

2015 – THE YEAR OF TOURISM REVIVAL IN ORADEA

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Abstract: *This paper presents a case study on the endeavours taken by public institutions in Bihor County in order to revitalize tourism in Oradea. According to the official website of Oradea Municipality, there are several ongoing projects in 2015, most of them aimed at raising Oradea's tourism at European standards. Projects which are currently in progress are focused, in particular, on developing the cultural and historic heritage (by conserving the history of places, buildings, customs and other works by men) and valorising the geothermal resources of which it benefits. Most projects are carried out through the Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013, Priority Axes 1 "Support to sustainable development of cities – urban growth poles" and 5 – "Sustainable development and promotion of tourism". Actually, the completion of these projects aims to diversify and improve tourism services in Oradea, on the one hand, by creating modern leisure services (of the Aqua park, Spa, Wellness type), and on the other hand, by rehabilitating and modernising the cultural and historical centre of Oradea (Piața Unirii [Union Square] and Vasile Alecsandri Street). Moreover, Oradea City App was created, available in Romanian and English, in order to provide the user with complex information both on tourist attractions, accommodation and catering establishments that are available in Oradea and Băile Felix, as well as on the possibilities for leisure (theatre, movies, concerts, fairs, exhibitions, sports facilities, etc.). This year also, on May 10, 2015, it was decided that a referendum will be held in order to request the territorial merger between Oradea and Sînmartin which would lead to ranking Oradea in the league of large cities. According to mayors Ilie Bolojan (Oradea) and Lucian Popuș (Sînmartin) "the purpose of this endeavour is the joint development of the two localities, by numeric increase of the population, in order to ensure economic development, tourism revival by highlighting the architecture of the city and by developing the hydro-thermal resorts of Băile Felix and 1 Mai, located within the area of Sînmartin commune, respectively by attracting European funds". Upon successful outcome of the Municipality referendum, Oradea could become an attractive tourist destination, both at national and international level.*

Keywords: Nymphaea Thermal Wellness Complex Oradea; Oradea Fortress – multicultural and multid denominational centre; Piața Unirii – cultural and historical centre of Oradea; Oradea City App; Oradea - Sînmartin merger.

JEL classification: O10, L83

1. Introduction

It may be noted that for Romania tourism strategies included in the 2013-2016 Government Programme are oriented towards local tourism by: decentralizing the authorization and approval activity, developing an integrated tourism by capitalizing on all the local resources (cultural, historical, thermal, agricultural, handicraft, etc.), connecting Romanian tourism to international trends, etc. (information available on the website: http://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini_fisiere/13-08-02-10-48-52program-de-guvernare-2013-20161.pdf).

As far as Oradea is concerned, through projects developed this year (2015), an intense concern of the local authorities can be observed with regards to the development of local tourism.

2. Tourism potential of Oradea

Oradea, located in the Western part of Romania, in the immediate vicinity of the Hungarian border (approximately 13 km from the Borş – Artand customs) is the seat and largest municipality of Bihor County. With an area of 11,556 ha, Oradea ranks 10th in size among the cities of Romania. Its geographical location makes Oradea a very important nodal point in the regional and international tourism, being only 12 km away from the famous hydro – thermal resorts (Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai) located in Sînmartin commune.

Map 1: Oradea location



Source: <http://www.eurobusinessparc.ro/ro/localizare/harti>

The tourism potential of Oradea is due not only to its overall position, but also to its history and architecture, as well as the location of its monuments within the city plan.

In the records of Bihor County Office of the Directorates for Culture, Religious Denominations and National Cultural Heritage, Oradea is registered with the following data (information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/pagina/turismul-in-oradea>):

Table 1: Protected objectives

Crt. no.	Protected objectives	Number
1.	Archaeological monuments and sites	6
2.	Architectural monuments and ensembles, technical monuments	91
3.	Memorial buildings	6
4.	Plastic arts monuments and ensembles	19

Source: <http://www.oradea.ro/pagina/turismul-in-oradea>

At Bihor County level, the Municipality of Oradea is the one that stands out due to the most extensive variety of tourist attractions. Thus, there are various *imposing buildings* in Oradea, built in different styles (eclectic, baroque, secession), such as: Baroque Palace, Black Eagle Palace, Greek Catholic Bishop's Palace, Moon Church, City Hall and City Hall Tower, etc.; *museums and memorial houses* of which: Cris Country Museum, National Military Museum, "Ady Endre" Memorial Museum, "Emanuil Gojdu" Memorial House, "Lucian Blaga" Memorial House, etc.

Among the most important cultural institutions in Oradea we can include: State Theatre, "Arcadia" Theatre for Children and Youth, State Philharmonic, Cris Country Museum, George Şincai County Library and Gallery of Plastic Artists (at the pedestrian area). Other cultural institutions that are representative for Oradea are: Cultural Centre of the Syndicates, Cultural Centre of the Youth, Children's Palace and the Hollywood Multiplex cinema complex in the Oradea Shopping City and Lotus shopping centres.

One of the most important educational centres in Romania is the University of Oradea, state university with a wide range of specialisations for bachelor, master and doctoral

degrees. Among private education centres the following stand out: Partium Christian University (higher education institution with Hungarian language of teaching, founded in 2000), Agora University (founded in 2000) and Emanuel University (Baptist academic school founded in 2002).

Types of tourism that can be mainly developed in Oradea and the surrounding areas:

- *Cultural and Religious Tourism.* The variety of the historical and cultural heritage of Oradea – Baroque Palace next to Basilica of Saint Mary and Canonical Row is the most valuable Baroque complex built in Romania, Greek Catholic Bishop's Palace, Orthodox Moon Church, Black Eagle Palace, etc. – favours the development of integrated tourism packages.
- *Business Tourism.* The conditions for organizing conferences, symposiums, exhibitions etc. are currently provided by hotels and institutions in Oradea, Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai resorts.
- *Urban Tourism.* This type of tourism can be developed in Bihor County, particularly in Oradea, which already has most of the conditions required for the development of business tourism (5*, 4*, 3* accommodation establishments, various catering establishments (luxury restaurants, pizzerias, terraces, bars, cafés, etc.), alternatives for leisure time, etc.
- *Hydro-Spa and Health Tourism.* The qualities of the thermal water in Oradea and the hydro-thermal resorts of Băile Felix and 1 Mai attract numerous local and foreign tourists each year. The existence of thermal resources in other cities, as well, in Bihor County (Marghita, Beius, Tinca) favours the development of new touristic resorts at county level.
- **Events Tourism.** Among the attractions of Oradea also the intangible heritage on the customs and traditions, cultural events, traditional crafts, traditional costumes, gastronomy, etc. can be noted, such as: Oradea Fall Festival, Festum Varadinum, International Sports Dance Festival, International Book Fair, Short Theatre Week, Wine and Brandy Festival, Romanian Traditional Craftsmen Fair, Traditional Song, Dance and Costume Festival, **etc.**

3. Tourism projects that are ongoing or in process of completion in the municipality of Oradea. Case studies

Due to the fact that tourist traffic in Oradea is dominated by short stays, pronounced seasonal character, transit tourism (at the expense of medium and long stays with annual coverage), in 2015, the Public institutions in Oradea launched a series of projects that aim to place Oradea among the international tourist destinations.

Aiming to develop tourism in Bihor, Bihor County Council, University of Oradea and Bihor Mountain Rescue Association started the procedures for setting up the association called "Agency for the Management of Bihor Destination". According to Horia Cartiş, director of the Office of the President of Bihor CC, the actions of the association will not be limited only to promoting tourism in the area, but rather aim at developing a tourism strategy (according to eBihoreanul newspaper of 01/04/2015) which could place Bihor County among the favourite destinations of local and international tourists.

Initiatives

In 2015, the Municipality of Oradea has several ongoing projects all focusing on creating the most complex image possible on the tourism of Oradea. Such projects include:

- development of the Nymphaea Aqua Park in Oradea;
- restoration of Oradea Fortress;
- renovation of Ciuperca (*Mushroom*) area;

- Oradea City App Application;
- significant increase of green spaces at city level; etc.

1. Nymphaea Aqua Park in Oradea **is achieved through the project called “Development of leisure tourism by developing the ”NYMPHAEA” Thermal Wellness Complex Oradea”** (information available on the website: <http://www.complexnymphaea.ro/index.php/descrierea-proiectului>)

The project is financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 – 2013;

Priority Axis 5 – “Sustainable development and promotion of tourism”;

Key Area of Intervention 5.2 – “Creation, development, modernization of tourism infrastructure for exploitation of natural resources and increasing the quality of tourism services”;

Implementation period: March 2015 - March 2017.

The *purpose* of this project is to complete, enhance and diversify the touristic offer of Oradea municipality with modern leisure services of Wellness, Aqua Park, Spa type (specific to leisure tourism) which are currently missing and deprive Oradea of an integrated development of the local tourism and a rational, responsible and sustainable exploitation of the natural resources of which it benefits. By achieving this goal, the project also aims to create additional revenue streams at regional and local level, to create new jobs in the field of tourism and the synergetic economic sectors.

The *overall objective* is to create “Nymphaea” Thermal Wellness Complex Oradea. The aim of creating this complex is to diversify and improve tourist services, in general and, leisure, in particular, offered to tourists and residents of Oradea Municipality, raising the standard of tourist offers, and the sustainable and responsible exploitation of the geothermal mineral resource.

2. Restoration of Oradea Fortress is achieved through the project called **“Revitalising Oradea Fortress for introducing it into the touristic circuit. Oradea Fortress, European tourist cultural complex”**, (information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/cetatea-oradea/despre-proiect/index.php>)

The project is financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 – 2013;

Priority Axis 5 – “Sustainable development and promotion of tourism”;

Key Area of Intervention 5.1 – Restoration and sustainable valorisation of the cultural heritage, creation and modernization of related infrastructure;

Implementation period: June 2009 - July 2015.

The *purpose* of this project is to reintroduce Oradea Fortress into the national, regional and international tourist circuit, as a multi-secular historical, architectural and cultural value within the European context. Moreover, by achieving this goal, the project also aims to create additional revenue streams at regional and local level, to create new jobs in the field of culture, tourism and related economic sectors.

The *overall objective* of the project consists of transforming the Oradea Fortress area into an area of major tourist attraction, the core of historical and cultural tourism, a pillar of sustainable urban development and European multicultural centre.

3. Renovation of the “Ciuperca” („Mushroom”) area – achieved through the project called **“Development of natural habitats of protected trees species and volunteer flora on Ciuperca Hill – Oradea”**, (information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/stiri-oradea/au-inceput-lucrarile-la-gradina-publica-de-pe-dealul-ciuperca>)

The project is funded by the Hungary – Romania Cross-border Cooperation Programme 2007-2013;

The project value is of EUR 1,722,253, of which 54.07% is the contribution of the municipality and 45.93% are grants. The area to be developed is of 38,759 sqm. Implementation period: January 2015 - December 2015.

The *project aim* is to develop the hill as a recreational area, by transforming it into an urban garden with amphitheatre, waterfall, exotic plants and cellar, therefore becoming a major tourist attraction where the city could be admired from above.

4. Oradea City App Application

Eduard Florea (city manager of Oradea Municipality) and Mihai Jurcă (representative of the Association for the Promotion of Tourism in Oradea) have launched on February 3, 2015, during a press conference, the official tourist application of Oradea Municipality and of Băile Felix resort. According to manager Eduard Florea *“the application is addressed both to tourists, and residents in their daily activities. We can say that through the information it provides, this application is the most complex in Romania. The aim was to create a free and intuitive electronic platform in order to access the most important information on Oradea Municipality and Băile Felix resort”*.

As of 03/02/2015, the application is available for free in Google Play and App Store stores and upon installing the application it may be viewed or consulted with no internet connection required. The application is available both in Romanian and English (according to the document “Oradea City App”, available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/stiri-oradea/primaria-a-lansat-oradea-city-app-cea-mai-complexa-aplica-539-ie-de-turism-din-romania>).

The *aim* of the project was based on:

- creating a free and intuitive electronic platform in order to access the most important information on the two destinations (Oradea and Băile Felix)
- promoting the most important touristic attractions;
- focusing the information one “touch” away;
- integrating part of the online services of the Municipality in one single place (OTL tickets, parking tickets);
- promoting and supporting economic agents in providing services for tourists;
- creating a method for direct tourist interaction; etc.

The *objectives* of the project consisted of:

- increasing the level of information of citizens and tourists;
- increasing awareness towards and repute of Oradea – Băile-Felix tourist destination;
- diversifying the methods of promotion;
- reducing marketing and promotion costs;
- adapting and updating the marketing strategy to the new trends; etc.

5. Significant increase of green spaces in the municipality of Oradea

Furthermore, a special attention has been paid to green spaces in Oradea Municipality. *Relative to the number of residents, Oradea can take pride in its 25 sqm of green space per citizen, which is only 1 sqm below the minimum required by the European Union.* Based on this criterion, in 2011 Oradea was granted the title of Green Capital of Romania (According to the document “Oradea Parks”, available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/pagina/oradea-capitala-verde-a-romaniei>).

At the January 26, 2015 press conference, two major projects of Oradea Municipality were presented which are aimed at significantly increasing green spaces (by an additional 9 ha) in the Municipality of Oradea, respectively: 4.5 ha Ciuperca Park, 1.4 ha Arena Park, 2.2 ha Salca Il Park and 1 ha Adona Park. According to the Mayor of Oradea, Ilie Bolojan, such works will be completed *either this fall or, at the latest, in the spring of 2016*

(information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/stiri-oradea/primaria-va-amenaja-8-hectare-de-spa-539-ii-verzi>)

Other Initiatives

Renovation of the downtown area alongside the renovation of buildings with architectural value in the city centre will be achieved through several projects:

- ✓ *“Rehabilitation, modernisation and reconstruction of squares in Piața Unirii (Union Square)”* (information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/subsituri/piataunirii/index.php>)

Project financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 – 2013;

Priority Axis 1 “Support to sustainable development of cities – urban growth poles”;

Key Area of Intervention 1.1 “Integrated urban development plans”;

Implementation period: March 2015 - December 2015.

The project envisages the decrease of environmental pollution by 25% and improvement of traffic flow by car traffic reconfiguration in Piața Unirii.

The *project objective* aims, on the one hand, to enhance the quality of life in Oradea by rehabilitating the urban infrastructure and improving the public transportation and, on the other hand, to increase tourist attractiveness of the urban ensemble and of the Historical Centre of the city.

- ✓ *“Rehabilitation and modernization of Vasile Alecsandri Street, including through restoration of the public lighting network and provision of street furniture”* (information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/stiri-oradea/proiectul-de-reabilitare-si-modernizare-a-strazii-vasile-alecsandri-votat-in-consiliul-local>)

The *project objective* aims to create a pedestrian area, offering the possibility to admire the imposing architecture of buildings located on Vasile Alecsandri Street.

- ✓ *„Rehabilitation of the Black Eagle Passage (sewage system and interior paving) and architectural lighting in order to obtain an optimum touristic exploitation and inclusion of this monument into the European circuit of the Secession style”* (information available on the website: <http://www.oradea.ro/stiri-oradea/mozaicul-din-pasajul-palatului-vulturul-negru-va-fi-refacut-cu-o-tehnologie-moderna>)

This project was submitted in the Regional Operational Programme (2007-2013), Priority Axis 1 “Support to sustainable development of cities – urban growth poles”;

Duration: 4 months.

Project objective consists of the rehabilitation of the Black Eagle Passage (located in Piața Unirii), which is an important attraction of the cultural and historical downtown area of Oradea.

4. Oradea and Sînmartin – Merger for prosperity

Tourism projects in Oradea (presented in the previous chapter) together with the tourist facilities offered by the hydro-thermal resorts (Băile Felix and 1 Mai) in Sînmartin could place Oradea Municipality in the foreground of Romanian tourism. Therefore, on May 10, 2015, a local referendum will be held in the two localities (Oradea and Sînmartin) requesting the modification of the administrative limit of the administrative and territorial unit of Oradea, in the sense of integrating Sînmartin commune in the administrative perimeter of Oradea Municipality. The pillars underpinning this merger refer to: attracting investors and investments, highlighting the local amenities and local labour, good infrastructure, and best possible public services.

According to mayors Ilie Bolojan (Oradea) and Lucian Popuș (Sînmartin) *“the purpose of this endeavour is the joint development of the two localities, by numeric increase of the population, in order to ensure economic development, tourism revival by highlighting the architecture of the city and by developing the hydro-thermal resorts of Băile Felix and 1*

Mai, located within the area of Sînmartin commune, respectively by attracting European funds”.

The May 10, 2015 referendum on the territorial merger of Oradea and Sînmartin represents an important step in the administrative reorganization, being the first project of its kind in Romania. By joining the two areas, Oradea Municipality will have a population of approximately 234,000 residents (in 2014, according to <http://statistici.INSSE.ro/shop/>), which will result in its positioning among 1st rank municipalities, thus ranking as 10th place among the top urban population of the country. Moreover, by territorial expansion, Oradea will consolidate its position in the “league of large cities” which will give rise to new lines of urban and industrial development by the extensive offer of credible strategic areas for investments and investors.

Furthermore, the complementary tourist offer of the two localities (Sînmartin – hydro-thermal spa tourism, Oradea - urban type tourism: cultural, architectural) will provide tourists with multiple opportunities for spending their vacation. Upon successful outcome of the Municipality referendum, Oradea could become *the capital of hydro-thermal spa tourism in Romania*, therefore representing an important tourist attraction both nationally and internationally.

5. Conclusions

Given that tourist flows mainly focus towards urban centres, tourism is an effective tool, by which benefits obtained by it may be redistributed from the urban to the rural areas.

Oradea Municipality and its structures employed in the tourism industry believe that sustainable, responsible and healthy development is achieved by investments in the local community, therefore creating a competitive business environment. Thus, through projects started in the current year (2015), local institutions aim to transform Oradea into a competitive tourist destination both nationally and internationally. Current investments for the development of hydro-thermal spa, as well as cultural and historical tourism will result in improved valorisation of the current potential Oradea benefits of.

According to the new vision on tourism demand, the objective for the future will be the development of complex and complementary tourism packages that would lead to extended tourist stays and increased tourism proceeds.

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