


Article

The WHS Designation—A Factor of Sustainable Tourism Growth for Romanian Rural Areas?

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Abstract: The presence of World Heritage Sites has been frequently used as a mean of tourism promotion and increased attractiveness. However, previous studies showed contradictory results regarding the territorial impact of World Heritage Sites, and very few researchers discussed their impact in Eastern Europe. This paper examines how the presence of World Heritage Sites in rural localities influenced the tourism growth and sustainable development in Romania after 2000. Independent Sample *t*-test was used to analyse the evolution of tourism and sustainable development indicators between 2001 and 2016. The results suggest an absence of a positive effect induced by World Heritage Sites in rural areas. It seems that, by itself, the brand has not enough power to sustain tourist attractiveness if it is not endorsed by national, regional, and local initiatives. These findings lead a discussion about how certain sites managed to induce a sustained tourism growth while others failed to do so.

Keywords: World Heritage Site; rural tourism; promotion strategies; sustainable development

1. Introduction

World Heritage Sites (WHS), either natural, cultural, or mixed, as listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), designate an outstanding significance for the human civilization, its label being supposed to indicate, at the same time, a conservation factor [1]. The UNESCO WHS label implies a character of singularity for the respective site and hence a greater tourism potential [2]. However, is it judicious to assume that there is a strong connection between the presence of WHS and tourism growth? In the tourism sector of 21st century, the presence of WHS has become a hot topic for both authorities and researchers [3–6].

To date, there has been little agreement on whether the WHS does or does not trigger tourism development, and almost no agreement regarding the impact of WHS on sustainable development. Previous studies are divided in two teams, each one confirming or denying the presence of a quantifiable effect of the WHS designation on tourism growth. Within the former group, there is a general belief, based mainly on quantitative studies, that WHS designation has an immediate positive effect reflected on the increase of tourist arrivals and incomes [3,7–9]. Usually, this effect is visible because the public becomes more aware of the site and its value [1]. Shackley [10] even induces the idea that the WHS designation is ‘virtually a guarantee that visitor numbers will increase’ (p. 13). As other authors have argued, the status change of a heritage site from National Heritage to World Heritage can sometimes create a new image of the place, thus attracting more visitors [4,5].

In the last decades, some empirical evidence was brought from Asian countries. Li et al. [11] identified a cluster distribution pattern of the Chinese WHS that enhanced tourist arrivals. Yang et al. [12] found a positive effect of the Chinese WHS on the local tourism growth by using econometric methods. Nevertheless, both of their studies gravitate in the same geographical area, a region that recorded an explosive increase in tourist travels. The distinction between the main effects of modern Chinese behaviour, with a greater desire to travel, and the induced effects of the WHS designation is therefore still unclear.

Outside China, similar studies encourage the idea that the sole designation of a WHS is enough to activate the tourism sector [13–16]. However, WHS status seems to have a greater influence on international tourists than on domestic ones [17]. Su and Lin [18] found a positive relation between the existence of WHS and tourist arrivals, estimating about 382,637 additional tourists per year for each new WHS.

On the other hand, the positive effects are contradicted by a series of papers that sometimes use the same quantitative approach. Econometric studies on Italian heritage sites [19] concluded that there is an almost indistinguishable economic effect of their inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). Huang et al. [20] also detected only a slight impact of the introduction of the historical centre of Macao in the WHL, with a considerable lower relevance than other tourism factors.

In UK, Rodwell [21], stated that there was no proved relationship between the status of a cultural site and the evolution of the tourists' number. The same conclusion was reached by Hall and Piggin [22] in a study on OECD countries. Despite the tourism growth, they argued that this was not significantly different than the usual average rate of tourism growth in these states. Their findings were supported later by examples from Australia [23] or Anhui, China [24].

Other studies induced the idea that the label has a positive influence, but that its influence varies among sites and sometimes is less important than, for example, the name of a national park [25]. In order to maximize the effect of the label, UNESCO networks were proposed [26].

In the same line, Poria et al. [27] stated that the WHS designation does not affect the tourists' overall motivation. Even more, the willingness to pay (WTP) is higher for a non-designated site than for an officially designated one.

An explanation for these contradictory results could be the lack of an effective evaluation and monitoring strategies over time [28] or the diversity of World Heritage Sites, as well as different strategies and different types of tourists visiting those sites [17]. Another possible explanation is the existence of a large number of WHS in developing countries (approximately 60%) [29], where the rate of tourism growth was bigger in the last decade, thus inducing the impression of a correlation between WHS existence and a massive tourism development. Unfortunately, the impacts of WHS are usually interpreted in terms of tourism growth and income [30,31], while other factors like local population and environmental issues should also be taken into considerations [32]. Sometimes, for the same destination, the economic impact is highly positive, and the environmental impact is highly negative [33].

The relations between local population and the heritage sites represent an additional point of interest. If the tourism value of a WHS is verifiable, then the local population should benefit from a direct economic output, as well as a visible change in the occupational structure. Surprisingly, the most frequently observed relation between the local population and WHS, based mainly on qualitative studies, is contradictory, including damageable impacts in terms of demographic pressure, [11,34–36], environmental impact [37], or architectural changes incompatible with the cultural value of the site [15]. While the negative impact is not as strong as in maritime destinations [38], it seems that tourism based on WHS is far from achieving its goals. The idea of WHS as an engine of sustainable development is demystified by the above-mentioned studies. Some authors go as far as sustaining that there is no such thing as sustainable tourism in WHS destinations [39].

However, the great number of methodological approaches that were used, and (more importantly) the geographical diversity of the sites, may suggest a different impact of the WHS designation specific

to the local features and the already existent tourism offer. It is difficult to find a direct connection when many sites were already popular prior to their World Heritage designation. In a study undertaken in Italy, Patuelli et al. [40] found out that the World Heritage designation had a different impact according to the number of spatial competitors (regions): for a greater number of spatial competitors, the effect is negative (−9% for the greatest distance bandwidth considered), while for a smaller number of spatial competitors, the effect is positive (+4% when only one or two neighbouring regions were considered).

Finally, it seems that the WHS designation has a smaller impact on well-known sites and a bigger impact for the less known sites [3,41].

World Heritage Sites in Romania

In the global tourism system, Romania is a rather new actor that started to count as a regional tourism actor only in the late 1990s after a decade of transition between the planned communist economy and the market economy. However, this rather tardive beginning was followed by a fast tourism development on several forms (agritourism, adventure tourism, medical and even business tourism) [42]. Heritage tourism was part of this trend, as seven WHS have been enlisted in the World Heritage List after 1990. With the exception of “Danube Delta” and the “Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe”, all Romanian WHS are listed as cultural sites. A particularity of Romania's cultural WHS is that four of them designate complexes of multiple heritage places (i.e. churches or fortresses) that share the same cultural heritage but are located in different administrative units. For example, the WHS Churches of Moldavia includes eight different churches, all famous for their exterior mural paintings. In this paper, the term WHS refers to each site included in the WHL, either individually or as part of a complex. That is why the rural WHS included in this study actually refer to 22 different sites.

So far, however, there has been very little discussion about the tourism impact of WHS on Romanian destinations, so it is still unclear if the designation had an impact on tourism development or not. A few studies sustained the importance of WHS for rural tourism development [43,44], but WHS are more a tangential object of their research rather than the main objective.

Recent developments in the tourism management of WHS have led to an increased interest from the authorities in properly using WHS as an engine for sustainable development. Based on the WTO definition that “Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future” [45], we also consider that sustainable tourism is the concept of visiting a place as a tourist and making only a positive impact on the environment, society, and economy. Our study aims to verify if there really is an impact from WHS designation on tourism growth and also on sustainable development in the Romanian rural areas and to suggest new approaches for WHS destinations. The findings of this study are a novelty for the Romanian literature as no previous research has been found that surveyed the impact of WHS on tourism development, to the authors' knowledge.

2. Materials and Methods

The first challenge of the study was the difficulty to measure the WHS designation effect directly, namely to calculate and compare the tourism indicators before and after the designation. The national political context before 1990 makes the analysis of tourism indicators difficult. During the communist regime, rural tourism was practiced only in a small number of Romanian destinations, especially in seaside and mountain resorts controlled by the State. Since 1990, private initiative in the tourism sector has increased all over the country, and the number of rural municipalities with tourist arrivals grew very fast in the late 90s [46]. During the same decade, the WHS from Romania were inscribed in the World Heritage List. All but two of the Romanian WHS were listed between 1993 and 1999. The absence of reliable data on tourist arrivals and overnight stays before 2000 and the absence of any kind of tourism activities in the localities with UNESCO heritage before 1990 made it impossible to measure the direct effects of the WHS designation.

Thus, an alternative comparative method was used in this research. The localities with WHS were compared with other similar localities without WHS. Several studies have used comparative methods to observe the behaviour patterns in similar administrative units [47,48]. A similar method has been used by Patuelli, Mussoni, and Candela [40] on Italian WHSs.

We used the smallest Local Administrative Units (LAU2, formerly NUTS-5 level) with statistical data, which in Romania are represented by urban and rural communes (administrative subdivision formed by one or several villages). For our study, we selected only the rural LAU2 with a cumulative value of at least 1000 tourist arrivals between 2001 and 2016 (Figure 1). Medium and big cities were excluded from the study because of their varied attractions and functions (business hub, for example) that could have biased the data. The impact of a WHS is easier to distinguish in the case of rural areas, as it often represents the only or the main attraction of the locality. Furthermore, the Romanian cultural WHS are mostly rural, only two of them being located in cities with more than 25,000 inhabitants.

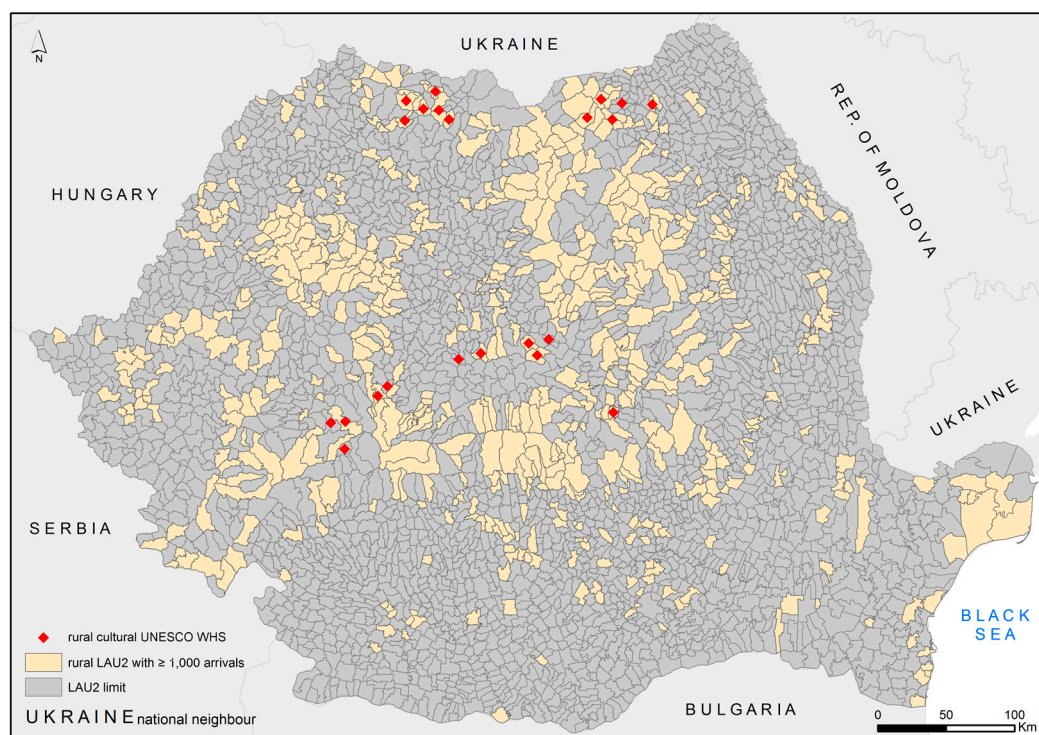


Figure 1. Summing up the tourist arrivals in Romanian rural areas during 2001–2016. Source: Authors' representation based on data from National Institute of Statistics [42].

For the purpose of analysis, two sets of data were used (see Table 1):

1. Indicators of tourism impact;
2. Indicators of sustainable development.

We used several indicators of tourism impact and sustainable tourism development, trying to match the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) list [49] and the available national statistics. The European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) was launched in 2013 by European Commission in order to help tourist destinations monitor their road towards sustainable tourism performance by introducing a common approach. For both categories of indicators, we used the data provided by the Romanian Institute of Statistics [42]. The choice of the indicators was motivated primarily by the available data on the National Institute of Statistics but also on the dimensions of sustainability related to tourism activity. Therefore, basic indicators for tourism offer and demand were considered, as well as tourist pressure on the territory and locals. Indicators for employment in tertiary sector were also

used to see if the local population is engaged in the economic activity related to tourism. Finally, data for public utilities of local interest were analysed in order to see if the living conditions of the local population have improved since the WHS designation.

Table 1. Indicators used in the study.

Indicators	Abbreviation
Number of Tourist Arrivals in 2016	Arr_2016
Dynamics of Tourist Arrivals 2001–2016	Dyn_Arr_2001_2016
Dynamics of Tourist Arrivals 2007–2016	Dyn_Arr_2007_2016
Number of Overnight stays in 2016	On_2016
Dynamics of Overnight stays 2001–2016	Dyn_On_2001_2016
Dynamics of Overnight stays 2007–2016	Dyn_On_2007_2016
Number of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments in 2016	Ap_2016
Dynamics of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments 2001–2016	Dyn_Ap_2001_2016
Dynamics of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments 2007–2016	Dyn_Ap_2007_2016
Number of tourist accommodation establishments in 2016	Au_2016
Dynamics of tourist accommodation establishments 2001–2016	Dyn_Au_2001_2016
Dynamics of tourist accommodation establishments 2007–2016	Dyn_Au_2007_2016
Number of Tourist Arrivals related to the Total Population 2016	Arr_Pop_2016
Departures of domiciled individuals 2000–2016	Pop_Dep_2000_2016
Arrivals of domiciled individuals 2000–2016	Pop_Arr_2000_2016
Population Dynamics 2000–2016	Pop_Dyn_2000_2016
Population Dynamics 2007–2016	Pop_Dyn_2007_2016
Employees in tertiary sector 2011 ¹	Ter_2011
Rate of employees in tertiary sector 2011 ¹	Ter_per_2011
Length of running water supply infrastructure 2016	Wat_Inf_2016
Length of running water supply infrastructure related to Build Surface 2016	Wat_Inf_Sur_2016
Length of running water supply infrastructure related to Population 2016	Wat_Inf_Pop_2016
Length of sewerage infrastructure 2016	Sew_Inf_2016
Length of sewerage infrastructure related to Build Surface 2016	Sew_Inf_Sur_2016
Length of running sewerage infrastructure related to Population 2016	Sew_Inf_Pop_2016

¹ Last year with available data.

For our analysis, we took into account several tourism indicators, like tourist arrivals, overnight stays, number of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments, and number of tourist accommodation establishments for the year 2016. As similar values could be the results of different dynamics, we also considered the dynamic of these indicators between 2001 and 2016. A second indicator of dynamics, 2007–2016, was also introduced in order to verify differences in tourism indicators after Romania's integration into the European Union (EU). Our motivation is sustained by the fact that the integration facilitated the access of a new clientele to the Romanian WHS destinations.

3. Results

Data management and analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22 (IBM Analytics, Armonk, New York, NY, USA). Comparisons between the two groups (rural LAU2 with WHS and rural LAU2 without WHS) were made using independent sample *t*-test in order to identify differences in tourism and sustainable development indicators. The analysis should allow us to verify the impact of the differentiator factor (WHS presence).

The results from the preliminary analysis of the comparisons are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Independent sample *t*-test for World Heritage Site (WHS) condition—tourism indicators.

Variable	LAU2 with WHS		LAU2 without WHS		<i>t</i> -Test	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Number of Tourist Arrivals in 2016	2710.63	3956.45	2814.37	9487.05	−0.044	0.965	588
Dynamics of Tourist Arrivals 2001–2016	562.12	1235.82	521.10	3693.92	0.044	0.965	588
Dynamics of Tourist Arrivals 2007–2016	1768.16	3852.45	390.04	2346.26	1.424	0.175	588
Number of Overnight stays in 2016	4736.00	6418.27	6962.12	38284.59	−0.232	0.816	588
Dynamics of Overnight stays 2001–2016	490.77	1093.31	650.30	6508.33	−0.098	0.922	588
Dynamics of Overnight stays 2007–2016	1710.52	3095.03	350.47	1779.22	1.750	0.100	588
Number of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments in 2016	114.38	189.99	128.63	441.88	−0.129	0.898	588
Dynamics of Accommodations places 2001–2016	42.06	190.08	46.78	276.64	−0.068	0.946	588
Dynamics of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments 2007–2016	120.27	293.12	68.74	247.50	0.817	0.414	588
Number of bed places in tourist accommodation establishments in 2016	6.25	7.60	4.54	12.01	0.566	0.572	588
Dynamics of tourist accommodation establishments 2001–2016	173.67	348.47	64.40	223.70	1.247	0.231	588
Dynamics of tourist accommodation establishments 2007–2016	53.98	116.21	53.86	228.33	0.002	0.998	588
Number of Tourist Arrivals related to Total Population 2016	0.83	1.23	0.86	2.63	−0.047	0.962	588

Table 3. Independent sample *t*-test for WHS condition—local sustainability indicators.

Variable	LAU2 with WHS		LAU2 without WHS		<i>t</i> -Test	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Population Departures 2000–2016	837.25	41.53	98.59	589.29	−0.979	0.328	588
Population Arrivals 2000–2016	869.00	704.31	1520.02	1819.76	−1.427	0.154	588
Population Dynamics 2000–2016	−0.42	16.32	2.83	36.72	−0.353	0.724	588
Population Dynamics 2007–2016	−0.18	7.59	4.35	26.64	−0.679	0.497	588
Employees in tertiary sector 2011 ¹	94.44	151.05	253.29	527.91	−1.201	0.230	588
Rate of employees in tertiary sector 2011 ¹	58.40	27.65	58.67	24.08	−0.043	0.966	588
Length of running water infrastructure 2016	27.71	20.78	26.58	21.95	0.177	0.860	588
Length of running water infrastructure related to Build Surface 2016	0.19	0.30	0.18	0.90	0.049	0.961	588
Length of sewerage infrastructure related to Population 2016	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	−0.056	0.956	588
Length of sewerage infrastructure 2016	11.11	1.34	12.89	13.27	−0.348	0.728	588
Length of sewerage infrastructure related to Build Surface 2016	0.02	0.05	0.07	0.88	−0.250	0.803	588
Length of running sewerage infrastructure related to Population 2016	0.00 ¹	0.00 ¹	0.00 ¹	0.00 ¹	−6.904	0.000 *	588

* Significant at $p < 0.05$; ¹ Values below 0.

From the data presented in Tables 2 and 3, it seems that there are no significant differences between the LAU2 with WHS and LAU2 without WHS. For all tourism indicators considered and almost all of the sustainable development indicators, there were no significant differences recorded. Furthermore, in most of the cases, the results showed higher means for the non-WHS condition. This indicates a stronger tourism development in rural destinations with traditional, cultural, or natural landscape attractions, whilst the WHS label for the moment does not seem to be very attractive for visitors. These values deny the existence of a positive effect of WHS's presence. Tourism activities have had a stronger development in the LAU2 without WHS rather than in the LAU2 with WHS. The indicators of sustainable development showed a similar pattern with the tourism indicators, reinforcing the idea that the WHS designation has no visible effect upon Romanian rural destinations. Specifically, our results suggest that the presence of a WHS will not increase the chances of a rural destination in attracting additional tourists or improving the living conditions of the resident population. We can fairly conclude that there is no significant impact of the UNESCO label on most of the LAU2 included in our analysis.

Several aspects highlight the above-mentioned results: out of 22 rural WHS, only four of them registered significant tourist arrivals during the 16-year period analysed (the general area of Moldavian Churches in the north of the country and the Fortified Church of Viscri in the centre of Romania). The increasing tourist demand in these destinations has generated the adaptation of the tourist accommodation offer into following the same, mostly ascending, trend. During 2001–2016, 18% of the Romanian rural WHS (4/22) did not have any tourist accommodation establishments, and two of them registered less than 1000 tourist arrivals in their accommodation establishments.

During the same 16-year period, the sewerage infrastructure has been lacking the necessary investments. More than a half of the rural LAU2 WHS do not have any kind of sewerage system and half of them do not have a water supply infrastructure. Moreover, some of these administrative units (e.g., Arbore, Valea Viilor, Patrauti) do not have any tourist accommodation establishments. At the last census, the population employment rate varied from 3.53% to 4.68% of the total active population despite the presence of WHS. The poverty of these local communities showed by this summary analysis proves, once more, that the UNESCO label does not automatically have a positive economic and social impact on the Romanian areas with WHS.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to determine the tourism effects of the WHS designation upon rural municipalities in Romania. Similar research for other countries has found either a strong effect of tourism development [3–5,7–10,13,14], a very small effect [19,20], or almost no effect at all [21–24]. Our study included only the rural LAU2 that have cumulated at least 1000 tourist arrivals during the 2001–2016 period (Figure 1). While a positive impact on tourist activities and, overall, on sustainable development was expected, the research results did not confirm the presence of a clear relationship between WHS existence and local tourism development or an improvement of the residents' living conditions. No significant statistical differences were reported between the two analysed groups—LAU2 with WHS and LAU2 without WHS. This finding is in agreement with previous studies that stated the lack of direct correlation between the WHS presence and tourism development in other countries [19–22].

For the Romanian sites, a possible explanation is offered by the main target population of WHS. As previous studies indicated [17], WHS are often more attractive for international tourists than for domestic ones, especially for European tourists [50]. Or this is the Achilles' heel for the Romanian tourism, as the international tourists represent only 22.6% of the total tourist arrivals registered in 2016 and only 18% of the total overnight stays [42].

It is possible that the low share of international visitors affect the popularity and tourism indicators of destinations with WHS. Unfortunately, this is impossible to clearly demonstrate because there is no statistical registration regarding the number of international visitors at LAU2 level or at WHS level.

A second possible explanation is offered by the small investments (at least until 2008) in the tourist capitalization of the UNESCO brand [51] and the national authorities' alternations between several branding opportunities, such as Dracula [52–54]. There has been a late development in the destinations with WHS, visible only in the recent years in the form of investments in the sites' renovation and conservation and in tourist infrastructure [55,56]. So far, only a limited number of WHS destinations have benefited from these national investments (e.g., Prejmer, Poienile Izei, Viscri). On the other hand, the entire Eastern European territory, Romania included, has inherited a few serious issues from the communist period that have left traces in today's tourism. While there is great tourism potential, its capitalization does not match the situation of Western countries, and hence the paradoxical situation of not registering a significant increase of tourist flows in WHS destinations. A faster overall development of Romania's tourism sector after 2000 could be another factor sometimes mistaken as an apparent impact of the WHS presence, as observed in several developing countries [27].

The insufficient national promotion of WHS could partially explain this weak tourism effects of the Romanian WHS, in addition to the tourists' educational background and travel preferences. In this case, there is a lack of structural promotion of WHS as attractive destination, especially among domestic tourists. There is also the matter of educating tourists in the spirit of appreciation of heritage sites for their unicity, singularity, authenticity, etc. As regards the travel preferences, recent European surveys indicate a lower interest for cultural tourist attractions among Romanians compared to the average of the EU residents (who represent about 75 % of Romania's foreign visitors [42]). Thus, in 2016, only 15% of the Romanian respondents mentioned culture as their main holiday motivation, compared to an EU average of 26% [57]. A 2017 survey indicated that only 18% of Romanians regularly visit cultural heritage sites or go to cultural events (compared to a 31% EU average), and only 78% consider cultural heritage important for local communities (84% at EU28) [57].

Romania's international promotion campaigns reflect a low and differentiated focus of national authorities on the tourist promotion of WHS, especially rural WHS. Since 2000, Romania has had three international tourism campaigns launched by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism, with several key national destinations appearing in these campaigns. Only few rural WHS have been presented in the campaigns, some of them (i.e., the Churches of Moldavia) with multiple appearances [58]. Other WHS destinations appeared only in the last campaign (after 2010) or not at all. This indicates different attitudes of the national tourism authorities regarding the importance of various WHS in the national tourism development.

During 2007, a real boom of tourist arrivals was recorded in Romanian rural destinations. However, this does not apply to destinations with WHS but rather to LAU2 without heritage sites (from two to 27 times more tourists were registered in 2007 compared to the previous year). This can be explained by the fact that, in Romania, tourism is still heavily sustained by the internal demand, which is not very interested in the UNESCO label but rather on the religious or historical significance of some of these sites. Thus, part of the studied WHS, such as the Churches of Moldavia, have been popular heritage attractions at national level for a longtime, a fact confirmed by tourist statistics since the early 1990s [42].

This could partially explain why only some WHSs managed to draw an important flux of tourists. This is the case of the Churches from Moldavia in the North-East of the country that have benefited from intense media discourses and from local and regional marketing strategies. For example, initiatives of local actors have strongly reinforced the national popularity of the Churches of Moldavia WHS, especially since the launching of a regional branding campaign in 2008 [6], supported by financial investments and the image capital of several political figures (hence, the high national impact). Other WHSs like Viscri have benefited from the association with Prince Charles of Great Britain, who visited Viscri and has a house in the village.

Private tourist strategies have also contributed to the tourist promotion and capitalization of Romanian WHSs. Thus, the WHSs sharing a similar cultural heritage have been functioning as integrated regional tourist products addressed to both national and foreign visitors. Such is the case of

the Fortified Churches of Transylvania, for example. These destinations mostly target foreign visitors with family or historical connections to the place, namely the Transylvanian Saxon migrants who return to Romania as nostalgia tourists [44]. Another aspect not reflected by tourist statistics is that most of the Romanian WHSs attract many transit visitors who buy such regional tours that usually include visits to several WHSs and accommodation in another locality in their proximity.

Another explanation for the study results can be offered by the different, individual capitalization strategies, adapted to territorial constraints. For example, the churches from cemeteries located at the periphery of transportation axes (the case of some Maramures churches, in the north of the country such as Ieud, Plopiș versus some living churches, close to transportation axes used by local residents and integrated into popular tourist products (the churches from Moldavia). Therefore, we can infer that the first sites are just being transited (part of them) whilst the tourists' accommodation is organized in well-known urban or rural establishments located in their proximity.

Finally, there is also a structural cause: no national integrated approach to tourism planning and development of WHS destinations has been advanced. Investments have been made in different time frames, counting on narrow strategies with very low or even inexistent focus on the UNESCO label. Several studies on WHS management promoted the idea of an integrated management plan for protected sites [15,36,59,60] at local, regional and national scale [60] in order to properly introduce them in the tourism circuit [61], without damaging their uniqueness [62].

Besides the stakeholders' involvement, the local community should play a more important role through an increased awareness on the role and importance of WHSs. This is necessary particularly in the regions lacking another economic development means [33,59], as tourism can be an important engine for convergence in Romania [63].

5. Conclusions

The present study brings new territorial information regarding a popular topic for both researchers and tourism stakeholders and hardly approached so far in Romania's case: the tourism impact of WHS designations. Overall, extremely diverse and complex national realities were underlined by the study results. Contrary to the general expectations and strategies usually built around the tourism benefits of WHS designation [43,44], this label does not seem to generate significant differences in the tourism development of the Romanian rural areas.

Compared to most of the similar impact studies that focus on tourism growth and economic aspects [30,31], this paper included several indicators linked to the impact on local population. In this regard, the results did not confirm a significant link between the WHS's presence and an improvement of the residents' life. This sustains previous findings from other countries where negative effects such as demographical pressure, have been observed [11,34–36].

For the analysed rural localities, there were no significant differences between the LAU2 with WHS and LAU2 without WHS designation. On the contrary, tourism activities are generally more developed in the LAU2 without WHS designation. This context is the result of several factors. The fewer tourism promotion initiatives (national and local) have generated rather fuzzy tourist images, where many destinations are less known individually. Other factors are accessibility (most of the sites are marginal to the major transport and tourism axes) and the lack of other popular attractions able to retain tourists for more than a several hours visit.

However, at regional level, the situation is more nuanced, since a few WHS destinations managed to draw an important number of tourists due to local and regional strategies. A major variation is introduced by the differentiation of those sites through their individual designation, further reinforced through tourism promotion and other local tourism initiatives.

Overall, the study indicates a rather weak national tourism impact of WHS label, a fact induced by the low involvement of national authorities in increasing the national awareness regarding this label and in internationally promoting the WHS. The results suggest that local initiatives have usually a limited (up to regional) impact when they are not reinforcing national directions. All this underlines

the need for a convergent involvement of tourism stakeholders at both the national and local level in the promotion and capitalization of Romanian WHSs.

The main limitations of this study refer to the lack of statistical data at LAU2 level for several tourism indicators (e.g., tourist expenditures, the structure of tourist arrivals etc.) and especially for indicators of sustainable development. This did not allow very precise and more in-depth analysis of the territorial tourism impact, neither research findings that could be compared with other countries.

Since the LAU2 with WHS designation cover all regions of Romania, future research could focus on a regional analysis aimed to identify the differences between the WHS and the non-WHS condition at regional level, as a result of a different local tourism approaches to WHS.

Additionally, future recordings of tourism and sustainable development indicators at LAU2 level could enable more in-depth studies on this topic in Romania. This would also allow a better understanding of this situation and of how UNESCO impacts on tourism and enables a sustainable tourism development in rural areas. Further studies could also extend this approach to urban WHSs in Romania and compare their impact.

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