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The Revival of Tourism Brands Post-pandemically. Solutions for Economic Actors in the Mountaneous Banat

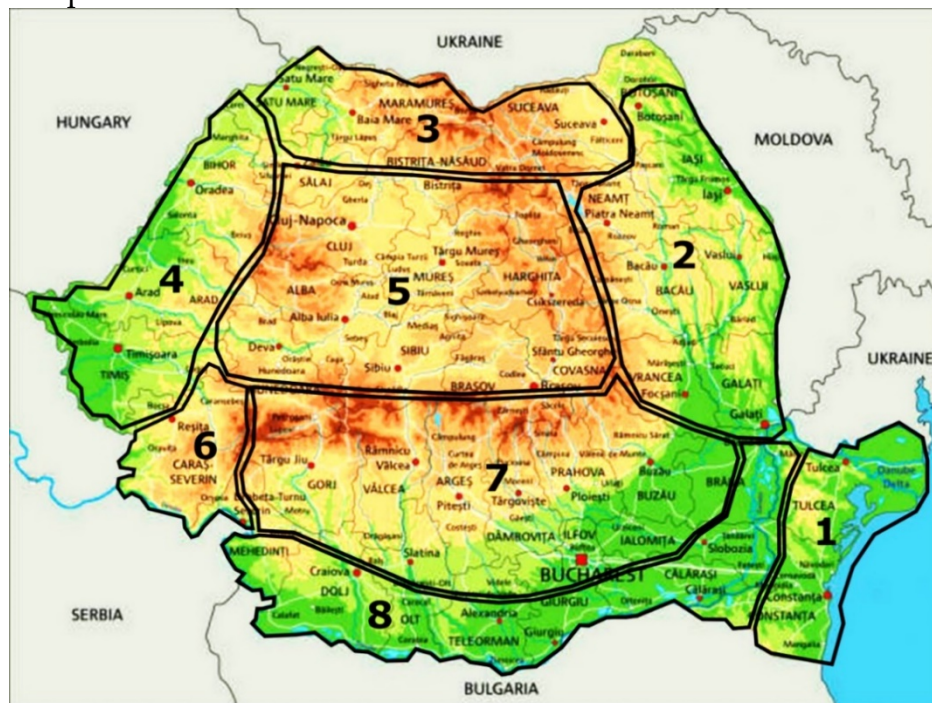
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At the moment, Romania is a European country in which the tourism industry is very poorly developed. On the one hand, this has been a blessing in disguise, as the country did not suffer huge financial losses, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as was the case for countries that are dependent on the tourism industry, e.g. Greece, Turkey, Croatia, etc. The post-pandemic era represents a sturdy chance for the Romanian tourism industry, as the needs of consumers have shifted: they are looking for quiet, small groups of people, traditional and cultural heritage and unique experiences. There is a shift from the classical sun and beach and winter tourism, in which consumers invest in more weekend getaways throughout the year, in places with natural landscapes and outdoor activities. All in all, Romania has a lot of these places, that can provide exactly what the new consumers wish to have, but the entire industry needs to be rethought in order to offer qualitative services. The following text provides ideas for Romania and the Mountainous Banat.

Delimitation of Romania's tourist macro-regions

- Surface area of the country.
- The many types of tourism that can exist, depending on the geographical area.
- Unlikelihood of collaboration between all economic players in the tourism industry under a single brand for the whole country.
- Compacting the responsibility of tourism promotion for the whole country in one place has failed in recent years.

Taking into account the experience of other countries, the examples given above and the limitations of the brand proposed by the Ministry of Tourism, I propose that Romania be divided into eight macro-regions, with Romania - Explore the Carpathian Garden becoming an umbrella brand. A sub-brand can be created for each macro-region delineated in the map below:



Map 1. Romania's tourism macro-regions. (Source: own representation.)

- 1 – Black Sea Seaside – Danube Delta;
- 2 - Moldova;
- 3 - Bucovina – Maramureş Oaş;
- 4 – Western Plain;
- 5 - Transylvania;
- 6 – Danube Bend– Banat Mountains;**
- 7 – Subcarpathian area;
- 8 - The Danube.

In addition, it would be desirable that the two tourism promotion authorities of Romania, the National Tourism Brand Council and the Tourism Advisory Council, become a single promotion office and have a branch for each macro-region. Thus, there will be a main office with the role of coordinator and eight offices that will deal with the sub-brands of the regions.

Delimitation of the Mountainous Banat

The historical Banat, also called "The Land between the Rivers", is bounded to the north by the Mures River, to the west by the Tisa River, to the south by the Danube River, to the east by the Cerna River and the Godeanu and Tarcu mountain range, a boundary that passes through the Gugu peak (2,291 m) and ends at the Iron Gates of Transylvania in the Retezat Mountains. The geographical area of the Banat is 28,526 sq.km (Popovici, Gh.).

After the First World War, the historical Banat was divided by the Treaty of Trianon (1920) as follows: two thirds of the area (18,966 sq.km) went to Romania, the western third to Serbia (9,276 sq.km) and a small area of 284 sq.km, located south of the Mures river, around Szeged, to Hungary. The Romanian Banat is a distinct geographical region of Romania, with geographical, historical and cultural characteristics that give it particular economic and tourist value. Located at the western gate of Romania, the Romanian Banat comprises the territories of the counties of Caras Severin and Timis, plus the area of Orşovei, belonging territorially to the

county of Mehedinți and partly to the county of Arad up to the river Mureș. The 15 main ethnic communities (Romanians, Germans, Hungarians, Croats, Serbs, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Russians, Lipovenes, Turks, Bulgarians, Roma, Jews, Poles and Italians) make the Romanian Banat a multicultural region considered to be the Little Europe. From this point of view, the Romanian Banat is unique in the Romanian and the European space, being a model of interethnic coexistence.

The Mountainous Banat comprises the mountainous area of the Caras Severin county (75%, the largest mountainous county in the country), the Orșova - Cazanele Dunării area (the Mehedinți county, three communes and the town of Orșova) and five communes in the east of the Timiș county.

The Mountainous Banat, in terms of surface area and population, is one of the most important geographical regions of the Banat, as it comprises about 36.3% of the total surface area of the Romanian geographical Banat and 22% of its population.

Brand for the Banat Mountainous Region

Starting from the premise that the Mountain Banat region, with more than 15 ethnic groups living in this area, is also called Little Europe, I want to emphasise its ability to be a home for everyone. The feeling of "home" will be a main factor in creating the attractiveness of the area, thus I propose the slogan Banat Mountain - Come home. During a time when our lives fly by in an accelerated way, I want the Mountainous Banat to be that place where people stop, rest and recharge with positive energy.

The proposed logo includes the colours of nature, green and blue, shows the typical mountains of the area and a house, representing the home that is the Mountainous Banat. The simplicity of the logo mirrors the simplicity of life in this fabulously beautiful area where time seems to stand still.



The logo of Mountainous Banat (Source: own representation)

The website will be built based on the Slovenian example, with a template used by all eight of Romania's tourism macro-regions. It is very important to have information about accommodation possibilities, transport, tourist routes, gastronomic points, information for emergencies and a map showing all this. The promotion of natural and man-made tourist offers must be in the foreground, so field research is recommended to centralise all current offers. The establishment of cooperation between the Mountainous Banat promotion authority and the area's economic players is of major importance and involves promoting business on the official website in exchange for guaranteeing a level of service agreed between the two parties.

The presence on the major social networks - Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok - is absolutely necessary. Through these, it is possible to raise the level of direct communication with potential tourists, the possibility of promotion through influencers and journalists, maintaining a constant dialogue with consumers, organising giveaways, encouraging tourists to post their experiences by using hashtags pre-defined by the promotion authority and many other promotional activities.

Another important point to centralise tourism in the Mountainous Banat under the brand of the same name is the creation of promotional and informative materials. Also, by means of field research, all tourist

services offered in the region are analysed and the tourist offer of the Mountainous Banat is created. For an easier collaboration, the proposed method is to officially notify all the economic actors of the presence of a new authority for the promotion of tourism in the area and request information related to the actual activity of these businesses. This creates a database and a communication network between the economic actors and the promotion authority. Based on all this information, online and offline tourism promotion materials will be created. Tourist information centres will become major points of interest, where promotional materials will be made available to tourists.

There are ten major events in the whole Mountainous Banat area, according to the author of the Mountainous Banat tourist guide, Gheorghe Popovici, namely:

1. Garana Jazz Festival
2. "Hercules" International Folklore Festival in Baile Herculane
3. The "Serbările cetății" event in Caransebeș
4. Multicultural Resita
5. Resita in ten dimensions
6. Multicultural and musical Oravița
7. Mihai Eminescu Days and George Enescu Days
8. Decade of German Culture in the Mountainous Banat
9. Event Days of Faith and Culture in Banat
10. International Short Film Festival in Reșița

There is currently no extensive promotion for any of these events, at least not beyond the cities where they are held. This is yet another perfect example of a lack of coordination at regional level. All these events will come under the umbrella of Banat Mountain - Come Home and will be promoted nationally and even internationally. They will become tourist attractions in their own right through proper promotion.

In order to outline the clear structure of promotion of the places in the Mountainous Banat under the proposed brand, absolutely all existing information boards need to be redone and new boards created where needed. The logo and contact details of the promoting authority should appear on all of the signs.

Collaboration with various private tourism promotion agencies for different markets is necessary to reach as many consumers as possible. An example of such an agency is Aviareps Tourism based in Germany. They can handle PR and marketing for Banat Mountain - Come home throughout the DACH region. Based on promotional materials provided by the brand promotion authority, they will "sell" the Mountainous Banat tourist destination to travel agencies in the DACH region, and these in turn will add it to the offers they sell. The Marketing and PR Agency also organises trips with journalists to the destinations they market, to then generate content in the various travel publications. They also work a lot with the influencer market and handle the participation of the destination/brand in various travel trade shows.

Solutions for the economic actors in the Mountainous Banat

Next, I will propose three solutions for the economic actors in the Mountainous Banat, which, if implemented, will increase the quality of tourism in the area, increase tourism revenues and create synergies between stakeholders. The aim is to offer something tangible and achievable, since my previous analyses of the Mountainous Banat area have shown that the most important aspects for the development of tourism are infrastructure, quality, the variety of tourism services and people's hospitality. By implementing the following proposed ideas, two of the three aspects mentioned above can be improved.

Ecological mountain dairy farm

Historically, the dairy farm was the summer "residence" of the shepherds in the mountainous areas, because in the warm season they

took their sheep, goats and cattle to graze on the mountain pastures. The location of the sheepfold was always in the valleys for protection and there was always a source of water nearby. At the sheepfold, the milk from the animals was processed into cheese and butter. For the people of the mountain area, this was a major part of their income because nature did not allow them to farm on a large scale. The barns were built of wood or stone, had a fairly large yard where the animals had no access and about 2-3 rooms where they lived and processed the milk.

On the plus side, a sheepfold adds value to the mountainous area by having the mountain pastures maintained and fertilised naturally through constant use. It also provides sanitary premises for processing milk and if cooperatives are set up, milk can be transported directly to market outlets. Last but not least, the dairy farms need people, which means repopulating the uplands, thus bringing back to life the upland countryside, a priority for the current Romanian government.

What is an ecological mountain dairy farm?

In today's hustle and bustle, people are looking for quiet resting places where time seems to stand still, unique places. Recently there has also been a need to make them as uncrowded as possible. At the same time, consumers want traditional, real, quality products. An organic mountain sheepfold meets consumer demands and revives the mountain countryside by combining tourist services such as accommodation and meals with milk processing services and reviving the Romanian pastoral tradition.

Structurally, an organic mountain dairy consists of a main building with a sanitary filter, milk reception room, processing room, warping room, maturing and storage room, shepherd's room and open terraces. In addition to this main building, there are the necessary livestock annexes, parking spaces and technical facilities. Depending on the size of the stable, it may also have some accommodation.

Services offered are:

- Meals with homemade or local products
- Participation in the processing of mountain products

- Outlet for traditional products
- Accommodation

From a business point of view, the National Mountain Area Agency, together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, has created a list of opportunities for such an enterprise:

- "the millennial tradition of the Romanian people for pastoralism and transhumance;
- the existence of a large flock of sheep in the Romanian Carpathians (approx. 2,753,399);
- fertilisation of meadows with organic fertilisers from sheep;
- the alpine pastures of the Carpathians have a flora with high nutritive value;
- the need to develop the upland area through the creation of associations;
- growing consumer demand for traditional mountain products;
- improving the quality of pastures, especially alpine pastures;
- development of water sources and the creation of water pipelines to the sheepfolds;
- energy independence of buildings through the use of photovoltaic panels;
- increasing the number of high-performance breeds of sheep and improving indigenous breeds;
- creating new jobs in the certified occupations of mountain shepherd and mountain shepherd."

At the same time, the two institutions had an installment of financial support for entrepreneurs who wanted to open such a business. All mountainous counties applied for this project, except Caras-Severin, including the Mountainous Banat area.

Although it is not known whether the Ministry of Agriculture will open another round of support for opening of ecological mountain dairy farms, the Caras-Severin County can use funds from the PNRR or PNDL projects. It is recommended to start with three of such projects to track the success rate and establish a strategy for future implementation.

Co-branding in the Mountainous Banat

According to the International Cooperative Association (ICA), a cooperative is an autonomous association of persons, united voluntarily, to pursue their common economic, social and cultural goals, needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

The ICA also argues that co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

Perhaps the most important aspect in areas where tourism is highly developed is the strengthening of the local community. People in that community plan and act in such a way that everyone benefits, from tourists to active locals to retired locals. In this way, synergies are generated, more value is created, the economy grows, and therefore consumption power increases. The following ideas are mainly aimed at bringing the rural communities of the Mountainous Banat together to develop the area, tourism and the local economy.

The first recommendation is that gastronomic outlets source basic foodstuffs - dairy, eggs, meat, honey, fruit and vegetables - from local farmers in the area. Of course, it is also desirable to use own products, for example if the gastronomic point has beehives, it will use honey from its own hive. From a legal point of view, agri-tourism guesthouses are requested to find food from their own household and from local producers, according to Government Ordinance 58/1998.

In order to lead the community towards a complete circular economy, i.e. an economy that does not produce waste, it is recommended that organic waste from gastronomic outlets be taken to local farms where it can be turned into compostable matter or given to animals.

In the Romanian countryside, and therefore also in the Mountainous Banat, there is "roadside selling", i.e. local producers or

craftsmen sell their products on the main roadsides. The creation of outlets such as souvenir shops where local producers can sell their products is necessary from several points of view. First of all, it would "clean up" the landscape by not having imposing roadside stalls. Second of all, producers can leave their goods at the shop and just collect the profit, not having to supervise the stall themselves, thus saving time for their own household or increasing the production of products. An example of good practice is the village of Corund in the Harghita county, where ceramic and wood craftsmen have opened an area for selling souvenirs:



Souvenir shop Corund. (Source: Wikipedia)

Another idea taken from a successful Travel Foundation project, the Much Kaab initiative, is for guesthouses and hotels to make hygiene products made by local artisans available in the sanitary facilities. For example, goat milk soap, marigold-based moisturisers, etc. It is important that the products are labelled with the name of the producer and the Banat Mountain - come home - logo. This way tourists know for

sure that the products are local, are part of the cooperative between the Banat Mountain brand and the economic actors and know where they can access more information or even purchase the products.

In order to ensure a certain flow of tourists to service businesses, which do not include accommodation and meals, it is recommended to collaborate between different economic actors to create tourist packages, such as:

Pension and rafting organiser on the Nera. If you stay at guesthouse X, you can book a rafting trip on the Nera as part of the room price. Or if you stay at guesthouse Y, you get a 20% discount on a rafting trip on the Nera.

The guesthouse and the shepherd who teaches tourists how to make cheese. The guesthouse that sources cheese from a certain local producer may offer as an activity a trip to the producer's farm where tourists can process the milk into cheese and then buy it.

In the vast majority of villages and communes, there are cultural hostels which are almost unused. It is recommended to use them for organising various activities:

- learning to sew at the sewing war
- cooking classes for traditional dishes (sarmale, mămloigne, fish in walnut leaves, roasting of tuile)
- folk dance classes

These activities will be planned and organised by the tourist promotion authority, together with the representative of the municipality of the commune and service providers who can provide such activities. The persons who will offer these activities may have special training courses.