

# Revisiting the Master Plan for Tourism Development in Romania. Content Analysis

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**Abstract**

The tourism industry has gained importance as a trigger of sustainable economic growth and regional development after the regime change in 1990. This paper investigates the Master Plan for Tourism Development issued in 2006 as the main strategic policy document to guide the next two-decade long evolution. The gaps between the goals set by the master plan and the persistent low performance of the Romanian tourism call for more systematic research of policy guidelines and outputs. Responding to this need, the study employs the content analysis based on computer-aided techniques (VOSviewer) aiming to get insights into the main themes approached by the master plan. Based on the semantic clustering and relatedness of the key terms, our findings point to a fairly good match of pre-defined categories of the master plan and the core associations of terms identified in the analysis. We also highlight the conceptual shortages and themes overlooked that hamper the coherence and structuring of the master plan. The analysis provides policy relevant information for government, entrepreneurs and local communities engaged with tourism development. We argue that this analysis is timely in the anticipation of future tourism reassessments and recovery strategies in post-COVID-19 era prompted by the reorganization of stakeholders and their actions to meet the changing perceptions and behavior of tourists. Further directions of research are outlined.

**Keywords:**

Tourism; master plan; content analysis; VOSviewer; Romania.

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**Introduction**

Since the regime change in 1990, Romania has embarked in a transformation process of economy and society. Tourism came to the forefront as an economic sector with a great potential for development grounded on the diversity and richness of the natural and cultural resources. During the 1990s the challenges encountered by the tourism industry were, among others, the slow privatization of formerly state-owned infrastructure, political and economic instability, difficult institutional capacity building. These reflected in declining international arrivals, derelict infrastructure, low performance and competitiveness. However, the availability of EU funds (LEADER, SAPARD) helped the emergence of new tourism investments and businesses. In particular, rural tourism was empowered as a strategy of economic diversification through the generation of jobs and incomes. Driven by the compliance with *acquis communautaire* along the accession process to EU, a master plan for tourism development was issued in 2006. Structured in two main parts, this strategic policy document was aiming at developing Romania as a 'quality tourism destination' matching the EU standards of product and service delivery (Ministry of Economy, Energy and the Business Environment, 2007). Covering a two decade-long period (2007-2026), the master plan set specific targets to be accomplished: 6.9% tourism contribution to GDP, international arrivals and nights spent to grow by 4.8% and 6.8%, respectively. Taking as a reference timeline the year 2019 - before the onset of the pandemic crisis, the policy outputs fall short of the master plan goals, especially in regard to international arrivals (2.68 million), employment in hotels and restaurants (3.62% of total employment) and contribution to GDP creation (2.7% in 2019). According to Eurostat tourism statistics in 2019, Romania ranked low in tourism attractiveness (nights spent) and intensity (nights spent by tourists at accommodation

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establishments per inhabitant), average stay, share of population participating in tourism, and travel receipts and expenditure.

Although the planning period is not over yet, the mismatch between the master plan targets and actual developments drove us to search for explanatory factors that prevented the progress of tourism industry. To this aim, we use the content analysis as a tool of qualitative research to scrutinize the second part of the master plan devoted to vision, goals and targets, and strategic initiatives to assess the coherence and structuring of the policy designed by the master plan. The novelty and originality of the paper relies on the research method that has not been used so far to assess tourism policy documents. We argue that this analysis is timely and relevant in the anticipation of future tourism reassessments and recovery strategies in post-COVID-19 era.

## 1. Review of the scientific literature

There is a wide recognition of tourism as a path to development. Its role to support development is conditioned by proper planning and management based on policy frameworks (Harilal, Tichaawa and Saarinen, 2019). Tourism planning is defined as “anticipating and regulating change in a system to promote orderly development so as to increase social, economic and environmental benefits of the development process” (Murphy, 2013, p. 156). Hence, the tourism industry requires holistic and future-oriented planning to downsize the negative externalities and further guide the development (Saarinen, Rogerson and Hall, 2017). The economic models that influence the design of tourism policies rely on the multiplier effects and backward linkages of tourism that positively impact the local and regional economies (Yang and Fik, 2014; Bohlin, Brandt and Elbe, 2020). Empirical studies focused on the correlation between economic and tourism growth at sub-national levels point to strong interaction and dependence of tourism growth on the overall economic development. Hence, the conclusion is that tourism follows rather than leads the economic development (Bohlin, Brandt and Elbe, 2020). This finding highlights the role of local and regional policies to capitalize on the complementarities and synergies between tourism and other economic sectors. Besides the economic models related to tourism, the contextual and historical dimensions of tourism influence its evolution (Saarinen, Rogerson and Hall, 2017) and should be considered in policy design and conceptualization. This view enables the understanding of tourism as pursuing a path-dependent evolution or following a breaking-through trajectory of development.

Planning and management of the tourism industry entails comprehensive and dynamic input data of both supply (accommodation infrastructure) and demand (tourist flows). Several arguments support the need of an integrative approach of tourism: first, the tourism space cannot be regarded as a fixed entity (Miller 2017), but has a strong spatiotemporal dimension as it is constantly produced and consumed; second, both supply and demand are strongly localized and concentrated (Yang and Wong, 2013; Majewska, 2017); third, both the supply and demand are related to territorial attributes unequally distributed within and between territories (Batista e Silva, et al., 2018). In-depth assessment of tourism variables and their spatial patterns is paramount to the correct management of tourism (Rodríguez Rangel, Sánchez Rivero and Ramajo Hernández, 2020). Supply of accommodation holds a direct influence on the overall development of tourism destinations and should be regarded as a central tenet of the planning process (Sharpley, 2000) since the diversity and density of accommodation supply are attractions on their own (Majewska, 2017). Dynamic analysis of tourist flows across space and over time adds policy-relevant information on various models of destination development, local and regional competitiveness, and competition-cooperation frameworks (Yang and Fik, 2014; Bohlin, Brandt and Elbe, 2020; Rodríguez Rangel, Sánchez Rivero and Ramajo Hernández, 2020). Spillovers stemming from tourism dynamics flow within and between destinations and regions bearing a strong impact on knowledge, productivity, and role in regional economies. Therefore, the tourism policy should consider both positive and negative externalities by incentivizing collaborative marketing efforts and joint strategic actions (Yang and Fik, 2014; Romão, Guerreiro and Rodrigues, 2017). Tourism is regarded as a vehicle in regional development and in reducing spatial disparities (Bohlin, Brandt and Elbe, 2020). However, it should be supported to contribute to the balanced regional development (Goh, Li and Li, 2014) given that tourism is more sensitive to centripetal rather than centrifugal forces of the economy (Bohlin, Brandt and Elbe, 2020). It means that urban centers are more attractive for tourism location due to diversified infrastructures, amenities, accessibility, assets, and experiences. Against this prevailing concentration pattern of tourism in urban areas, there is a widely acknowledged view of tourism as an engine for growth in peripheral regions. The positive outcomes of tourism development in the peripheries are many: diversification of local economy, additional source of income, enforced resilience to external shocks. Nevertheless, peripheral regions share structural weaknesses that are difficult to overcome without public investments and targeted regional planning and policy interventions. Placed at the intersection of endogenous growth theory and stakeholders theory, the literature on tourism advocates the

role of local communities to generate development through investments in human capital and innovations (Romão, Guerreiro and Rodrigues, 2017; Bohlin, Brandt and Elbe, 2020). In addition, Sanabria-Díaz, Aguiar-Quintana and Araujo-Cabrera (2021) point to the power and involvement of the public authorities in implementing development policies and influencing specific target groups or stakeholders (tourists, the tourism and hospitality companies and tourism destinations).

The pandemic significantly challenged the tourism industry worldwide. A central question arises related to the impact of the pandemic on tourism industry: which factors trigger the bounce back of tourism in post-crisis setting (Haywood, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Ioannides and Gyimothy, 2020). In such a context, the renewal of tourism in the post-pandemic era entails tourism policies able to respond in a systematic and comprehensive way to changing patterns concerning climate change mitigation, sustainable tourism promotion, local communities engaging and societal welfare (Sharma, Thomas and Paul, 2021). In the particular context of the EU where a solidarity fund has been enacted to cope with the pandemic effects, planning interventions should match the supranational and national levels of decision-making including stakeholders (enterprises, tourists and destinations) through institutional coordination, resource management, political responsibility and education programs (Sanabria-Díaz, Aguiar-Quintana and Araujo-Cabrera, 2021).

## 2. Research methodology

Content analysis (quantitative relational analysis) helps categorizing textual units based on frequency counts and similarity scores to cluster and visualize the networks of related items (Kirilenko and Stepchenkova, 2018). Applied to bibliometric mapping (van Eck and Waltman, 2010; Bazm, et al., 2016; Merigo, et al., 2018; Rialp, et al., 2019), the content analysis based on VOSviewer (a java-based program freely accessible) has been extended to a wide range of research fields: political discourses (Albaugh, et al., 2013), policy documents (Derrick, Meijer and van Wijk, 2014), corporate website disclosure of environmental policy (Popescu, 2017). Similarly, tourism studies employ content analysis to identify the main areas of research, topics, authorship, and geographical coverage of high ranked scientific journals (Martorell Cunill, et al., 2019). This research method has been recently used to identify the themes central to resilience-based strategies aiming at reviving tourism industry in post-COVID19 era (Sharma, Thomas and Paul, 2021).

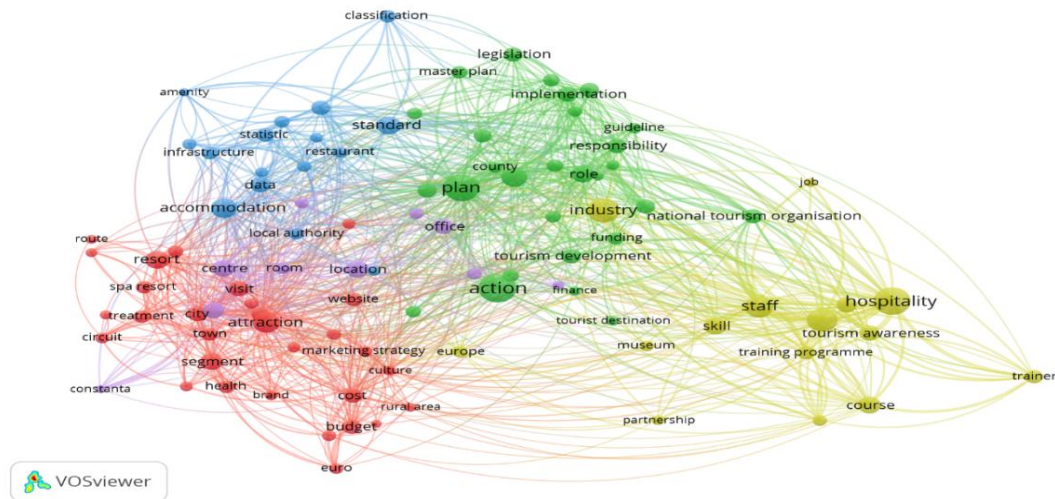
A growing body of literature uses VOSviewer for investigating the content of policy documents which employs a linguistic filter to select the most relevant noun phrases helping the identification of thematic clusters. The analysis of various corpora of texts identify clusters of words based on their occurrence and relatedness (co-occurrence), which may be hierarchically associated and visualized as maps or graphical charts based on the spatial proximity. Steps taken before running the software include: collection of the text document, conversion into a text corpus for analysis, similarity checks of structure and style, removal of stop words irrelevant to identifying the themes; co-occurrence matrix creation of words with a minimum ten occurrences retained in the analysis; topics extraction; interpretation of word clusters and networks based on their proximity and relatedness.

This paper uses the VOSviewer software for an in-depth hierarchical cluster analysis of the content of the Master Plan for National Tourism Development 2007-2026. Our focus is on its second part dedicated to Vision, Goals, Targets and Strategic Initiatives containing 125 pages and 59,584 words. The section is organized along multiple headings including: tourism policy, organization and legislation; human resource development and training; planning and development proposals; information services; investment policy; marketing and product-market matching; and environment.

## 3. Results and discussions

By the means of VOSviewer software a semantic cluster map resulted displaying five main clusters with different degrees of importance (Figure no. 1). The minimum number of occurrences of a term was set at 10; from the total of 6,942 terms, 211 met the pre-defined threshold. For each term retained in the analysis, a relevance score was calculated and the default choice was to select 60% most relevant terms. Finally, the selected terms number 127 grouped in five clusters with 1,399 links. One of the most extended and coherent cluster is built around the term 'plan' and secondly comes the term 'ministry'. This association of terms shows the emphasis given to the management-related activities as the core functions of the governmental body. 'Policy' comes next to 'function', 'guideline', 'legislation' and 'responsibility' showing the main role of the national tourism organisation (NTO). This goes in line with the aim of the master plan to restructure the NTO as an efficient and effective organization in charge with marketing, information provision

and support to all sectors of the tourism industry. The term ‘role’ is matched with ‘advice’, ‘recommendation’ and ‘support’ which embody the need of strong and efficient relations with the industry stakeholders. In fact ‘local administration’ and ‘county’ represent the main stakeholders for territorial planning and policy implementation and so complete the geographical scales to be approached in the process of tourism development. There is a strong association of the terms ‘implementation’, ‘action’, ‘process’, ‘target’ and ‘funding’ which denotes the process by which policy is translated into action. Likewise, the terms ‘tourism destination’, ‘promotion’, ‘tourism information centres’ and ‘regional development’ are closely linked.



**Figure no. 1. Semantic cluster mapping – networks of terms**

Another strongly connected cluster has two key terms: ‘industry’ and ‘hospitality’ closely related to ‘staff’ that pinpoint one of the main shortcomings of the Romanian tourism: the quality of the employment. This is suggested by the next layer of terms as importance in this cluster including the words ‘job’ and ‘skill’ which are further associated to terms such as ‘training program’, ‘trainer’ or ‘course’. The term ‘visitor satisfaction’ is interestingly added as a variable, showing the connection between service quality, highly influenced by the employment quality and training, and visitor satisfaction, which eventually determines the destination revisiting rate. According to the cluster mapped relations it could be read the fact that ‘development’ and ‘visitor satisfaction’ can be reached through ‘training programs’ and ‘partnership’ as the terms ‘staff’, ‘skill’ and ‘job’ are semantically close to ‘trainer’ and ‘course’.

Beside these two clusters revolving around the key words associations of ‘plan – ministry’ and ‘industry – hospitality’, other three important semantic groups stand out from the analysis, namely one around the term ‘attraction’, close to the one around the term ‘accommodation’ to which a third one referring generally to tourism role is added.

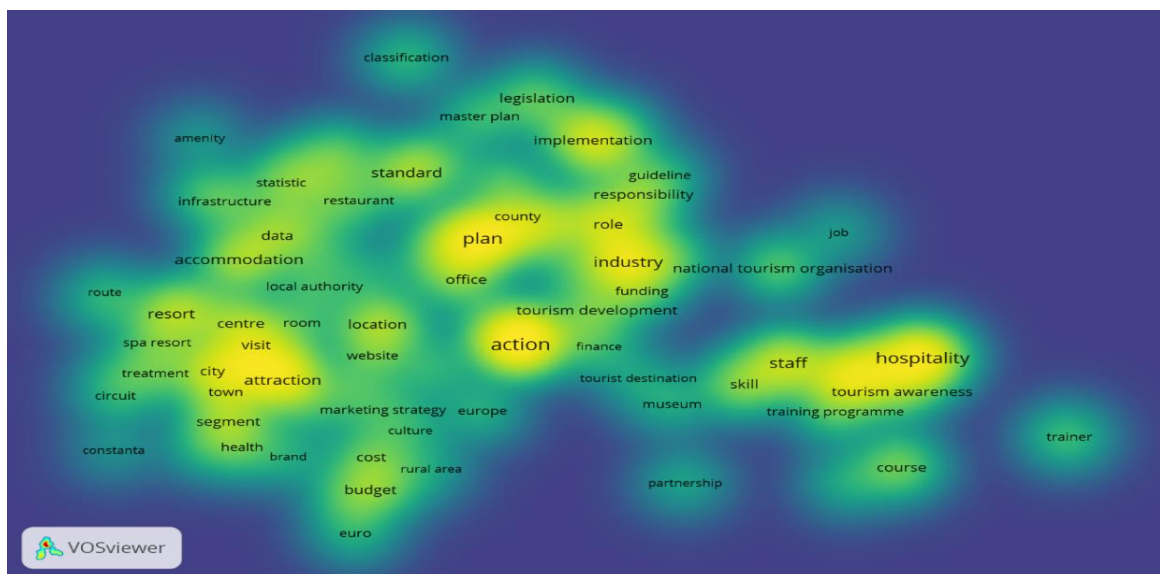
The significant cluster centered on the term ‘attraction’ contains networked terms, such as: ‘tourism destination’, ‘tourism product’, ‘resort’, ‘visit’ and ‘stay’. Close relatedness is found between associations of ‘circuit’ and ‘route’; ‘spa’, ‘health’ and ‘treatment’; ‘city’ and ‘culture’ showing on the one hand the dominant forms of tourism products (spa tourism, cultural tourism) and the increasing role of new destinations and products within overall tourism offer. Another form of tourism is ‘ecotourism’ that appears strongly related to ‘environment’ and ‘rural area’. The target region is Transylvania, and the cities of ‘Constanta’ and ‘Bucharest’ seem mostly appealing for both domestic and international tourists. Two more terms are included in this cluster, namely: “awareness” of the stakeholders of the attractiveness of the tourism destinations on one side, and “website” as the main channel of communication and information and also of promotion for many of the local and regional tourism attractions and their amenities on the other side. Closely connected is the succession of terms, such as ‘market demand’, marketing strategy’ and ‘brand’ that altogether represent the core of the strategic design.

Less developed is the cluster built around the term ‘accommodation’, although the cluster composition suggests a significant semantic coherence. It is closely connected with ‘standard’, ‘classification’ and ‘rate’ as the occupancy rate and the high seasonality of tourism demand remain important problems for the accommodation units in many tourism destinations of Romania. The term “restaurant” adds to the mapping of this cluster, showing the importance of catering units for the industry in general and of their contribution to the overall turnover of the sector, even in out of season periods due to events meant for both business tourism and local residents. A strong association is found between the terms: ‘infrastructure’, ‘transport’,

‘road’ and ‘improvement’ stressing the relation between the attractiveness of tourist destinations and the overall quality of activities, mobility and accessibility. The term ‘local authority’ is added to point to the main stakeholder involved in local development policy whereby road infrastructure modernization is key to support the performance and competitiveness of tourism destinations.

The last cluster stands apart by its more difficult semantic correlations to be deciphered. The cluster is made up of terms, such as ‘centre’ associated with ‘office’, ‘conference’, ‘meeting’, ‘representative’ and ‘member’. Supposedly, it may refer to Romania as an appealing destination for business tourism, although the term is not explicitly mentioned. Or it may emphasize the structural and institutional complexity of the tourism industry and the role of cooperation and joint involvement into decision making.

The density of connections between terms summarizes the emphasis of the master plan on specific issues related to tourism development (Figure no. 2). The relatedness of the key terms indicates a well-framed structure of the master plan underpinned by some persistent themes within the dimensions of tourism development. The highest density reflects the level of semantic relatedness between industry, plan and action. The strong co-occurrences of these terms embody the main aim of the master plan to providing the legal, institutional and policy framework for the long-term development of the tourism industry. The second semantic core relates to the importance of human resources development to trigger tourism specialization and economic growth. Finally, tourism attractions are central to the identification of the main forms of tourism and targeted regions for development.



**Figure no. 2. Semantic cluster mapping – relatedness of the key terms**

Overall, the semantic cluster mapping on the tourism master plan shows that there was a multidirectional approach targeting different areas of action among which the most important seems to be the staff training, the attractions development and promotion, the improvement of transport access, the modernization and the higher occupancy rate of accommodation infrastructure. The master plan promotes specific types of tourism – nature-based, spa and wellness, rural and cultural tourism. It also envisages measures to address critical issues for the tourism development: the low level of management activities and implementation of projects; the lack of focus on monitoring and assessing the progress towards the enhancement of tourism development; the marginal role of promotion and advertising for tourism destinations; poor relations with stakeholders and little interest to respond to their needs and requirements. Acknowledging the lack of strategic direction, the master plan intended to provide key inputs for the formulation of future tourism development and marketing policies (Jaliu, 2012). Recent tourism studies discuss the institutional instability, poor administrative capacity and financial shortages as the main determinants hampering the implementation of the master plan (Burja and Burja, 2014; Postelnicu and Dabija 2016; Pop, Coros and Balint, 2017).

### Conclusions

In sum, there is a good match of pre-defined categories of the master plan and the semantic clusters identified in the analysis. The approach integrates economic, sociocultural and environmental values in tourism planning and development. It also includes public management by distinguishing the main stakeholders involved into the process of tourism growth. The master plan relies on the understanding of

the tourism industry as a link between different levels of decision-making and interconnected areas of action.

The directions and measures promoted by the master plan gained more consistency through the follow-up strategic documents and programs released after 2006 demonstrating the conceptual and practical underpinnings of the tourism policy. Two of them are worth mentioning, albeit with mixed results. First, it is related to the marketing and promotion strategy enacted in 2010. As a result of a EUR900 thousand project, Romania was branded under the logo 'Romania: explore the Carpathian Garden'. Contested in content and criticized in form, the brand was unable to raise the international visibility of Romania as an appealing tourism destination. In contrast, more benefits are expected from the series of documentaries ('Wild Romania', 'Flavors of Romania', and 'Wild Danube') streamed by the British Broadcasting Company espousing the untouched nature, traditions and lifestyles on one side and the challenges for a sustainable tourism development on the other side. Second, it is the recently launched program 'Attractive Romania', EUR100 million budget within the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience. It extends the priority given to cultural tourism in the master plan by identifying 12 cultural routes with positive impact on reaching international markets.

Conversely, our analysis points to some important conceptual shortcomings and confusing wording that should be addressed by the forthcoming revisions of the tourism policy. The utmost limitation is the neglect of the term 'space' as a central dimension of any economic policy. The lack of associated terms, such as 'balanced territorial development' or antonyms (inequalities, disparities) gives credit to the findings of the existing studies arguing that tourism is a factor of widening rather than reducing spatial gaps (mainly inter and intra-regional) (Constantin and Reveiu, 2018; Cehan, et al., 2019). There is also an incomplete approach of some basic themes. For instance, the term 'sustainability' is missing either when referring to environment protection or/and destinations development. Cultural tourism is supported as a mainstream form of tourism; however, the term 'heritage' does not receive a proper consideration. Likewise, promotion, marketing and branding are discussed without reference to 'international visibility' although the goal of attracting increasing international arrivals was clearly set up in the policy document. The identification of the stakeholders is limited to local authority, regional development agency and county; 'communities', 'entrepreneurs', and 'tourists' do not appear as key terms of the identified clusters and networks. Overlooking these stakeholders means to under-estimate the interactional and relational effects entailed by inclusion, participation and coordination and their meaning for planning and development. Alternatively, we noticed a relative semantic disconnection of the relevant terms. Analyzing the relatedness and co-occurrences of the key terms, it appeared that some are placed in wrong language contexts. For example, market research and marketing strategy although semantically close, are grouped in different clusters. Similarly, the term museum is related to hospitality and training, instead of city and culture. Finally, the fifth cluster identified in our analysis while connecting terms with similar meaning, it is difficult to interpret and place within the overall design of the policy document.

Tourism industry is an outcome of its policy formulation and implementation. As shown by our study, the formulation of the master plan is well-grounded on tourism specificities and the directions of development are rightfully meant to capitalize on natural and cultural resources. It follows that the implementation failed to close the gap between plan and action. This assumption echoes the conclusions of the recently released strategy for tourism development (The World Bank, 2019) pointing to the deficitary implementation, low involvement and financing, and institutional changes as the main determinants that hampered the positive effects of the master plan. In terms of liabilities of tourism development, this new document reiterates some emphasized by the master plan (low accessibility of tourism attractions, low quality services of destinations) and adds some new (limited opportunities for consumption, low institutional capacity, inadequate segmentation of the market, poor international visibility). However, many of the shortages exceed the tourism policy framework and relate to the wider context of economic development. We argue that a valuable extension of the present research could be the comparative semantic analysis of the two policy documents to follow the dynamics and adjustments revealing the change of focus, the temporal variations in frequencies of term clusters, reasons and contents of change.

The systematic and comprehensive research investigation of policy documents may be useful in the post-pandemic context when planning and management play a vital role in designing actions for tourism recovery. As advocated by the international literature, tourism policies should propose efficient ways to manage stakeholders through coordinated involvement of institutions, efficient management of resources, educational programs and enhanced political responsibility (Sanabria-Díaz, Aguiar-Quintana and Araujo-Cabrera, 2021; Sharma, Thomas and Paul, 2021). Aligned to these worldwide efforts of reconstruction and renewal, the policy response based on scientific knowledge and taking advantage of the European Solidarity Fund, may help Romania becoming a successful tourism destination.

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