

The Role of Rural Tourism in the Socio-Economic Diversification of Rural Space from Lăpuşului Land (Țara Lăpuşului, Maramureş County, Romania)*

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Abstract—This study is aimed to provide a “radiography” of nowadays stage of rural tourism’s development in Lăpuşului Land and highlights the main results of a larger study about the rural tourism from this region. After a brief review of the evolution of the tourist accommodation units specific for the rural tourism (the tourist hostels) within a given period of time (2000-2009) and of their territorial distribution in the localities, we presents the main results of a field investigation taken through the technique of questionnaire applied directly, through operators upon a sample made of 24 households from 12 localities. The questionnaire elaboration and the assessment of the field inquiry results was based upon the analysis of the following problems: presentation of the households’ specific features that practise rural tourism; effects of the contacts with abroad; motivation of practising rural tourism from the perspective of the implied actors; way in which the actors appreciate their own level of life compared with that established at the level of country and its possible implications upon the tourism; way in which the households attract tourists, offered services and foreseen improvements, places for accomodation, practised prices; seasonality problem of the touristic flow; incomes from tourism; character of tourism (inner, international) and the origin areas of tourists; degree of satisfaction/insatisfaction, reasons for dissatisfaction and the intention to continue or renounce rural tourism. Finally, the main conclusions have been drawn on the basis of field inquiry processing and assessment.

Keywords—tourist resources, ethnographic region, rural tourism, field inquiry, questionnaire

I. INTRODUCTION

Lăpuşului Land is located in the north-eastern compartment of the Transylvanian space and it overlaps one of the clearly defined depression units in the north side of the Transylvanian Depression. It is overlapped in the eastern part of the tectonic-erosive depression Baia Mare – Copalnic – Lăpuş, formed upstream by the canyon dug in the Preluca Massif by the network of rivers reunited in the hydrographical convergence area within the central sector of the depression (the local collection of waters from Târgu Lăpuş – Răzoare – Dămăcuşeni). This fills almost entirely the superior hydrographical basin of the Lăpuş river. The area studied

covers a surface of 918.53 km² and it is incorporated in eight administrative-territorial units (with a total population of 33,846 inhabitants counted in the last census of 2002). Among these, seven are localities (Băiuţ, Coroieni, Cupşeni, Groşii Tibleşului, Lăpuş, Suci de Sus, Vima Mică - with almost 24 settlements), respectively, a town from the category of small urban centres (Târgu Lăpuş, with 5,844 inhabitants) which has 13 member villages. The above mentioned data reveal the true rural feature of Lăpuşului Land, with 37 member villages belonging to a city (the average per country is 42.8 member villages to a city in 2004). The majority of the local communities from Lăpuşului Land gathered in a territorial project in 2001 (the association “The Social and Economic Development Micro-region of Lăpuşului Land”). This project was based on the concepts promoted by the European Union for the territorial planning and development.

Lăpuşului Land stands out through the geographical diversity marked by a complex natural frame, with a considerable number of components and a high diversity of orographic shapes, landscape diversity, climate and bioclimate features and the hydrographical and bio-geographic resources. All this is doubled by the existence and the manifestation of a sum of social, historical and economic conditions with direct or/and indirect reflection and manifestation, in different degrees, within the offer and the current tourist phenomenon features.

The long evolution of the society from Lăpuşului Land in social, historic and complex natural conditions has allowed the individualisation of Lăpuşului Land as being one of the most representative ethnographic regions from the Romanian ethnic space, which has earned a special place in the local cultural and rural civilisation as a consequence of its perpetuation of numerous archaic material and spiritual cultural elements, revaluated on a tourist and cultural level through the specific means of tourism that can be practised all year round [9].

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study – having as basis a similar one enrolled during the period 2000-2001 that aimed at the analysis of the rural tourist phenomenon micro-regionally and locally [4] - [6] – having as purpose capturing the phenomenon at the scale of the entire country, is focused on the analysis of the rural

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tourism features unfolded in the perimeter of Lăpuşului Land given the spatial structure with a mainly agricultural feature and the general agricultural processes (the opposite of tertiarisation) and the pauperisation processes that have altered the Romanian rural space during the period after 1989. In this context, the scientific interest has been turned to the appearance of regional and local strategies, alternatives and answers to the major political, social and economic processes occurred after the change of the communist regime from 1989, and to these possibilities which may be used for the territorial development. The present study is focused on the tourist phenomenon, especially on one of its rapid developing forms after 1990, the rural tourism, among the small palette of activities that have found a proper development ground in the rural space (tourism, forestry and its associated products, different crafts etc.). In this study, we have decided to analyse the achievements of the last fifteen years of the local communities in the area using the criteria of scientific objectivity. We would also like to analyse the extent to which their achievements are left behind by the real possibilities and to identify the causes that have led to this discrepancy and, based on this, to set forth some viable solutions for the tourist development meant to correct these problems.

As a whole, the research performed aimed at the multiphase unfolding: the first phase aimed at the inventory of the attractiveness elements which made up the tourist offer of the region, its value estimation and its hierarchy using the method of valuable ranks (not comprised in the present study). The examination, using the investigation method, of the active households within the total tourism unfolded in Lăpuşului Land during the second phase (the one that constitutes the object of the present study). Based on the data and the information resulted from the first two phases, with the help of the SWOT analysis, the weak and strong points on which the viable tourist planning and development strategies might be set forth, were identified during the third phase.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF THE ACCOMMODATION STRUCTURES SPECIFIC FOR THE RURAL TOURISM DURING THE PERIOD 2000 – 2009

The first finding derived from the preliminary analysis reveals the fact that, in Lăpuşului Land, there are very few accommodation facilities in total opposition with the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the natural and anthrop heritage, unable to ensure its efficient revaluation. The uneven distribution of the accommodation bases in Lăpuşului Land reveals not only the lack or the extremely reduced interest for the revaluation of the tourist resources following the proper endowments, but also a certain value hierarchy according to the emphasis on objectives and the categories of tourist objectives within each studied territorial unit.

If the radical changes in the social and economic life occurred after 1990 led to the generalized decline of the old state organizations and bodies or of the cooperatives whose task was the tourist infrastructure administration, the debut of the private initiatives started – even if still very shy compared to the typological diversity and the geographical distribution –

to manifest during at that time also in the Lăpuşului Land area. These meant the appearance of more tourist accommodation structures of small sizes in the majority of the cases following personal initiative, which took into account the adoption of price policies and promotion of more competitive products compared to the high capacity units (which are very difficultly functionally shaped), besides the location usually in tourist interest areas. This feature offered at the same time what was missing from the large accommodation units (intimacy, family stay, closeness to nature etc.)

Thus, together with the appearance of several private accommodation units (such as motels, hostels or the secondary residences, such as the holiday houses), the system of the family hostels, connected to areas of specific rural habitat, activities and traditional customs, developed to diversify tourism and its forms. These family hostels are very important for many localities from Lăpuşului Land having a great attractiveness potential and corresponding to the classification and certification norms in the field (for instance, Târgu Lăpuş, Băiuţ, Lăpuş, Suci de Sus etc.). Moreover, as a consequence of the legislative stimulation, the private initiatives and the collective ones in this field appeared very rapidly (unfolded through the means of the Maramureş Ecologist Society), as well as the association type of activity organization (starting with 1997, through the founding of the “Lăpuşului” Rural Tourism Association, with the head office in Târgu Lăpuş).

Thus, the rural hostels represent the most important tourist accommodation units existing at the moment in Lăpuşului Land from the point of view of the offered (cumulated) accommodation capacity, of the qualitative dimension and of the spatial distribution.

Entering the tourist circuit starting with the second half of the '90s, their evolution was marked by a progressive trend. There were already 10 rural tourist hostels (grouped in only two localities – Groşii Țibleşului and Lăpuş) in 1997, while, in 2003, their number reached 31 distributed in seven localities, with 104 accommodation places. The last few years have maintained the ascending trend and, in 2009, there were 24 such tourist units summing up a number of 242 accommodation places made available for the tourists, located in 12 localities spread in the entire Lăpuşului Land.

However, seen through the relationship between the dimension and the structure of the global tourist heritage and the quantitative and qualitative dimension of the general material basis and of those with a tourist destination built after 1990, the attribute of chronic underuse continues, unfortunately, to remain present and current. Within the whole regional system, the accommodation capacities of this hostel type have varied over time, the current existing statistics revealing (for the same reference year – 2000) a series of differences not only from the point of view of the number of existing hostels and the majority of the vacant places, but also of their distribution in the territory. As a consequence, the feasibility and the correspondence of the data with the reality have raised a series of questions so that we had to resort to the field study in order to capture the real situation. The results have been subsequently processed and compared with the situation forwarded by the local authorities and by the bodies

directly involved in the promotion of tourism in Lăpuşului Land.

Thus, if, in 2009, the official statistic information of the ministry of tourism revealed the existence of 78 accommodation places integrated within a number of 20 hostels, 40 of them grouped in 10 agro-tourist hostels (9 of them being located in Băiuţ and 1 in Groşii Țibleşului), other 38 places in the other 10 tourist hostels (6 of them located in Lăpuş and 4 in Băiuţ), the reality of the field study revealed that the situation was slightly different compared to the information obtained from the local authorities.

As a consequence, according to the results obtained following our field study, the number of permanent accommodation places existing in Lăpuşului Land was 104 in 2000 (respectively 68.9% of the total number of existing accommodation places in Lăpuşului Land), whose distribution revealed a different situation regarding the number of the hostels (19 hostels instead of 20), as well as the localities (7 localities with hostels compared to 3). The majority of the hostels were classified according to the 2-daisy comfort class. Their distribution within the localities is the following: 1 hostel with 4 places in Băiuţ, 4 hostels with 16 places in Groşii Țibleşului, 6 hostels with 34 places in Lăpuş, 4 hostels with 30 places in Târgu Lăpuş, 1 hostel with 6 places in Rohia and Dumbrava and 2 hostels summing 8 places in Suci de Sus.

In 2003, the situation revealed that this total number of

places was maintained, but it was redistributed in less than 31 hostels (whose number increased from 19, meaning a 37% growth within three years), also recording a series of movements in the localities with hostels (even if their number remained 7). These localities knew the increase (Băiuţ, Groşii Țibleşului, Suci de Sus, Târgu Lăpuş), the numerical decrease (Lăpuş) of the number of hostels or even the disappearance of some hostels (Dumbrava, Rohia), while other localities entered the rural tourist landscape (Drăghia, Stoiceni).

The contradictory evolution of the number of hostels and of the number of accommodation places made available for the tourists was noticed between 2000 and 2009, assisting, on the one hand, at the increase of the hostel type of units in the region (from 104 to 242) and of the number of localities which dispose of such units, from 7, in 2003, to 12, in 2009).

IV. THE RESULTS OF THE FIELD INVESTIGATION

The main results of the field investigation performed using the directly applied questionnaire, through operators, are presented as follows. The field investigation intended to identify and analyse the features of the active households that practised rural tourism in Lăpuşului Land.

A major problem in the drawing up of the sample constituted the choice of households that were to be questioned, because of the relatively reduced number of

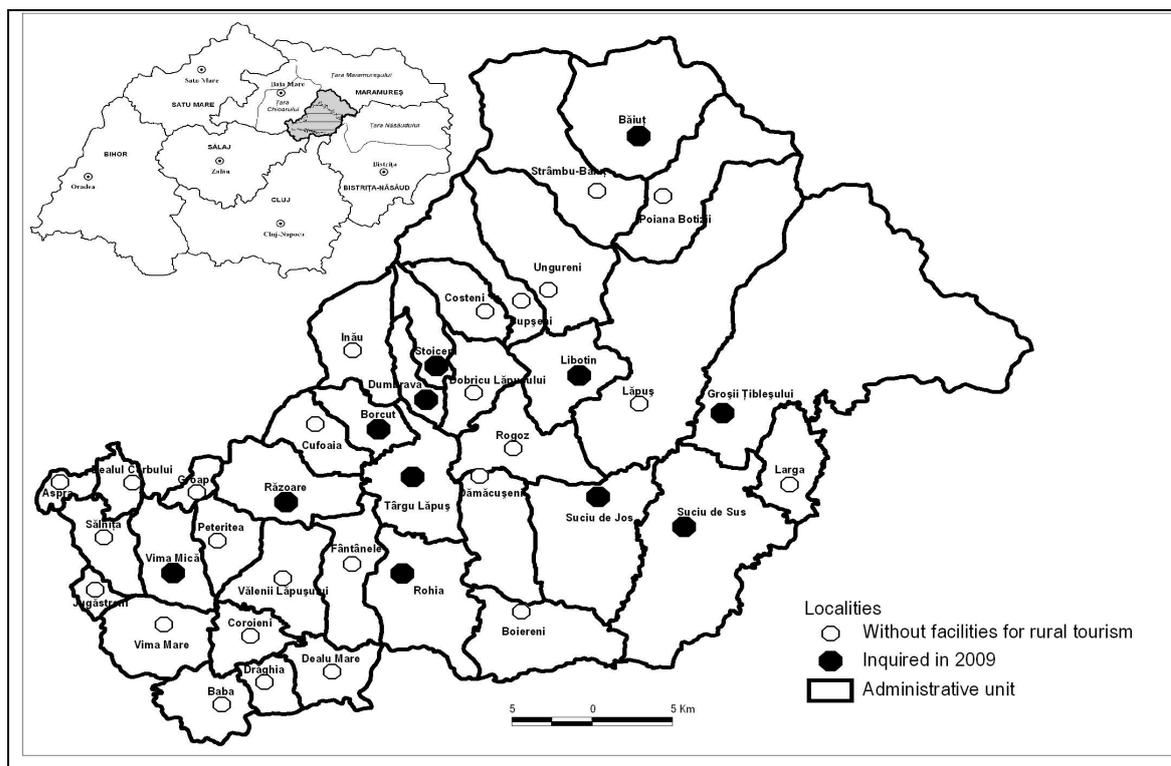


Fig.1. The localities inquired in 2009

households which were listed in the evidences of the profile institutions and which practised rural tourism and were thus

certified and authorised according to the criteria in force. In order to have a real dimension on the rural tourist phenomenon, i.e. the exact number of the households

practising rural tourism, the field investigation performed in 2009 led us to the conclusion that there was a series of households which either left the formal networks or practised this activity without legal forms or were not officially certified. Thus, in the context of official evidences afferent to 2009 corroborated with the information obtained following the field investigation which indicated the presence of a relatively reduced number of hostels (certified or not) at the level of the region, it was decided to question all the households identified. As a consequence, the statistic population included all the localities (12) that contained hostels integrated in the formal and informal tourist circuits, all the households identified (24) and found in the mentioned evidences or were identified on-site, meaning that they practised the formal or informal rural tourism and were disseminated on all the territory analysed. All these households were questioned (fig. 1): Târgu Lăpuș (5 hostels), Băiuț, Suci de Sus and Groșii Țibleșului (each with 3 hostels), Rohia and Răzoare (each with 2 hostels), respectively Borcut, Dumbrava, Libotin, Stoiceni, Suci de Jos and Vima Mică with one hostel each.

The applied questionnaire (this aimed at the same criteria and items as the case applied in 2000 and 2001 within a wider study on the analysis of the rural tourist phenomenon on a national scale [4]-[6], and the evaluation of the field investigation results were based on the analysis of a set of problems (containing 84 variables):

- a. The emphasis of the features of the households that practised rural tourism: the number of persons in the household, the number of persons active in the household, the gender, the age, the education, the occupation and the social mobility of the person which practised rural tourism, the telephone, the car;
- b. The motivation for practising rural tourism from the perspective of the actors involved (the manner of appreciating their own level of life in comparison with the one from the whole country and the eventual implications of it on tourism);
- c. The manner in which the households attract tourists, the services offered (estimated improvements);
- d. The number of accommodation places and services offered to tourists;
- e. The features of the tourist flow (intensity, seasonality);
- f. The features of tourism (internal, international) and the tourists' areas of origin;
- g. The prices and the incomes achieved from tourism;
- h. The degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, the reasons for the latter and the intention of continuing / abandoning rural tourism.

IV.1 THE BASIC FEATURES OF THE RURAL HOUSEHOLDS WHICH PRACTISE RURAL TOURISM

As a whole, the households made of one person have an insignificant share (7.2%), the highest percentage (71.4%) being held by the *households made up of 2-4 persons*. This situation may be explained by the complexity of the activities in rural tourism (accommodation, catering, and other types of services) that could be difficult to cover by the households formed of a smaller number of persons. Thus, even if the great

majority of the active members of the family are engaged in various other activities (their basic occupation covering a wider spectrum, services sector, silviculture, health, agriculture), they are actively involved in the activities of rural tourism from the family business, sharing an important part of their free time for it. This way an important contribution – in various shares and time and share combinations – is brought to the diversification and the optimisation of the activities and services placed at the disposal of the tourists. To support the above mentioned, we have to mention the relatively high share of the active persons from the households involved in rural tourism, the *category of households with one or two active persons* holding the highest share (64.3% of the total). On the contrary, the share of 7.2% of the households with no active persons involved in tourism activities is given by a sum of causes: the high "adherence" of this form of tourism in the rural environment, in general recorded in the last decade, together with the increase of the number of inactive persons following the massive firing from the industry of the last 20 years, respectively as a consequence of reducing the retirement age and of the large number of request retirements and the retirements due to illnesses, part of this category of persons, with an extra budget of free time, redirecting towards rural tourism as an alternative to the social and economic situation of the long transition period undergone by Romania. These persons are inactive, from a statistic viewpoint, but they practise this type of activity as a secondary occupation, without any connection with their real position on the work market. Thus, the retired people, the unemployed and the house persons are, from a formally and statistical viewpoint, inactive, but they can get involved in the organisation and the management of the rural tourism as a secondary occupation.

The analysis of the basic occupation of the persons involved in the rural tourism unfolding reveals a high cumulated share of a relatively heterogeneous group of people from a point of view of the social status (intellectuals and persons with lower education), besides the categories mentioned the occupational spectrum of the persons involved in the rural tourism phenomenon consisting of the presence – to a great extent (42.9 %) – of the basic occupation of hostel administrator, fact which shows a tendency to specialise and professionalize the activities performed and the services offered. The age of the persons involved in the management of the rural tourism activity is mainly classified within the category of 30-50 years, fact that emphasises that the rural tourism was popular within the category of young, active, dynamic, persons willing to assume the new professional status and get involved in the promotion of the attractive activities with real development chances and, implicitly, with real chances of great profitability from a financial viewpoint. All this could be noticed during the period of 10-12 years from the beginning of rural tourism activities in our country. The majority of them classified in the category of persons dealing with tourism in the last 10 years, while the rural tourism phenomenon was consolidated, underlining the fact that this activity became, gradually, the basic occupation in the rural environment. The rural tourism with an ascending share added to the occupational palette of the rural population, managing to

successfully substitute and offer a viable economic alternative for the unemployed segment of population, more and more numerous, following the massive restructuring from the majority of the industrial branches from the last 20 years.

The above mentioned category (the hostel administrators) is filled with persons whose occupation falls into a diverse spectrum of sectors (engineer, secretary, security agent, instructors, nurse), but who manage and perform tourist services specific to this form of tourism.

The important share held by the category of "intellectuals" (grouping occupations like engineers, managers, secretaries, instructors, teachers etc.) results from the revaluation of the advantage offered by the very high cultural capital in comparison with the other social categories, respectively the easier adaptation to the rigours imposed by the competition from the profile market, but especially, the knowledge of one or more foreign languages - favourable premise and generally revaluated for the achievement of larger incomes from the tourism activity. The possibilities of communicating with foreign tourists have facilitated, in time, the setting of a collaboration relationship, which continue to this day, allowing the easier setting of contacts with persons from abroad, including their attraction and the transformation from "occasional consumers" into loyal customers of the rural tourism from Lăpuşului Land. In this way, at a general level, one may notice a higher level of occupation of the foreign tourists in the households managed by persons from the intellectuals' category (71.4%). The important share (14.2%) which is held by another social category present in the range of basic occupations of the persons involved in the rural tourist phenomenon from Lăpuşului Land, respectively the retired people, derives, on the one hand, from the fact that they can allocate the greatest part of their time to the activities afferent to rural tourism and, implicitly, to the efficient organisation of these activities, on the other hand, and, on the other hand, the perspective of completing their budget or gaining additional incomes offered by rural tourism, taking into account that the two social categories of people mentioned occupy an unprivileged position regarding the quantum of the real incomes obtained.

The analysis of the level of education of the tourist services offerers from the rural environment reveals the presence of a cumulated high share (92.9%) which is held by the social category with a medium and high cultural capital, respectively the graduates of medium and high level of education (that is, the rural tourism from the region constitutes, almost exclusively, the occupation of this category). This fact reveals the higher impact and their superior receptiveness regarding the involvement in rural tourism, to which a more realistic perception and a more rapid adaptation related to the operation of the economic mechanisms of the rural tourism activity under the conditions of a competitive market are added. Thus, these categories have permanently engaged in the competition for the attraction of more numerous and loyal clientele (from the country, as well as from abroad). They are backed up by the easier access to the facilities made available by the various programs initiated and unfolded in the period 1994-1997, for the stimulation and the development of the rural tourism in

Romania. These categories have earned larger profits compared to the lower educated categories.

In this context, the initiatives and the connections created with similar organisations from the country and abroad, but also the motivated impulse for the training and the education from the part of the tourist services providers, shall offer an extra chance for a category of the population which professionalize in the field.

The assurance of the necessary conditions for the rapid circulation of information and the mobility of the persons – essential conditions for the efficient organisation and integration of the households in the tourist circuit – are, according to the survey, in the case of the great majority of the households involved in this activity, ensured. Thus, the *degree of endowment of the households* with telephones reaches percentage values of 92.9% (the value is higher than the national average of the Romanian rural space) while the share of the owners of cars reaches maximum values (100%), fact that reflects, on the one hand, the reaching of a certain welfare degree, which allows them to purchase such products, and on the other hand, the fact that the car has become an absolutely necessary "accessory" for dynamic persons, always in a hurry and forced to efficiently manage their time budget and to make a series of quick travels from one place to another in order to try and increase the efficiency of the activity.

Regarding the *motivation of practising rural tourism*, the conviction that rural tourism can contribute to the increase of incomes and, on a long term, even to the accumulation of capital, has been the one that mattered in the option of entrepreneurs to engage in such a business. Practically, all the persons (100 %) questioned indicated as the main motivation, as it had been expected, the financial reasons. To these, one may add, with not negligible frequencies, but with differentiated shares, a larger spectrum of people for whom other reasons mattered as well: the relationships between people, the contacts and the friends, the exchange of information, ideas - 85.75% mentioned this reason, the pleasure of doing this activity - 21,4%, or the promotion of the image of the locality - 7,1%. Thus, as a whole, one may state that rural tourism selectively stimulates the local population in order to diversify the occupations through new activities, requested by the tourist demand, this undergoing a continuous process of diversification and "searches" as well. This form of tourism would like to satisfy a more and more important segment of persons, for whom the rest and the recreation in the rural environment can offer varied possibilities of passing the free time.

IV.2 THE FEATURES OF RURAL TOURISM PRACTISED BY THE HOUSEHOLDS

In the context in which the rural tourism – unlike other geographical regions where the rural tourism has known such a development due to the active involvement in the promotion and the management of the rural tourism of the non-governmental organisations with national "coverage" and of the networks managed by them (ANTREC and OVR) - from Lăpuşului Land initially had as "engine" of implementation

and development (at least in the first years – the county branch of ANTREC and, later, the Rural Tourism Association “Lăpușul”), the role of the tourist networks gradually became less and less active, and at the moment the network's involvement in the attraction of tourist is minimal. This fact is emphasised by the surveys of 2000 and 2001 on the emancipation of the households from the custody of the tourist networks [4]-[6].

However, even if the attraction through personal relations of tourists (combined with other factors, like the advertisement and the internet, with a lower share, but increasing, practically the hostel using the last two types more and more) holds the most important cumulated share (85.7%), and no less than 43.5% from the total number of households attract more than 50% of the tourists accommodated through personal relations), the attraction of tourists through the means of the formal tourists networks remains important, even if it has lost much of its importance lately (24.4% of the offerers mentioning the merits of the tourist network in attracting the tourists, of course, in combination with other factors, like tourists, advertising on the internet, personal connections). The ones that follow are the personal connections network (39%) and the advertising one (29%). The relevant results from the investigation emphasise the increasing importance in attracting tourists of the relational capital of the households, based to a large extent on the experience accumulated in the last few years and on the circle of tourists who used during this period the tourist services offered by the rural tourist hostels, underlining thus the importance of attracting tourists through the means of the information transmitted by their former tourists, the majority of the offerers having an already stable network of tourists, fact which emphasises the growing importance of the relational capital of the households based, to a great extent, on the experience accumulated over the years in the attraction of tourist and on the group of tourists who have turned to the services of the rural tourist hostel during this period.

The less relevant role of the NGOs and of the tourist networks in the promotion of rural tourism in the analysed region is illustrated by the reduced share held by these related to the source of information on the possibility of practising rural tourism (only 21.4% mentioning their involvement, but in combination with other factors and without filling a first rank position in the hierarchy indicated), the investigation showing that the personal relationships fill the first place in the supply of information (well informed or already working in the field connections and relatives), in combination with, in order, the mass media and the state institutions (85.7%) or the category "other sources" (together with a emphasis of the “personal idea” kind).

We notice, at least in comparison with other regions with developed rural tourism (e.g. Bran-Moeciu, Maramureș, the superior basin of Arieș, the mountainous sector of Cluj etc.), the reduced incidence of the tourism agencies (7.2 %) as an exclusive category of supply of information of this kind, revealing on the one hand a reduced degree of professionalization of the relations from the rural tourism field through the delegation of the organisation task advertising

some competent actors. On the other hand, the increase of the independence degree of the local structures from the classical tourist networks (OVR and ANTREC) as well as the more reduced importance given to the establishment of a new division of work between the rural households which practice the rural tourism and the tourism agencies localised in general in urban centres issuers of tourists, for the advantage of both, are also noticed.

Another important fact is that the majority of the hostels have understood the fact that making available for tourists, besides accommodation and food, of a more diversified range of auxiliary services constitutes a competitive advantage which can translate to an increased attractiveness, a higher degree of occupation, the increase of the duration of the stay and, implicitly, earning higher incomes. Based on this, the majority of the existing tourist structures offer a range of auxiliary services and activities different from a case to another according to the financial possibilities, the inventiveness of the offerers and, of course, the desires and exigencies of the tourists, like: organising hiking trips in the local area and trips/thematic circuits or mixed in Lăpușului Land or at the objectives outside the region (85.7% of the total number of households which offer other services). To these one may add other different leisure and sports activities (with a cumulated share of 35.7%), the organisation of cultural programs or the participation in diverse activities related to the traditions of the local culture (7.2%), or even the offer of household chores (like the washing and ironing of clothes). Also, one may notice the fact – unlike the more reduced share for other services from the part of the tourists coming from the more urbanised areas, with less traditional communities (like the case of Bran) who organise their own activities, and the services offered by the host generally being reduced to the serving of the meal - that the use of auxiliary activities and services (other than accommodation and food) constitutes a constant, in the context of the isolation of the region and the remoteness related to the major axes of circulations lead to, on the one hand, a larger duration of the stay in comparison with other regions, and, on the other hand, to the difficulty of organising recreational activities on their own in the local or regional area. This fact constitutes an advantage which is largely used by the offerers from Lăpușului Land who try to adapt and to answer the various necessities and options, aspect revealed by the intention expressed by the absolute majority of the hostels of improving the infrastructure and the services offered to the tourists which aims at an extremely diversified register: sport grounds (volleyball and tennis, swimming pools, ponds, the possibility of practising extreme sports - rafting etc.). Interesting is the relatively reduced share (14.3%) of the answerers who expressed their intention of executing improvements which require a higher capital investment (for instance the increase of the number of accommodation places and/or the increase of the comfort degree of the existing facilities), as a consequence of the reduction of the incomes, because of the decline in the number of tourists based on the economic crisis whose effects have started to manifest since 2009, although the majority of the interviewed persons has understood by now that the constant investments in the

household which allow the continuous diversification of the activities and the services offered is a compulsory condition for the increase of its attractiveness. Moreover, the absolute majority of the hostels (85%) are classified in inferior categories of comfort (2 daisies), the rest (15%) in the immediately superior category, aspect which should raise questions to the ones involved in the field regarding the above mentioned things..

The distribution of the number of accommodation places at the level of the hostels reveals the nuanced situation, the highest cumulated share being held by the ones under 12 places 65% (among these, the ones with 5 accommodation places having 20,8%, the ones with 10 places 12,5%, with 4 and 5 places 16.7%, and the ones with 12 places 8.3%), the majority are functionally re-adapted through the transformation of the old households in order to answer the classification criteria, while the majority of the structures with a higher number of accommodation places represents the more recently elevated buildings through the own financial effort or with the contribution of some community programs. This aspect reveals the fact that these have been built in the context of an ascending evolution stage of this type of activities, where the households have aimed at the maintenance of the ascending trend, interpreted as a sign of the intensification of the tourist circulation and demand (evolution which has not been confirmed, we hope temporarily, by the economic recession stage manifested during this period).

The average prices for the accommodation service shape, compared to the other regions with a similar profile, a region with average prices, there existing several territorial differences within it, identifying localities which practise higher prices (with nuances, sometimes significant, according to the category of comfort), like Târgu Lăpuş and Groşii Tibleşului, followed by other localities with average prices (in the majority of the cases), like Rohia, Răzoare and Groşii Tibleşului and the ones with the lowest prices (Vima Mică, Băiuţ). Also, the prices are ranging between 25 and 70 lei for a night, with an average value of 45 lei, noticing that a high cumulated share of the quantum ranging between 40 and 50 lei per night, without finding positive correlations between the level of the prices and the country of origin of the tourists, the price not being an indicator which selects the tourists after the origin criterion, with tourists from the same country in hostels with higher and lower prices.

The phenomenon of *seasonality*, manifested at the level of the entire Romanian tourism, shows its effects in the case of rural tourism from Lăpuşului Land, even if these are less seen compared to other regions. The problem of seasonality is present in almost half of the hostels, the majority of the tourists being recorded during the summer season (64.3% from the hostels recording the maximum flow of tourists during summer) and only 14.3% in the winter season. There is a series of hostels (21,4%) which are demanded by tourists exclusively during the peak season of the tourist demand (in summer or winter), situation which places them in a more advantageous position compared to others which manage, to different extents, to attract tourists all year round, even if the number is far from the one ensuring usage coefficients which ensure

efficiency to the activity enrolled. The latter have comparative and competitive advantages derived from their location in areas with more diversified tourist resources and more developed tourist and access infrastructure, but also due to the quality and the diversification of the auxiliary services offered.

The number of night stays achieved reveals the reduced intensity of the tourist flows to the region, including during the summer and winter seasons, when not less than 21.4% of the households recorded only 1-2 night stays per week, which does not ensure a minimum profitability. Also, the share of the households with the least advantageous situation which do not manage to attract tourists outside the season (21.4%) or which record at the most one night stay (14.3%) reaches high values. At the opposite pole, although far from the indicators which ensure the expected efficiency, there are the hostels (28.6% of the total) which manage to accommodate 4-5 persons per day during the summer season. Overall, in 42.9% of the households, 3-5 night stays are recorded per day during the summer season, which constitutes a favourable premise and in general revaluated for the record of larger incomes from the tourism activity. However, almost a third of the households does not manage to attract a sufficient number of tourists, which ensures satisfactory incomes. The majority of the households which are accessed outside the season records a reduced tourist flow (1-2 night stays per day in 35.7% of the total), there existing a nucleus of households (21.4% of the total) where the frequency of the night stays is higher (3-4 night stays per day), their more advantageous situation deriving from the geographical position of the respective localities, the different development degree of tourist infrastructure and, especially the quality and the diversity of the basic and extra services offered. A more advantageous situation is found in the villages located in the mountainous and pre-mountainous areas (Groşii Tibleşului, Băiuţ, Suci de Sus) with the possibility of practising hiking or which preserve better the traditional side of the rural life or which have important religious objectives (Rohia).

The gross incomes achieved from the rural tourism activity (calculated by multiplying the number of stays per day and the accommodation tariff indicated by each household, without subtracting the operational expenses and, as appropriate, the percentage retained by the network, the extension of the tourist season being considered to be four months, respectively between 15 May and 15 September) reached the value of 222,640 lei and an average value of 15,900 lei, with a relatively large range, between 3,360 lei and 35,840 lei, revealing the existence of wide inequalities between the households related to the revaluation of the tourist offer and of the localities and areas they belong to. The analysis of the incomes recorded on major categories (<5,000lei, 5,001-10,000 lei; 10,001-15,000; 15,001-20,000; 20,001-25,000; 250,001-30,000 and > 30,000) reveals the existence of an obvious balance between the hostels integrated in the first part of the hierarchy (the ones which record incomes under 15,000lei) and the ones whose earnings place them above the average value, mentioning that the balance is preserved in the case of the two extremes of the hierarchy (minimum and maximum), which group only one hostel. The households

which achieve higher incomes (over 25,000 lei) represent 21.4% from the total number of hostels.

The analysis of the correlation coefficients reveals the significant correlations between the incomes and the following items: the basic occupation, the duration of the tourist season, the demand from Bucharest, Timiș, Constanța, Piatra Neamț, respectively the international one (especially from Germany, France and USA), the contribution to the budget of the household, the number of night stays recorded, the prices, the importance of the personal relations and of the former tourists in attracting new tourists etc.

The correlations established between the different items lead to the conclusion that obtaining certain financial results over the regional average is determined by: the accommodation capacity of the rural tourist hostels; the intensity of the tourist flow, corroborated with a satisfactory intensity of the tourist flows outside season, the level of the accommodation tariffs, the social or relational capital of the household in attracting tourists.

There, also, is the correlation with a high level of significance between the basic occupation and the level of training, on the one hand, and the level of the achieved incomes, on the other hand. Thus, the categories of higher and very high incomes are made of a great share of persons with a high or average level of training. This fact reveals the clear relation between the level of training and the cultural and social capital, the persons with a higher cultural capital having higher chances of success and recording, generally, higher incomes. To this the contribution of other factors is added, like the tourist offer of the locality and of each hostel in part. We could not establish a positive significant correlation between the role of the personal relationships in attracting tourists and the incomes recorded, the situations being diverse and sometimes even contradictory, there existing cases when a larger share of connections through the network has led to obtaining different amounts of incomes, but also the reversed situation, when the high share given to the personal relations and of the former tourists has contributed to important cashing. Related to the correlation between the level of incomes achieved from rural tourism and its share to the formation of the household budgets, significant connections were not found, in a number of cases with a significant share of the income recorded from tourism in the budget of the households protecting the households with a generally low level of incomes, with situations when the intensity of the tourist flow is more reduced.

The most important share (57.1%) is held by the households whose incomes contribute with less than 25% to the family budget, while the households registered in the group of 25-20% hold only 28.6%. Significant is the fact that 14.3% of the households achieve their incomes from the activities connected to the rural tourism in proportion of 50-75%, fact illustrated by the appearance, through self-identification, of the basic occupation of hostel administrator, which, as it has been mentioned, represents another significant leap to the improvement of the situation of rural households involved in the practice of rural tourism. As a consequence, the analysis of *the share of incomes achieved from tourism in the budget of*

the household reveals, in the majority of the cases, the subordinated, complementary feature of the tourist activity in the rural space, none of the households being specialised and oriented exclusively towards this activity, the incomes achieved not offering the financial independence and the achievement of a plus which could be reinvested in order to develop this activity.

The evaluation by the actors involved from the part of the tourist offer of *the level of life*, the results show the tendency to appreciate it as being higher compared to the one of the whole country, mentioning that, on a scale of intensity from 1 to 10, besides the importance of the average-high incomes (between the levels 7 and 8, with a frequency of 71.4%) one may notice a slight shift of options between more positive appreciations (the value 9, with a share of 14.3%). Also, in the case of the evaluations of the own level of life, the absence of the maximum values (10) and the ones from the inferior categories (between 1 and 4) is noticed. The evaluations of the level of life at the scale of the whole country (belonging to the same actors) are recorded for a larger and more heterogeneous group, despite the fact that most of these appreciations are directed towards the average levels (5 and 6 which group 64.3%), noticing the tendency to shift the qualifications towards the average-superior levels of the hierarchy (levels 3 and 4 hold 21.4%), in the detriment of the superior ones (level 7 is absent, and level 8 holds 14.3%). Based on this, one may establish a direct correlation, even if it is not significant ($r=0.19$), but at an acceptable level of significance ($p=0.05$) - between this attitude and the beneficial effects of rural tourism, appreciated through the items of income achieved or the contribution to the family budget. Consequently, we may state that the development of rural tourism in Lăpușului Land is confirmed by this correlation, the increase of the incomes from tourism in the budget of the households being noticeable in the evaluation of the own level of life. This attitude may be the effect of the social desire or the protection of the ego through the mechanism of attribution, each rural household trying to find various management strategies under the crisis conditions, rural tourism being one of them.

Regarding the *tourists' origin*, the domination of the mixed variant of attracting tourists (64.3%), from the country as well as from abroad, is noticed, the households accessed exclusively by the local clientele holding 35.7%, while the households "specialised" exclusively on international tourism are absent. The highest share values are held by the tourist coming from Germany (27.6%) and France (24.3%), the hierarchy of the countries of origin being completed, in decreasing order, by the Netherlands (13.2%), Spain (9.2%), Slovakia (8.4%), the Czech Republic (6.1%), Poland (4.9%) and, with a more reduced contribution, the USA (2.3%), Portugal (2.1%), Turkey (1.8%), and, surprisingly, Japan (0.4%). We could not establish a significant correlation between the origin of the foreign tourists and the preferential orientation towards certain locations on the territory of Lăpușului Land, even if the domination of the German tourists could be partially explained, by the "roots" from Romania (in the case of the Germans who emigrated starting with the '70s and especially after 1990). Practically, the inter-regional

spatial distribution of tourists does not reveal an affinity of the tourists coming from various countries for various hostels, the contribution of the external component of the demand being found in various combinations and shares in every area, location or household.

Regarding the internal tourism, we noticed the dominating position of the big cities, which supply the most important volume of the demand. Even if, regarding the origin of the tourists accommodated, the majority of the answerers indicated a generic phrase "from all over the country", among these, Bucharest has the lead (71.4% of the households receive tourists from this city), followed at a great distance by Cluj-Napoca (mentioned by 42.96% of the hostels), Oradea (28.6%), Constanța and Timișoara (each with 14.3%), Piatra Neamț (7.2%) look for more attractive rural spaces. The above mentioned cities are the largest in the country, but also have the highest economic potential, respectively a favourable social stratification for rural tourism (the highest percentage of the average and higher social strata). The lack of tourists from some of the urban centres with a high demographic and economic potential is surprising, some of these centres being located at a very short distance from the area analysed, like Târgu Mureș, Satu Mare, Sibiu, Brașov. In some cases it might be about the practice of other types of tourism (weekend tourism, secondary residencies – own holiday homes), either the lack of tradition in practising this form of tourism (Târgu Mureș, Bistrita), and in other cases, there probably is a tendency to find other localities with a similar offer or even more attractive located at more appropriate distances or with a higher accessibility potential.

The degree of satisfaction generated by the results obtained from the rural tourism activity is situated at very high shares, all the households involved, with one exception, expressing their wish to continue the rural tourism activity, fact reflected by the palette of improvements mentioned at the level of the tourist offer, even if not referring to much to the increase of the accommodation or the improvement of comfort, but to the improvement of sports and leisure activities, of animation and of other auxiliary services. This intention shows the increase of the trust of the persons involved in the possibilities offered by rural tourism, especially related to the achievement of substantial incomes on a short and medium term, obviously, having as basis the generally good results obtained in the previous years. To support this statement, we have the analysis of the frequency of the answers referring to the *degree of satisfaction obtained from this activity*, which records a high share (57.1%) of pleased households, respectively partially pleased (42.9%) and the lack of the dissatisfied ones with the results obtained from the practice of rural tourism.

If the financial factor is, an easily anticipated fact, the one which motivates the majority of the persons involved, together with the possibility of establishing new connections and personal relationships, respectively hobby/pleasure (57.1%) or the exchange of ideas and information (28.3%), among the mentioned factors as dissatisfaction sources in practising this activity, the majority of the subjects mentioned as major sources the lack of financial support and the logistic necessary to improve the tourist offer, the reduced support of the local

and central administrations, the poor general and tourist infrastructure, the reduced profit/great investment, the reduced contribution of the tourists (especially outside the season period), insufficient promotion etc.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- *The rural tourism from Lăpușului Land gathers to a small extent the features of a local tourism.* Thus, based on the gradual reduction of the last few years of the tourist markets role and the one of the tourist organisations in attracting the tourists (especially the foreign ones), as well as the distribution process at the level of the households, the gradual separation of the households from under their custody and the occurrence of local tourist association and individual entrepreneurs have been noticed, who benefit from the experience and the capital accumulated during this interval, managing to organise and promote their business, in the majority of the cases on their own, and the offer to the relatively stable network of tourists;

- the high frequency of the *hostel administrator occupation* constitutes an expression of the positive tendency to evolve of the tourist phenomenon from the Lăpușului Land space, as well as of the individualisation process of the tourist offer, creating the favourable premises of the rural tourist phenomenon affirmation in the region and the increase of the professionalism level regarding the organisation, the management and the promotion of the profile activities.

- The incomes achieved from rural tourism are, generally, low. The reduced contribution in the formation of the household budgets confirms the hypothesis that the rural tourism, at the level of the tourist offer, is a secondary activity with the role of completing the incomes obtained in the traditional economic sectors of the rural space: agriculture, silviculture, mining and the tertiary activities. Nevertheless, there are households which manage to collect important incomes from the rural tourism. These are in general the households with a high cultural capital, with proper infrastructure, which managed to establish and develop relationships with foreign tourists. However, on the entire Lăpușului Land, the share of the households whose incomes from the rural tourism activity exceed 25% from the family budgets is important (42.9%), and 14.3% from the households manage to obtain the notable performances in this sense (among 50 and 75%), fact which reveals the importance given to this activity and the intention to continue the activity in the future, despite a series of dysfunctions and dissatisfactions. Based on this fund, we believe that the tax exemption of the households is necessary, because their reduced financial capital, as well as the hard taxation from Romania, is not capable of stimulating the development of this tourism form.

- The rural tourism is, and, probably, will be on a medium term, a *spatially and socially selective activity*. Regarding the spatially selective activity, certain localities (as for example Târgu Lăpuș and Groșii Tibleșului) and hostels have managed to fill an important segment of the tourist market from the region, where the most important tourist flows are recorded within the rural tourism. The hostels grouped within these localities have accumulated a relational and economical capital

which is more important than the others, benefiting from a positive tourist image, which will ensure a dominant position in the future. There are other hostels which manage to attract significant tourist flows and obtain important incomes in the region (Răzoare, Rohia), but the other locations which have hostels integrated in the profile tourist flows, are left in a peripheral position because of the less developed territorial infrastructure, the absence and the weak development of the tourist planning, of the supplementary offer of poorly diversified services or a reduced promotional activity;

- *The intensity of the tourist flows reveals the relatively low values*, 21.4% of the households recording a reduced number of tourists (1-2 night stays per week) during the summer season. This constitutes one of the main impediments in the development of this form of tourism. However we notice the existence of a household category (28.6% of the total) which records a special tourist flow (more than 4 or 5 night stays during the summer season), which constitutes favourable and revaluated premises for the record of larger incomes from the tourism activity.

The empirical analysis of rural tourism in Lăpuşului Land reveals the fact that the complex, diversified and complementary natural and anthropogenic tourist potential is, for now, far from being revaluated in a satisfactory manner through the means of rural tourism, whose practice, at the level of the coordinates which define the dimension and the quality of the general infrastructure and the accommodation structures involved, of the services offered, as well as from a point of view of the volume and the intensity of the tourist flows involved, cannot generate, on a short term, a spectacular economic re-launching of the rural tourism in Lăpuşului Land, than at the most for a relatively reduced number of households, fact that questions the "myths" formulated by many authors related to the role of rural tourism in this unfolding phenomenon. The causes which are the basis of this statement derive from, in a concise enumeration, the fact that this is not a generalised activity on extended areas, but it is focused in certain areas, in spaces which have special attractive resources, revaluated by a better developed tourist infrastructure than the whole rural space of Lăpuşului Land and a series of facilities and more diversified services in relation with the competitive hostels, the tourist offer and the tourist programs destined to reevaluate it are poor, the less developed territorial infrastructure, the limited accessibility, which could bring the region out of the geographical isolation, not generating large and constant incomes, a sporadic local initiative, missing the focused and wide vision, together with the lack of an adequate entrepreneurial vision, the lack or the reduced involvement of the local and regional administration, the competition of other forms of tourism from the rural space, especially the one represented by the holiday residences.

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