

CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES IN NORTHERN TRANSYLVANIA IN PLANNING DOCUMENTS AND IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS FINANCED BY EUROPEAN FUNDS

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ABSTRACT. *Churches and Monasteries in Northern Transylvania in Planning Documents and in Tourism Development Projects Financed by European funds.* In the present paper we studied the manner in which county and regional authorities from Northern Transylvania view churches and monasteries located in this area as tourist landmarks. In order to do that, we analyzed the county and regional policies and strategies and looked for projects addressing cultural heritage in the area that were financed by European programmes. While highlighting the diverse tourism potential of the religious buildings, the counties' development strategies also recommended the preservation and rehabilitation of the historical monuments and promoting them in an integrated manner, as parts of cultural and/or religious routes. These objectives have been realized mostly with the help of the European funds – more than 40 churches were renovated and more than 80 have been promoted using REGIO and INTERREG funds, and wooden churches in Maramureş and Sălaj counties and medieval churches in Satu Mare County were included in thematic routes. Moreover, the creation and promotion of more cultural tourism routes is one of the main objectives of the Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, adding more value to the region's tourism potential.

Keywords: *cultural heritage, tourist routes, European funds, churches, Northern Transylvania.*

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1. Introduction

In addition to their religious function, churches and other places of worship can also have a tourist function. They can be attractive to a wide range of tourists from an aesthetic perspective (e.g. architecture, exterior and interior decorations - churches being often the most imposing buildings in a village or a town), from a historical perspective (as places where important events took place, which are accompanied by legends or are associated with the image of certain historical figures), or they can host cultural events (such as artistic performances, exhibitions, etc).

In Northern Transylvania (the administrative North-West Region of Romania) about 750 churches are registered on the List of Historical Monuments (LMI 2015), but only a part of them possess characteristics interesting and valuable enough to become tourist attractions (despite their cultural importance as heritage sites, most listed churches do not possess the aesthetic and/or other elements to become attractive to other tourists than those represented by a specialized public, they are not different enough from other better-known churches located nearby, or they are severely deteriorated, etc.).

In a study on the tourism potential of the North-West Region coordinated by Cocean and Pop (2020), 295 churches and 85 monasteries and hermitages of interest for local and regional cultural tourism were identified. The tourism potential of churches and monasteries at county level is variable, high in Maramureş and Cluj, and lower in Satu Mare (Table 1).

Table 1. Assessment of the tourism potential of the churches and monasteries in Northern Transylvania. Calculation based on the methodology described in Cocean and Pop (coord.), 2020, pp. 51-58

Area	Churches with tourism potential (no.)	Cumulative score of churches with tourism potential	Monasteries with tourism potential (no.)	Cumulative score of monasteries with tourism potential
Bihor County	40	910	10	184
Bistrița-Năsăud County	48	970	11	175
Cluj County	51	1185	18	337
Maramureş County	77	1703	30	448
Sălaj County	47	926	8	114
Satu Mare County	32	706	8	146
Northern Transylvania	295	6400	85	1404

Also, eight wooden churches in Maramureş County are registered on the UNESCO World Heritage list (the Church “Intrarea în Biserică a Maicii Domnului” in Bârsana, the Church “Sf. Nicolae” in Budeşti, the Church “Sf. Paraschiva” in Deseşti, the Church “Naşterea Maicii Domnului” in Ieud-Deal, the Church “Sf. Arhangheli Mihail şi Gavril” in Plopiş, the Church “Sf. Paraschiva” in Poienile Izei, the Church “Sf. Arhangheli Mihail şi Gavril” in Rogoz, the Church “Sf. Arhangheli Mihail şi Gavril” in Şurdeşti), presenting interest for national and international tourists.

However, identifying a tourism potential is only the first step for tourism development, tourism planning and promotion being essential stages for attracting tourists and for creating genuine tourist destinations. Currently, only a small number of religious sites in Northern Transylvania are really known - according to the number of reviews on Tripadvisor on October 23, 2022, the top ten tourist attractions in the categories *churches&cathedrals* and *sacred&religious sites* in the region were: Bârsana Monastery in Maramureş (325 reviews), “St. Michael” Church in Cluj-Napoca (301), The church with Moon in Oradea (122), the wooden churches in Maramureş (134), the Orthodox Cathedral in Cluj-Napoca (98), Săpânţa-Peri Monastery in Maramureş (88), The Roman-Catholic Cathedral in Oradea (70), the Neolog Synagogue in Oradea (63), the Reformed Church on M. Kogălniceanu Str. in Cluj-Napoca (53) and the Evangelical Church in Bistriţa (46). For comparison, the Black Church in Braşov had 2191 reviews, the Church on the Hill in Sighişoara 446, and the Fortified Church in Biertan 336, all being located outside the region.

In this context, the objectives of this study were to analyze:

- how the religious sites (churches, monasteries, synagogues) in the North-West Region are seen in the strategies for tourism development at the regional and county levels and,
- how the European funds contributed to the tourism valorization of this kind of sites.

2. The Northern Transylvania’s religious sites in the planning documents for tourism development

The *Strategy for tourism development in the North-West Region* (published as Cocean and Pop (coord.), 2020) gives to the cultural tourism in the region (based mainly on the existence of historical sites, religious buildings, cultural events, and other cultural landmarks), a less important role than to other forms of tourism (wellness tourism, rural tourism, speleotourism, adventure tourism and hunting tourism). Also, it was oriented especially towards the domestic demand, but acknowledging its potential to enrich the offer for foreign tourists as

well (Cocean and Pop (coord.) 2020, pp. 122-123). In the same document, there were two recommended directions for tourism development that address the valorization of religious sites, among other cultural sites – further developing specialized forms of tourism (including pilgrimages based on the monasteries in the region) and designing thematic routes (some of which are based on religious sites, such as the tourist circuits of wooden churches). The same publication identified 19 churches with tourism potential that were in urgent need for restoration and/or reconstruction, including 11 wooden churches and the Evangelical churches in Teaca and Jelna villages in Bistrița-Năsăud County (p. 55). In the case of monasteries and hermitages, the recommendation was to include them into religious tourist circuits based on their geographical proximity, their particular Christian denomination and on already established pilgrimage traditions: the Someșul Mare Circuit (consisting of the monasteries in Salva, Cormaia, Telcișor-Buscatu, Parva and Ilva Mare), the Maramureș Circuit (which includes the monasteries of Săpânța-Peri, Moisei, Petrova, Bârsana, Ieud, Botiza, Vișeu de Sus, Dragomirești, Baia Borșa), the Lăpuș Circuit (with the monasteries of Rohia, Rohița, Dumbrava, Ruoia, Coroieni, Breaza), the Oaș Circuit (consisting of Bixad, Portărița and Moșișeni monasteries) and the Beiuș Circuit (which includes Izbuc Monastery, Târcaia wooden church, Rieni wooden church, Stâna de Vale Monastery and Huta Hermitage). Moreover, the authors advocated for the international promotion of three of the monasteries in the region - Săpânța-Peri Monastery (the tallest religious building made of wood in Europe), Rohia Monastery (the place where Nicolae Steinhardt lived) and Nicula Monastery (which houses a “miracle-performing” icon of Virgin Mary) (p. 58).

At county level, only Maramureș, Bihor and Satu Mare have prepared sectoral tourism strategies; in the case of the other counties in the region (Cluj, Sălaj and Bistrița-Năsăud), tourism is addressed in more or less detail within the general development strategies for the respective counties. The public authorities in Maramureș have shown lasting interest in valorizing the rich potential for tourism that the county possesses, and, over the years, a *Strategy for tourism development in Maramureș County (2007-2013)*, a *Prospective study for promotion and branding (2018)*, and an updated *Strategy for the development and promotion of tourism in Maramureș* were being written and implemented.

Regarding the religious sites, the first strategy highlights the very large number of wooden churches with tourism potential (starting with the eight ones registered on the UNESCO World Heritage list), but also the need for restoration works to many sites and for adequate tourism promotion. Consequently, one of the priorities the strategy specified was the “restoration and valorization of tangible and intangible cultural, historical and religious heritage, and the preservation of the identity of tourist areas”, and among the recommended

actions: “restoration, consolidation, protection and conservation of the heritage buildings”, “restoration, protection and conservation of the interior and exterior paintings, frescoes and murals” and other investments for setting-up of these buildings for tourism (architectural facade lighting, equipping them with sanitary facilities, air conditioning and fire protection systems, construction and rehabilitation of the access roads, etc.), but also “creating support programs for the religious tourism” based on pilgrimages to the monasteries in the county (CJ Maramureș, 2006, pp. 44-45).

The *Prospective study for promotion and branding* (which is based on previous attempts to create a tourism logo for the county) proposed two stylized and superimposed images of a church and a traditional wooden gate to represent Maramureș (together with the message “Gateway to tradition”), which illustrates both the identification of local actors with the tradition represented by these symbols, as well as the perception of the territory among tourists.

The Strategy for the sustainable development of Maramureș County (2014-2020) lists rural tourism and cultural-religious tourism among the most suitable forms of tourism for this county, in accordance with the already existent tourism development and the potential for future development (CJ Maramureș, 2016, p. 144). The section on tourism of this document reviews the numerous actions for tourism development and promotion that already took place in the county, including the creation of a route of wooden churches comprising 16 sites. According to this strategy, until 2035, Maramureș will become “a tourist destination of European importance and a Romanian national brand, capitalizing on the authenticity of its architecture, „wood” culture, folk art, folklore, crafts and well-preserved local traditions, gastronomy, museums, contemporary cultural production, but also on the uniqueness of the landscapes, the diversity of natural touristic resources or the historical heritage of the county” (p. 318), a goal supported by measures such as “sustained and sustainable development of the forms of tourism with high potential at the county level” and “increasing the offer for cultural tourism through the appropriate conservation and valorization of built heritage and the development of the cultural infrastructure” (p. 334).

The *Strategy for tourism development in Bihor County* and the associated *Operative Action Plan* published in 2003 describe the county’s potential for tourism, to which the religious buildings in Oradea and the wooden churches in the rural area make an important contribution. In these documents, cultural and heritage tourism is seen as having good potential for further development, but with lesser importance than the wellness tourism, business tourism and ecotourism (CCI Bihor, 2003, pp. 27-34). In terms of measures addressing the built heritage in the county, it is noteworthy the “architectural rehabilitation of

cities and villages, especially of the heritage buildings”, while, in what regards the religious tourism, “organizing visiting circuits” of churches, the restoration of degraded buildings, and “the harmonization of the religious life of the local communities with the presence of tourists” (pp. 71-73).

Within the *Integrated Strategy for sustainable development of Bihor County (2021-2027)*, one of the main objectives is “the sustainable development of the tourism based on local identity and heritage”, and among the proposed actions: increasing the value of the cultural-historical (and religious) heritage by “supporting protection, conservation, restoration and the sustainable valorization of the county’s natural tourism potential and built heritage” (CJ Bihor, 2021, pp. 528-530). However, the same document also highlights the need for an updated sectoral strategy on tourism.

The *Development strategy of Satu Mare County until 2020* identifies tourism as a sector in which there is further potential for development (based on thermal water resources, cultural and historical landmarks of importance for both local and Hungarian tourists, and traditional local products), highlighting at the same time “the competition from other counties in the region, that have a similar cultural, natural and heritage profile, but which are much more accessible, have greater notoriety and an increased diversity of the services and facilities they offer to the tourists (Cluj and Bihor)” (CJ Satu Mare, 2016, pp. 150-153). Hence, one important objective is to “support and promote the local identity” through tourism development and promotion of local tangible and intangible heritage (with six measures, including “promotion of cultural and historical tourism” and “rehabilitation of tangible heritage elements”) (pp. 415 -417).

The *Strategy for tourism development of the heritage in Satu-Mare County (2014-2020)* lists the county’s heritage tourism products, among which the route “Pilgrimage in the footsteps of past times” which includes cultural and religious landmarks, the “Circuit of medieval churches” and a part of “Via Mariae”, a European pilgrimage route, which passes through Carei, Petrești, Căuaș, Hotoan and Tășnad (CJ Satu Mare, 2014, pp. 90-103). According to this document, one of the three main priorities for developing tourism in the county is “enhancing the image of Satu Mare County as a tourist destination” based on a marketing strategy (pp. 68-85) and by promoting the county’s tourist attractions on digital channels (TripAdvisor, Youtube and Facebook).

The *Strategy for the territorial development of Cluj County* lists among the priorities for the 2020-2030 period the “sustainable capitalization of the county’s heritage in order to develop the tourism sector”, further detailed in several measures including “the restoration of the county’s historical monuments”, “the preservation and promotion of the traditional architecture and cultural

heritage of the villages in the county” and “effective and active promotion of the county as a tourist destination” (with an example of a direct action - “creating a web portal for tourism promotion of the county”) (CJ Cluj, 2020, pp. 9-10 of chapter II).

In what regards tourism, the *Strategy for sustainable development of Sălaj County (2021-2027)* declares a very ambitious goal - “to support the development of the local tourism sector through integrated efforts to rehabilitate the infrastructure, developing and promote tourist attractions, so that the number of tourists doubles in the 2021-2027 period” (CJ Sălaj, 2021, p. 544). Among the recommended measures one can find “supporting actions to achieve and consolidate county branding and promote tourist attractions” (the most important of which are briefly described in a separate chapter on tourism - pp. 452-456). In the context of the county authorities’ interest for creating a brand for tourism, we must note the fact that the current coat of arms of the county includes the silhouette of a wooden church (in Sălaj there are several dozen such landmarks), and that through an EU funded project a route of wooden churches in the county was created and promoted. At the same time, the competition represented by Maramureş limits the potential development of the religious heritage tourism in Sălaj to tourists from the county area.

The *Development strategy of Bistrița-Năsăud County (2021-2027)* pays special attention to tourism in an extended chapter and focuses on four main objectives: “within ten years Bistrița-Năsăud County will become an attractive and well-known destination at the national level; placing the architectural heritage at the center of the county’s “proposal” for tourism; promoting the niche tourism (...), but also the integrated development of tourism” (CJ Bistrița-Năsăud, 2021, p. 118). Among the actions derived from these objectives are “the restoration and repurposing of some key landmarks in the county (the mansions in Posmuş and Comlod, the Evangelical churches in Teaca, Vermeş, Chiraleş)”, “the registration of the rehabilitated sites in existing tourist routes” and implementing the project *Via Nösnerlandia* – an integrated tourist route proposing a combination of heritage tourism, cycle tourism, wine-gastronomy tourism and ecotourism based on Saxon churches (Teaca, Vermeş, Chiraleş, Corvineşti and Livezile), restored/rehabilitated mansions, villages with well-preserved traditional architecture, a 35 km tourist train route (Mocănița Transilvaniei) and vineyards in the county.

3. Rehabilitation and tourism promotion of the religious heritage in Northern Transylvania using European funds

After Romania joined the European Union, a major funding source for rehabilitating heritage buildings have been the European funds - parishes, non-profit associations, municipalities, regional and county public authorities were taking advantage of these opportunities to renovate and promote for tourism purposes many of the major landmarks in the region. In order to have an overview on this activity, we analyzed the following programs: the Regional Operational Program Regio 2007-2013 (POR 2007-2013), the Regional Operational Program 2014-2020 (POR 2014-2020), INTERREG RO-HU 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 and the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR).

From the lists of financed projects available on the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration website we selected the churches and other religious sites in the North-West Region that benefited from restoration, rehabilitation and promotion through POR 2007-2013 (under the priority-axis 5 "Sustainable development and promotion of tourism", major intervention field 5.1. "Restoration and sustainable valorization of the cultural and built heritage, as well as the creation/rehabilitation of the related infrastructures") and POR 2014-2020 (priority-axis 5 "Improving the urban environment and preservation, protection and sustainable exploitation of the cultural heritage"). We listed them below together with the identification code from the national List of Historical Monuments (LMI 2015):

- the Reformed Church on 16 Kogălniceanu Str., Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-A-07380),
- the Roman-Catholic Church "Sf. Mihail" in Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-A-07469),
- the Lutheran Episcopal Church in Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-B-07306),
- the „Învierea Domnului"/ Bob Church in Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-B-07277),
- the Reformed Church in the Old Turda, Turda, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-A-07793),
- the Reformed Church in Dej, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-A-07598),
- the church and the cloister of the Franciscan Monastery in Gherla, Cluj County (CJ-II-a-B-07641),
- the Reformed Church in Huedin, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-A-07679),
- the Reformed Church in Sic, Cluj County (CJ-II-m-A-07759),
- the Roman-Catholic Cathedral in Satu Mare, Satu Mare County (SM-II-m-A-05225),

- the Roman-Catholic Church “Calvaria” in Satu Mare, Satu Mare County (SM-II-m-B-05209),
- the Orthodox Cathedral “Adormirea Maicii Domnului” in Satu Mare, Satu Mare County (SM-II-m-B-05226),
- the Reformed Church in Acâș, Satu Mare County (SM-II-m-A-05253),
- the Evangelic Church in Bistrița, Bistrița-Năsăud County (BN-II-m-A-01450),
- the wooden church “Sf. Arhangheli Mihail și Gavril” in Gersa, Rebrîșoara Commune, Bistrița-Năsăud County (BN-II-m-A-01659),
- the wooden church in Șurdești, Șișești Commune, Maramureș County (MM-II-a-A-04769),
- the wooden church in Buzești, Fărcașa Commune, Maramureș County (MM-II-m-A-04533),
- the circuit of the wooden churches in Northern Transylvania, Maramureș County, <http://www.bisericimaramures.eu/> (seven UNESCO churches and nine other churches registered on the national List of Historical Monuments located in Bârsana, Bogdan Vodă, Budești, Botiza, Călinești, Desești, Ieud, Poienile Izei, Plopiș and Șurdești in Șișești Commune, Remetea Chioarului, Rozavlea, Ocna Șugatag, Săcălășeni and Copalnic Mănăștur),
- the circuit of the wooden churches in Northern Transylvania, Sălaj County (churches located in Baica and Racâș villages in Hida Commune, Porta Sălajului and Ciumărna villages in Românași Commune, Fildu de Sus village in Fildu de Jos Commune, Sânmihaiu Almașului village in Sânmihaiu Almașului Commune and Bârsa village in Someș-Odorhei Commune).

In the context of mainly individual sites benefiting from renovation works and promotion, the two circuits of wooden churches in Northern Transylvania listed above stand out in terms of connecting the separate landmarks in tourism routes and promoting them under a common brand. However, while, in general, the projects contributed to a better visibility of the targeted heritage monuments and sites, to increasing access for larger categories of tourists (e.g. people with locomotor disabilities), in certain cases the selected architectural and technical solutions do not fit harmoniously in the surrounding landscape or tend to overshadow the very landmark with their size (Fig. 1.).

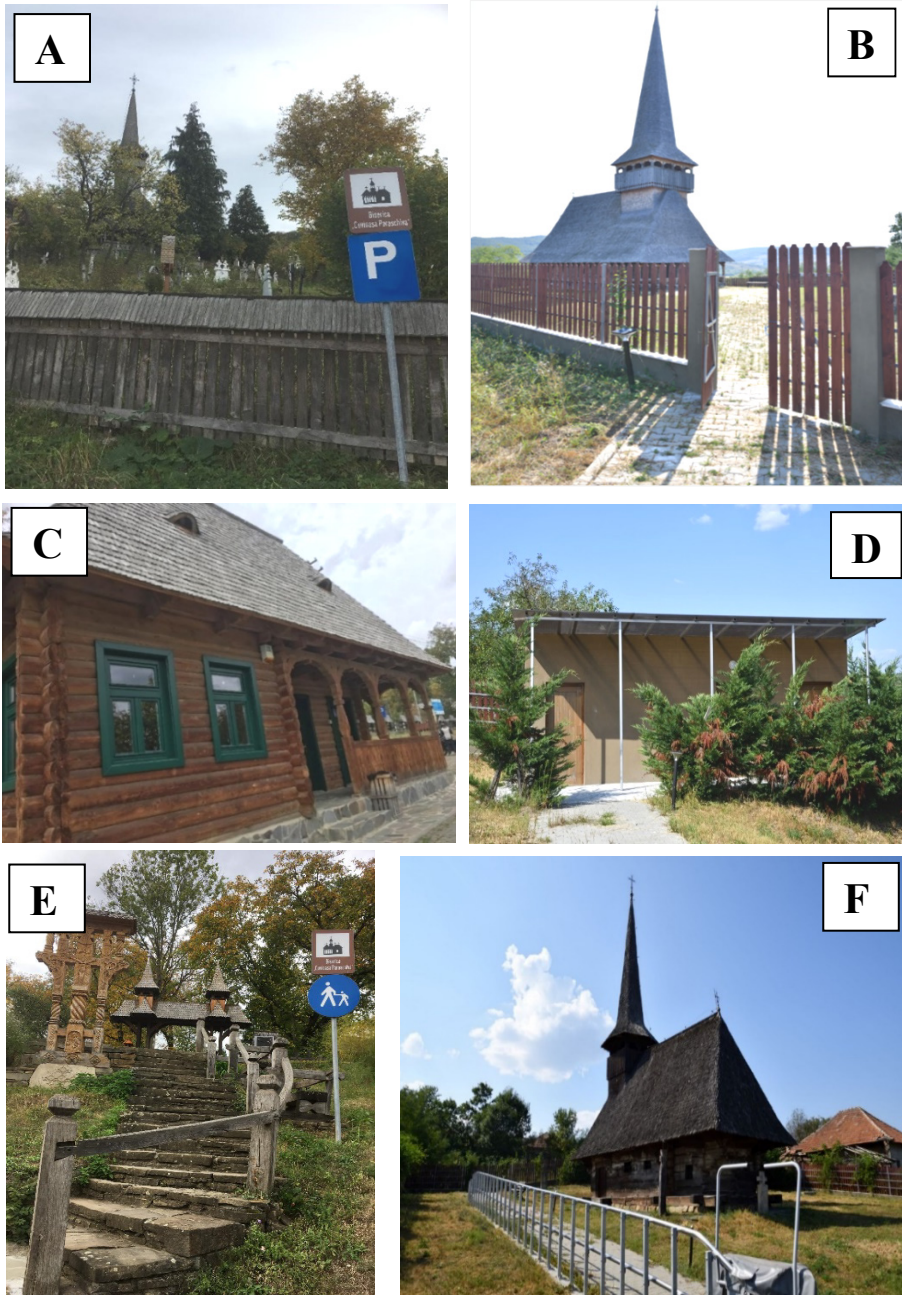


Fig. 1. Positive (A, C, E - the wooden church in Desești, Maramureș county) and negative examples (B the wooden church in Sânmihaiu Almașului, Sălaj county, D, F - the wooden church in Baica, Sălaj county) of set-up for tourism of heritage churches in the region.

A, B – fences, C, D – additional new buildings (administrative buildings, toilets),
E, F – access ways. Photos: Magdalena Drăgan and Călin Drăgan.

Renovations, rehabilitation and tourism promotion of the cultural heritage in the region were also carried out through the Cross-Border Cooperation Programs between Romania and Hungary. “*The Path of Medieval Churches*” is one of the successful projects financed through this program (EPICAH Interreg Europe, 2019, pp. 75-79). It started as a cooperation project between Romania and Hungary (Temple Route-HURO/1101/149/2.1.3), then continued through the Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Cross-Border Cooperation Program. At present, it includes 37 churches in Hungary, 16 in Ukraine and 13 churches in Satu-Mare County (located in Acâș, Ciumești, Șeghea, Vetiș, Negrești-Oaș, Agriș, Livada, Berea, Căpleni, Corund, Bixad, Beltiug and Tășnad).

At first, the project aimed to promote the selected churches by means of historical studies, a web page, promotional leaflets and brochures, signages and informative panels. In a second stage, several churches were rehabilitated, out of which in Romania the churches in Berea, Țeghea, and Ciumești, and a visitor center was set-up for the church in Acâș (<http://www.templomut.hu/uk/churchroad>). A very important aspect of this project was the attention given to the promotion of the sites connected by tourist routes – a thematic route of medieval churches, and, also, including them with other cultural-historical landmarks into complex routes such as “Journey through the world of churches, palaces and castles” (which includes sites in Hungary and Romania), the “Historical Heritage Route”, which includes churches, fortresses and memorial houses in Satu Mare County, etc. (<http://www.templomut.hu/uk/heritagetour>).

Another important international project was *Promoting religious tourism by capitalizing on the heritage of the Jewish communities in Oradea and Debrecen*. For the Romanian part, the main outcome of it was the rehabilitation of the Neolog Synagogue in Oradea and valorizing it by cultural tourism (art exhibitions, concerts, book launches, etc.).

The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR) addresses tourism through the *Component 11 Tourism and culture* and pursues three directions: establishing a network of Regional Tourism Destination Management Organizations and supporting local investments in tourism, promoting the active tourism through cycling routes and the establishment of a National Cycling Tourism Coordination Center, the proposal and promotion of 12 cultural tourism routes, and the establishment/rehabilitation of several memorial houses. Within the cultural routes in Northern Transylvania, the following churches were selected for renovation and/or promotion (we listed them together with the type of activity supported by PNRR funds and the route they are part of):

- the Evangelic church in Herina (BN-II-m-A-01661), Galații Bistriței Commune, Bistrița-Năsăud County (promotion, the fortified churches route),
- the fortified Evangelic church in Jelna (BN-II-a-A-01663), Budacu de Jos Commune, Bistrița-Năsăud County (promotion, the fortified churches route),
- the wooden church “Sf. Prooroc Ilie” in Petriș (BN-II-m-A-01683), Cetate Commune, Bistrița-Năsăud County (promotion, wooden churches route),
- the wooden church “Sfinții Arhangheli Mihail și Gavril” in Beznea (BH-II-m-B-01141), Bratca Commune, Bihor County (promotion, wooden churches route),
- the wooden church in Tilecuș (BH-II-m-A-01217), Tileagd Commune, Bihor County (promotion, wooden churches route),
- the wooden church “Sf. Arhangheli Mihail și Gavril” in Margine (BH-II-m-A-01174), Abram Commune, Bihor County (promotion, wooden churches route),
- the wooden church “Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur” in Bunțești Commune, Bihor County (restoration and promotion, wooden churches route),
- the abbey in Sâniob, Bihor County (restoration and promotion, Saint Ladislau route),
- the wooden church from Leurda, located in the premises of Bistrița-Năsăud Museum, Bistrița, Bistrița-Năsăud County (promotion, wooden church route),
- the wooden church from Chiraleș located in the premises of „Romulus Vuia” Ethnographic Park in Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (promotion, wooden churches route),
- the wooden church “Sf. Mucenic Dimitrie” in Larga (MM-II-m-A-04594), Suciu de Sus Commune, Maramureș County (restoration and promotion, wooden churches route),
- the wooden church “Sfinții Arhangheli” in Rogoz (MM-II-m-A-04618), Târgu Lăpuș town, Maramureș County (promotion, wooden churches route).

The Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism ranks the cultural routes by their importance as local, regional, national, transnational and European. An inventory of the cultural routes in Romania is available on the Ministry’s website (we accessed it on October 3, 2022, at <https://turism.gov.ro/web/rute-cultural-turistice/>). A tourism route is called national if it connects landmarks from at least three different counties. Religious landmarks in the North-West Region are included in several national routes: *the cultural tourism route of the wooden churches in Romania, the route of the open-air ethnographic museums in*

Romania, The gates of Transylvania route (which includes landmarks in Braşov, Sibiu and Bistriţa-Năşăud counties), *the multi-ethnic heritage route in Romania*, the route of the “*Wooden Civilization*” in Romania (with tourist attractions located in Maramureş, Suceava and Neamţ counties), the route *Via Mariae*, the *UNESCO material heritage route in Romania* and the “*miracle-performing*” icons route. Several of these routes extend to the neighboring countries, as it is the case with the *cultural tourism route of the wooden churches in Romania and the Republic of Moldova* (a transnational cultural route) or are a part of European cultural routes such as the “*European Cemeteries Route*” (which includes the Central Cemetery in Cluj-Napoca) and *Via Mariae* pilgrimage route.

Regional cultural tourism routes must include landmarks from at least two municipalities. In Northern Transylvania, the following regional routes (that include religious sites) were certified:

- „*The route of the wooden churches in Bihor County*” was proposed in 2020 by a county public agency on tourism (the Agency for the Management of the Tourism Destinations in Bihor). It includes the wooden church in Gheghie, Auşeu Commune, the wooden churches in Beznea and Valea Crişului villages in Bratca Commune, the wooden church in Fânaţe, Câmpani Commune and Izbuc Monastery in Cărpinet Commune - <https://www.vacantelataro.ro/ruta-bisericilor-de-lemn-din-judetul-bihor>;
- „*The circuit of the wooden churches in Maramureş*” was proposed by the County Council of Maramureş (<https://www.visitmaramures.ro/ro/places/circuitul-bisericilor-de-lemn-din-maramures>) based on the project „*The circuit of the wooden churches in Northern Transylvania, Maramureş County*” financed by POR 2007-2013;
- The Romanian Orthodox Bishopric of Maramureş and Sătmar (by its Office for pilgrimages), in collaboration with the tourism agency Pelerinul Creştin/the Christian Pilgrim proposed two cultural tourism routes: „*The circuit of the wooden churches and monasteries in Maramureş and Satu Mare – the way to sanctity (Drumul spre Sfinţenie)*” including 101 religious wooden buildings in the two aforementioned counties (<https://www.directmm.ro/comunitate/drumul-spre-sfintenie-101-biserici-si-manastiri-din-maramures-si-satu-mare-au-fost-atestate-ca-ruta-culturala-turistica/>), and the route of the “*Miracle-performing icons in Maramureş and Satu Mare*” connecting monasteries such as Rohia, Moisei, Dragomireşti, Bixad, etc.
- „*The wooden civilization in the ecotourist destination Mara - Cosău - Creasta Cocoşului area in Maramureş County*” route proposed by the Association Ecologic Baia Mare (<https://www.ecomaramures.com/descopera-zona/2-2-civilizatia-lemnului/>) includes traditional households, wooden churches and traditional technical installations;

- „*The circuit of the wooden churches in Bistrița-Năsăud*” proposed by the Association „Turism în Bistrița-Năsăud” (<https://www.bnpoartatransilvaniei.ro/>) includes 21 wooden churches connected in two different routes: Bistrița – Petriș – Sărata – Budurleni – Silivașu de Câmpie – Sălcuța – Sângeorzu Nou – Bungard – Manic – Apatiu – Strugureni – Țigău – Arcalia – Bistrița, and Bistrița – Cormaia – Gersa – Runcu Salvei – Zagra – Suplai – Păltineasa – Dobricel (<https://www.complexulmuzealbn.ro/ro/publicatii/circuitul-biseriilor-de-lemn-din-bistrita-nasaud>);
- Two cultural tourism routes in Cluj County, described on the https://clujtourism.ro/_webpage (belonging to the County Council of Cluj): „*The ecumenic Cluj*” including 21 religious sites, most of them in urban areas – 11 religious sites in Cluj-Napoca, the Church “Sf. Cuvioasa Paraschiva” in Feleacu, four churches in Turda, Nicula Monastery, the Armenian-Catholic Cathedral in Gherla, the Reformed-Calvinist Church and the Synagogue in Dej, and Vad Monastery, and „*The route of the wooden churches in Cluj County*” including 12 churches in rural areas and “Sf. Nicolae” Church from Cizer, located within the “Romulus Vuia” Ethnographic Park in Cluj-Napoca;
- „*The route of the wooden churches in the Land of Lăpuș*” proposed by the Center for Information and Tourism Promotion in Târgu Lăpuș.

4. Conclusion

There is a large number of churches and other religious sites in Northern Transylvania which, in addition to their main role into the religious life of the local communities are also of interest for tourism, due to certain aesthetic characteristics and/or historical importance. At the same time, they are the elements of the cultural heritage with the largest territorial distribution - due to the presence of this kind of landmarks registered into the national List of Historical Monuments in all cities and almost in every commune. Also, the ethnic and religious diversity specific to Transylvania often resulted in the presence of different kind of places of worship in every city, town and, sometimes, even village. Due to the dispersed territorial distribution, their tourism exploitation may represent a way of redistributing the tourists arriving in large urban centers, diversifying the offer at the county level and increasing the length of the tourists’ stays in the region.

However, the importance for tourism of the religious sites in the region rarely exceeds the local and county level (there are several exceptions such as the eight wooden churches on the UNESCO World Heritage List in Maramureș

county, several churches in the cities of Oradea and Cluj-Napoca, a few well-known monasteries). That is why in terms of the national and regional tourism they are seen, most often, as complementary elements for other forms of tourism (urban and rural tourism). On the other hand, the counties pay more attention to the religious landmarks highlighting their tourism potential. Also, within the tourism development strategies and general development strategies of the counties in Northern Transylvania, the measures addressing the historical cultural heritage (and religious buildings) most frequently mention rehabilitation works and tourism promotion.

Most of the analyzed documents for this study identified the precarious state of many religious heritage buildings and the need for renovation and restoration works in order to be able to capitalize on them through tourism. This applies especially to the buildings that have lost their main function – they are no longer used for regular religious services due to a lack of practitioners (as is the case with many Evangelical churches or synagogues in the region), or because new, larger, more comfortable churches were built for the use of the rural communities where most heritage wooden churches are located.

Another frequently encountered approach for the tourism development of the religious sites is to include them into cultural or mixed routes. The promotion of these routes and of the landmarks along them may contribute to the greater visibility of the historical heritage in the region consisting of places of worship and to the tourism development of the rural area where many of them are located. Such positive results at local level were noticed in the case of the European cultural routes: preserving and promoting the built heritage and local traditions (especially if the routes include heritage elements located in peripheral areas), creating new sources of income for the local communities, offering learning opportunities for tourists, and, on a more general note, the orientation towards the sustainable tourism development (European Commission and Council of Europe, 2020).

The rehabilitation of religious buildings and their promotion both individually and/or in thematic routes was put into practice more consistently with the help of the European funds. By using them, several emblematic religious sites in the region were renovated or rehabilitated (the UNESCO churches in Maramureș, the Evangelical Church in Bistrița, the Church of St. Michael in Cluj-Napoca, etc.) and wooden churches in Maramureș and Sălaj counties and medieval churches in Satu Mare County and in the neighboring counties in Hungary were united in thematic routes. Thus, over 40 religious landmarks have been restored/rehabilitated and set up for tourism, and over 80 have benefited from tourism promotion through the REGIO and INTERREG Romania-Hungary programs, adding more value to the region's tourism potential.

Recently, the investments in tourism financed by the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience are oriented towards the tourism promotion of the national built heritage (including religious sites) in an integrated manner (in cultural routes) and creating package tours that harmoniously and sustainably value the potential of these objectives.

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