involves the development of some support structures projected to facilitate the stay of tourists, such as: accommodation units, infrastructure and centres of tourist information. In these circumstances, part of unemployed people might be hired in accommodation units, while others might serve as guides for tourists or encouraged to produce and sell religious objects or local handicrafts. From such viewpoint, we might also emphasize the positive effects on the education and training of local population.

Commercial activities promoted by churches and monasteries are also an important source of income estimated at millions of dollars every year worldwide [12]. Considering the prevailing ecumenical heritage in North-East Romania and the growing number of visitors, from which only residents were estimated in 2011 at 283 000, religious tourism might be seen as an important source of economy revival [National Institute of Statistics, *Tourism demand of residents from Romania in 2011, 2012*, available at <http://www.insse.ro>, accessed on 11 January 2013]. Last but not least, given the fact that monasteries and medieval churches are located mostly in rural areas, touristic activity is leading to rural and ecotourism development [13]. The European Fund encouraged the expansion of rural and agricultural boarding houses. This had a major contribution to the enlargement of tourist accommodation establishments

in the North-East region from 554, in 2010 to 604, in 2011. The number of existing places in all these units followed a positive trend from 21 279 to almost 22 000 places in 2011 [National Institute of Statistics, *Romanian Tourism Statistical Abstract 2012*, 2012, available at <http://www.insse.ro>, accessed on 25 January 2013].

In other terms, religious tourism supports conservation and environmental protection, natural tourism resources, but also cultural and historical traditions of the North-East region

## **5. Conclusions**

Romania is a developing country with a significant religious potential. Even though such ecumenical heritage is dominant in the North-East region, its major contribution to the development of the local area remains unsatisfactory. Well preserved, all these resources are practically inexhaustible, which highlights the potency for a long-lasting development source in the area. In other words, pilgrimage activity, travels, commercial activities associated with ecumenical tourism or religious camps for youth are able to generate significant income meant to improve the regional economic climate. Despite the enormous competitive potential and its international acknowledgement, this particular form of tourism seems to be insufficiently exploited in North-East Romania. Such a situation becomes understandable in the light of poor socio-economic evolution and general economic context which is not that favourable to further expansion. Even so, regional and national strategic plans still have the opportunity to raise the competitiveness level of the North-East area, by attracting European funds, modernizing the existent infrastructure, paying a special attention to tourism promotion and religious tourism in particular. The entire region needs an economic revival and the ecumenical patrimony seems to be the closest and most economical native resource.

This authentic heritage emphasizes an outstanding development potential on the long-term. But the most important part is related to its tangential effects on sustainable tourism, rural tourism development, ecotourism, employment, the education of local people and living conditions and, in this way, to the regional economic growth and prosperity.

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