

# TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE BORDERLANDS OF ROMANIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE DANUBE GORGE-IRON GATES

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**ABSTRACT:** Border areas are a real challenge for tourism development. Usually associated with the periphery from a socio-economic point of view, these areas often have natural potential and attractive landscapes that have been little transformed by human activity and numerous historical and cultural tourist attractions. Although these areas have considerable tourism potential, this is not sufficient for the sustainable development of tourism and the exploitation of this potential is strongly influenced by the degree of permeability of the border. This is the case of the Romanian-Serbian border, which overlaps the most spectacular sector of the Danube – the Iron Gates Gorge. The main aim of this article is to analyse the role of tourism in the development of border areas and how it functions in a particular territorial context: the Danube Gorge located at the border between Romania and Serbia. The Romanian-Serbian border currently functions as an external border of the European Union in a favourable historical and political context, given the tradition of good neighbourliness between the two entities, the states located on either side of the Danube. However, the communist period altered the prospects for tourism development in this region through a very drastic and controlled border regime, even though the area benefited from major investment projects, such as the dam and hydroelectric power station at Porțile de Fier, built in the 1970s in cooperation with the former Yugoslavia. An analysis of the statistical data on tourism development shows that tourist traffic is on the increase, although there is a contradiction between the upward trend in tourist flows and the backwardness of large-scale tourist infrastructure, with the dominant type of accommodation being small, flexible, and rural accommodation that does not require large investments. The results presented in this article can be summarised in the general conclusion that the development of tourism in the Danube Gorge-Iron Gates remains dependent on the political factor and the border regime, even though the region has a remarkable tourism potential.

**KEYWORDS:** border, tourism, Danube Gorge, ecotourism, infrastructure

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## Introduction

Tourism development is a national priority for Romania. Not all border areas of the country have a remarkable tourist potential, as is the case of the Danube Gorge-Iron Gates region,

located on the Romanian-Serbian border. In this sense, it is absolutely necessary to investigate how the border regime can influence the development of tourism. Border areas are usually assimilated to the peripheries from a socio-economic point of view. Often, however,

they have a natural potential and attractive landscapes very little transformed by human activity (Haselsberger 2014). In addition, these areas sometimes have many historical and cultural attractions. Therefore, they have a considerable tourist potential, but it is not enough for the effective development of tourism, and the capitalisation of this potential is strongly influenced by the degree of permeability of the border (Cacomo 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the relationship between borders and tourism in a specific territorial framework (a border area on the Romanian-Serbian border) and how the development of tourism can overcome a difficult historical and political context. To achieve this purpose, the following targets of scientific investigation are proposed:

1. a conceptual approach to the relationship between tourism and borders – a complex relationship, difficult to analyse, with multiple influences in the development of border regions,
2. a summary of the main historical stages that marked the Romanian-Serbian border (and the relations between the two states), and
3. reporting on recent trends and restrictive factors in the development of tourism in the Danube Gorge sector on the Romanian-Serbian border.

A less permeable European border sector was chosen for this analysis, namely the border area of Romania with the former Yugoslavia, where the most spectacular sector of the Danube is located: the Iron Gates Gorge (Pătroescu, Vintilă 1997). The need for this research derives from the fact that this border region of Romania, with a certain natural tourist potential, has evolved, at least in the last 70 years, under the influence of a border regime that has undermined the territorial development and implicitly the tourist practice. In this context, the article is based on the following research hypotheses: (1) the current situation of the Romanian-Serbian border (external border of the European Union) is favourable to the development of tourism; (2) the development trends of tourism activities located in the Romanian Danube Gorge area are generally positive. There are certain factors that undermine the development of tourism in this border region of Romania.

## Conceptual background: The relationship between tourism and borders

The complexity of the tourist phenomenon imposes difficulties in understanding the spatial phenomena and social processes that characterise the border regions. An exhaustive definition of tourism is practically impossible given the multiple economic and psycho-social implications. Tourism as a whole is a vague, essentially subjective notion, considering the intrinsic combination of many profile activities with other economic sectors (Britton 1982). It is difficult to separate what is touristic or not in a given space, as the same arrangements can serve multiple purposes. Boyer (1996) wrote that “for those who want to write about tourism, the most difficult thing is to define it” (Boyer 1996). In a technical approach, Pearce (1993) defines tourism as “a set of relationships and phenomena resulting from travel and temporary stay of people, especially to relax and recreate.” In the same register, tourism is defined as a system of actors, practices and spaces, participating in the ‘recreation’ of people according to travel and temporary stay, away from the usual location (Knafou et al. 2003).

On the other hand, the tourism system is the result of three distinct fields: economy, society and space. Each of them has a specific weight, which is why it is mandatory to carry out preliminary studies before launching a tourism planning programme. The initiators of such programmes usually pursue three main purposes: job creation, revenue accumulation and balance of payments adjustment. This approach is a priority for any tourism enterprise, once the tourism development process has started (Muntele, Iașu 2003). Tackling tourism as a system is essential in understanding the tourism phenomenon. The concept of the tourism system focuses on interdependence in tourism, on the fact that it consists of several interrelated parties working together to achieve common goals (Leiper 1990; Gunn 2002). A functioning tourism system incorporates the offer of attractions, services, promotion, information and transport, but, regardless of how labelled or described, tourism is not only made up of hotels, airlines or the so-called tourism industry, but rather of a system of major

components linked to each other in an intimate and interdependent relationship (Gunn 2002). Thus, a tourism system consists of five elements (Leiper 1990): a human element (tourist), three geographical elements (the passenger-generating region, the transit route and the tourist destination region), and an industrial element (the tourism and travel industry).

In order to identify the degree of tourism development in the area and to establish the tourism competitiveness of a tourist region, the concept of tourism potential plays an important role. Tourism potential refers to the natural or man-made elements that can be the object of tourist attraction. Often a certain 'tourist vocation' is invoked, without any real justification, since many places with such qualities were initially absolutely ordinary (Muntele, Iașu 2003). Even if no natural or man-made element is in itself of tourist value, the process of space occupation by tourism is dependent on the intrinsic qualities of the environment, with tourists seeking out anything that is spectacular, apparently unique and unrepeatable. The tourist value of a place is only meaningful in the presence of the tourist and can have a completely different connotation for others. Tourism potential is therefore the sum of objective, natural or social conditions, but also subjective conditions, which are linked to motivations and needs that are in a constant state of flux (Dewailly, Flament 2000).

The study of social and economic literature on different border models (Brunet-Jailly 2005) reveals that borders are complex phenomena (Haselsberger 2014) and lead to the shaping of two directions. By border, the first direction means a demarcation, a line between two countries, which affects anyone or anything that crosses it and which, depending on the factors acting on it, adjusts and forms a wider area of economic integration. The other meaning involves a fixed representation of the border and the area next to the dividing line of two countries, with some specific characteristics: periphery, marginal position, a need for regional development and a specific context (Cacomo 2007).

In the postmodern world (Ihab 1985), there was a change in perception of borders (Passi 2000) from the classical way of looking at borders as dividing lines, separating two entities, to the literature related to the constructivist perception,

which also brings to attention the cultural, social and political aspects, as well as the mental dimensions (Newman, Paasi 1998). In many cases, border tourism can have a great potential for development and there are numerous studies that confirm the upward dynamics of tourism activities in border areas (Arreola, Curtis 1993; Gallusser 1994; Timothy 2002; Cacomo 2007). Even in the absence of outstanding tourist potential, cross-border travel has a tourist component, since border crossing points and neighbouring localities often have reception infrastructures that would not be justified in the absence of such flows (Więckowski 2010).

Depending on their character and the function that the borders fulfil, they can constitute barriers or filters regarding the development of tourism, being able to modify the constitutive elements of the spatial integration (Abler et al. 1972). Borders can influence the development of tourism by motivating and stimulating travel, developing tourism infrastructure through marketing and efficient promotion of regional brands. Borders have a strong influence on the surrounding landscape, and in some cases, the development of tourism can be contrasting on both sides of the border (Timothy 2002). Borders can also have significant implications for tourism, especially in terms of planning, promotion and taxation. The flow of tourists, the choice of destinations, the planning and physical development of tourism, and the scale of marketing campaigns can all be affected by the presence of political boundaries. Borders are also often associated with a sudden change in language, religion, national traditions and holidays, and political attitudes and working hours. In a national context, borders have the most significant impact on the natural environment, the economy and models of socio-cultural interaction (Pumain, Saint-Julien 1997).

Tourist areas are sensitive to changes in the location of borders and the functions they perform. A new border or the disappearance of another may affect the functionality of adjacent spaces. Usually, the disappearance of a border or its opening can positively influence the development of tourism through cooperation, but there are also cases where the closure of a border has the opposite effect by the disappearance of attractive tourist locations, rising prices, disappearance of offers, etc. (Więckowski 2010). The disappearance

of borders or their greater permeability have positive effects over time by enhancing the flows of goods and people, increasing the importance of border localities that had a marginal significance in the past, decreasing the number of cross-border conflicts, establishing good relations between neighbours and communities, and reduction of insulation (Beeton 2006). Cross-border cooperation is a useful tool for transnational integration and conflict reduction, if we look at borders as places of exchange and cooperation, rather than as barriers (Smith, Eadington 1992).

One of the key issues related to cross-border tourist areas is attractiveness. This is often associated with the evolution of tourist behaviour in parallel with the progress of tourist infrastructure (Cazes 1992). In the first phase, there is a gap between the awareness of the advantages that tourism practice can bring at the local level and the attraction exercised. Subsequently, there is a balance between these factors, and in a third phase, the respective tourist place develops at the level of maximum potential (Butler 1996). On the other hand, models have been built showing that tourist attraction depends on a multitude of factors (Lew 1987; Leiper 1990; Richards 2002) and in the case of a border region it depends, along with tourist resources, on elements such as political decisions or human needs and social capital (Fig. 1).

As for the types of tourism in border areas, they are mainly based on specific activities based on 'otherness', such as shopping, gastronomy, leisure, healthcare, transit, nature knowledge, cultural (including urban) or event-oriented tourism.

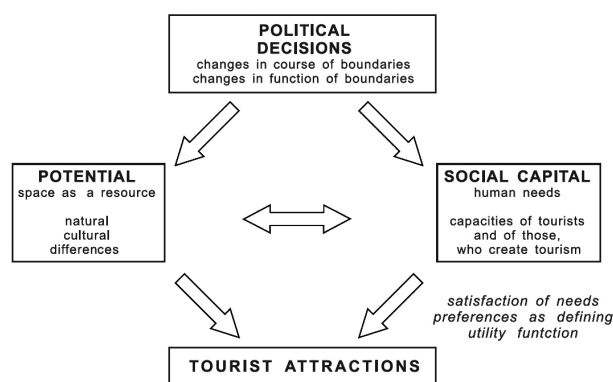


Fig. 1. The influence of the most important elements on the tourist attractiveness of a near-border area (after Więckowski 2010).  
Source: own compilation.

In other countries located in mixed spaces of different cultures and religions, the elements of otherness on which the tourist attraction is based are generated mainly by the different urban and cultural landscapes, which adds the advantageous factor of proximity (Więckowski 2010). Tourism based on common values present in cross-border areas is based in particular on the attractive elements of the natural environment when they belong to both sides of the border (for example the Danube Gorge in the border area between Romania and Serbia) (Hamilton 2001).

In many cases, borders only play the role of mandatory transit points, without tourists using the existing infrastructure in one way or another. The presence of cities with high tourist potential near the border usually generates significant flows. A particular case is presented by the Lilliputian states in Europe (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, San Marino) whose visitors are largely citizens from neighbouring areas of neighbouring states, attracted by lower prices and their tourist reputation. Another special case is represented by some states with a precarious tourist infrastructure, sought by a limited number of tourists for their exoticism, tourism being possible only in the border regions, as is the case with the state of Bhutan (Muntele, Iațu 2003).

### Arguments for the development of tourism in the Romanian space of the Danube Gorge

Located in the south-western part of Romania, the Danube Gorge is the first sector of the Danube River that runs in its Romanian course. It has a length of 144 km and stretches between Baziaș (Danube entrance in Romania) and Gura Văii (Fig. 2). The Gorge crosses a mountainous area, unique in Europe both in terms of extent and diversity of the natural environment and is an area of interference of natural elements of geological, morphological and climatic order, as well as cultural, ethnic and ethnographic diversity.

The study area includes all 11 rural communes located near the Romanian side of the Danube Gorge, plus three towns, and one medium-sized (Drobeta-Turnu Severin) and two small towns (Orșova and Moldova Nouă). These administrative units cover the entire length of the Danube

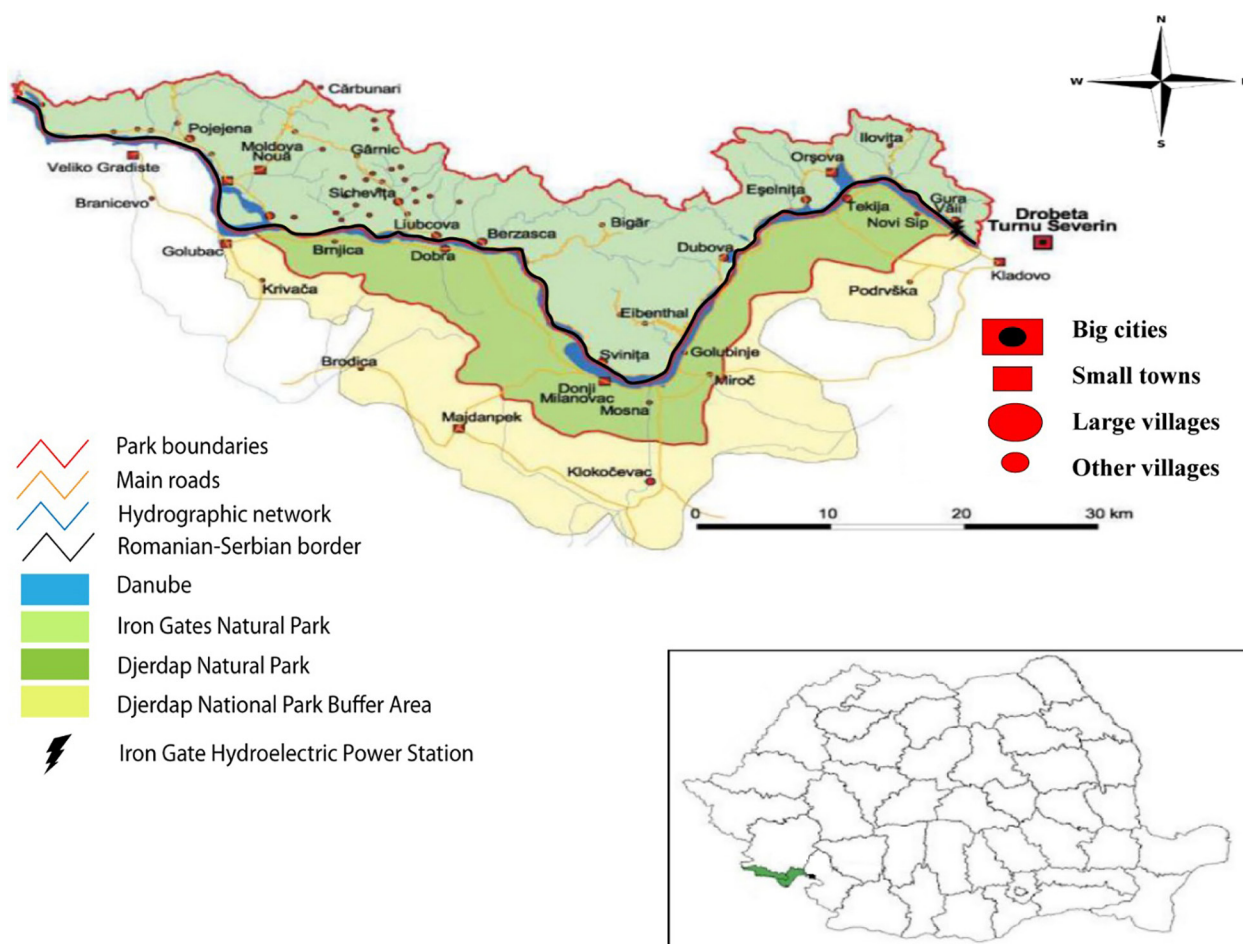


Fig. 2. Location of the Danube Gorge-Iron Gates region (after Pătroescu, Necșuliu 2008 with modifications). Source: own compilation.

Gorge. The whole territory under analysis has an area of 974.51 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 13,526 inhabitants (according to the 2011 Population and Housing Census).

The Danube Gorge overlaps with a tectonic corridor that was created by abrasion, and later by river erosion (Menković, Koščal 1997). From a morphological point of view, the Gorge is made up of a succession of narrow and wider sectors. This succession occurred due to the fact that the Danube crosses in the Gorge an alternation of hard rocks (crystalline shales), as well as softer sedimentary rocks. In this sector the Danube has a low slope that shows the age of the Gorge, and its general direction is West-East (Pătroescu, Necșuliu 2008).

The most spectacular part of the Gorge is the Danube Boilers area, which is the main area of tourist attraction. This region is a nature reserve consisting of two sectors: Cazanele Mici (Fig. 3) and Cazanele Mari. In the Cazanelor area, the

course of the Danube narrows a lot, making navigation difficult. At the same time, from a morphological point of view, the river is bordered by vertical, rocky walls that create natural landscapes characterised by originality and diversity (Pătroescu, Vintilă 1997).

The Small Boilers take place between the Știrbățul Mic and Ciucaru Mic hills, being a calcareous area that is characterised by a narrowness of the Danube valley, with a riverbed width of approximately 150 m. Near the bay of Mraconia, on a limestone rock, was carved the face of King Decebalus, a tourist attraction appreciated by tourists but controversial in terms of artistic will (Fig. 3).

The face of the Dacian King Decebalus is a 55 m high bas-relief, located on the rocky bank of the Danube, between the localities of Eșelnița and Dubova, near the town of Orșova. The bas-relief represents Decebalus, the last king of Dacia (87–106 AD), being carved into a rock by the sculptor



Fig. 3. The rock sculpture of King Decebal and Cazanele Mici.

Source: photos taken by Andrei-Florin Băbăț.

Florin Cotarcea, from the city of Orșova. It is the tallest stone sculpture in Europe and the second tallest in the world.

Cazanele Mari are located between the hills of Ciucaru Mare and Știrbățul Mare, an area where the Danube riverbed varies between 200 m and 350 m. In this area on the Ciucaru Mare hill are characteristic karst forms, and the Ponicoval brook has formed small gorges in the limestone massif.

The Danube Gorge is also an area of bioclimatic interference, transitioning from continental to Mediterranean, which is reflected in the variety of flora and fauna. The mild climate, with strong sub-Mediterranean influences, made possible the presence of elements of flora and fauna with numerous endemisms (Necșuliu, Necșuliu 2005).

Cultural, ethnic and ethnographic interference are also important features of this area. On both banks of the Danube coexist mixed Serbian and Romanian communities, or Serbians and Romanians living in separate communities, but always in good relations (Manea 2003). In addition, the Banat region of Romania (where most of the Gorge is located) is considered to be

exemplary in this regard, in terms of friendship between several minorities. The mixed villages on the Romanian bank of the Danube (such as Berzasca or Eșelnița) demonstrate the possibility of cohabitation (Zbicz 2000). For example, the Czech communities in Romania and Serbia participate together in festivals and events, even if they take place on the other side of the border, which strengthens cultural relations between the two countries. Statistical data from the last census (2011) show the multi-ethnic nature of the population, with a large Serb minority west of Moldova Nouă (Pătroescu, Necșuliu 2008).

Even if that part of the Romanian-Serbian border which constitutes the European Union's external border is discouraging, all these advantages demonstrate that the Romanian area of the Danube Gorge has all the potential elements necessary for tourism development and sufficient arguments to become one of the most important tourist areas in Romania and one of the most original tourist destinations in Europe.

## Methodology

The need to develop a paper on tourism development in the Danube-Iron Gates border region stemmed from the fact that this geographical area is characterised by many native forms, fundamental values of human existence and specific elements of tourist attraction which, in the context of an optimal exploitation, could generate a plus in terms of development of the area. Thus, most research directions have aimed at an objective analysis of the diversity and quality of natural and anthropogenic development resources, as well as the ways in which they can be exploited, in the particular context of a border region located at the external border of the European Union.

The working methodology was adapted to the objectives of the article, each of these objectives corresponding to different stages and specific activities, with a well-established development over time. The research methods and procedures used were both traditional (analysis, synthesis, comparison, direct and indirect observation, description, algorithm, cartographic and historical methods) and modern (diagnosis, quantitative analysis, interpretation of GIS maps, mathematical modelling, etc.). In this sense, the GIS software

was used for the mapping of the analysed elements and the interpretation of the maps, the analytical approach being based on the cartographic representations (Mitchell, Murphy 1991).

The realisation of this work, from a methodological point of view, presupposed the structuring of the research in several stages (Fig. 4).

The process of collecting data and information was completed by an identification of elements of natural potential as a support for tourism development in the study area. In order to achieve this objective, a thorough documentation was made, regarding both the approached topic, in order to avoid confusions about the terminology used, and the study area. In order to know the particularities and the political and historical context in which the Romanian-Serbian border evolved, a series of documents and historical studies were used, because the historical method remains relevant in decoding the socio-political background of a territory (Ogborn 2010). Although the literature concerning Romanian-Serbian relations during the communist period is quite poor, unlike that which deals with the period before 1945, sufficient studies and historical documents have been found with the help of which the main stages in the evolution of the Romanian-Serbian relations and the issues related to the borders have been delimited.

The next stage, which followed the documentation, focused on the field analysis, because this method is useful both in the analysis of the tourist potential and in the visual analysis of the main tourist facilities (Laurier 2010). In order to argue the remarkable tourist potential of the investigated area, the variety of natural elements, accommodation structures, tourist infrastructures in the Danube Gorge, etc., numerous objectives and tourist areas were repeatedly observed and

visually examined to capture the main transformations and evolutions.

In the development of tourism, interviews and discussions were conducted with local actors. A total of 150 people aged between 18 and 70 were interviewed in 2019–2020. The following randomly selected categories were targeted: locals, Romanian and foreign tourists, hotel and hostel owners, and public administration representatives. The semi-structured individual interview method was used. According to the nature of the information acquired, the interviews had both structured and unstructured components, as different aspects of reality were followed during the field research. This variant of the interview is specific to geographical studies and gives the researcher the possibility to ask additional questions, to change the order of the questions and to adapt on the spot in order to achieve the objectives. The open-ended, biographical and narrative questions highlighted facts experienced by members of the community in a context in which the recent history of the Romanian-Serbian border is little studied and there are not enough documents in this regard, and in order to reconstruct some conflict situations, the testimonies of special respondents, who were witnesses of the events, were necessary. It was also necessary to collect subjective data (interpretations, points of view) from those directly involved in the development of tourism in the Danube Gorge. The questions in the interview guide were based on three pillars:

1. perception of the individuality of the Romanian-Serbian border area,
2. opinions about the problems of tourism development in this area, and
3. perspectives of tourism development in the future.

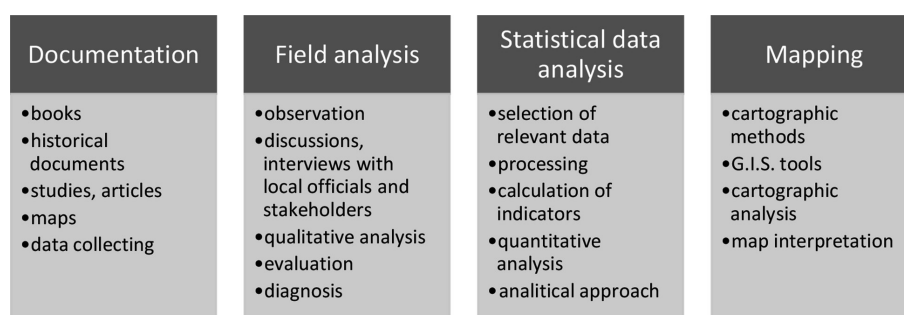


Fig. 4. A flowchart of the methodology used.  
Source: own study.

This was followed by an evaluation of the observed potential tourism elements, which aimed to record data on their value and importance. In order to evaluate, the criteria for assessing the potential of each element were taken into account, the elements of attractiveness being quantified according to the degree of interest, complexity, knowledge, accessibility and facilities. Taking into account the difficulties involved in quantitatively assessing these characteristics (e.g. in Romania, access to data on real estate transactions is not allowed), the value and importance of the attractiveness elements were determined based on tourist flows (tourist arrivals) to these tourist attractions. The elements of tourist potential were evaluated by a score from 1 to 5 according to the number of tourist arrivals in the administrative unit in which they are located. The highest scores were obtained by: Eșelnița (5), Dubova, Berzasca (3).

The main types of tourism, classified according to the aggregative principle, were identified based on field observations and diagnosis. Based on the principle associated with diagnosis, specifically that involving the recognition of forms, the main types of tourism associated with the Danube Gorge were established. *A priori* knowledge, a necessary priority for all form recognition systems and based on field observation in our case, has led to the definition and establishment of the characteristics of each type of tourism.

The method of statistical analysis complemented the previous ones given that the description and exploration of statistical data is important in accurately understanding (Dorling 2010) the main processes in a given space. The processing and analysis of data consisted in establishing a correlation between the degree of attractiveness of the area (number of tourists) and the degree of equipment with tourist reception structures. For this purpose, the calculation of some indicators regarding the number of tourist arrivals and the equipping of the territory with accommodation structures was taken into account. For this, on the one hand, the official data obtained from the National Institute of Statistics were taken into account, and on the other hand, a set of unofficial data, obtained as a result of observations during field trips, was gathered. Also, based on the statistical analysis of some indicators such as the dynamics of tourist flows, accommodation capacity

and the type of accommodation structure, the tourist competitiveness of the studied area was identified.

In order to portray and geographically evoke the main spatial features of the Danube Gorge and to reveal certain features of tourism development, the cartographic method and GIS tools were used. It is an essential method in geography for the synthesis of some essential data, for the investigation of the spatial distribution of some phenomena or for the illustration of some spatial characteristics.

### **Peculiarities of the border between Romania and Serbia**

The Romanian-Serbian border has a length of 546.4 km, of which 289.6 km form the river border (Danube river), and 256.8 km land border. The current border was drawn at the end of 1918 by an international commission chaired by the French geographer Emmanuel de Martonne and confirmed by the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, which divided the historic province of Banat (which until then belonged to Austria-Hungary) between Hungary (a small area near the city of Szeged), the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (one-third of the territory of the province) and Romania (about two-thirds). This border separates the northern part of Vojvodina and the districts of Central Serbia from the Romanian counties of Banat (Timiș, Caraș-Severin, Mehedinți) and currently has 11 points for border control, all in international traffic (eight roads and two railways) and a port one. Along the Romanian-Serbian border, the Danube can only be crossed at the Iron Gates I and II, where the two bridges connect the cities of Drobeta-Turnu Severin (Romania) and Kladovo (Serbia), respectively, with the villages of Ostrovu Mare and Dušanovac. It is a complex of two hydroelectric dams that serve both countries, providing them with electricity.

From a historical point of view, the Romanian-Serbian border has been marked by several stages (Herța 2011; Moscovici 2013) (Fig. 5).

Although during the post-World War I peace negotiations there were some animosities between Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) over the division of the historic province of Banat, the interwar

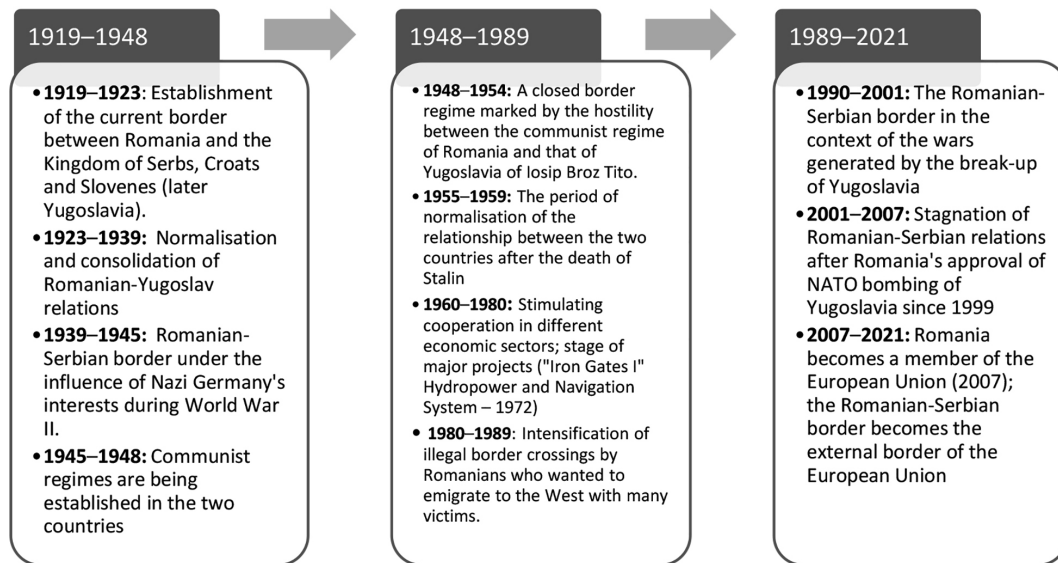


Fig. 5. The historical context of the Romanian-Serbian border in the period 1919–2021.

Source: own study.

period normalised relations between the two countries and even consecrated certain diplomatic alliances with a view to prevent the outbreak of another conflict. Historical research (Herța 2015) indicates that, in the context of World War II, the two states did not face insurmountable disputes and that they were rather willing to cooperate and engage in regional cooperation efforts (Moscovici 2013).

In the post-war period, the Romanian-Yugoslav relations and the character of the border between the two states went through several stages. After the period of 1948–1954, in which hostility with Yugoslavia doubled during the reign of Tito, including by way of conflict-involving incidents and tensions at the border, there followed a period of gradual normalisation culminating in the 1970s with an intensification of interstate relations and economic cooperation (Herța 2015). For this period, both these countries exhibited their willingness to work together by ensuring a high degree of cooperation in various sectors warranting collective efforts, and among these ventures, the great Romanian-Yugoslav Project Iron Gates I remains emblematic; this is the largest hydropower and navigation complex in Europe, built on the Danube at the border between the two countries. The economic crisis in communist Romania in the 1980s marked a distinct period in Romanian-Serbian relations not so much through major changes in official relations between the two states, but especially through

the dramatic change in the status of the border that became the border sector with the highest flows of the clandestine emigrants who left communist Romania, in the perspective of a better life in the countries of Western Europe. There are no official data on the exact number of those who tried to cross the border illegally or the number of those arrested and convicted, ill-treated or shot by the military on time, with the tacit permission of the officers (Johann, Doina 2008). There are certain ways to cross, on land, with the help of guides, or by swimming through the Danube. There is not enough historical research in this regard, but it can be seen that during this period the Romanian-Serbian border became the bloodiest border in Europe; a few studies estimate that thousands of Romanians tried to cross the border illegally during 1980–1989. However, the authors of the present study are struck by the lack of archival information. Despite this situation, the authors managed to discover a statistic which shows that only in the years 1980–1989, 16,000 people tried to leave Romania illegally, 12,000 people were caught by border guards and 4,000 managed to avoid the border obstacles [Johann, Doina 2008]). Also, during this period, there was a high-intensity and small-border traffic, used especially by Serbian citizens, for smuggling products and consumer goods that were missing in Romania in the 1980s.

Due to the major political events after 1989—the fall of communism and European integration,

to which we can add the phenomena of globalisation and migration – borders have redefined their characteristics (Holger 2016). They are related to contemporary world events and phenomena and therefore reflect the reality of relations between states (Hansen 1977). Consequently, ideological and political tendencies to create a Europe of regions that could diminish the role of the nation-state in the context of globalisation have also been reflected in the construction of borders (Weidenfeld 2013).

Unfortunately, in the 1990s, the wars that led to the break-up of Yugoslavia affected the Romanian-Yugoslav relations and, implicitly, the character of the border between the two states. Romania had to choose, on the one hand, between the objective of the Belgrade authorities to preserve the integrity of the Yugoslav state and, on the other hand, to accept the decision of the Yugoslav peoples for self-determination, which was supported by most Western European states. It was not until 1999 that Romania tacitly opted for the second alternative, authorising NATO aviation to use Romanian airspace to bomb the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war. Romania's option was justified by Romania's major objectives at the time, which aimed at rapid integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. However, a large part of the Romanian public opinion did not agree with this decision, since, while NATO aviation forces were using Romanian airspace to execute belligerent military action against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the one hand, on the other the Romanian public remembered the history of good relations between the two states, which did not justify this gesture on the part of Romania.

The process of European integration that followed the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe generated major changes in European policy (Keck-Szajbel 2013). A new doctrine has emerged in all free states, as well as a new approach oriented towards economic and social policies. Former communist countries began to participate in the challenges of the free and democratic world and joined regional and international geopolitical structures (Hjalager 2007). The European Union has gradually expanded to the east, the number of member states has increased, as has the number of cross-border cooperation areas, with more than

100 cross-border cooperation areas in Europe alone (according to the Association of European Border Regions [AEBR]).

The gradual enlargement of the European Union through the accession of the new member states, including Romania, has once again changed the perspective of the approach towards the opening up of the borders of European countries. After half a century of communism, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have made efforts to regain their lost identity and change their unwanted past (Light 2000) into a Europe that pursues the economic and social integration of states, its member states and pre-accession states.

Unfortunately, this favourable European context was marked by the transformation of the Romanian-Serbian border into the external border of the European Union. Although the border-traversal procedure required to be followed (by citizens of both countries, who wish to cross the border) has been simplified (citizens are allowed to cross the border only upon producing an identity card), it is obvious that there is a lack of economic dynamism and an absence of major projects in the field of tourism, although the area benefits from a remarkable tourist potential, especially at the Iron Gates (Causevic, Lynch 2013). The level of border permeability (Ricq 2000) is an indicator of the degree of cooperation between two countries and can be calculated according to the following formula:

$$P = 100 / (y / n)$$

where  $P$  = border permeability index,  $y$  = the length of the border (km) and  $n$  = No. of border crossing points.

A result close to 0 could indicate very little cooperation between countries. A good level of cross-border cooperation is indicated by a result  $>2$ . Between Romania and Serbia there are 11 border crossing points. According to the calculation, the permeability index of the Romanian-Serbian border is within the parameters of a permeable border ( $P = 2.01$ ), which indicates a good cooperation between the two countries. Indeed, at first sight, the intensification of cross-border traffic is noticeable, including for tourist purposes, and the multiplication on the two banks of the Danube, especially in the Gorge sector, of tourist

reception structures (especially tourist pensions [guesthouses]); however, tourist flows in the Romanian-Serbian border area remain low, according to statistics, and the area remains limited to small-scale regional tourism.

## Results

### The types of tourism characteristic of the Danube Gorge-Iron Gates region

The Danube Gorge area of the Danube has a great potential for ecotourism development, especially due to the fact that the area overlaps with the Natural Park 'Iron Gates' where some rare floristic and faunal species are protected (Zbicz, Green 1997; Phillips 2002). A large category of tourists look for such protected areas to spend their holidays, the label 'natural park' being a guarantee of the quality of the landscape (Fig. 4). With Romania's accession to the European Union, the chances of developing tourism in the park area have increased, even if the infrastructure is still deficient. However, it is very important for the park to have a good promotion, especially outside the Romanian borders, and to develop services of acceptable quality, in order to increase the immense tourist potential, which is recognised by several authors, including, prominently, Dumbrăveanu (2004). There are already some remarkable initiatives, such as the marked routes linking the villages of Czech minorities and some major tourist attractions. There are also tourist practices that must be stopped, such as the off-road parking practiced in the Danube Boilers reservation by land vehicle owners, which takes advantage of the existing 'freedom'

and risks damaging the natural values of the site (Pătroescu, Necşuliu 2008).

The implementation of a sustainable tourism, in harmony with the natural environment, must start with the resident population of the area, and needs to encompass all the parties involved in the tourist act, together with hosts and visitors. Additionally, such efforts could yield a successful outcome in terms of maintaining a steady inflow of tourist populations only with the support of local authorities and through educating the population on the importance of preserving the environment intact, as well as attractively displaying the customs and traditions of the local populace. This is because ecotourism in the Danube Gorge area cannot do without the two major components: the natural environment and the local population to enhance this space (Sandwith et al. 2001).

The Danube Gorge has the necessary criteria to practice quality tourism where visitors can benefit from not only the components of the natural fund but also the hospitality of the hosts, the area being remarkable from the point of view of traditions (Westra et al. 2000; Iaşu, Ibănescu 2018).

Apart from ecotourism, based on field observations, it has been established that other types of tourism are present in the Danube Gorge area (Table 1).

Rural tourism (agritourism) is practiced mainly for rest and recreation, and there are many villages that still keep alive traditions and customs. This type of tourism benefits from the increase in the number of agritourism pensions in recent years and the existence of traditional festivals that are becoming more and more spectacular every year, e.g. the accordionists' festival in Moldova Nouă and others.

Table 1. Types of tourism present in the Danube Gorge area.

Type of tourism	Location	Examples of tourism products offered	Entity offering
Rural tourism	Eşelniţa, Eibenthal, Moldova Nouă	festival 'Different ethnically, but united culturally'	local government
Cruise tourism	Orşova, Dubova	local cruise	private operators
Sports tourism	Coronini, Sicheviţa, Berzasca, Sviniţa, Dubova	cycling routes	local government
Gastronomic tourism	Orşova, Moldova Nouă, Sviniţa, Dubova, Eşelniţa, Pojejena	tastings of traditional products	tourist pensions
Cultural tourism	Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Dubova, Eşelniţa	guided visits	private operators

Source: own study.

Cruise tourism has only a local importance, being practiced only over short distances along the Gorge. Very rare are the cases in which the area benefits from the presence of foreign tourists, who cruise on the Danube from the capitals of Central Europe (Vienna, Budapest) to the Danube Delta, the main reason being the absence of luxury accommodation structures.

Gastronomic tourism, also known as culinary tourism, attracts visitors who travel especially to the Danube Gorge to enjoy traditional dishes. The area is famous for its fish dishes but also for other gastronomic dishes.

Sports tourism attracts visitors having the desire to practice different sports and temporarily remove themselves from their everyday sedentary lifestyle. The area has 15 ecotourism trails arranged, where visitors can practice hiking, cycling, sport fishing and so on. They have different lengths, and the degree of difficulty differs from one route to another.

Cultural tourism is based on a series of anthropic objectives, which include visits to churches, monuments, archaeological sites, museums

and so on. Among them, the sculpted face of King Decebalus from the Mraconia Bay area, the Mraconia Monastery, the Saint Ana Monastery and the Catholic Church, both in Orșova, Tabula Traiana, etc. have a great tourist potential.

### Accommodation infrastructure features

The capacity and quality of accommodation play an important economic role. The needs of current tourism in the Danube Gorge are met by a rich network of hotels, clubs, campsites and second homes, which meet both qualitative and quantitative requirements. Although the Romanian National Institute of Statistics provides official data on accommodation structures, it is difficult to know the actual accommodation capacity. In order to avoid taxation, many profile units only partially declare the number of available places. Even so, based on the available data (Table 2), some significant findings can be made regarding the accommodation infrastructure, at least in order of size and dominant types.

Table 2. Tourist accommodation capacity by type of tourist accommodation (2019).

Type of tourist accommodation	Locality/number of places						
	1. Drobeta-Turnu Severin	2. Breznița-Ocol	3. Ilovița	4. Orșova	5. Eșelnița	6. Dubova	7. Svințița
Hotels	799	0	0	44	0	0	0
Hostels	245	0	0	54	0	0	0
Motels	45	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist villas	24	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist huts	0	0	0	0	0	10	0
Bungalows	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist cottages	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist pensions	164	0	0	102	0	0	0
Agritourism pensions	0	0	0	0	428	118	28
Total	1,277	0	0	200	428	128	28
Type of tourist accommodation	Locality/number of places						
	8. Berzasca	9. Sichevița	10. Coronini	11. Gârnic	12. Moldova Nouă	13. Pojejena	14. Socol
Hotels	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hostels	0	0	26	0	0	0	0
Motels	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist villas	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist huts	13	0	0	0	0	14	0
Bungalows	30	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tourist cottages	0	16	0	12	0	0	0
Tourist pensions	0	0	0	0	59	0	0
Agritourism pensions	78	58	80	0	0	50	14
Total	121	74	106	12	59	64	14

Source: National Institute of Statistics.

The most important accommodation capacity is registered in Drobeta-Turnu Severin, the largest city in the Danube Gorge region (92,617 inhabitants in 2020), located in the eastern extremity, which functions as a redistribution centre for tourist flows. In fact, the city has 50.8% of the total regional accommodation capacity and the largest number of places in hotels. However, the role of the urban environment in generating the tourist infrastructure of the area should not be overestimated, because the other two cities (Orşova and Moldova Nouă), small towns with a population under 20,000 inhabitants, contribute insignificantly to the total accommodation capacity. The rural environment concentrates 38.8% of the accommodation capacity of the region, of which the largest share is constituted by the pensions and agritourism pensions (with Eşelnița locality in the first place). In fact, the rural character of the area has a strong imprint on tourism development through a large number of tourist and agritourism guesthouses.

A tourist pension means a reception structure for accommodation and dining, located in rural and urban areas, with a capacity between three and 20 rooms, operating in citizens' homes or in independent buildings, which provide accommodation in specially designed spaces for tourists and catering services (Cândea et al. 2009).

This specific of the Danube Gorge characterised by more flexible accommodation infrastructures, such as tourist pensions, to which is added the low presence of hotel structures, denotes a predisposition for rural tourism, with a less demanding clientele interested in lower costs (Fig. 6). It is the sign of an intermediate phase in the development of tourism and attests to the process of transition to higher forms of tourism; on the other hand, the standard forms are reserved for a more demanding clientele and those having higher disposable incomes.

A significant fact is the high share of places in accommodation structures such as tourist and agritourism pensions (47%). It is a trend that is registered in Romania and the explanations for this fact are numerous. The reasons are related to the many advantages offered by this new concept of recreation and invigoration in optimal conditions, far from noise pollution and the stresses of the civilised world. The natural setting and the rustic lifestyle offer such conditions to

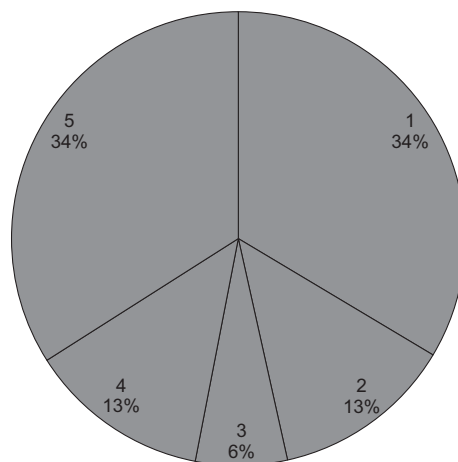


Fig. 6. The structure of total accommodation capacity in the Danube Gorge (2019).

1 - hotels; 2 - hostels; 3 - motels, tourist villas, tourist huts, bungalows and tourist cottages; 4 - tourist pensions; 5 - agritourism pensions.

Source: own study.

the potential tourist. The importance of tourist pensions has increased as more and more tourists turn to accommodation units specific to the smaller 'hospitality industry', with cheap rates and locations in predominantly rural or suburban areas. The typical case for the Danube Gorge is Eşelnița, a rural locality, which concentrates four times more places in tourist pensions than the nearby city of Orşova.

### Dynamics of tourist flows

In the analysed period (2015–2019), the evolution of the number of tourist arrivals from the Danube Gorge illustrates on the whole a sustained increase, with a decrease only in 2018. The highest increases are highlighted in rural areas, where localities such as Pojejena or Eşelnița register 4–5 times increases in the number of arrivals in the tourist reception structures (Fig. 7). The

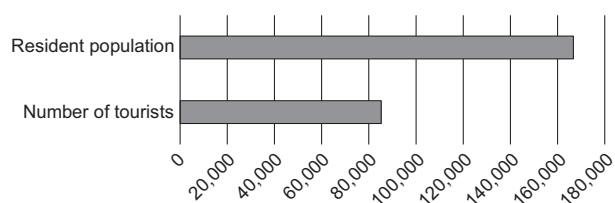


Fig. 6. The structure of total accommodation capacity in the Danube Gorge (2019).

1 - hotels; 2 - hostels; 3 - motels, tourist villas, tourist huts, bungalows and tourist cottages; 4 - tourist pensions; 5 - agritourism pensions.

Source: own study.

strong amplification of tourist flows to several destinations (Berzasca, Pojejena, Eșelnița) cannot be interpreted in the sense of a tourist 'boom' for the entire area (Table 4). Although the ascending evolution is obvious (Table 3), still the number of registered tourists in 2019 is much below the level of the resident population in the region (166,715 inhabitants), which implies a tourist circulation in the process of affirmation (Fig. 8).

Based on the data in Table 2, some relevant indicators could be calculated. Their expression in the form of an average implies the consideration of the whole interval to which the chronological series refers. The mean level is obtained as a simple arithmetic mean:

$$\bar{y} = \frac{\sum y_t}{n} = \frac{397.545}{5} = 79.509$$

The result is that the average number of tourists accommodated in the reception structures in the Danube Gorge is 79,509 tourists annually.

Absolute average change ( $\Delta ma$ ) is the arithmetic mean of the absolute increases from one period to another, in their succession over the analysed time interval 2015–2019.

$$\Delta ma = \frac{\sum_{t=2}^n \Delta / t-1}{n-1} = \frac{16257}{4} = 4.06425$$

Table 4. The localities in the Danube Gorge where tourist arrivals increased.

Locality	Years (no. Sosiri Turistice)				
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Orșova	5,649	7,835	9,074	8,133	10,258
Berzasca	1,439	1,634	1,958	3,386	3,859
Pojejena	457	1,697	1,987	1,580	2,195
Eșelnița	1,344	2,871	3,621	4,002	5,919

Source: National Institute of Statistics.

During the five years analysed, the total number of tourists accommodated in the accommodation structures in the Danube Gorge increased on average by 4,064 tourists per year.

### Tourism competitiveness

The tourist competitiveness of the Danube Gorge region has been analysed based on the dynamics of tourist flows, the presence of tourist infrastructures and the tourist potential of the tourist area (Câdea et al.).

To assess tourism competitiveness the main challenge was to select the most relevant indicators with maximum explanatory power. The trifactorial model (Huggins 2003) was adapted using available local and national statistical data. The model is based on the evaluation of three components: the number of tourist arrivals, the

Table 3. Evolution of the chronological indicators of the number of tourists in the Danube Gorge.

Years	Absolute indicators			Relative indicators			
	Level	Absolute change		Dynamic indexes		Growth rate	
	yt	$\Delta t/1$	$\Delta t/t-1$	It/1 (%)	It/t-1 (%)	Rt/1(%)	Rt/t-1(%)
2015	68,961	–	–	–	–	–	–
2016	78,756	9,795	9,795	114.20	114.20	14.20	14.20
2017	84,712	15,751	5,956	122.84	122.69	22.69	7.56
2018	79,898	10,937	–4,814	115.85	115.85	15.85	–5.70
2019	85,218	16,257	5,320	123.57	123.57	23.57	6.65

Source: National Institute of Statistics.

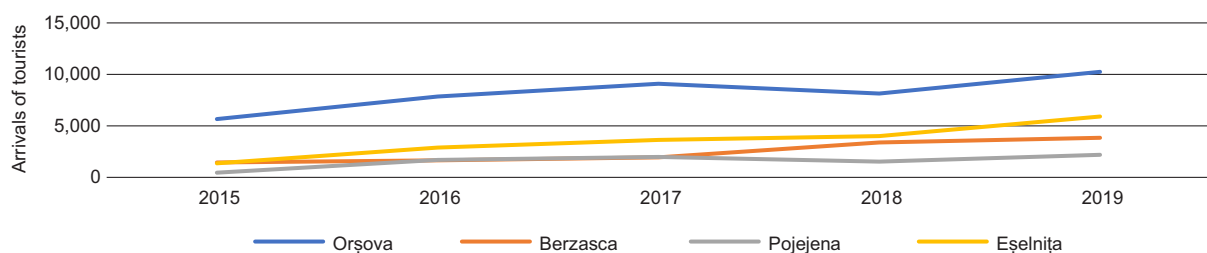


Fig. 8. Localities that have recorded increases in tourist arrivals.

Source: own study.

Table 5. Analysis of the tourism potential of the Danube Gorge.

Indicator	Value	Points	Value	Points	Value	Points	Value	Points	Value	Points
Tourist arrivals	Under 2,500	1	2,500–5,000	2	5,000–7,500	3	7,500–10,000	4	Over 10,000	5
Accommodation capacity	Under 100	1	100–200	2	200–300	3	300–400	4	Over 400	5
Tourism potential	1–2	1	2–3	2	3–4	3	4–5	4	Over 5	5

Source: National Institute of Statistics.

total number of accommodation units and the value of tourism potential. The variables used and the related scores are listed in Table 5.

Analysing the competitiveness of the tourist space (Fig. 9), it can be seen that the competitive tourist offer is high within the administrative limits of Eşelnița, Berzasca and Dubova communes. Here, there are planned tourist areas of regional scale, the accommodation units being constantly developed. This is closely related to the uniqueness of the natural environment, which corresponds to the Danube Boilers, and this makes the attractiveness of the landscape and cultural heritage render these areas the most visited in the Danube Gorge. It is possible to observe a separation of the tourist spaces into accommodation units, public alimentation, practicing sports, etc.

The localities of Berzeasca, Șvinița, Șichevița and Moldova Nouă benefit from a moderate competitive tourist offer, and the tourist endowments are punctual in nature. Unlike the Danube Boilers area, this area sporadically develops

accommodation and public catering spaces. The only tourist space that attracts visitors like a magnet is the Egreta Complex in Berzeasca, due to the accommodation units located directly on the Danube. In the case of the other localities, Socol, Pojejena, Gârnic, Coronini, Ilovița and Breznița-Ocol, the competitive tourist offer is reduced and there are punctual tourist spaces developed spontaneously. Accommodation units are extremely small and visitors are few due to the much lower attractiveness of the relief.

### Restrictive factors of tourism development

Based on discussions with local stakeholders, pension and hotel owners and tourism investors, at the level of the analysed area, several restrictive factors were identified that prevent the development of sustainable tourism:

1. the lack of an authorised body to contribute to the real promotion of the area both nationally and internationally,

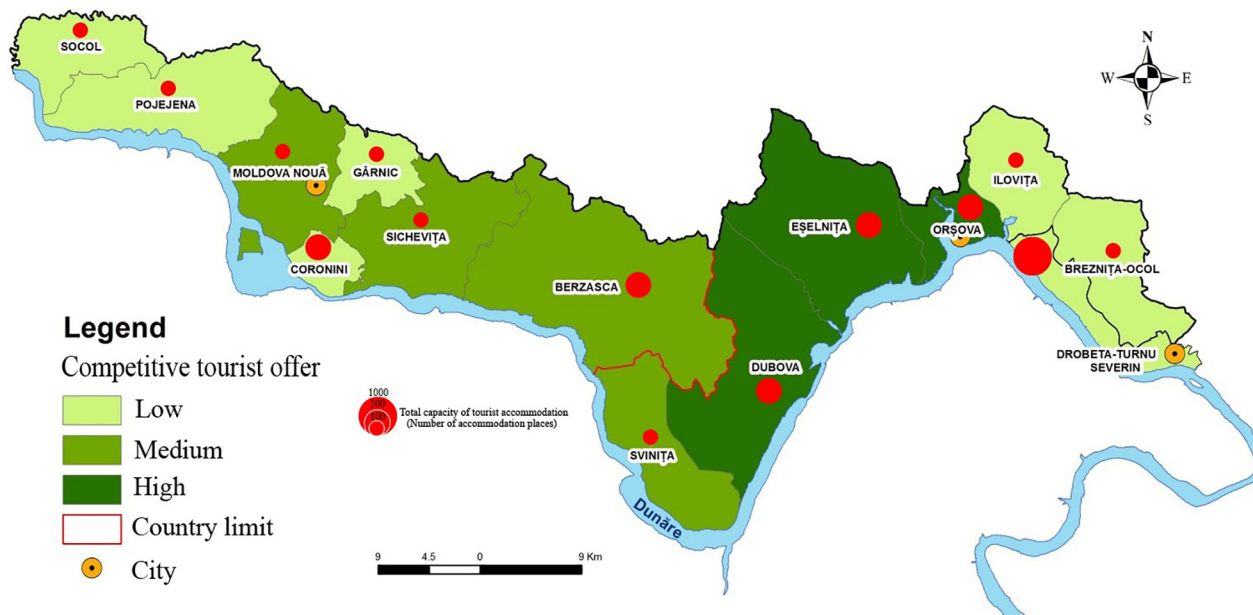


Fig. 9. The competitiveness of tourism.  
Source: own compilation.

2. the absence of tourist information points, which leads to difficult access to tourist information,
3. the area is facing a deficient access infrastructure, lacking road information panels or bus parking lots,
4. the investments made in tourism are small, and
5. the region is facing an insufficiently trained workforce in the field of tourism.

The Danube Gorge can benefit from a partnership between local/central authorities and tourism employers who can develop a national strategy to relaunch tourism in this area, so that a promotion of local communities can be used to increase the attractiveness of the area and, finally, to contribute to an increase in the living standard of the inhabitants.

## Discussions and conclusions

Often in Romania, the development of tourism is approached only through the prism of the tourist potential of a certain tourist region. It was intended in this article to emphasise from a theoretical point of view the idea that, especially in a border area, tourism is influenced by a multitude of factors, among which the historical and political ones have great weights. Although limited in terms of the statistical data available to us, in practice the results that were obtained can provide future studies with a starting point for identifying trends in tourism development in the Danube Gorge and the characteristics of tourism infrastructure that have developed in the preceding periods.

Regarding the hypothesis that the current situation of the Romanian-Serbian border (constituting the external border of the European Union) is favourable to the development of tourism, first of all, we can see the lack of large investors and, surprisingly, those in Serbia, which could be explained by the remnant of the imprint of the unfortunate history of the border during the communist period, but also by the legislative barriers in Romania that make it difficult to invest outside the European Union. Secondly, although declaratively, at the political level, it is stated that although the relations between Romania and Serbia are good, there is a reluctance on both sides to

get involved in major infrastructure projects, as happened during the communist period. The reasons given by the Serbian side refer mainly to the economic and customs obstacles between the two countries, but for the Romanian side it weighs heavily on the uncertain political status of Serbia in terms of accession to the European Union. In this situation, without an impulse from the state, the development of tourism in the area of the Gorge is based on complementarity and punctual investments, which are incoherent most of the time. It is well known that any major investment in tourism is started by investors only when there are at least two or three anchor elements. In the absence of such flagship elements (for example, modern transport infrastructures), the tourist spaces in the Gorge area, on both banks, shaped only by the local initiative, will have a residual character and will not be able to benefit from a coherent planning exercise.

At present, it can be said that the Romanian-Serbian border has at least three directions of influence on the development of tourism in the studied area:

1. the fact that the Romanian-Serbian border functions as the external border of the European Union discourages large investments in tourism, making room only for small entrepreneurs,
2. there is no synergy in the field of tourism development between Romania and Serbia at the moment, due to the fact that there is a general stagnation of relations between the two countries, and
3. the Romanian-Serbian border still plays a relatively barrier role in the absence of modern transport infrastructure, which is absolutely necessary for the development of tourism.

The evolution trends of the tourist activities located in the Romanian space of the Danube Gorge, as it results from the existing statistical data, are generally positive (second hypothesis). Regarding the number of tourist arrivals for the whole region in the period 2015–2019, the trend is generally positive, although the growth is concentrated in two or three localities. In this context one should mention the relatively backward position of Drobeta-Turnu Severin in terms of tourism development and apparent degree of attractiveness for tourists; considering its capacity as the largest city in the region, it should function as

a true centre of concentration/dispersion of tourist flows, but yet it is characterised by a stagnant evolution of tourist arrivals. In fact, the weak position of the urban centres in the Danube Gorge is also confirmed by the picture of tourist reception structures in 2019. There are a variety of accommodation units of different types, but tourist and agritourism guesthouses remain dominant. The dominance of rural tourism and the function of the Natural Park of the area can be an asset, given the need for preservation of a minimum balance between tourism and the functionality of ecosystems. At the same time, the evolution in this direction will imply a much more careful planning of the tourist spaces, which comes in contradiction with the spontaneity of the tourist developments from the recent period.

For the third hypothesis, it is noted that, in essence, the factors that undermine the development of tourism in this border region of Romania, with a recognised tourism potential at national and European level, are not subject to the impacts of the political decisions affecting all border regions, but refer especially to the lack of synergy of tourism development. The absence of long-term strategies (local or national) for tourism development in this area, the simplistic nature of exploitation and promotion of tourist resources, the lack of correlation between the tourism market and the labour market, and ignoring the multiplier and dynamising effect of tourism in the economic sphere are factors that undermine the punctual efforts of investors in the field.

It can be concluded that the development of tourism in border areas is primarily dependent on the existence of tourism potential. However, the tourism system is not a rigid form: it is rather dynamic and constantly changing. New concepts and phenomena are constantly emerging and influence the development of tourism. The tourism system is also largely affected by external influences such as politics, demography, technology, etc., and changes are constantly driven by political uncertainty and technological innovations.

At the same time, it is clear that political decisions that influence the existence and functions of state borders have important effects in general on development and implicitly on tourism, especially in less permeable border areas, such as the Romanian-Serbian border that operates at present as the external border of the European Union.

It is difficult to demonstrate which elements make a decisive contribution to the development of tourism in a border region, given the multitude of internal and external factors that influence this complex area.

The results obtained from this study contribute to a possible deeper reflection on the contradiction between the declared tourism development potential and the complexity of the field data attesting tourism development. For this reason, for the Danube Gorge area in Romania, based on statistical data, there is a contradiction between the upward pace of tourist flows and the delay of endowments with large tourist infrastructures, dominant being the flexible accommodation units of low capacity, which do not require large investments.

The idea of the remarkable tourist potential of the Danube Gorge is unanimously accepted among the specialists from Romania. It should be noted, however, that the tourism potential alone is not enough to generate a sustainable development of tourism activities and the desired status of a major tourist region in Europe.

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### Author's contributions

The authors contributed equally to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript. The authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

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