Tracing the certification of tourism resorts in Romania

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Abstract

The certification of tourism resorts is a policy instrument employed extensively to foster the growth of tourism industry through capitalization on natural resources and EU non-reimbursable funding. The three times increase of certified tourism resorts in the last two decades (from 65 in 2002 to 216 in 2024) requires a systematic research of the certification process focused on the economic, social and political context that motivated this particular policy action, the criteria to be met, the institutional setup likely to catalyze policy implementation. Attempting to contribute to this line of research, less approached so far, the paper examines the normative and legislative background that set the rules, procedures, and management of tourism resorts. Based on a descriptive research design, the paper explores the conceptual foundations of tourism development and planning through the comparative analysis of Government decisions of 2008 and 2022 regarding the certification of tourism resorts in connection with the objectives of the tourism strategy released in 2023. The main findings of the analysis point to conceptualization biases related to the definition of tourism resorts that challenge the consistency of criteria and the accuracy of statistical record; the disconnection of strategic objectives from policy instruments, in particular the certification process related to integrated spatial planning, marketing practices and tourism governance articulations between the central and local levels. Relying on the updated assessment of the tourism certification, the paper aims to provide policy-relevant knowledge to endorse the growth of tourism in a sustainable manner.

Keywords

Tourism policy, tourism resorts, certification, criteria, Romania

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Covid19 pandemic, renewed concern for formulating and implementing effective tourism policies to revitalize the sector came to the forefront of the public agenda (OECD, 2020). The pandemic exposed multiple shortcomings of tourism development. Among them, the widely acknowledged policy-action gap gained prominence and called for the reconsideration of the rationale, role and type and institutional setup of tourism policy (Aguinis et al., 2023). The approach is needed to design specific and sensitive policies to local contexts based on historical contingencies and contextual factors that explain how tourism works with localities and localities with tourism (Saarinen et al., 2017).

The policy instrument of certification entails a set of standards and accreditation schemes of products, staff and activities to achieve tourism performance and competitiveness. In Romania, certification has been extensively employed to grant the status of tourism resort to an increasing number of localities, both rural and urban (Grecu et al., 2019). Consequently, the number of tourism resorts has more than tripled during the last two decades (65 in 2002 and 216 in 2024). Relying on the rich and diversified tourism potential, the certification of tourism resorts aims to provide the legal framework for sustainable tourism development. The impressive upsurge of tourism resorts of local and national interest, less researched so far, requires a systematic study of the certification process focused on the economic, social and political context that motivated this particular policy action, the criteria to be met, the institutional setup likely to catalyze policy implementation. Attempting to contribute to this line of research, the paper examines the normative and legislative background that set the rules, procedures and management of tourism resorts. To this aim, the paper posits the certification of tourism resorts in the policy discourse exploring the conceptual

foundations of tourism development and planning, discussing the meanings and understandings of certification criteria, and their role to promote Romania as a competitive tourism destination. Focusing on the case study of Romania, the paper aims to provide policy-relevant knowledge to facilitate the growth of tourism in a sustainable manner.

The structure of the paper runs as follows: the next section reviews the literature on tourism policy, planning and governance to provide the wider context within which the tourism development is embedded; then, the comparative analysis of Government decisions of 2008 and 2022 regarding the certification of tourism resorts enables the discussion of criteria and their dynamics in connection with the objectives of tourism strategies. Conclusions complete the study.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Development and planning have been a constant concern for tourism studies. As a growing industry world-wide, tourism requires comprehensive and future-oriented strategies to guide the pursuit of the development path while reducing the negative environmental and social externalities of the sector (Saarinen et al., 2017). Tourism policy and planning are closely linked to politics and power reflecting dynamic relationships of political actors at different levels of decision making and policy implementation, complex articulations of communities and localities, stakeholders and tourists (Hall 2000; Bianchi 2003; Aguinis et al., 2023). The focus in policy making has shifted from the government to issues related to power, influence, interests, values and agendas (Dredge and Jamal 2015). As such, policy has been regarded as a political outcome of the multifaceted nature of tourism and complex inter-organizational relations and collaborative policy-making (Wang and Ap 2013).

Since tourism is embedded in places and spaces with particular cultures, economies and social lives of communities (Saarinen et al., 2017), a primary concern of research is the tourism destination as the key concept of institutionalized tourism and the basic unit of analysis for tourism studies (Saraniemi and Kylänen 2011). In the last two decades, destination studies have addressed specific themes related to loyalty, image, digitalization, marketing, governance, resources, and experience (Huang et al., 2022). Although approached from different angles, tourism destination is defined as an amalgam of tourism products, offering an integrated experience to consumers (Buhalis 2000). Starting from this, the destination is the unit of action where different stakeholders (business, public authorities, local communities and tourists) interact through co-creation of experiences (Saraniemi and Kylänen 2011). Conventionally, a tourism destination is a defined geographical area where attractions, amenities, services, accessibility, and activities combine to produce experience in a tourism product (Buhalis 2000). It requires strategic marketing planning and brand management to enforce the competitiveness through image and identity building (Buhalis 2000; Saraniemi and Kylänen 2011).

Within the context of tourism destination, planning is a tool to guide tourism toward a development path where benefits and well-being transcend the industry and its core operations (Saarinen et al., 2017). Tourism planning has a strong business and marketing orientation with stakeholder communication and sustainability concerns placed at the center of the policy approach (Rahmafitria et al., 2020). Understanding the development of tourism destination as a political process where different interest are traded-off, two interconnected strategies converge to foster authenticity, experience and identity: placemaking and place-making (Lew 2017). The former is a planned and intentional action initiated by governments and tourism authorities where different policy options are negotiated with the local communities and a consensus over the future evolution is reached (Hultman and Hall 2012). The latter is organic, incremental and often unplanned driven by individuals and cultural groups, hosts and tourists, where place making is a reflection of their identity, needs and wants (Lew 2017). Although structurally different, these strategies complement each other in place making; however they need to be strategically balanced to support destination brand building and cooperation among stakeholders (Saarinen et al., 2017; Lew, 2017).

Either way, tourism destination is a socio-cultural construct, a space to produce and reproduce power, meaning and behavior in line with wider political contexts and dynamics (Saraniemi and Kylänen, 2011). Tourism destination calls for interdisciplinary research to address the concept from different perspectives (economic geography-oriented, marketing management-oriented, customer-oriented, and cultural (Saraniemi and Kylänen, 2011). Closely related to this understanding of tourism destination is the issue of place governance (Hultman and Hall, 2012). It is context sensitive entailing the concomitant production of locality and destination economy with tourism being the driver of transforming a locality into a destination (Hall, 2000). Based on social interaction, network formation and stakeholder negotiation, practices of place-making define the attractiveness of destination resulting from collaborative relations and meaning production

grounded in social contexts (Hultman and Hall, 2012). Through the lens of governance, Hall (2011) iden-tified four structures relevant for tourism destination - hierarchies, markets, networks and communities – each reflecting varying levels of state intervention, public-private partnerships and community participa-tion.

2. Research methodology

The analysis is based on a descriptive research design. Focusing on the Romanian case study, we employ a qualitative approach in line with the purpose of the study to develop an in-depth understanding of the pro-blems and issues pertaining to policy making, specifically to certification of tourism resorts. The first step of the analysis was to collect legislative acts related to certification of tourism resorts. A number of 20 Government decisions were identified spanning the 2002-2024 period. The next step implied the selection of legislative acts that explicitly refer to criteria of granting the tourism resort status. Among them, two Government decisions (852/2008 and 1580/2022) were further examined to ground the analysis in concep-tual and dynamic terms. The findings were discussed in correlation with the wider normative context of tourism development, especially the recurrent national strategies.

3. Results and discussion

Certification of tourism resorts is carried on by the Ministry of Tourism, at the proposal of local adminis-tration authorities, and approved by Government decision. Starting from the asumption that tourism resort is the center of tourism activity, Simoni (2015) pointed to some shortcomings derived from conceptual confusion and lack of clarification of tourism legislation, overly supply-oriented planning in the detriment of demand, gaps between practice and legal framework. Several factors undermined the coherent evolution of tourism: frequent institutional changes, poor bridging of scientific knowledge and policy issues, the ina-bility of decision makers to design sustainable tourism policies (National Strategy for Tourism Develop-ment, 2023).

While the tourism law remained in limbo (approved by the Government in 2019 and rejected by the Parli-ament in 2023), three national strategies have been designed in 2006, 2018 and 2023. Their overlapping timelines (2007-2026, 2019-2030 and 2024-2035) suggest the uncertainty of the development context am-plified recently by the pandemic, but also the low institutional capacity to design and implement the tourism policy. Granting the status of tourism resorts widened the accessibility toward non-reimbursable financing, given that some financing programs require certification as a tourism resort (Simoni, 2017). Competition for EU funding has been translated into national context through certification of tourism resorts. The num-ber of resorts of national interest doubled, while those of local interest increased four times between 2002 and 2024, mainly after 2018 when the Government assigned tourism as a priority sector to catalyze eco-nomic development at local, regional and national level (Figure no. 1). Overall, this positive trend prompted the growth of local economies alongside increasing pressure on the natural environment (Grecu et al., 2019).

Figure no. 1. Evolution of certified tourism resorts
Source: By the author

The design and implementation of tourism policy depend largely on the broader political, economic, and social environment. This will set the context for examining the criteria to be met by certified tourism resorts, i.e. 'the locality, part of locality or the area made up of neighboring localities or parts of neighboring localities that has tourist resources and that cumulatively meets the prescribed criteria for one of the categories, namely of national or local interest' (Government Decision 1580/2022). The mandatory criteria are streamlined along five categories: the natural setting, natural healing factors and air quality; accessibility; utilities; tourism reception and leisure structures; tourism development, information and promotion (Table no. 1). Out of the 28 criteria, 15 remained unchanged in 2022 as against 2008; the rest being either excluded or restated (clarified/simplified).

Table no. 1. Mandatory criteria for certification of tourism resorts

	Government Decision 852/2008	Resort of national interest	Resort of local interest	Government Decision 1580/2022	Resort of national interest	Resort of local interest
	The natural setting, natural healing factors and air quality					
1	Location in a natural setting without polluting factors	x	x	Location in a natural setting without polluting factors	x	x
2	Studies and documents attesting the presence and value of natural healing factors (mineral waters, mud, therapeutic lakes, salines, bioclimate, etc.) from a qualitative and quantitative point of view	x	x	Studies and documents attesting the presence and value of natural healing factors (mineral waters, mud, therapeutic lakes, salines, bioclimate, etc.) from a qualitative and quantitative point of view	x	x
3	Well maintained green spaces, recreation areas, surrounding grounds and other outdoor facilities located on the public domain	x	x	*		
4	Planting curtains and green protective fences in the destructured areas of the resort (locality, part of a locality or the area formed by neighboring localities or parts of neighboring localities)	x	x	*		
5	The distinct delimitation of the areas provided for leisure and services in the master plan (PUG).	x	x	*		
6	Ecological, hydrogeological and sanitary protection perimeters of natural healing factors, in accordance with the legislation in force, as the case may be	x	x	Ecological, hydrogeological and sanitary protection perimeters of natural healing factors, in accordance with the legislation in force, as the case may be	x	x
	Accessibility					
7	Easy accessibility by modernized roads or railways	x	x	Road modernized and marked with a traffic sign**	x	x
8	Provision of public transport lines (buses/minibuses/taxi services) from the station/bus station serving the resort	x	x	Shared transport between the tourist resort and the train station or bus station that serves it **	x	x
	Utilities					
9	Permanent medical assistance and means of transportation for medical emergencies	x	-	Permanent medical assistance and means of transportation for medical emergencies	x	-
10	First aid point and means of transport for medical emergencies	-	x	First aid point and means of transport for medical emergencies	-	x
11	Pharmaceutical point	x	x	Pharmaceutical point	x	x
12	Promenade places, illuminated at night	x	x	Promenade places, illuminated at night	x	x
13	Public parking lots in percentage of 20% of the minimum number of accommodation places	x	x	*		
14	Provision of ecological sanitary groups	x	x	*		
15	Running water served by the public water supply system	x	x	Running water served by the public water supply system	x	x
16	Sewage system	x	x	Sewage system	x	x

17	Electricity	x	x	Electricity	x	x
Tourist reception and leisure structures						
18	Minimum number of places in tourist reception structures with classified accommodation functions, with the exception of camping units, of which at least 40% are classified in the 3-5 star/daisy categories, and with public catering functions, in a percentage of 10% from the minimum number of accommodation places	x	100	Minimum number of places in classified tourist reception structures, of which at least 30% are classified in the 3-5 star/flower categories, with the exception of campsites **	500	100
19	Minimum number of places in tourist reception structures with classified accommodation functions, with the exception of camping units, of which at least 20% are in hotel units and at least 40% are classified in the 3-5 star/daisy categories, and with public catering functions, as a percentage of 10% of the minimum number of accommodation places.	500	-	**		
20	Tourist information and promotion center, with permanent staff to exclusively serve the center, accredited	x	-	*		
21	Localities or parts of localities on the coast must have a landscaped beach, water rescue stations - lifeguard and first aid stations	x	x	Localities or parts of localities on the coast must have a landscaped beach, water rescue stations - lifeguard and first aid stations	x	x
22	Mountain localities that have developed ski slopes and approved mountain tourist routes must have mountain rescue services - mountain rescue	x	x	Mountain localities that have developed ski slopes and approved mountain tourist routes must have mountain rescue services - mountain rescue	x	x
23	Leisure facilities (sports fields, swimming pools, cycle paths), relaxation and outdoor walks (kiosks, pavilions, covered terraces, pedestrian paths)	x	x	Facilities for outdoor relaxation and walks (pedestrian roads, promenade places) **	x	x
24	Playgrounds for children	x	x	Playgrounds for children	x	x
Tourism development, information and promotion						
25	Signposting of tourist attractions with orientation and information indicators, both physically and electronically or on the website	x	x	Signposting of tourist attractions with orientation and information indicators, both physically and electronically or on the website	x	x
26	Promotional materials for the tourist resort and the area, printed, website and social media	x	x	Promotional materials for the tourist resort and the area, printed, website and social media	x	x
27	Creation of a tourist map of the resort, large (about 1.5-2.0 m), illuminated at night, located in an area heavily traveled by tourists, on which all the tourist attractions, reception structures can be located tourist facilities with accommodation and public catering functions, pharmaceutical and first aid points, useful telephone numbers and other information necessary for tourists	x	x	*		
28	Tourism development strategy	x	x	*		

*excluded in 2022; **restated (clarified or simplified) in 2022;

Source: By the author

The comparative analysis points to the exclusion of criteria whose compliance would have made difficult the certification process by narrowing the eligibility of potential candidates. However, the exclusion of

criteria related to environmental protection (green areas, outdoor facilities), spatial planning (parking areas, delimitation of the resort in the master plan), promotion (tourist information center, tourist map), and local development (tourism strategy) hampers the future evolution of the tourism resort. Other criteria have been clarified and simplified; they mostly refer to accessibility and leisure structures. By far, the most relevant concerns the share of more than 30% of accommodation units classified in the 3-5 stars/flowers categories for both the resorts of national and local interest in the attempt to raise the comfort of reception structures. The minimum number of places remained unchanged: 100 for resorts of local interest and 500 for those of national interest.

Additional certification criteria address accessibility (railway and road), general interest services (shopping, bank branch), entertainment infrastructure (performance hall, conference room), green area (park), sport grounds and fitness centers, cultural and sport events with a fixed calendar, tourism information and promotion center with permanent staff. Medical assistance and facilities for natural and mineral therapeutic resources are also considered in the certification process. However, in comparison with 2008, the set of additional criteria in 2022 are less demanding with the exclusion of the destination management organization, local gastronomic point, or cultural routes and ecotourism destinations as additional criteria.

Conversely, the normative framework set in 2022 brings significant improvements. It contains mechanisms of monitoring and verification, timelines for criteria accomplishment, sanctions for non-compliance, and ultimately withdrawal of certification. In this new institutional setup, the relations between central and local authorities are reframed raising the level of responsibility, accountability, and coordination, designing formal procedures, dynamic traceability of outcomes. This marks an important progress in tourism policy design moreover that the certified tourism resorts amass 44.5% of accommodation structures, 52.9% of accommodation places, 40.9% of arrivals and 56.8% of overnights in 2022 (National Institute of Statistics – Tempo online data series).

However, our findings emphasize that the certification of tourism resorts is biased by the conceptualization framework. First, the definition of tourism resort is used as generic to encompass different types of tourism entities, including spas, seaside and mountain resorts, parts of localities or groups of localities challenging the consistency of criteria (resorts vs spas defined by different sets of criteria) and the accuracy of statistical record (tourism zones registered at the level of territorial administrative unit). Second, there is a clear distinction between tourism resort (concentration of tourism resources) and destination (variety of tourism products, a network of general and specific services, and a coherent and unitary marketing enacted by the destination management organization - DMO). So far, eight DMOs were established at regional level (2022) raising questions about how the 'local' and the 'regional' are articulated to create value of experiences grounded on the symbolic nature of places (Buhalis, 2000; Saraniemi and Kylänen, 2011).

In line with the aim of the research, it is important to position the certification process of tourism resorts within the broader policy environment. The comparison of certification criteria set recently by the Government Decision 1580/2022 and the latest national strategy for tourism development issued in 2023 (National Strategy for tourism development 2024-2035) is particularly insightful in this respect. On one side, the rationale of the strategy is to address the market failure to attract more tourists, especially foreign to Romania as an international tourism destination. The determinants are related to underdevelopment and poor accessibility, the limited opportunities of consumption and uncompetitive services to trigger high quality experiences at the level of tourism destination. On the other side, the certification of tourism resorts aims to include more localities in the tourism space, most of which are small, isolated and peripheral. As such, there is a disconnection between strategic objectives and the policy instruments, in particular the certification of tourism resorts, suggesting major shortcomings to achieve development goals. Furthermore, our analysis points to several cases of non-compliance with the minimal number of places in accommodation units (in 6 resorts of national interest and 43 resorts of local interest with less and 500 and 100 places, respectively). At a more general level, the non-compliance of this criterion questions the capacity of these resorts to develop a local context for tourism production and consumption providing incentives to stakeholders networking and creating meaning and identity (Hultman and Hall, 2012).

Another critical issue concerns the certification of parts (tourism zones) of localities, both rural and urban, as tourism resorts challenging the underlying principles of integrated local development. The emerging dichotomy between tourism cores and the rest of the locality creating edges that separate them through boundaries (Saarinen et al., 2017) may undermine the overall functionality and interaction flows at the local level. The exclusion of criteria related to the distinct delimitation of the areas assigned for leisure and services in the master plan and the design of local tourism development strategy require efficient governance mechanisms and actions to avoid potential functional discontinuities and spatial fragmentation between 'tourism enclaves' and 'left-behind' spaces of localities. In contradiction with prescriptions of the certification of tourism resorts, the national strategy requires the design and implementation of master plans

to preserve cultural landscapes, an updated classification system and a simplified legislation to enable the creation of more jobs in tourism industry. Hultman and Hall (2012) argue that tourism governance implies the understanding of local places not as containers, but as porous, whose production relies on relationality and not on setting boundaries. This approach is central to support more holistic and inclusive planning in tourism (Saarinen et al., 2017).

Failed promotional campaigns render Romania as a destination with low visibility for incoming tourists (National Strategy for tourism development 2024-2035). The access to tourism information is key for understanding the social construction of destination with meanings of place and marketing practices enhancing the attractiveness within the competitive framework (Hultman and Hall, 2012). The national strategy for tourism development (2023) highlights the need to setup tourism information centers based on digital technologies, digital maps and apps, communication hubs, community centers to offer improved information services. On the contrary, the certification criteria (2022) mention the information center as additional, hence elective and not a mandatory criterion for granting the status of tourism resort. Moreover, the information boards including the destination map are excluded as a condition for certification, making the promotion a difficult and biased undertaking.

The national strategy (2023) acknowledges the failure of previous strategic documents due to the limited capacity of central authority, namely the Ministry of Tourism, to design and implement the tourism policy. Among the factors that caused this failure are the insufficient funding and institutional changes. In addition, over-centralization of tourism planning and poor practice of public administration management hamper the accomplishment of tourism development goals. The certification of tourism resorts assign more power to local authorities to initiate the process and carry it out. The transfer of responsibility and accountability from central to local is justified by the account that planning should be based on destination level. However, this approach comes at odds with the local administration that, despite its legislative authority mandate, largely lacks proper knowledge of tourism issues, budget and staffing resulting in major constrains toward the policy implementation (Wang and Ap, 2013). Either central or local, the authorities are more likely to plan than to govern and design plans difficult to implement (Hall 2000; Tosun and Timothy 2001; Hultman and Hall 2012), thus widening the policy-action gap and jeopardizing the sustainable future of tourism (Aguinis et al., 2023).

Conclusions

By examining the certification process of tourism resorts within the larger policy environment, the paper added theoretically-informed knowledge on the conceptual foundations of tourism development and planning, tracking the certification criteria, and their role to promote competitive tourism destinations. Bridging scientific knowledge with policy issues, the paper aimed to provide policy-relevant information to facilitate the sustainable development of tourism. Comparing the conceptualization framework of the certification process and the objectives of the national strategy for tourism development, issued in 2022 and 2023, respectively, the paper found significant dissonance within the policy environment. While the former is based on a quantitative approach aiming to increase the number of tourism resorts, the latter calls for a qualitative approach grounded on diversified offer, high quality tourism products and services, coherent management and marketing strategies to enhance the attractiveness of destinations. These opposing approaches recall the long debated difference in tourism studies between growth and development where 'growth means to get bigger, development means to get better – an increase in quality and diversity' with positive effects on wealth and well-being (Hultman and Hall, 2012).

In such a policy environment, several questions are raised. First, the question on how the dimensions of tourism policy and the certification process herein – the rationale, role and type and institutional setup – are pulled together to design and implement policy in line with specificities and sensitivities of local contexts. Tourism development planning is dominantly supply-oriented whereby certification of resorts is an attempt to introduce more localities into the tourism space. In these regards, it has a strong political dimension with central and local authorities playing the central role in granting the status of tourism resort. Starting from this, a second question refers to how status granting will be followed by status building since stakeholders (local communities and tourists) are the missing links in the co-production of tourism destinations. This may result in authenticity loss through the dominance of placemaking (politically planned and intentional) over the place-making (organic and driven by locally shared interests and visions). The dichotomy is strengthened by the policy rhetoric poorly connected to the local as to provide tourism legitimacy. Network relations and community involvement are key to 'make the meaning in practice' and complete the construction of destinations through articulation and performance. The former implies the creation of competitive and authentic tourism products, while the latter results from negotiations between

public and private stakeholders to build a coherent image of the destination. Finally, there is a need to shift from the narrow-sighted approach of establishing goals based on planning to a more comprehensive approach to incorporate branding, marketing and management into the process of tourism destination development.

By providing an updated assessment of the certification process of tourism resorts, the analysis is an invite for more sustained interdisciplinary approach by scholars of all policy-related fields (economists, geographers, political scientists) to raise on the top of their future research agenda the topic of tourism development in Romania.

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