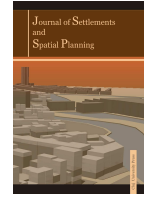




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# Consequences of Peripheral Features on Tourists' Motivation. The Case of Rural Destinations in Moldavia, Romania

**Bogdan IBĂNESCU<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Al. I. Cuza University, Faculty of Geology and Geography, Department of Geography, Iași, ROMANIA

E-mail: [b.ibanescu@yahoo.com](mailto:b.ibanescu@yahoo.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Peripheral spaces represent areas situated at a certain distance from a centre they are dependent on. They are faced with several socioeconomic challenges and demographic exodus. However, they also preserve an image of unaltered environment, ancient way of life, and a means of escape from the urban agglomeration. This second aspect (whether is based on real or imaginative features) of the peripheral zones have made them so appealing for the tourists masses. Our study focused on the rural space of Moldavia region, a peripheral region in Romania and in the European Union, region that has known a surprising tourism development in the last decade. The aim of the study was to identify which of the peripheral features of the region are responsible for this growth, acting like an attractive element, or rather slowed down what could have been a more sustainable tourism development. We used the method of on-line survey and based on the 155 valid answers we learned that the peripheral features of Moldavian region acted like an obstacle and not like an attraction for the visitors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Peripheral spaces are primarily defined as the surrounding area of a decisional or economic centre. However, at a closer look, periphery is not defined only by its geographical features (even if this remains one of the main attributes) but also by the lower values of socioeconomic indicators than those registered in the centres, demographic exodus, and outdated technological performance. The term has no longer have a local connotation (periphery of a developed city), but it is extrapolated at regional level (counties which are in relation of core-periphery), at national level (some regions behave like peripheries, while other like centres) and even at international level (less developed countries are referred to as global peripheries, while the developed countries represent global centralities) [1].

As a rather shy subject for the scientific community, both for the geographical or economic research fields, peripheral areas have become more and more appealing, especially in the European space, after the continuous enlargement of the European Union and the accentuation of the differences between the developed central regions and the peripheral ones [2], [3], [4], [5].

In the last decades there has been an increasing interest in the study of peripheral areas and the opportunities that could appear for their development, such as tourism activities [4], [6], [7], [8], [9].

The idea of tourism development in peripheral areas has been discussed since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but was fully developed and scrutinized only beginning with the '90s [1], [5], [10], [11].

Despite the negative aspects of peripheries highlighted by several authors (Müller, 2013; Wanhill,

1997; Wanhill & Buhalis, 1999; Nash & Martin, 2003) a general idea of tourism attractiveness in peripheral areas emerges, based on the distinctive features of peripheral areas, like wilderness, isolation [7], [14], [15], cultural and anthropologic authenticity, and traditions [14], [16], [17].

Furthermore, a positive effect of tourism activities in peripheral areas was proved, inducing sustainable economic development [2], [9], [18], [19], stabilising population in areas of demographic exodus [20], or inducing positive effect on local population [21].

However, Hall & Boyd (2005), Britton (1991), Singh, Timothy, & Dowling (2003) draw attention on the necessity of an adapted tourism strategy for peripheral areas [7], [22], [23].

A number of studies found that the peripheral features of a destination have great impact on tourists and especially on tourist motivation, whether this impact acts positively [16], [17], inciting tourists on visiting those destinations, or negatively, creating an additional frontier between the destination and the tourists [5], [12], [13].

The area of study for our research is represented by the rural space within the historical region of Moldavia from Romania, an area confronted with a triple periphery feature [24], which acts on three different levels:

- a). Spatial periphery of European Union, guarding a portion of the eastern border.
- b). Economic and decisional periphery within Romania, being too remote (geographically and economically) from the centre.
- c). A fixed periphery in the interior of the region itself between the urban and the rural areas [25].

The triple periphery of the Moldavian rural space, which can be translated as an extreme periphery, could be used as an asset for rural tourism, positive example for Southern Europe [12], [18], [19], Northern Europe [4], [26], [27] or other parts of the World [11], [28], [29], [30], including Romania [31], supporting this idea. At the same time, the area is confronted with several risks, typical for any peripheral area, such as low accessibility indicators [4], [15], economic struggles [5], [12], or demographic exodus [6].

The objective of this research is to determine whether the peripheral features of the Moldavian territory have rather positive or negative impact on tourists' motivation.

It is possible to hypothesise that strong relation between the peripheral features of a destination and the motivation of tourists visiting that destination exists. We anticipate that a positive relation exists between the peripheral feature and the image of the destination (thus acting like an attractive factor), while a negative relation exists between the peripheral feature and the motivation to stay (thus reducing the length of stay at the destination).

## 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Tourism in peripheral areas – theoretical review

The peripheral feature of a territory could be identified at any geographical level, either the analysed territory representing a metropolitan area, a county or even a country. It is usually associated with a negative connotation as a high risk zone (both socioeconomic and demographic) with demographic exodus and a growing unemployment rate [1], [28].

During the past 30 years much more information has become available on peripheral areas and the economic opportunities for those areas, capable of producing sustainable economic development.

Christaller (1964) was the first to mention the power of attraction in peripheral areas, but his studies were focused mainly on the southern European periphery [32]. When the European Union extended, including new countries, the idea of tourism development in peripheral areas was fully scrutinized [1], [5], [10], [11], [12].

Even if the southern European periphery remains a major destination in tourism industry [12], [33], the northern and western territories have begun to emerge on the market, bidding on their peripheral features [4], [34].

The empirical evidence on this subject is varied. The previous studies are divided in two factions, each one affirming, or on the contrary denying the presence of a quantifiable effect of geographical periphery on tourism growth or on tourism attractiveness.

The first action was to consider the peripheral areas impractical for tourism activities of any kind because of their lack of economic and decisional power [5], reduced accessibility [8], [13], [35] or the poor tourism infrastructure [12]. Wanhill and Buhalis (1999) even drafted a list of 14 handicaps that peripheral territories encounter when faced with a tourism development [12]. Furthermore, Wanhill (1997), Nash & Martin (2003) considered that the tourism activities acted sometimes like an intruder in the peripheral, preponderantly rural area, where the agriculture and the low industry were the main economic sectors [5], [13].

However, at a closer look it is shown that in some cases the main reasons of failure of tourism in peripheral areas were rather the poor management and the lack of an adapted strategy for the territorial features [7], [22], [23], rather than the inherent peripheral features.

More recently, contradictory findings were reported about the negative impact of periphery on tourism activities. Several papers indicated a positive effect of tourism in peripheral area, by inducing an economic development especially in peripheral rural

areas where primary activities like agriculture, low industry or craftsmanship were not economically profitable anymore [2], [9], [18], [34].

The cause of this positive effect is very often associated with several inherent advantages like wilderness, lack of modernity or isolation, which are easily associated with an escape from urban environment or a challenge [3], [7], [15]. Therefore, the positive features of the peripheral destinations can be translated in an increase in tourist numbers and even a transformation of the economic sector of the rural locality [14], thus creating a sustained development [21].

Additionally, tourism implementation proved to have a beneficial impact on rural peripheral spaces confronted with a massive deindustrialisation [36], situation which is more and more common in Eastern Europe and in Moldavia region, as well. At the same time, the accessibility handicap can be transformed in an advantage: the longer the distance between the centre (which provides the tourists) and the rural peripheral destination is, the longer the stays of tourists and bigger the budgets provided by tourists will be [5], [37].

So far, however, there has been little discussion about the impact of periphery on tourists' motivation. How can the peripheral feature of a destination affect the tourist motivation? How can the peripheral feature by itself attract or repel tourists? While some authors have sustained the existence of a positive effect [1], [14], [15], [17] which increased the tourists' motivation to visit peripheral destination, they are contradicted by a series of studies which sustain that the peripheral features negatively influence the tourists' motivation [8], [12].

## **2.2. Methodological approach**

In order to answer the question of study, an in-depth understanding of the tourists from the rural destinations of Moldavia was required. The main impact of a peripheral tourism destination is reflected in its visitors profile [1], therefore we decided to apply an extended survey which will verify if the main consequences of peripheral features in Moldavia region were an increase or a decrease of attractiveness. This approach was chosen because it offers a direct insight into tourists' motivations and behaviours and thus offering a bigger validity of our results.

Previous researches used survey instruments in order to analyse tourism aspects in the Moldavian space, however, most studies in the field of tourism geography have only focused on the geographical interaction between tourists and destinations.

Bulai (2011) identified the existence of peripheral and extreme peripheral destinations in Moldavia using a survey focused on travel distance

between the tourist's origin and its destination [37]. However, his study is limited to the identification of peripheral feature and not on the consequences of those features. An additional study tried to evaluate the attractiveness in the region, but the study focused exclusively on tourism resources and not on tourist motivation [38]. Iațu et al. (2010) took a profile tourist survey in rural Moldavia, but limited on active rural tourism with a high accent put on sportive events, so the tourists' motivation was affected by the sport factor [39].

Extended surveys on tourists' motivation and their relation towards the peripheral features of a destination have not yet been conducted on the Moldavian territory.

The survey was formulated and consisted in open ended, multiple choice and scaling questions. The first part of the survey focused on the frequency of visits, group dimension, means of transportation, while the second part of the survey focused on tourist behaviour, tourist inner motivation, destination image, and perceived image of rural peripheral areas of Moldavia.

In order to obtain enough subjects and without a location bias (destination monopoly that would occur if the survey were applied in a fixed location), the instrument was applied via an on-line open platform. The research protocols were outlined, including the informed consent and the possibility to redraw from the survey at any time, and with no explanation. Previous to the application, the survey was pretested on a sample of 25 volunteer-subjects for adjusting the questions. The pre-test application helped the research team to assess the validity of the instrument after which the necessary modifications were made. The survey was in Romanian language, given that the largest part of tourist arrivals in Moldavian rural space is from the Romanian-speaking population.

A number of 239 answers were received, with 84 invalid answers (wrong geographical positioning, incomplete or incorrect survey answers), and 155 valid answers, the last category constituting the base for our study. The period of survey application was of two months. For the interpretation of answers we used the SPSS software.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the survey were divided in three main sections, each one focusing on a different aspect of tourist stay. The region of Moldavia has known an astonishing tourism development after 1989 and the passage to a market economy. While the '90s were marked by a transition period, with only shy development, the tourism growth was marked by a real boom after 2000, especially in rural areas [40]. This development was possible by the appearance of private

sector, which was inexistent before 1989. The tourism development in rural areas was so intense that some rural localities recorded an increase of over 100% of the housing capacity only in the last decade [40]. Overall, in the first decade of 2000, a growth of 300% in the number of rural guesthouses, 48% in tourist arrivals and 10% in tourist overnights was recorded in the rural area of Moldavia, making the tourism sector the most dynamic activity in this area [40]. The growth is uneven, manifested most visibly in the counties of Suceava and Neamț, which benefit from their position in the mountain area, and only timidly in the eastern part of the region, in the counties of Botoșani, Iași, Vaslui, and Galați [24], [37], [40].

The Moldavian tourist system is divided in four distinct groups:

a). *Suceava County*, the county with the highest number of arrivals, overnights, lodging capacity, and number of lodging structures in the region. It is also the county with the highest tourism potential from all the eight counties of Moldavia (eight World Heritage Sites, ski slopes at Vatra Dornei and Gura Humorului, important national heritage sites, a relatively high accessibility by road or rail, and a considerable part of mountain area). Suceava County does not only have the highest values of rural tourism indicators, but also the highest values of rural tourism incomes, so we can affirm that for the moment it represents the tourism standard in the region.

b). *Neamț County* is the county which comes in second position, as tourism importance. Even if it does not present the same values in tourist arrivals and tourism incomes, or the same anthropogenic heritage, the county takes benefit from the presence of several monasteries of national importance, especially for pilgrims, sites capable of providing constant fluxes all over the year with high peaks during the Christian holidays.

c). *Bacău County*. It represents the county with “residual rural tourism” benefiting from the existence of several health treatment destinations built during the communist period. During the communist period these destinations received an appreciable number of visitors, but the fluxes started to decline after 1989. Fortunately, new rural destinations have made their appearance in the last decades and could provide the premises for a tourism “refuelling” of the area.

d). *Other counties* present isolated tourism destinations, mainly along the European roads and the railroads, or in the metropolitan areas of large cities. Statistically, none of the other counties of the region know a similar tourism development in the rural area like the counties of Suceava or Neamț.

However, regardless of the tourism development in rural areas, little is known about the factors that triggered this development and about the role played by the peripheral features of the region.

It is possible that the peripheral features of Moldavia region acted like a trigger for tourism activities, attracting visitors from urban area and thus creating economic development in some rural areas. This idea is supported by positive examples from other European peripheries [12], [26], [28]. If this is the case, then we may be faced with one of the very first examples of tourism peripheries from the post-communist Eastern Europe. A second possible explanation is that the peripheral features did not act like an attractor, but rather like a discouragement for possible tourists. In this case, tourism development could be explained by a certain tourism start-up. Before 1989, the lack of private sector made tourism development almost impossible if it was not for the health stations controlled by the State. The current development could be only the expression of a necessary start-up came after 1989. However impressive tourism development in Moldavia may be, we must not forget that similar development was recorded in all of the Romanian regions, situation quite logical given the fact that prior to the Revolution in 1989 all private activity in the sector was inexistent. Even more, tourism development in Moldavia is below the average, so the region advances at a slower pace than other regions in Romania. One question that needs to be asked is whether the peripheral features of Moldavia region represent the factors that triggered the tourism development, or the same features acted as an obstruction for a more sustained tourism development and the current situation is only a social wake-up, necessary after the moment of 1989.

The main objective of our study is to answer this question, by identifying the impact of geographical periphery on rural destinations in Moldavia region.

Secondly, our study tries to identify the place of road/rail accessibility in the Moldavian rural system, by identifying at which point the accessibility (as the main nemesis of peripheral features) plays a role in tourists' choice of destination. Therefore, we may be able to define the Moldavian rural destinations as peripheral destinations with peripheral products or rather accessible destinations in a peripheral space.

### 3.1. Basic behaviour of tourist in peripheral destinations

*Length of stay.* The length of stay is rather short in the rural destinations of Moldavia, 81% of the subjects having a stay of maximum 3 days (1-3 days). According to Wanhill (1997), this indicator can symbolize the existence of a repulsive periphery, because the destination is not able to retain tourists for a longer period [5].

*Seasonality.* The seasonality curve indicates a mono-seasonality during the summer season, with a high peak in July and August with 73, respectively 77 answers (multiple months choice was possible) and in

third position June with 38 answers. Surprisingly, the winter season shows very few visits (less than a third of the number of summer visits). A possible explanation could be offered by the limited offer of winter tourism products in the region (the only exception being Suceava County).

### **3.2. Image of peripheral destination**

*Image of the Moldavian village.* In order to analyse the image of Moldavian villages in tourists' minds we introduced a control question with open ended answer "For you, the village from Moldavia is ....". This indicator was used in order to identify the most common definitions of rural peripheral villages of Moldavia and to compare them with scientific literature in order to observe if the tourists associate correctly or not the Moldavia region with the peripheral spaces. The answers showed a bipolar image of the Moldavian village: a positive image with a constant presence of the words: "traditions", "culture", "calm" and a negative image with a constant presence of the words: "poverty", "weak infrastructure", "lack of investment" and "kitsch". All those words are often associated with every peripheral space [1], [24], [25], thus there was no surprise in the data interpretation. Both positive and negative image of the regions are based on its peripheral features. However, it was still unclear which one of the two images weighted more on the inner decision of tourists to choose or to avoid a rural destination in Moldavia.

*Positive features of the Moldavian village.* A second question was meant to analyse the perceived image of Moldavian tourism destinations. It was a multiple choice, where the subjects had to choose up to four options from a list of seven positive features.

Out of those seven features, three define positive features of any periphery, being generically positive features (*natural environment, lack of urban noise and pollution, and traditions keeping*), while four define positive features of an actual peripheral region, in this case Moldavia (*local hospitability, local heritage and architecture, human relations, sociability, and way of living*).

The results showed that all the three generic features obtained over 50% of answers, as follows: natural environment (57.41%), lack of urban noise and pollution (55.48%), traditions keeping (52.25%), while three out of four specific peripheral features of Moldavia recorded below 40% and even 30% of answers, as follows: local heritage and architecture (37.41%), human relations, sociability (30.96%), way of living (27.74%). The only exception was the specific feature local hospitability with 58.70%.

It seems that tourists did not appreciate the Moldavian region just as a periphery, but rather as an ideal periphery. Their choice of destination was not

based on the peripheral features of the region, but on different reasons. Even if it seems surprising, the difference between the local hospitability (58.70%) and the human relations, sociability (30.96%) is explained by the fact that those indicators have two different dimensions: the first one is strongly related to the offered services and the professional services involved (hotel reception, restaurant, etc.), while the second one is about the traits of the local communities.

*Image of desired destination.* In order to find the inner motivation of the tourists, participants had to indicate which activities they would like to be involved in or practice in a peripheral tourism destination. Surprisingly, 48.14% of them did not answer at all, while 7.74% answered "I do not know". It seemed that more than 55% of our subjects had not yet have an idea of their ideal peripheral destination, which could led us to believe that their choice of destination was based on different reasons than the peripheral features.

### **3.3. Peripheral influence of inner motivation**

The third part of our survey had the role to identify which are the factors that motivated the tourists to visit a rural destination in a peripheral region as Moldavia. In order to do so, we introduced a scale with 14 different factors which covered different areas, such as: accessibility, heritage products, presence of relatives, natural environment, etc. The subjects had to note each factors with a value from 1 to 5.

The results strengthened the negative image of peripheral features against the Moldavian tourism, factors like the presence of the family (2.92), the quality of roads (3.25), or accommodations' conditions (3.28) having much higher scores than traditions (2.87), or local gastronomy (2.58). It seems that the factors responsible for the tourism development in the rural destinations of Moldavia are: high accessibility (compared with other destinations in the neighbourhood) and a certain sense of familiarity.

Returning to the hypothesis posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that there is no strong relation between the peripheral features of the Moldavian destinations and the motivation of tourists in visiting it. The peripheral features of Moldavia region do not act like a tourism trigger. The Moldavian periphery is directly related to the lack of accessibility, those factors acting simultaneously on tourists' behaviour and motivations.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study was set out to determine whether the peripheral features of Moldavia region act like a trigger for the tourism development, or on the contrary they represent an obstacle for a more sustainable development of tourism activities.

Our results seem to indicate that in Moldavia, peripheral features are an obstacle for the development of a more sustainable tourism sector in the rural areas. Overall, the findings suggest that visitors are more interested in how to reach the destinations (road accessibility) rather than the local products or the regional specific products.

At the same time it seems that tourists are aware of the peripheral features of the region, but did not take them into account in their choice of destination. For the Moldavian rural area the geographical periphery is a deficit which acts constantly negatively on its image and on its tourism indicators.

Finally, a number of limitations to this study have to be considered. Firstly, the study focused exclusively on a single region, while a multiregional approach would be more appropriate, in order to identify if the peripheral feature of Moldavia are similar with a less peripheral region. Secondly, the study did not compare destinations within Moldavia region, but considered all the rural destinations as being part of a peripheral larger space. A more intra-regional approach could bring a distinction between destinations according to their accessibility.

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