

Cultural landscape changes in the built environment at World Heritage Sites: Lessons from Bukovina, Romania

World Heritage Sites (WHSs) are among the most visited destinations due to their unique cultural and natural features. Their recognition by UNESCO as having 'outstanding universal value', while meant to help preserve their characteristics, also leads to increased visitation that may put them at risk. This study focuses on the changes in the cultural landscape as a result of tourism development at WHSs in the region of Bukovina, Romania. The paper offers a comprehensive picture by employing a mixed-method approach and analysing a wealth of data collected from key stakeholders involved in tourism development. The findings show that there is agreement among stakeholders with regard to the importance of preserving the cultural landscape of heritage destinations, with most believing that stricter measures should be put in place. However, the lack of cooperation between the key stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation could pose a threat for the sustainable development of tourism in the region. The study contributes to expanding our knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by heritage destinations in developing countries in Eastern Europe, in particular their struggle to keep up with the modern life style while preserving their cultural features and thus the authenticity of the area.

Keywords: World Heritage Site; destination management; cultural landscape; authenticity; Eastern Europe; Bukovina

1. Introduction

Culture has long been an essential component that adds to the attractiveness of a destination (González Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017), and contributes to the authenticity of an area (Timothy, 2011). To capitalize on this, cultural tourism has been proposed in many destinations, in particular in developing countries (Khanom et al., 2019), as a path to economic prosperity and better job

opportunities for locals. Researchers note however that this comes at a price, such as overcrowding, pollution, or compromising local traditions and customs (Ye et al., 2018). This situation is even more acute in heritage destinations, where diverging interests exist between those in favour of heritage preservation and those in favour of attracting more visitors to the area (Mariani & Guizzardi, 2020), which can lead to conflicts and the deterioration of heritage sites (Parga Dans & Alonso González, 2019). Zhang, Fyall and Zheng (2015, p. 112) group those conflicts around six main themes: resource-use; commercialisation-authenticity/modernity-tradition; cultural/ethnic; interest/collaboration; conceptual/values; and human rights-World Heritage conflicts.

The present study focuses on the commercialisation-authenticity/modernity-tradition conflicts in World Heritage Sites, and in particular on the changes in the cultural landscape as a result of the loss of traditional houses that are seen to contribute to the authenticity of the area. Although an important feature of heritage destinations, cultural landscapes of many such destinations are threatened by major socio-economic and environmental changes they are undergoing, in particular in South East Europe (Pătru-Stupariu et al., 2019; Subotic, 2020). The paper thus aims to contribute to the current limited body of knowledge on challenges faced by heritage tourism destinations from developing countries in Eastern Europe in preserving their cultural landscape.

The study site under investigation – Voroneț, is home to an important UNESCO World Heritage Site considered “one of the greatest cultural treasures of Romania” (Buzgar et al., 2014, p. 142). This is located in the region of Bukovina in north-eastern Romania, an area little researched by academics and with few studies published in the English speaking literature. The reason for

choosing this region is that experts have noted important changes in its cultural landscape, in particular in the built environment in the proximity of the UNESCO heritage sites (Nicu & Stoleriu, 2019; Ordinul Arhitecților din România – Filiala Nord Est & Asociația Heritage, 2010). To date however, there are no studies looking at the views of different stakeholders, whether they are aware of the changes, and their views on the topic. The present study aims to fill this gap by collecting and analysing the views of the key stakeholders in tourism (i.e. local community, visitors, public authorities, tourism associations and tourism businesses) on the changes in the built environment, in one of the most well-known World Heritage Sites in the region of Bukovina. A good understanding of the different views expressed by the main stakeholders in heritage destinations on the importance of cultural landscapes and the challenges in its preservation would help tourism managers to set appropriate measures to better manage these destinations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Heritage tourism and World Heritage Sites

Heritage tourism is a popular choice among visitors and an area of research that has attracted the attention of researchers for over three decades (Adie et al., 2018; Fyall & Garrod, 1998; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Hall & McArthur, 1993; Heeley, 1989; Mariani & Guizzardi, 2020; Millar, 1989; Nuryanti, 1996; Park et al., 2019; Poria et al., 2003). Heritage is seen as one of the main tourism drivers for many regions, helping destinations to differentiate between one another in a very competitive environment. Although the literature on this form of tourism has expanded rapidly since the initial debates in the late '80s (Calver & Page,

2013), Cohen and Cohen (2012) include the topic among the current issues deserving further attention from researchers, in particular in the context of developing countries (Zhang et al., 2015).

The present study responds to this call by investigating the challenges faced by an important heritage destination in Eastern Europe, a region rich in cultural heritage that has been little researched (Nared & Bole, 2020). This part of Europe presents specific characteristics due to its communist past and the transition process that these countries have been going through over the past decades (South East European Heritage, 2011). The region was characterised for centuries by a fluidity of state borders, with frequent changes in the political systems, delayed industrialisation and modernisation, experiencing the communist regime and centrally planned economies, and going through important political and economic transformations after the 1989 anti-communist uprisings (see Hall, 2000; Murzyn, 2008; Young & Kaczmarek, 2008). The heritage in this part of Europe thus “possesses its own unique features, stemming from the region’s geographical location, its peculiar, turbulent history as well as ethnic and religious diversity” (Murzyn, 2008, p. 315).

According to Lu, Chi and Liu (2015, p. 85), heritage tourism “refers to travels undertaken with the intention to experience the places, activities, and artefacts that reflect the cultural history and stories in an authentic manner”. Such travels are among the most popular tourist activities, making heritage tourism one of the fastest growing niche markets within tourism (Parga Dans & Alonso González, 2019). This type of tourism allows visitors to directly experience the tangible assets of a destination such as the landscape and architecture, as well as the intangible legacies such as the history, folklore and

traditions, both of which are important resources for heritage tourism (Yi et al., 2017; Yu & Xu, 2019).

Some of the most important heritage destinations in the world are designated by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites, due to their outstanding international importance (Parga Dans & Alonso González, 2019). These sites are among the most visited places, as their inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List confers recognition (Peira et al., 2018) and is a symbol of quality, authenticity (González Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017) or even branding (Timothy, 2011) for these destinations. Such an association is seen as desirable, in particular in developing countries, as the WHS brand tends to be recognised easily and attracts international visitors (Adie et al., 2018).

The designation of a site as a WHS, while helping to “preserve its historical and artistic inheritance” (González Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017, p. 111), also leads to increased visitation from both domestic and international tourists looking for authentic experiences. As a result, Della Lucia and Franch (2017, p. 1759) call the relationship between World Heritage Sites and tourism “controversial” as it brings both positive impacts – image, visibility, job creation and improved infrastructure, but also negative impacts such as changes in the original architecture, over-commercialization of local culture, loss of authenticity or biased interpretation of these sites (Fyall & Garrod, 1998; Lu et al., 2015; Waitt, 2000).

Li (2003, p. 252) also notes the existence of “inherent contradictions” between conservation aims and the changes brought by tourism development in heritage destinations, which leads to a number of conflicts. Among these, the commercialisation-authenticity / modernity-tradition conflicts are particularly

relevant for WHSs, as their natural and cultural resources are often subject to commercialisation and transformation as a result of the desire to accommodate an increasing number of international visitors (Zhang et al., 2015).

Many researchers highlight unsustainable practices encountered in various heritage destinations and WHSs where policy makers tend to focus on the economic benefits associated with tourism development, rather than on protecting and preserving the features that brought visitors in the first place (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Lu et al., 2015; Mariani & Guizzardi, 2020). Calver and Page (2013), for example, point out the inherent tensions faced by managers of UK heritage sites who try to balance conservation efforts with the search for authenticity, accessibility, and offering a good visitor experience. Similar challenges are discussed by other authors (Della Lucia & Franch, 2017; du Cros, 2001; Garrod & Fyall, 2000) who emphasize the importance of sustainable development of tourism in heritage destinations, which requires wider stakeholder participation (Landorf, 2009).

2.2 Authenticity in heritage sites

Authenticity is an important attribute of heritage destinations (Fu, 2019; Park et al., 2019), being considered “an essential driving force that motivates tourists to travel to distant places and times” (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010, p. 652) and a “critical component of a meaningful experience” (Lu et al., 2015, pp. 86–88).

Authenticity is even more important in World Heritage Sites, being one of the considerations taken into account when a place is conferred such a status. The concept was initially used in connection with museums and art exhibitions (Zhou et al., 2018) to help understand the perception of visitors. Authenticity is described by Ram, Björk and Weidenfeld (2016, p. 111) as “being real, reliable,

trustworthy, original, first hand, true in substance, and prototypical". For the purpose of this study, authenticity is defined as "those characteristics that most truthfully reflect and embody the cultural heritage values of a place" (Drury & McPherson, 2008, p. 71).

As with other complex concepts, various authors offer different views, meanings and approaches on authenticity (Ye et al., 2018), with some questioning its practicality (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). A significant contribution to the development of this concept was made by Wang (1999), who looked at the meaning of authenticity and identified three different perspectives – objective authenticity, constructive authenticity and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to the genuineness of objects such as historic buildings, traditional costumes, or cultural artefacts, while existential and constructive authenticity are both subjective concepts related to the visitors' experience. Existential authenticity "involves internal fulfilment" (Park et al., 2019, p. 101), where "personal or intersubjective feelings [are] activated by tourist experiences" (Khanom et al., 2019, p. 3). On the other hand, constructive authenticity refers to something that receives the social recognition as authentic – "things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers" (Wang, 1999, p. 352).

Over the past years tourism scholars have made progress in clarifying the concept and discussing its applicability. Lu et al. (2015), for example, look at historic districts in China and conclude that authenticity is an important factor that positively influences destination image and tourist satisfaction. Ram et al. (2016) focus on perceived authenticity and place attachment in major visitor

attractions, and find a positive correlation between the two. Mura (2015) discusses the perception of authenticity in the Malaysian homestay experience and finds that authenticity plays an important role. This list can be expanded further with a number of other recent studies (Farrelly et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2018) that discuss the validity and applicability of the authenticity concept in different settings.

Previous research found that tourists relate the authenticity of heritage sites to either objective authenticity – toured objects such as buildings and souvenirs (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), or to existential experiences that enable them to get personally involved in the daily life of visited communities. While acknowledging the significance of both objective and existential authenticity, the present paper looks at the importance of preserving the built environment (i.e. traditional houses, which contribute to the authenticity of an area) for the sustainable development of tourism in heritage destinations.

2.3 Cultural landscape and the built environment

According to Jones (2003, p. 21), cultural landscape was first introduced as an academic concept in the late 19th century by Friedrich Ratzel. The term became more widely known in the 1990s, when a number of international organisations such as UNESCO's World Heritage Committee adopted it as a conservation category. Since then, the concept has been embraced by an increasing number of researchers from different disciplines, including geographers, ethnologists, and environmentalists.

The concept refers to the interrelation between landscape, nature, human culture and the people that populate a specific region, offering a way to interpret the “continually evolving human-modified environment” (O'Hare, 1997,

p. 34). Academics from different disciplines tend however to have different views on cultural landscape and its characteristics, according to the emphasis in their field, e.g. geographers tend to focus on land use, architects and archaeologists on the built environment, historians on the historical development of the area, while biologists and landscape ecologists on ecosystems and vegetation (Arntzen, 2003, p. 27).

In a tourism context, Buckley, Ollenburg and Zhong (2008, p. 48) describe cultural landscape as “an area where the landforms have been created by human culture as well as by nature”, “a place where the setting would not look the same without the culture, and the latter would not look the same without the landscape”. The authors note that cultural landscape is often used in relation to World Heritage Sites, playing an important role in the global tourism industry and deserving further investigation from academics. While emphasising the attractiveness of cultural landscapes to visitors, Knudsen, Soper and Metro-Roland (2007) point out that these landscapes are being changed as a result of the tourism activities. They argue that cultural landscapes are “highly reflexive and multifaceted” and open to various interpretations that are created, recreated and contested over the years (Knudsen et al., 2007, p. 229). Other authors highlight the dynamic interrelationship between cultural landscape and the local communities, as they both constantly evolve (Pătru-Stupariu et al., 2019). As a result, researchers have looked at the importance of preserving cultural landscapes, seen to be something original that helps communities and destinations to differentiate from other regions (Bamert et al., 2016, p. 127), and that help people maintain a sense of identity (Arntzen, 2003, p. 33).

With regard to the built environment, Bamert et al. (2016) found disagreements in the attitudes of local people towards maintaining the built heritage, which were attributed to the socio-cultural context of the studied areas. The authors therefore call for context-specific solutions when deciding whether to preserve the buildings in their integrity (as a museum) or to allow some sort of changes in order to give them new functions (e.g. holiday houses). Consequently, they advocate for clear regulations to ensure that traditional elements are kept alive, but also for some flexibility when deemed necessary.

3. Methods

3.1 Study site and context

The study area is located in Bukovina, Suceava County, a region in the North-East of Romania considered to be one of the most important destinations for heritage and religious tourism in the country. The region is well-known for its customs and traditions, beautiful landscapes, and for the medieval monasteries famous for their painted exterior walls that in 1993 were included among the UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Primăria Gura Humorului, 2011). One of the most famous of these monasteries is found in Voroneț (Nicu & Stoleriu, 2019), located in a beautiful rural landscape, by a stream that runs along the main village road leading to the town centre (see Fig. 1 for a physical map of Voroneț).

The cultural landscape of Voroneț thus includes the following key elements [based on the works of Knudsen et al. (2007) and O'Hare (1997)]:

- Natural environment: hills covered by forests; village character, with an imprint of the agricultural activity;

- Built elements: Voroneț Monastery or the “Sistine Chapel of Eastern Europe” as some call it (Nicu & Stoleriu, 2019, p. 4); traditional houses that appeal through their architectural elements specific to the region;
- Traditions: very well kept traditional clothes, dances, and customs.

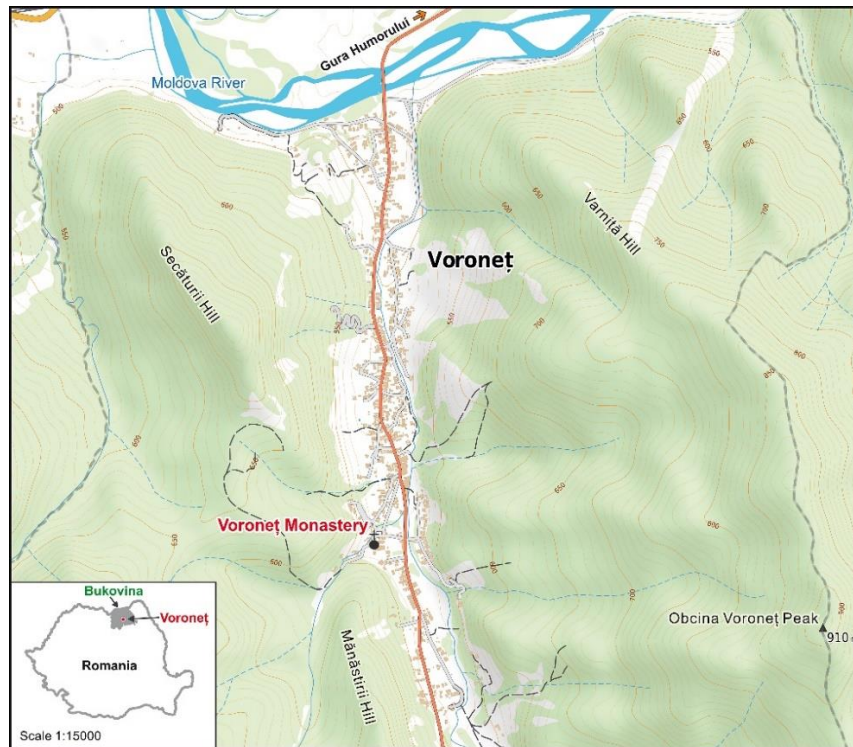


Fig. 1. Physical Map of Voroneț (authors' own work)

In terms of the volume of tourism in the region, the latest official data available shows that in 2019 Bukovina attracted a total of 450,820 tourists, of which 88% were domestic visitors and the remaining 12% were international visitors (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2020). The total number of visitors to the region is much higher when also including day visitors, and it has been increasing year on year, with the figures from 2019 showing an increase of almost 17% when compared to 2017 and of about 85% when compared to 2013 (Direcția Județeană de Statistică Suceava, 2018). However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors for 2020 was significantly lower

than in previous years, especially since the region was in lockdown for nearly two months during April and May. According to the latest data, the number of visitors to the region saw a severe drop of 64.3% in March 2020, when compared to the figures from the previous year (StiriSuceava, 2020), but started to pick up again over the summer months as restrictions were gradually lifted.

With regard to the management of the destination, this is shared by the Suceava County Council Tourism Department and the Bukovina Tourism Association, a professional association created in 2001 at the initiative of a number of stakeholders (including the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Suceava County, the Ministry of Tourism, the local public administration and local travel agents). The Bukovina Tourism Association started off as a Destination Marketing Organisation focusing on promoting Bukovina, slowly evolving over the years into a Destination Management Organisation (Chaşovschi, 2019).

There is limited research on tourism development in Bukovina, with most of it published in Romanian and focusing mainly on the region's potential as a tourist destination. The work produced by the Institution of Romanian Architects – North East Branch, together with the Heritage Association (Ordinul Arhitecţilor din România – Filiala Nord Est & Asociaţia Heritage, 2010) is among a handful of studies that discuss tourism development in Bukovina, focusing on the changes in the built environment and the loss of traditional houses in the region. When looking at the state of traditional houses in Bukovina, Vicol (2013) points out that these are currently either in a bad state or are being renovated and modified without keeping to the local architecture. More recently, Nicu and Stoleriu (2019) studied land use changes in Bukovina and found that the new

houses built in the region are rarely aligned with the traditional architectural style. Yet, no studies to date have consulted the key stakeholders in the destination on this topic, and no papers could be found that look specifically at Voroneţ, which is a significant omission considering that Voroneţ is one of the key WHS attractions in the country.

For a better understanding of the political context of the Bukovina region and the challenges faced over the past decades, a number of events that had implications for heritage destinations in the region need to be mentioned. During the communist regime, in an effort to transform Romania into an industrialised urban society, traditional heritage in rural areas tended to be replaced by new urban architecture, and traditional materials substituted with industrial alternatives (Greceanu, 2001). Ten years after the 1989 Revolution, there was still a lack of legislative frameworks to protect the country's heritage (Machat, 2000). Although Romania had signed the World Heritage Convention since 1990, it was not until 2000 that a decree was promoted by the Ministry of Culture to protect and manage WHSs, and almost a decade later (in 2009) the National Heritage Institute of Romania was created. From the 1990s through to 2019, the country experienced a process of rapid changes and transformation, with no less than 28 different Ministers of Culture having been appointed (Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends, 2019), and a Cultural Heritage Code yet to be adopted.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The methodology adopted consists of a mixed method strategy, which allows the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data (Zhou et al., 2018) to help better understand the views of different stakeholders on the topic

at hand. The mixed method approach is advocated “as an appropriate way forward when both types of data are needed” to analyse contemporary issues in tourism (Hewlett & Brown, 2018, p. 237), as it combines the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach thus facilitated the collection of key primary data from the main stakeholders in Voroneţ, a much needed perspective (Nistor, 2018) since no prior studies in the region consulted these groups to offer a comprehensive view on the topic.

As part of the quantitative approach, a street intercept survey (Veal, 2017) was conducted with visitors and face to face questionnaires with locals using convenience sampling (Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2018), while email questionnaires were applied to travel agents using purposeful sampling – agents that have Bukovina in their portfolio were contacted (see Table 1 for a summary of the research instruments adopted for the study; data collected in 2018). Both closed-ended and open-ended questions were used in all three sets of questionnaires, together with screening questions when necessary.

Table 1. Research instruments

Stakeholder	Instrument	Focus on
Visitors	Street intercept survey	The role played by traditional houses in their visit
Locals	Face-to-face questionnaire (convenience sampling)	Importance attached to preserving traditional houses
Travel agents	Email questionnaire (purposeful sampling)	Whether the changes in the cultural landscape affects the attractiveness of the area
Local & regional authorities Professional organisations Tourism industry	Semi-structured interview (purposeful sampling)	Whether the preservation of traditional houses should be a priority and measures (to be) taken towards this

The survey conducted with Voroneț visitors took place during week days as well as weekends in order to capture views from a larger variety of subjects. The demographic questions included in the survey were guided by the work of Adie and Hall (2017), while the rest of the questions were guided by the findings of Șerbescu (2012) and look at what attracted the respondents to Voroneț, their length of stay, chosen type of accommodation (traditional, non-traditional) and what motivated their choices. It thus helps understand the characteristics of visitors attracted by the heritage site in question, and whether traditional houses play a significant part in their experience.

The questionnaires completed by locals were applied mainly during weekends, as they were most likely to be busy with their work engagements during the week. The questions were developed based on Nared's (2014) work on the importance of considering the views of local communities in heritage sites, on Corsale and Iorio's (2014) findings that local communities may not perceive heritage as other stakeholders do, and on Șerbescu's (2012) work on traditional houses. The questions looked mainly at the importance attached by respondents to preserving the local characteristics of the area by preserving traditional houses. The responses referring to traditional houses were then cross-checked against the notes taken by those conducting the questionnaires, who had been instructed in advance how to recognize a traditional house.

A total of 151 valid questionnaires were completed with visitors (two incomplete questionnaires were discarded), 50 valid questionnaires with locals from a total of 266 existing households in Voroneț (two incomplete questionnaires were discarded), and 16 valid questionnaires with travel agents (four incomplete questionnaires were discarded). The responses to the survey

conducted with visitors and locals were entered into an EXCEL spreadsheet, then imported into SPSS to help analyse the data and compile descriptive statistics (Adie & Hall, 2017). The questionnaires completed by travel agents were coded manually, identifying patterns which were then analysed.

For the qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of key organisations involved in tourism development in Voroneţ (see Fig. 2 for the main stakeholders). The interviews aimed to gather their opinion on whether the preservation of traditional houses is encouraged by policy makers, and what measures, if any, should be promoted for the preservation of the cultural landscape and for a harmonious development of the built environment in the region. The questions included were guided by the works of Airinei Vasile (2011), Nared (2014) and Şerbescu (2012).

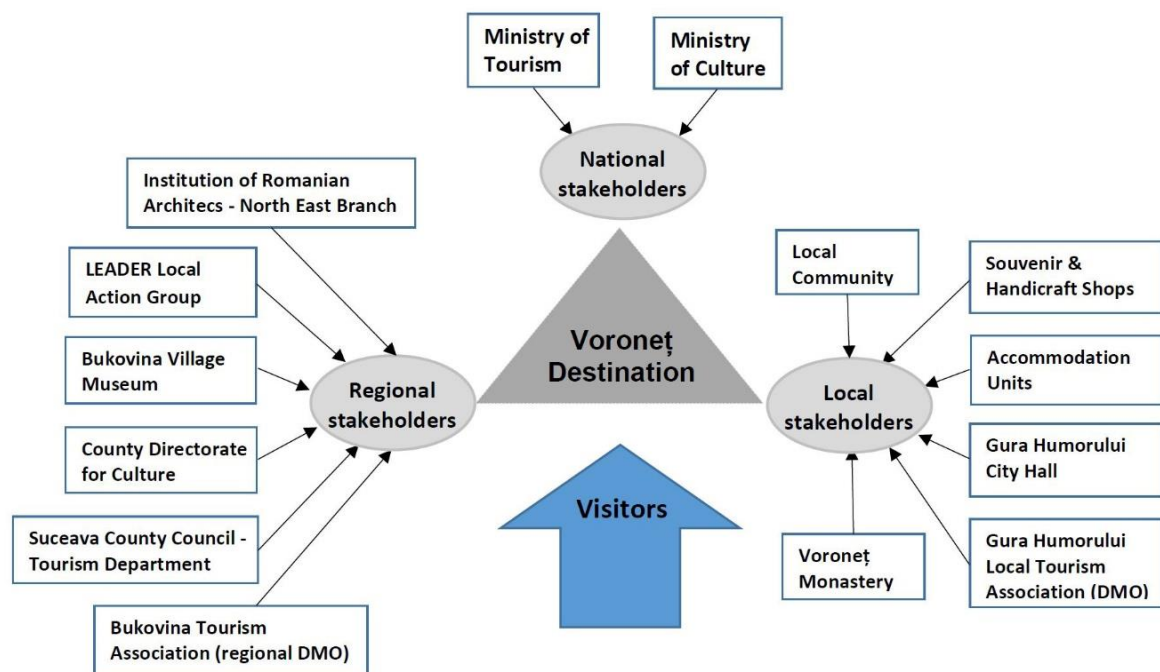


Fig. 2. Key stakeholders involved in tourism development in Voroneţ

Nine representatives of different organisations participated in the research: four representatives from the local and regional Government, three managers of organisations involved in tourism development in the region, and two owners of accommodation units. Purposeful sampling was used when selecting the possible subjects, as some participants were considered to be more knowledgeable about the topic and their contribution to the study was therefore deemed more important (Veal, 2017). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, manually coded by grouping the relevant information about the topic under certain themes (Zhang et al., 2015) and then analysed. Part of the coding was carried out when preparing the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews (Altinay et al., 2015), based on the literature review conducted on the studied topic.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaires with visitors

4.1.1 Demographic profile of respondents

Looking at the profile of respondents (see Table 2), the split between genders is roughly 60% women and 40% men, with most of the respondents in the 24 - 39 (34%) and 40 - 55 (29%) age groups. These findings support previous studies by Remoaldo, Vareiro, Ribeiro and Santos (2014), and King and Prideaux (2010) who found that women are slightly more likely to visit World Heritage Sites and that the age of most visitors is in the range of 25 to 54 years old. However, the findings differ from those of Adie and Hall (2017), who looked at three geographically-diverse World Heritage Sites and reported mixed results for both gender and age.

Table 2. Sample profile.

Variables		Frequency	%	Valid %
Gender	Male	59	39.1	39.3
	Female	91	60.3	60.7
	Missing	1	0.7	
Age	18 – 23	16	10.6	10.6
	24 – 39	52	34.4	34.4
	40 – 55	44	29.1	29.1
	56 or above	39	25.8	25.8
Occupation	Student	11	7.3	7.6
	Employee	99	65.6	68.8
	Retired	28	18.5	19.4
	Other	6	4.0	4.2
	Missing	7	4.6	
County of residence	County of Suceava	38	25.2	26.8
	Moldova region (excluding Suceava)	36	23.8	25.4
	Bucharest	12	7.9	8.5
	Other regions in Romania	46	30.5	32.4
	Other European countries	10	6.6	7.0
	Missing	9	6.0	
	Visiting Voroneț	1 st time	73	48.3
Repeat	77	51.0	51.3	
Missing	1	0.7		
Reason for visit	Leisure	115	76.2	76.2
	VFR	10	6.6	6.6
	Business	3	2.0	2.0
	In transit	14	9.3	9.3
	Other	9	6.0	6.0
Length of stay	1 – 3 hours	78	51.7	51.7
	3 – 5 hours	23	15.2	15.2
	1 day	12	7.9	7.9
	> 1 day	38	25.2	25.2

In terms of their occupation, the majority of respondents stated they were employed (69%), followed by retired (19%), and other occupations (12%). Over half of the visitors participating in the study (52%) were from the region of Moldova, which includes Bukovina and comprises seven counties, with almost

half of them from the County of Suceava alone, where Voroneț is located. The remainder of the visitors came from other regions in Romania, including 8.5% from the capital, Bucharest, while 7% were international visitors – all from European countries. While the very strong presence of domestic tourism is in line with previous findings in WHSs in the United States for example, it also contrasts the findings from other heritage destinations, such as a WHS in Morocco (Adie & Hall, 2017). In the case of Romania, this may be attributed to the low percentage of international tourists visiting the country in general, which in 2019 represented 20% of the total number of visitors (Statista, 2020), but also to the religious and historic significance of the site for Romanians (Primăria Gura Humorului, 2011).

An aspect worth noting is that about half of the respondents (51%) were repeat visitors. This may be explained by the fact that many visitors are from the region itself, with Voroneț being an important cultural and religious attraction for the area. The large majority of visitors who took part in the study came for leisure (76%), while a far smaller proportion were either in transit (9%), visiting friends and relatives (7%), or on business (2%).

4.1.2 Reasons why visitors come to Voroneț and how long they stay

Looking at the pull factors that attracted visitors to Voroneț, the large majority of respondents noted the painted monastery, with 91% of participants choosing it as their first option. Other characteristics of the area that drew visitors to the destination were the natural landscape (with 54% of respondents selecting it as their second option), peace and quiet (with 64% of participants noting it as their third option), followed by the local culture, architecture and hospitality.

To encapsulate as well as possible the most memorable experiences from their visit, an open-ended question was used to allow the respondents to freely express their opinion. The majority of participants mentioned in their answers the monastery and/or the 'blue' of Voroneț – which the monastery is famous for (62%), followed by the natural landscape (26%), the culture, traditions and local architecture (14%), while a smaller number mentioned peace and quiet. The results of this question resemble to some extent those from the previous question regarding the reasons for choosing the destination, which may indicate that the visitors' expectations were met. Worth noting is that while peace and quiet was the third most popular reason for the participants to visit the area and the local culture was the fourth, the order of the two changed when looking at the most memorable experience. It would appear therefore that visitors were impressed more by the local culture, rather than the tranquillity of the destination.

The next aspect considered in the survey is how much time the study participants spent in Voroneț. More than half of the respondents (52%) said they stayed in the destination between one to three hours, while 15% stayed between three to five hours and nearly 8% for one day (see Table 2). As such, three quarters of the total number of visitors questioned were day visitors, while only a quarter stayed in Voroneț for more than a day. These figures seem to be in line with the official statistics regarding the length of stay in the region, which stands at 1.7 days for the town of Gura Humorului where Voroneț is located (Direcția Județeană de Statistică Suceava, 2018).

4.1.3 Accommodation preferences: traditional vs. modern houses

Regarding the architectural style of the chosen accommodation units, over half

of the respondents (53%) stayed in traditional houses, almost a quarter (23%) chose new buildings that followed the traditional style, nearly a fifth (19%) chose new buildings with a modern style, while the rest selected the not applicable (N/A) option. By traditional houses (see Fig. 3.a & b) we refer to old houses that were fully or partially adapted for receiving visitors; new buildings in traditional style are those new houses that follow the traditional elements of the area (see Fig. 3.c); while the new buildings with a modern style are those that do not follow the local architecture of traditional houses in the area (see Fig. 3.d). When asked to choose between traditional and modern style accommodation with the same utilities and level of comfort, the majority of respondents (79%) preferred accommodation units in traditional style.



Fig. 3. Traditional vs Modern Buildings (photos taken by the authors)

As for the reasons for choosing a certain type of accommodation (open-ended

question), those staying in traditional houses valued the local traditions and the authenticity of the area, while those choosing new buildings did so for the comfort offered by new properties that usually provide better facilities. For those staying in new buildings but with a traditional style, both comfort and local architecture played an important role in their choice. Other factors considered by respondents when choosing a certain type of accommodation were: recommendation from friends, price, facilities, design, location, availability of rooms, and the curiosity to try something new.

4.2 Questionnaires with locals

Before trying to understand the opinion of respondents regarding the importance of preserving the characteristics of the area by preserving traditional houses, an overview of the characteristics of their own house is needed. Close to half of the houses considered (44%) are traditional houses with no changes in terms of style or chromatics, a third (34%) are traditional houses with minor changes such as changes to the windows or the roof, about 8% are traditional houses that present major changes such as new parts added to the house, new levels or exterior walls painted in bright colours, and 14% are new houses built in a modern style after the 1990s.

The next aspect looked at is whether local people deem important the preservation of the area's characteristics by protecting traditional houses. The vast majority of respondents (90%) see it as important or very important, with over half of the participants (52%) considering it very important. Only 10% of the locals questioned see the preservation of local houses to be less important, or not important at all. The reasons why the preservation of traditional houses is considered important by locals can be grouped under the following three main

themes. The majority of respondents attribute sentimental value to traditional houses, which are passed on over the years from one generation to another. About a quarter of respondents consider traditional houses to be prettier than the new ones – as one respondent commented, ‘old is beautiful’; while a few respondents consider such houses important for visitors to see something traditional.

4.3 Survey with travel agents

The questionnaire applied to travel agents looked at whether they noticed any changes in the cultural landscape of the region that impacted the visitor experience. These questions refer to Bukovina as a destination and not specifically to Voroneț, as it was observed that most travel agents offer packages to Bukovina that include only a short visit to Voroneț.

All travel agents that took part in this study offered trips or packages to Bukovina, with some respondents pointing out that most of their cultural tours include Bukovina as this is a key tourist area in Romania. As one of the respondents emphasise,

“The region offers a still well-preserved cultural and natural landscape and this makes it one of the most authentic regions in Romania. [...] the traditional houses tell us stories about local customs, the rural life of the past, and to some extent that of the present.” (Respondent A20)

Another aspect considered is whether the representatives of the travel agents contacted had recently visited Bukovina and if so, whether they noticed any changes that may affect the visitor experience in the destination. All representatives participating in the study responded that they visited the region recently, with 90% of them noticing changes in the cultural landscape. The

changes identified by the respondents were both positive and negative, however the negative changes exceed by far the positives. The positive changes include the larger number of traditional festivals and cultural events, more accommodation facilities, better infrastructure, and the restoration of a number of tourist attractions. The negative changes can be grouped under five main themes that are discussed below: the built environment, local products and souvenirs, infrastructure, littering, and regulations.

In terms of the built environment, a majority of respondents (72%) mention discrepancies between new or renovated buildings and the local traditional architectural style, with a negative impact on the cultural landscape. Other respondents point to the excessive development in the area and the presence of unfinished building work making for unpleasant views. Over a quarter of respondents complain about the inappropriate, bright colours used by locals when renovating or building new houses, with some respondents emphasizing that this threatens the authenticity of the area. These aspects are very well captured in the comments made by one of the study participants:

“Unfortunately, these changes become visible “to the naked eye” from year on year. I refer in particular to the development of some new buildings (houses, B&Bs) with an architecture, colour palette that does not fit within the local cultural landscape. Truly concerning is that these new buildings often appear in place of traditional houses. We thus see the authenticity disappear, which is or should be part of the local identity.” (Respondent A14)

The presence of too many souvenir stalls and shops in the proximity of the painted monasteries is another negative aspect, seen by participants to give a feel of over commercialisation. In addition, respondents note that only very few

local products are available to purchase on those premises, while many souvenirs on display are in fact imported cheap mass produced items. As souvenirs embody the uniqueness of a local culture and represent destinations, the visitors' authentic experience is likely to be altered by these commodified objects (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019). Other respondents note the lack of an appropriate infrastructure, littering, and a lack of planning regulations to help preserve the traditional characteristics of the local area.

An aspect worth noting is that although the question addressed to the travel agents referred to the region of Bukovina as a whole, almost half of the respondents gave examples from Voroneț – our study area, to emphasize the negative changes that took place over the years in the region. An eloquent example is given below:

“Unfortunately, the detrimental changes to the cultural landscape of Bukovina are found particularly in the proximity of valuable tourist attractions, such as the painted monasteries. The best example could be that of Voroneț Monastery, a UNSECO heritage site, where the area in its immediate vicinity should be under some special regulations. By a lack of education of the owners of the local houses, villas or B&Bs, coupled with the indifference of local authorities but also the lack of reaction from representatives of the monastery, the Voroneț region has suffered terrible transformations.” (Respondent A18)

4.4 Interviews with other stakeholders

4.4.1 Tourism development strategy and planning regulations

Looking at the responses received from different organisations that took part in the study, there are variations in terms of their awareness of policy documents guiding tourism development in Voroneț. While the interviewed representatives

of local and regional government note that the development of tourism is guided by the Sustainable Development Strategy of Gura Humorului (Primăria Gura Humorului, 2011), of which Voroneț is part of, representatives of non-governmental organisations and the private sector are not aware of any policy documents that cover tourism. Furthermore, one representative of local government mentions that meetings and focus groups were organised with different stakeholders to establish a set of priorities for tourism development in the area. It is therefore surprising that representatives of organisations involved in tourism development in the region are not aware of such priorities, and they seem to not have been consulted.

When asked whether there are any planning regulations that guide new developments (e.g. houses, B&Bs), the representatives of public organisations confirm the existence of such criteria that all new buildings should adhere to. These cover aspects including the number of levels, the colour of roofs and exterior walls, the construction materials to be used, and the shape and size of new buildings. Some respondents emphasise that these rules should be even more strictly applied in protected areas and near heritage sites like Voroneț monastery. This is however not the case, as pointed out by Nicu and Stoleriu (2019), who note that the planning legislation is not applied as it should by the policy makers in the Bukovina region.

The representatives of non-governmental organisations, on the other hand, are not sure whether such criteria exist at all, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

“I am not certain, but considering how the cultural landscape in the county looks like, I do not think there is a set of criteria established and therefore they are not observed.” (Interviewee R4)

4.4.2 Preservation of traditional houses

One of the threats faced by the Bukovina region, as noted in the Sustainable Development Strategy of Gura Humorului (Primăria Gura Humorului, 2011) and highlighted in previous research (Chaşovschi, 2016; Nicu & Stoleriu, 2019), is the loss of its cultural and architectural identity. Therefore, the next aspect considered is whether the preservation of the local culture and traditional houses is encouraged by the local government. The responses received from representatives of the public authorities and those of non-governmental organisations are again mixed or even contradictory. Respondents in the first group believe this to be a priority for the local and regional government and highlight a number of initiatives that encourage the preservation of local traditions, such as creating an architectural guide on conforming to the local style; a published monography titled “The Traditional Architecture of Bukovina”; and organising public exhibitions with models of traditional houses to raise awareness and educate people on the importance of preserving the authenticity of the area.

One policy maker, however, notes that while the preservation of local architecture should be a priority for the public authorities, unfortunately that is not the case. Similarly, the representatives of non-governmental organisations interviewed also responded ‘no’ or ‘to a lesser extent’, noting that usually non-governmental organisations and professional associations are the ones that promote initiatives for the preservation of local architecture. Otherwise,

“Every owner is free to choose the architectural style they wish, without taking into account the specific of the area.” (Interviewee R2)

Looking at the potential reasons for the chaotic development of rural areas in

the region of Bukovina, part of the respondents (mainly representatives of non-governmental organisations) point to the lack of guidance and regulations promoted by local authorities, while others (mainly representatives of public organisation) blame the lack of qualified architects at local level so those who approve the plans do not have the knowledge and qualification needed to make informed decisions.

4.4.3 What needs to be done for the preservation of the cultural heritage and local architecture

The last question asked the participants to identify any measures that should be promoted for the preservation of local traditions and the local architectural style.

A summary of the measures noted by participants is included below:

- More specific criteria included in the regional and local urban planning provisions that should not be open to interpretation;
- A stricter / better application of the legislation and urban planning policies established by the local authorities;
- The approval of new tourist accommodation units should be moved under the responsibility of local authorities and not the Ministry of Tourism, as is currently the case;
- Regulate souvenir shops in the proximity of the main attractions to include more traditional products;
- Educate local people on the importance of cultural heritage;
- Involve local communities in the decision making process with regard to the preservation of the cultural heritage.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The empirical data collected and analysed in this study contributes to expanding our knowledge and understanding on the modernity-tradition conflict in heritage destinations (Zhang et al., 2015), and in particular on challenges faced by such destinations in developing countries in preserving their cultural landscape. One of the strengths of this research is the wealth of data collected from the key stakeholders involved in tourism development (i.e. visitors, locals, local and regional government, professional organisations, and industry), the analysis of which offers a comprehensive picture of the studied area.

What makes this study more interesting is its location in Easter Europe, a little studied region ruled by communist regimes until the late 1980s, and which over the past three decades has experienced a protracted transition towards democracy (Banaszkiewicz et al., 2017). According to Nared and Bole (2020, p. 1), the region “is still struggling with its own development path and transition to a post-socialist [...] economic era”. This offers a different context when compared to the heritage sites located in Western countries (Bucurescu, 2015; Rampley, 2012), which so far have attracted most of the attention from researchers (Zhang et al., 2015).

In this part of Europe heritage has often played a role in redefining, constructing or enhancing national identity (Rampley, 2012), with major changes in the way heritage was seen and managed post-1989, as opposed to during the communist regimes. If through the communist era heritage was promoted as a unified ‘monocultural’ socialist vision with a ‘universal’ style-less socialist modernism (Murzyn, 2008), in the post-communist era the emphasis changed towards the local and regional cultural heritage that contributes to the

local identity. However, new challenges were encountered in finding a balance between the enthusiasm for embracing free-market rules and commercialisation of heritage sites for economic benefits, and the need to adopt and implement legal frameworks to protect and conserve those resources.

This transformation process was not an easy one for Romania and had implications for heritage destinations in the country that over the years suffered damage and destruction (Nistor, 2018). For many years, there was a lack of legislation and governmental frameworks to help protect heritage sites and promote education and awareness among key stakeholders, which led in some cases to irreversible damage to those sites (Machet, 2000).

This is the first study that consulted the main stakeholders in Bukovina, a key heritage destination in Romania, to understand their views on the importance of the cultural landscape that contributes to the authenticity of the area, and identify the challenges faced by these destinations. The factors found to contribute to the deterioration of heritage sites include ambiguous legislation, contradictory approaches, lack of political initiatives, lack of resources and carelessness shown by those involved. Part of these factors were identified in previous studies that looked at heritage or cultural tourism in Romania (Airinei Vasile, 2011; Nistor, 2018), which shows that they are not particular to Bukovina, but are part of a common theme that can be seen in heritage sites in the country.

Cultural landscape, and in particular the traditional houses, were considered by all stakeholders to be an important feature that significantly contributes to the attractiveness of heritage sites in Bukovina. The authenticity of traditional houses and the beauty of villages have long been praised by

Romanian philosophers and writers (Blaga, 1937; Eliade, 1936). Over the past decades, however, rural areas in Romania have seen a radical transformation, in particular after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 (Chaşovschi, 2016). Most of the people in Bucovina used to work in agriculture but many of them have now opened their houses to visitors (Ordinul Arhitecților din România – Filiala Nord Est & Asociația Heritage, 2010). As a result, the functionality of traditional houses has changed according to the new way of living (Șerbescu, 2012). Part of the locals adapted their houses, in many cases not in keeping with the local architectural style (Chaşovschi, 2016). In time, this may lead to commodification (Șerbescu, 2012) that could diminish the uniqueness of the region, and ultimately deteriorate the authenticity of the area (Ye et al., 2018).

At the same time, however, there is the question of whether locals should be allowed to change their houses as they wish, or if there should be strict regulations in place to restrict such changes in order to preserve the characteristics of the area. This is not a new question as other researchers have raised it before when discussing authenticity and its challenges (Cole, 2007), with some arguing that hosts should have the right to decide on the matter (Zhou et al., 2018) and others proposing context-specific solutions (Bamert et al., 2016; Nared & Bole, 2020).

The majority of respondents in this study believe that the conservation of local traditions and customs, including the traditional houses, are the only way forward to help save heritage destinations from losing their authenticity and thus their appeal to visitors. As such, they are of the view that stricter regulations should be put in place to preserve the characteristics of the local culture and these should be better enforced by the local authorities. However, only having

stricter regulations in place is not enough if they are not carefully implemented and enforced in practice (Wang & Ap, 2013). Based on the findings, it looks like this is one of the main challenges faced by heritage destinations in Bucovina.

Another interesting finding is that there are differences between the opinions expressed by policy makers and those of representatives from tourism organisations with regard to policy measures that are in place to guide tourism development in the region. While the representatives of local and regional government mention that such measures are already in place and that these were created in consultation with the industry, most participants from the tourism industry were not aware of such measures. Therefore, a number of issues that impact the sustainable development of tourism in the region may be noted: first of all, there is a lack of awareness among stakeholders about the tourism policy measures promoted by the local authorities; second, it would appear that the industry and other stakeholders in tourism development were not consulted when these measures were put together; third, there is a lack of measures put in place to preserve the local architecture and traditional houses; fourth, the limited measures that do exist are poorly implemented in practice due to a lack of interest, a lack of resources, or both. The lack of cooperation between different stakeholders in a destination, and the lack of policies promoted by local authorities to protect the cultural resources, are two key challenges recognised in the tourism literature (Della Lucia & Franch, 2017; Maxim, 2015). Addressing them is therefore important for the sustainable development of tourism in heritage destinations, in particular in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe that are still struggling to catch up with Western democracies (Chaşovschi, 2016).

To conclude, it appears that 30 years on after the 1989 Revolution, heritage destinations in Romania are still facing significant challenges, including a struggle to reconcile with an “unwanted past” and a difficult and protracted transition towards democracy (Sima, 2017, p. 210), a constant search for identity, and an ongoing lack of legal frameworks to help protect these sites (Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends, 2019) that are perceived by many as important remnants of the past.

Moreover, this situation is not singular, with heritage sites in other Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria (Ivanova, 2017; Murzyn, 2008) facing similar challenges. The findings of this paper have therefore a broader applicability, being relevant for heritage destinations in other developing countries that may face similar issues in preserving the built environment that contributes to the authenticity of those regions. A better understanding of the challenges faced by policy makers in heritage destinations and a clear insight into the views of different stakeholders can thus help managers to find better solutions in their efforts to promote sustainable measures in these destinations.

6. Limitations and future research

Firstly, it should be mentioned that the data used in this study was collected prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which affected destinations worldwide. However, the challenges identified by this research are likely to continue to be relevant in a post-pandemic world. As seen in other destinations such as China, once the lockdown measures were eased, people started traveling again (mainly domestically at first), with cultural destinations among their top choices (Carruthers, 2020). Moreover, following the negative impact of the coronavirus on the tourism industry in the region of Bukovina, a call for

action was initiated in May 2020 by the Suceava County Council for a cooperation between the main tourism destinations in Bukovina, to help with the recovery of the tourism industry in the region post-crisis. Therefore, the pressure posed by high numbers of visitors in World Heritage Sites, the changes in the cultural landscape as a result of the loss of traditional houses, and the conflicting interests of different stakeholders remain important issues that policy makers in heritage destinations would need to consider in their efforts to manage such destinations sustainably.

Secondly, although this study focuses mainly on one heritage destination in north-eastern Romania, the challenges identified may well apply to other heritage sites in emerging destinations, in particular to those from former communist countries in Eastern Europe that went through similar experiences in their journey towards democracy. Another limitation that should be acknowledged is the small number of interviews conducted. The efforts made by the authors to conduct more interviews were met with reluctance from the people involved in tourism development in the Voroneţ area, who were nervous to freely express their opinion. To overcome this shortcoming, efforts were made to complement the qualitative data by gathering the views of all key stakeholders involved in tourism development in Voroneţ. Further research should be conducted to understand whether the challenges identified in Voroneţ are faced by other heritage destinations from former communist countries in Eastern Europe.

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