

Festivals and cultural events – a destination attractor and a triggering factor of change in the post-communist Romanian landscape

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Abstract: Festivals and cultural events became a fashionable trend after the 1989 Revolution in Romania engaging new audiences and re-engaging old ones in public socio-cultural manifestations. This cultural product was designed and was included by recent development policies and cultural agendas in the attempt to launch post-communist Romanian tourism products on the international market and counterpart the severe socio-economic transformation process. Despite their novelty and enthusiastic support from behalf of administrative authorities these events generate less tourism attractiveness than expected and are often randomly mingled with different types of events within a local cultural agendas part of the 'festivalisation' process that characterized the democratic Romania after 1990. However festivals and cultural events may be considered an important triggering factor of change in the Romanian socio-economic transition process. Our study attempts to identify the form in which festivals and cultural events are to be found in the contemporary Romania and to extensively analyze the existing most important cultural event tourist destinations as the main reinventing and promoting centers of the continuously evolving and profoundly changed socio-economic autochthonous landscape. Considering both the issues involved by a profoundly changed post-communist landscape and the overpower of mediatized gaze in tourism an extended analyses of the destination internet sites and of their cultural agendas was made from which positive and negative aspects for the large Romanian cities and their main events as cultural tourism attractors were detached.

Key words: festivals, cultural events, tourism, post-communist, Romania

1. Introduction

Festivals and cultural events became a fashionable trend after the 1989 Revolution in Romania, being attractive for all public categories as new elements with

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recreational character responding the needs of the reinventing post-communist democratic society. Both rural and urban settlements tried to redefine themselves through different types of new or redesigned cultural events inscribed as regular manifestations on a yearly agenda at different territorial levels (from the national to the regional and the local one). Moreover in the last three decades certain settlements hosting hallmark events became event tourism destinations attracting each year more and more tourists and visitors.

The Romanian cultural events developed after the '90s once with the increase of service industry in general and were oriented, through recent policies, to a higher extent than in the previous decades, towards hospitality and recreational sector. Their increase was seen as a positive aspect, counter parting the transforming socio-economic background dominated by a severe deindustrialization process that profoundly changed and redesigned the post-communist labor force and economic production landscape in Romania. Despite their novelty and enthusiastic promotion urban and rural cultural events, mostly shaped as folk music festivals, generated less tourism attractiveness and more amusement facilities for local and regional inhabitants exploiting to a less extent the creative potential of the participating public compared to similar events located in European cultural tourism destinations. They might be considered however as germs of the Romanian socio-economic reinventing process in a profoundly transforming post-communist society that inscribes itself in a global societal behavior pattern while preserving and imprinting autochthonous manifestations of consumerism. In this respect niche types of tourism or powerful branded cultural events generating in the end cultural tourism destinations proved to be more successful in generating, at least for the last two decades, domestic and sometimes even incoming tourism attractiveness at the national level than urban cultural events which received much more support from public funds. However this last category was politically aimed and considered a destination attractor almost without exception by local and even regional development strategies of large Romanian cities, interested in developing their cultural and creative potential for hospitality reasons and in developing profitable economic sectors.

2. Cultural events as tourism attractors and triggering factors of change in the post-communist Romanian landscape - theory and policies

Culture represents a genuine resource able to rehabilitate destination images and generate a capital for creative economies such as in the case of post-communist countries, among which Romania is an illustrative example. For domestic Romanian tourism market urban cultural events and cultural festivals are an important part of

the new cultural event paradigm promoted by local administrative policies and cultural organizations and expressed by new tendencies of leisure consume. In fact festivals and cultural event tourism seems to be part of the present reinventing process and socio-economic development model of the post-communist Romania reflecting social patterns as well as the socio-economic development level and needs of a specific territory. Moreover cultural events represent important attractors for tourism demand and are shaped within the light of the politic and socio-economic background of the place. After the change of the communist regime Eastern European countries entered a reinventing process within which cultural events played an essential role as heritage and cultural tourism “have been used to promote positive images”, sometimes too selective and leaving aside on purpose some aspects (Hughes & Allen, 2005: 175).

In Romania cultural event tourism is a result of complex factors among which an important one was the reshaping of territorial development policies which included tourism and cultural events as matching elements for socio-economic growth and tourism attractiveness at local level.

Post-communist transformations of Romania, caused by the major politic changes occurred after 1990, determined in the first place the radical transformation of the socio-economic system. Consequently cultural and recreational domains were also affected and transformed (Figure 1) due to the free unrestricted movement of people, the development of services in general and the appearance of new cultural attractors and events as tourism itself became an important component of the identity - building process (Light, 2001).

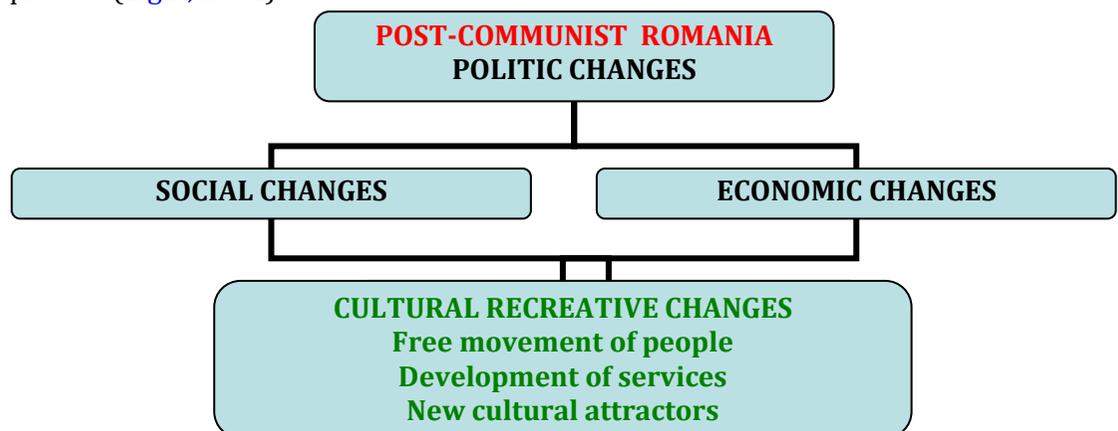


Figure 1. Cultural and recreational changes of post-communist Romania.

In fact in terms of politic changes one should remark in the first place the shift of the governing system from a communist centralized one to a capitalist, democratic one. Once with Romania's European Union entrance in 2007 the common EU policy imposed an even more accelerated rhythm of decentralization and downscaling of administrative power from the national to the local level, emphasizing at the same time the role of regions for overall socio-economic development and cohesion.

The politic shift towards democracy and the decentralization of power meant free movement for people (Hall, 1998: 425), including for recreational purposes, but also the freedom of expression and consequently a stimulating factor to express and experience creativity during traveling. "Tourism has become part of the cultural economy" (Richards, 2011: 1228) and of the experience economy trying as well to develop 'experiences' as an added value for its services. Consequently autochthonous cultural resources and events, perceived more than ever as attractors of tourism demand (Hughes & Allen, 2005: 175), diversified and were redesigned under the influence of international global trends in terms of democracy and hospitality standards through new types of events or reinvented old traditional festivals.

Romanian tourism destinations in the post communist period often represented an inert continuation of already established classical mass tourism destinations witnessing sometimes the emergence of new structures (Dincă, 2013: 254). Under the influence of a broader eastern European tourism market, discovered at the beginning of the '90s by the international tourists attracted by the 'new' tangible leisure cultural resources (Hughes & Allen, 2005: 173) and of the general recreational trends of the post-communist period, incoming tourism demand oriented towards green and authentic forms of tourism. Therefore the new Romanian tourism destinations mainly focused on rural and cultural resources. Generally it was accepted that "culture has become an essential resource in the postindustrial economy" (Richards & Wilson, 2006: 1210).

The development of cultural events in the post-communist Romania and of event tourism with its niche type: festival tourism may be considered newly branded cultural recreational attraction as several "festivals with a tourist component" have been identified (Tudoricu, 2008: 95). On the background of both international and domestic emerging market trends the flourishing of cultural events and festivals transformed into periodic hallmark events rebranded or founded new cultural event destinations in Romania since 1990. Cultural shows and especially festivals from local to regional and hallmark events are organized periodically and designed as one-time shows in different settlements or as regular events generating destination revisiting. New post-communist festival destinations (e.g. Vama Veche, Gărbăna) and the old rediscovered traditional cultural event destinations (e.g. Bucharest, Brăila) reflect the

free liberty of movement and expression gained after 1989. They have become part and even accelerated the Romania's reinventing process as a response to politic changes and to international recreational trends at the same time.

National and regional policies designed after 1990 make reference to cultural events as local resources to face steep regional competition on the European hospitality market. In fact the support for performing arts was mentioned as a main objective of Romanian Master Plan on Tourism envisaging: "the creation of a national cultural events database to facilitate the promotion of visual and performing arts, and particularly traditional festival and folklore events" (UNWTO, 2008) and clearly mentioning cultural events as a tourism strategic resource at the national level.

3. Aim and methods of the study

In the context of the Romanian profound socio-economic transformations and of the changing international leisure paradigms our study has as a first objective to empirically identify and classify the main categories of places and/or types of events that generated the current Romanian post-communist cultural tourism destinations, considering both the importance of cultural infrastructure and of tourist demand while making reference to Getz theoretic concepts.

The second objective of our exploratory research was to analyze the most important centers that organize festivals and cultural events in Romania which were identified as the main large cities (over 100.000 inhabitants according to 2011 census). They may be considered the most important type of cultural destinations in our country if cultural heritage resources, tourist infrastructure, tourist demand and cultural institutional capacity is considered. These cities disposing of great heritage, financial and administrative resources compete one another at the regional and national level in terms of tourism attractiveness, rebranding themselves as new cultural and event tourism destinations and trying more recently to outstand also in an international context (Lequeux-Dincă et al., 2018). The elements analyzed from the evolving perspective of both post-communist profoundly changing destinations (with different actors involved by cultural and recreational events) and the actual context of the over powerful tourist 'mediatized gaze' (Urry, 2002) are the existing tools or image centered communication means through which these destinations make themselves remarked, namely the sites belonging to the main stakeholders involved by the cultural events management.

Through this extensive analysis method the study managed to emphasize great differences in terms of appearance, content, ownership, etc. of the sites belonging to these destinations as the main promotional and mediatized gaze tool which may

generate further queries on the messages and how the destination images are transmitted to the public. Our study empirically evaluates in this way the capability of these event and cultural tourism destinations to support promotional and marketing strategies for event and cultural tourism. A synthesizing table shows the existence of the on-line communicating tools on the form of the internet sites and cultural agendas belonging to different stakeholders, involved to a great extent as organizers of their main cultural events.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned objectives the aim of our study may be described as an attempt to show an image of the form in which festivals and cultural events are to be found in the contemporary Romania and to extensively analyze the most important cultural event tourist destinations as the main reinventing and promoting centers of the continuously evolving and profoundly changed socio-economic autochthonous landscape.

In this context one of the main limits of our study was the no uniformly shaped administrative sites (almost 35) and policy documents to be found on line which motivates as a research method the synthetic table displaying an inventory of cultural promoting institutions, tools and policies these actual important Romanian urban cultural destinations dispose of at the moment.

4. Types of cultural event tourism destinations in the post-communist Romania

Romanian tourism destinations and patterns of consume reoriented after the 1989 Revolution, on the background of the newly gained freedom of expression and movement and under the influence of international trends, towards cultural event tourism and represented a reinventing way of manifestation of recreational activities in a profoundly transformed post-communist society. Consequently several types of cultural event tourism destinations appeared and promoted themselves as leisure products, reflecting recent patterns of consume and the new socio-economic paradigm.

According to Getz (2008) several types of events might be identified and characterized according to their importance in terms of tourism demand and generated value, starting with the basic periodic or one-time local events, continuing with the periodic or one-time regional events and ending up with the periodic hallmark events and the occasional mega-events. The last category is to attract a high tourist demand and to generate a high value, measured through elements such as: the growth potential, the market share, the quality, the image enhancement, environmental value, economic benefits etc. (Getz, 2008: 407).

Within the Romanian cultural leisure market institutional capability and cultural events' importance outline at present three major types of cultural event tourism destinations namely:

Cultural festivals or international mega events representing a tourism attraction in themselves. They were a new emerging type of cultural event after 1990, a result of the recently gained freedom of expression generated by a contemporary rich, internationally recognized domestic artist activity. Frequented generally by youth and backpacker tourists of all ages these events shaped and promoted, especially after 2000, a whole range of tourism destinations in Romania and were sometimes developed as a manifesto for ecologic and humanitarian rights against abusive political decisions (e.g. Vama Veche, Gărna, Roşia Montană – Figure 2, Sfântul Gheorghe in the Danube Delta, Sighişoara);

Great urban areas that have been rediscovered and promoted by traditional old events they hosted even during communist epoch in the form of periodic hallmark events (e.g. valuable music festivals sometimes around internationally famous names representing Romanian music personalities – Golden Stag – Braşov, Enescu festival – Bucharest, Hariclea Darclee festival - Brăila).



Figure 2. a, c - Posters of Fânfest – Roşia Montană Festival 2012 and 2013 editions; b - image of Roşia Montană public attending Fânfest concert and exposing manifest banners against extensive gold cyanide exploitation in the area – Source: www.bestmusic.ro; www.fanfest.ro.

- Numerous urban and rural cultural art performing destinations generating low tourism demand, hosting mostly local events and sometimes regional events. These events appeared as a consequence of the 'festivalisation of the city' (Richards & Wilson, 2006: 1211) but also of the village in the post-communist Romania. They are often theme festivals around gastronomic and agricultural topics (e.g. The Onion Festival in Asuajul de Sus, Maramureş County and also in Pericei, Sălaj County; The Trout National Festival and The Painted Eggs festival in Ciocăneşti, Suceava County - Figure 3, The Sausages Festival in Berca, Buzău County around the famous brand of

Pleşcoi sausages Figure 3), they may represent sometimes old cultural manifestations (The Maiden fair of Mount Găina – Apuseni Mountains) or new designed leisure cultural events (e.g. Garlic festival – organized for the first time in 2013 through EU funds in Bistrița-Năsăud county and benefiting of the famous literary advertised Stoker location of Dracula). Regularly located in rural and picturesque natural areas and advertised by regional and national media, almost all these local or regional festivals involve also folk manifestations, valuing traditional regional resources.

All the three destination categories describe the present post-communist socio-economic development Romanian paradigm in which both cities and villages reshaped their politic agendas and budgets so as to support a yearly calendar of cultural events and mainly a core event on the form of a local representative festival. In this context post-communist democracy and EU entrance were factors which helped the redefining process of old traditional events that have been rebranded and promoted for the international market while a new emerging type of cultural events on the form of youth festivals became a tourism attraction for the domestic and even for the incoming tourists.

International programs such as the European Capital of Culture become in the post-communist period a tangible asset for important cultural Romanian cities as Sibiu which gained the title together with the city of Luxemburg in 2007 while Timișoara recently gained title in 2021. The program contributed to a great extent to Sibiu tourism development, increasing substantially its accommodation capacity (with approximately 70%) and its tourism demand (with approximately 40%).



Figure 3. a - Image from The Trout National Festival – Ciocănești Village, Suceava County – Source: www.adevarul.ro; b - Image from The Sausages Festival - Berca Village – Source: www.jurnalul.ro).

However the effect of occasional mega events is punctual and sometimes cannot be constantly maintained at the same level. Even if of smaller dimensions, the constant effects of periodic famous traditional hallmark events, at present internationally promoted, represent possibly a more sustainable alternative.

5. Characteristics of cultural event tourism destinations reinventing and promoting post-communist Romania

Cultural events are generally concentrated by great urban areas that have the institutional capability and the financial resources to support them. One should see large Romanian cities as urban poles for present and especially for future cultural tourism demand attraction as they traditionally disposed and also concentrate at present important regional administrative functions, demographic and socio-economic resources. Each of them mirrors through its own case post-communist socio-economic transformations in Romania, as large cities were also important industrial centers during the communist epoch and suffered an important process of deindustrialization witnessing the emergence of the services sector after 1989. Concentrating important hospitality services, large urban settlements register at present an important tourism demand for business tourism but also for itinerant cultural tours especially for incoming tourists. In this context most of them tried to develop cultural activities and host cultural events, which would promote their image and offer them a competitive advantage in terms of leisure attractiveness.

Our study approached cities over 100,000 inhabitants according to the 2011 census. They represent without exception urban centers with traditional important administrative function which promote themselves nowadays as cultural event destinations. Their agendas of events, part of local policies, appear on sites belonging to local and even regional administrative authorities or cultural institutions and should offer them an advantage on the urban cultural tourism market. In order to detach common characteristics for this group of cultural event destinations a whole range of different documents representing local and regional cultural strategies, plans and yearly agendas was analyzed. Their very unequal appearance (although with a generic similar name local cultural agendas have very different lengths and degrees of content detail) and difficult access made from various internet sources (sites belonging to different institutions, non similar as content and structure) made very hard their centralization and comparison. The existence of a central uniform looking site to promote a yearly cultural agenda or of a separate city's main cultural event site, belonging to the local authority or to a local/regional cultural organization (county / NUTS 3 level), should be in this context an important element to be considered by large Romanian cities governance in their attempt to increase local cultural events attractiveness and gain a competitive advantage on this leisure segment market. As the table shows (Table 1), 11 out of the 19 large Romanian cities promote cultural events on their local authority site and even a small number (only 5 of them) through

a separate site belonging to a cultural organization. Moreover, only 12 of them display their yearly cultural agenda on the internet, the documents looking very non uniformly. Holistic local agendas with tens of pages presenting without any selection or categorization all yearly cultural and sportive events or synthetic tables of cultural events, holy ceremonies and fairs (many with commercial character) could be found on local sites.

Table 1. Existing communication and promotional means for local cultural events in the case of Romanian large cities (over 100,000 inhabitants).

	Local site*	Cultural organization site	Main event site	Cultural agenda
Arad	X			X
Pitești				X
Bacău	X			
Oradea			X	X
Botosani				X
Brașov	X		X	X
Brăila			X	X
Buzău	X	X		X
Cluj	X		X	
Constanța			X	
Craiova		X		
Galați		X		
Iași		X		
Baia Mare	X			X
Târgu Mureș	X		X	X
Ploiești	X		X	X
Sibiu	X		X	X
Timișoara	X		X	X
București	X	X	X	

* Local site promoting cultural events.

Although all the analyzed documents without exception didn't have any division based on the type, the theme or the importance of the events, they played the common role of promoting and informing public opinion from behalf of administrative authorities on local yearly events. Another common point which might be remarked not only for the studied cities but also for smaller cities and villages, would be the existence of one main local cultural event (sometimes several events) generally on the theme of a music festival during the year, they promote and financially support from the local budget. This might thus be underlined in the yearly local budget, allocated by administrative authorities according to the importance (planned dimensions, objectives) of the envisaged events as well as sometimes through the presence of a separate site for the event (Table 1).

As already stated, the most difficult task would be in the given conditions the centralization for a comparative study of all this range of documents, hardly found

and accessed via internet in spite of the fact that ICT (Information Communication Technologies) has become nowadays the most convenient tool of information and presentation for official and promoting materials, involved in a “mass customization of tourism products” transforming the entire process of production and delivery for individual consumers (Buhalis & Law, 2008: 618). However after having analyzed the sites belonging to local administrative authorities and to main cultural events for large Romanian cities one could detach both positive and negative aspects regarding the way of presenting and promoting either their top cultural events or themselves as urban cultural leisure destinations.

Positive aspects remarked for the large Romanian cities and their main events as cultural tourism attractors would be:

- the fact that cultural events are considered by authorities one of the most important branding, promoting and even improving elements for the image of their cities and are allocated a share in the total budget;
- all local authorities include and emphasize a main local cultural/themed festival (e.g. Hariclea Darclee – Brăila; Golden stag – Braşov; Tulips festival - Piteşti) in their agenda of cultural events and fairs;
- cultural events are outlined in the local policies and agendas as tourism attractors (no matter their real economic impact and the tourism demand they generate) being part of a general trend to develop cultural activities perceived as generators of leisure demand;

Negative aspects to be underlined in the case of cultural events as promotion tools for post-communist leisure cultural urbanscapes of Romanian large cities would be:

- the lack of actualization of local cultural event agendas, often missing a clear hierarchy or segmentation on types of events and sometimes reflecting the lack of continuous preoccupation for organizing and financing main local cultural events;
- the lack of a separate site for important local cultural events;
- a fragmented strategic vision and poor financial resources of different cultural institutions, missing a unitary local program and/or strategy for promoting cultural events and their host city as a branded leisure cultural destination;
- a high imitative potential of cultural events (except for those pre-existing the 1990 moment) often missing originality and neglecting genuine and better documented local cultural traditions and resources.

The solutions to diminish negative aspects for large Romanian post-communist ‘Cultural cities’ as tourism destinations would be in the first place to carefully plan, segment and present their cultural agendas and cultural leisure products according to their type and importance, distinctively promoting the hallmark events. Networks of stakeholders that might support and organize important events should be formed and publicly sustained and even centrally coordinated by administrative authorities. Cultural events should be prioritized in the local investment budget according to their tourism importance as there is no reference and analysis regarding their tourism attractiveness and economic impact. Moreover, beside agendas, a cultural

development strategy, also focusing tourism objectives, should be designed and tourism marketing elements should be part of the most important cultural products and form a central pillar in the development strategy of the cultural destination itself.

4. Conclusion

Cultural event tourism represents a central element in the reinventing socio-economic development paradigm of post-communist Romania. Even if its economic success is still arguable, its presence and ways of manifestation reflect new global tendencies of tourism consumption adapted for an autochthonous cultural background. Not enough competitive and mostly reshaped as new cultural event destinations, large Romanian cities, comprising important heritage resources, should consequently struggle to better design, coordinate and promote their 'important' cultural events. This should be done starting with the way in which the events appear in their yearly cultural agenda and continuing with a strategy for a leisure cultural product which to approach cultural development from a tourism attractiveness point of view. Beside this group of resourceful cultural destinations, one should remark the focus on leisure cultural products and events of almost all urban and rural settlements of post-communist Romania, experiencing a process of so-called 'festivalisation'.

Cultural events, especially youth music festivals, became after 1989, under international influences and on the background of an autochthonous freedom of movement and expression, a tourist attraction in itself and an important element in the Romanian post-communist reinventing social paradigm. Presenting different degrees of tourist attractiveness and disposing of different volumes of resources, these events are ranging from local to hallmark events and very rarely they reach the status of mega-events. However they all share the common role, informally conferred by administrative authorities (almost always co-organizers of these events) of developing and promoting the Romanian post-communist socio-economic and cultural background. In this regard one may consider them triggering elements of change in the present continuously evolving and reinventing Romanian post-communist landscape.

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