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Tourist Valorisation of the Cultural Identity of Galați County, Romania

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ABSTRACT

The concept of cultural identity encompasses a sense of belonging to a human group with cultural traits such as customs, values, traditions, and beliefs mutually shared. Identity is not a truly fixed concept; it is analytical, ambiguous, and filled with many contradictory meanings. According to Cooper and Brubaker (2000), the concept is fluid and constantly renegotiated, being recreated individually and collectively through continuous external influences. Identity is directly linked to history and cultural heritage.

According to anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological studies, identity emerges in opposition and as a reaffirmation of the other. Although the concept of identity transcends borders (as in the case of migrants or refugees), the origin of this concept is often linked to a territory. In an anthropological sense, territory is considered a "living environment, of action, and of thought of a community, associated with processes of identity construction" (Tizon, 1995).

From a methodological perspective, the study employed a quantitative approach, involving direct engagement with residents of both the municipality and the county of Galaţi. The aim was to assess their perceptions of cultural life, the development of the hospitality sector at the local and regional levels, and the anticipated benefits of repositioning the area as a destination of national and international tourist interest. This would be achieved through the valorization of cultural tourism resources—particularly ethnographic and folkloric heritage—thereby contributing to the strengthening of the region's cultural identity.

Keywords: culture, ethnography, folklore, rurality, traditional costume, tourism development.

INTRODUCTION

"Culture is something living, composed both of elements inherited from the past and of external influences that are adopted, as well as innovations invented locally. Culture has social functions. One of them is to provide a sense of self-worth, an essential condition for any development, whether personal or collective" (Verhelst, 1994)

The aim of this article is to reflect on the relationship between cultural identity and tourism. This is a difficult but inevitable relationship, and by taking advantage of the existing resources in a given territory, a new form of tourism may arise: ethnographic tourism. From different perspectives, the need to assign new social uses to such resources is emphasized, and one of the most important is tourism. Tourism can be a beneficial phenomenon for culture and cultural identity, or a serious threat to it. One or the other outcome will depend on whether certain important reflections are addressed—such as the practice of sustainable tourism in all its forms.

Culture plays an important role in the development of a territory, to the extent that many towns and places in Europe have committed to a revaluation of culture, identity (even recreating new cultural identities), and heritage as a central axis of their own development. Carles García, in "Ethnological heritage, culture, and memory", notes the following:



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"Local development has become the new driver of heritage policies. While the society of places becomes the society of flows, it seems that places have engaged in an identity-building endeavor that prioritizes the local or civic dimension over national, state, and global ones. Identity is the traditional domain of heritage, and it is no surprise that among the objectives recognized by most heritage-related actions in these areas is the (re)construction of local identities."

This recreation or strengthening of identity can not only revive and repopulate rural areas—which today are almost entirely depopulated—and spark interest in an apathetic population in continuous decline and with no apparent future, or achieve social cohesion, but it can also trigger economic activities and thereby improve the income and quality of life of the entire community.

Usually, this income is related to the supply of products, goods, and services that are appropriately placed on the market, ranging from early human activities like agriculture to modern ones such as tourism. In terms of services, tourism has a particularly historical relationship with culture, cultural identity, and both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. According to Hernández Hernández (2002:356), one could speak of cultural tourism since ancient Rome and Greece, with the 18th century marking a closer relationship between travel and cultural heritage, as public museums emerged and what we now know as cultural tourist routes began. In the 19th century, travel guidebook collections appeared, and the heritage concept expanded to include the ethnological. In the 20th century, mass tourism emerged, along with other heritage-related forms of tourism: ecological, gastronomic, and cultural tourism.

The cultural identity of Galați County

Galați County is divided into three ethnographic subzones (Figure 1). The first is the Cocurlui South ethnographic area, the second is Covurlui North, and the third is the Tecuci-Zeletin ethnographic area. The delimitation of these zones was established over many years of fieldwork conducted by the visual artist and ethnologist Eugen Holban. The differences between these areas are marked by the architecture of traditional rural houses, traditional crafts, and certain geographic features.

The Galați area covers the southern part of today's Galați County, as well as some villages in the southeastern part of Vrancea County, and a large portion of the interwar Cahul County located beyond the Prut River in the Republic of Moldova. The northern boundary of this area runs south of the communes Oancea, Băneasa, Vârlezi, Smulți, Corod, Matca, and Barcea. The main feature of the peasant households in this area is the blind stove with a back room (chiler) where the fire was lit in the hearth. This element extends from the cultural traditions specific to the Bărăgan Plain, with the architectural style showing Wallachian (Muntenian) influences (Figure 2).

In the villages along the Prut River, Lake Brateş, and the lower course of the Siret River, which has a wide floodplain, fishing plays an important role. Ethnographic elements related to the diversity of fishing tools and boats as well as old reed-thatched houses, are of particular interest, . The bulrush (papură) found near Lake Brateş was used to weave mats (an essential item in any household—used to cover the clay floors of rooms or as shade in the fields) and to create household items, most commonly baskets used to carry food to the fields. This food was kept in clay pots and covered with towels woven by women in winter by the light of oil lamps. These woven fabrics were also used to make towels for various events, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, featuring beautiful floral, zoomorphic, and geometric motifs, all significant ethnographic value.

The Covurlui-North area includes the northern part of the Covurlui Plateau. Its southern boundary follows the previously mentioned route up to the commune of Corni. From there, it continues along the border between Vârlezi and Corni and rises past the communes of Valea Mărului and Corod, reaching Bălăbăneşti, where it meets Vaslui County. Peasant architecture here is an identity marker, characterized by houses made of adobe, with a hall and a room divided in two. In the back section was the "iatac" or "etac"—a third of the room's space separated by a partition wall, which was the stove used to heat both rooms and for cooking. In this area, peasant architecture is purely Moldavian (Figure 3).

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume IX Issue VII July 2025

The villages in this region are old, many established by "răzeși" (free peasants and landowners in medieval Moldavia), and contain many interesting cultural and ethnographic features, such as houses made of woven twigs, supported by forked posts buried in the ground, and coated with a thick layer of clay mixed with straw or chaff.

The Tecuci-Zeletin area largely preserves the configuration of the southern half of the former interwar Tecuci County. It incorporates elements of both Wallachian and Moldavian peasant architecture. The "iatac" appears in a corner of the room in the form of a small, enclosed bed space ("cotruță"). Ethnographic aspects in this region are related to fishing and fishing tools, as well as household industries, particularly woven towels and carpets (Figure 4).

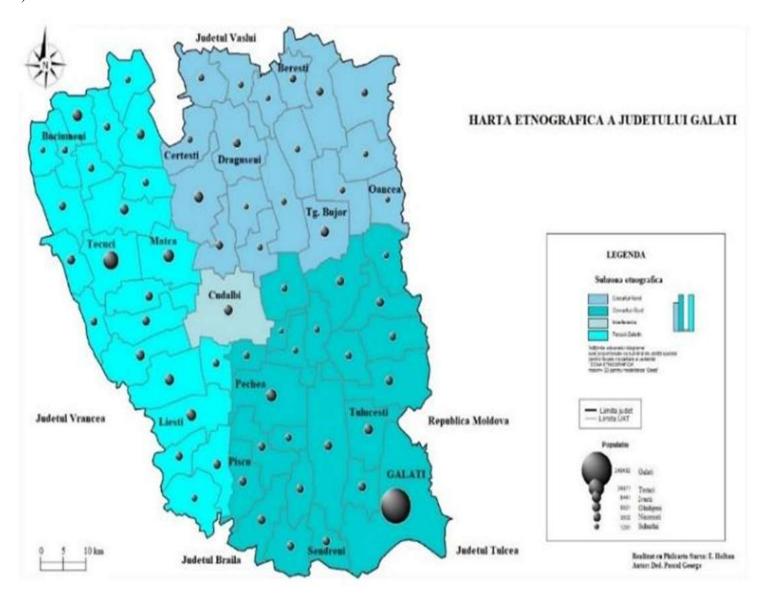


Figure 1. Ethnographic Map of Galați County

Legend: Dark Blue – Ethnographic subzone Covurlui-South; Turquoise – Ethnographic subzone Covurlui-North Light Blue – Ethnographic subzone Tecuci-Zeletin The commune of Cudalbi is located at the intersection of the three subzones.

Source: Eugen Holban

Realized by author





Figure 2. A thatched house specific to the southern Covurlui ethnographic area.

Source: https://Galaţicityapp.ro/places/muzeul-satului-Galaţi-sijbghyx1ytdtg



Figure 3. Traditional house from the Covurlui-North ethnographic area

Source: https://Galaţicityapp.ro/places/muzeul-satului-Galaţi-sijbghyx1ytdtg



Figure 4. Traditional house interior, with walls decorated with handwoven towels and carpets.

Source: https://Galaţicityapp.ro/places/muzeul-satului-Galaţi-sijbghyx1ytdtg

The traditional costume of Galați County - symbol of cultural identity

Within the cultural space of southern Moldova, the Romanian traditional folk costume, through certain elements of local specificity, stands apart not only from the traditional dress characteristic of neighbouring regions, but also from that of the entire Romanian territory. This raises intriguing questions regarding its origins—especially considering that the area where this type of costume is found overlaps with parts of the former Roman province of Moesia Inferior, as well as with the territory inhabited by the Free Dacians, a region continuously populated since the Neolithic era. During the Middle Ages, this geographic area was traversed by important trade routes: those starting from the mouths of the Danube and heading toward Lviv and Crimea; the route taken by merchants from the Balkans to the Baltic Sea; and the Central European route, which originated in the Adriatic region, passed through the Romanian principalities, and continued westward across the continent to Flanders.

This study also highlights an ancient practice specific to European culture: transhumance. Dr. Savu Timariu defines transhumance as "the alternate and periodic movement of flocks between two regions with different climates—summer in the mountains, winter in the lowlands." The term, as the same work explains, is of Latin origin ("trans" – across, "humus" – land), and it accurately reflects a long-standing reality—not only within Romanian territory but



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across Europe. This traditional practice has been formally acknowledged in the European Union through the European Charter of Transhumance, signed in 1997 in Cuenca, Spain. In Romania, transhumance is historically associated with the,, mocani,,—shepherds from southern Transylvania.

In Galați County, the traditional garment that covers the lower part of a woman's body and which substantially contributes to the distinctive appearance of the peasant costume is the, catrință, or,, pestelcă,, (traditional wrap skirt) (Figure 5). What ethnographer Eugen Holban identified in the 1980s was that this wrap skirt, was composed of two rectangular panels, always worn as a pair: one in the front and one in the back. These were usually woven from wool using a four-heddle loom.

Each panel was, in turn, made of two separate pieces, woven individually and then joined together by hand using a zigzag stitch with coloured wool thread. Executed in this expressive zigzag style, the seam not only served a functional purpose but also enriched the decorative surface of the garment, softening or even entirely masking the visual effect of the joining. One of the colours used in the overall decoration of the piece was typically chosen for this seam. While the seam on the front panel was always executed using this carefully crafted zigzag technique, the one on the back panel was sometimes made with a simpler, straight seam. The two panels were placed over the lower part of the shirt, leaving visible white spaces at the sides and the hemline.

Over the past two centuries, women in our cultural area have worn three main types of blouses for special occasions: the old-style blouse (called "cămeșoi,, or straight blouse in villages—also known to specialists as the tunic-style or poncho-style blouse), the gathered blouse in romanian "cămașa cu altiță, " also known as the shoulder blouse, and in its version without a skirt, simply called the i.e, and the patched blouse called in Romanian language "cămașa cu platcă,, , which came into use much later than the other two, which are more traditional and ancient. These styles coexisted and were chosen based on the preferences of the community or different age groups.

The traditional men's costume consisted of a fine silk shirt, embroidered in white, with long, wide sleeves and cuffless ends, often adorned with tassels and buttons. The collar was narrow, straight, and close to the neck, featuring geometric patterns on the chest that ran parallel to the slit, as well as on the sleeves. These motifs were predominantly blue or red, dyed with natural vegetable-based colours. The shirt reached down to the knees.

The festive men's shirt (Figure 6) with a yoke was distinguished by a stylized vegetal-geometric decoration, located on the collar, chest, and cuffs. The central motif consisted of a garland of flowers and leaves. The primary focus of the design was the ornamental composition on the chest, made up of three vertical rows descending from the collar to the waist, alternating with two circular motifs. The embroidery was done using the cross-stitch technique. The colour palette—red, green, and the natural white of the fabric—gave the garment a simple and understated character.

The shirt was sometimes long, reaching down to the ankles, and was fastened at the waist with a belt. These shirts were typically worn over trousers or over traditional undergarments.



Figure 5. "Catrintă, or "pestelcă, - traditional wrap skirt.

Source: Personal archive





Figure 6. Traditional men's shirt and details

Source: Personal archive



Figure 7: Traditional women's gathering for crafts and socializing. May 2025. Coordinator: Hulea Ecaterina

Source: Personal archive



Figure 8: Traditional women's gathering for crafts and socializing. Cultural activity in Village Museum. June 2025. Coordinator: Hulea Ecaterina

Source: Personal archive

Tourism in Galați County

Theoretical aspects of tourism

We define tourist supply as the set of natural and artificial tourist attractions that motivate large numbers of tourists

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to travel to the destination to satisfy demand. In addition to the tourist attractions themselves, the supply includes the resources and equipment for the production and commercialization of the final tourism product, the goods and services intended for consumption, the conditions under which it is marketed, the technical and material base, and, last but not least, the labour force (Nedelea, 2003:49).

In the specialized literature, tourism supply is divided into primary, which includes all natural resources (physical and geographical potential), and secondary, which includes human-created resources (historical, architectural, cultural, ethnographic values, etc.). It is important to note that primary tourism supply is characterized by its uniqueness, distinguishing it from secondary tourism supply in that natural resources cannot be artificially reproduced by humans, as they are created by nature, in space and time (Cosmescu, 1998:23).

Primary and secondary tourism supply form the basis of the tourism industry, which is shaped into different tourist products, solely through the consumption of labour, reflected in the provision of tourism and hospitality services, specific to each tourist product. The complex and heterogeneous nature of the tourism supply is composed of several components that can be classified as follows:

- 1. Tourism potential, as the main element of tourist demand attraction, consisting of all natural and anthropogenic resources to date, that can represent an attraction for the population involved in tourism;
- 2. Tourist equipment, consisting of all fixed and circulating assets that contribute to meeting the tourism needs;
- 3. The services provided to tourists and the goods offered for their consumption, strictly of a tourist nature;
- 4. The labour force, which transforms all other mentioned elements of potential production into real production.

From a dynamic perspective, we can represent tourism as a system that connects three key elements: the subsystem of tourist action, the subsystem of actors, and the subsystem of tourism products (Velasco, 2004), and consider that tourism represents a blend of the multiple relationships that can occur between all the pieces that make up the system.

Tourism infrastructure of Galați County

Regarding the types of tourist establishments in the studied area, the figure shows a clear lack of tourist infrastructure. Hotels, rental rooms, and tourist guesthouses predominate, with most of them located in the municipality of Galați and the city of Tecuci, the second-largest city in the county. The most important ones are the 3-star Ibis Style Dunărea Hotel, the 4-star Viva Club Hotel, and the 4-star Mercur Centrum Hotel. All these hotels have their own restaurants offering local specialties (traditional Moldovan cuisine and fish dishes). The main segments are business tourism, cultural tourism, and also high-potential economic tourists transiting the region.

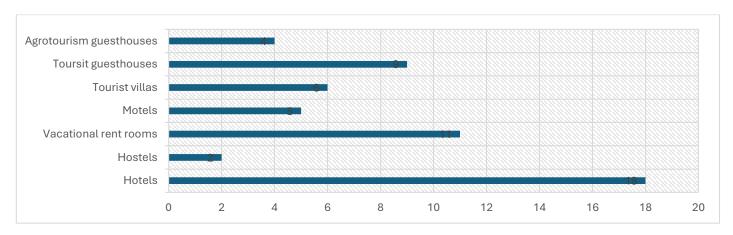


Figure 9. Number of types of tourist establishments in Galati County.

Source: Own elaboration based on Tempo Online (http://statistici.insse.ro/)



The number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation establishments in July 2024 amounted to 16,729, representing a 0.5% increase compared to the same month in 2023. Compared to the previous month, overnight stays in tourist accommodation structures with lodging facilities in Galati County in July 2024 showed an increase of 8.2%. The number of overnight stays by Romanian tourists in tourist accommodation structures in July 2024 accounted for 84.5% of the total number of overnight stays, while the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists represented only 15.5% of the total number of overnight stays.

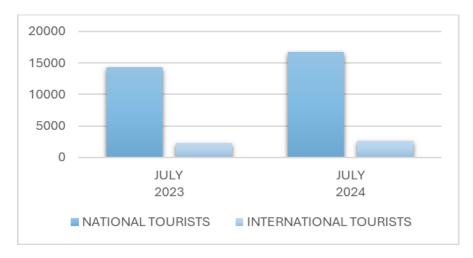


Figure 10. Overnight stays in tourist accommodations

Source: Own elaboration based on Tempo Online (http://statistici.insse.ro/)

In July 2024, tourists preferred to stay in 3-star tourist accommodation establishments (76.4%), followed by 4-star establishments (16.1%) and 2-star establishments (7.5%). The arrivals of Romanian tourists in tourist accommodation structures in July 2024 accounted for 86.0% of the total number of arrivals, while the arrivals of foreign tourists represented only 14.0% of the total number of arrivals. The number of foreign tourist arrivals to Galați County in July 2024 increased by 9.8% compared to July 2023, while the number of Romanian tourist arrivals decreased by 1.4%. Of the foreign tourists staying in the tourist accommodation facilities in Galati County, 87.4% come from Europe, 6.9% from North America, and 3.3% from Asia.

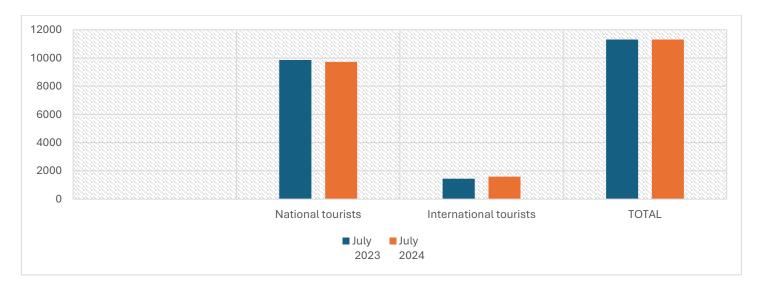


Figure 11. Arrivals of tourists in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions

Source: Own elaboration based on Tempo Online (http://statistici.insse.ro/)



ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume IX Issue VII July 2025

Ethnographic tourism – the bridge between cultural identity and tourism development

Tourism has evolved over the centuries. While in the mid-20th century, travellers chose their destinations based on what they wanted to see, admire, and witness, by the end of the 20th century this was no longer enough. There was a need for diversified activities to be available at the admired place. In the 21st century, travellers choose their travel destinations based on the ability of these places to offer meaningful, unique, and memorable experiences that are different from what they can find in other places. This evolution has impacted tourist destinations that today focus on designing and offering such distinguishable and unique experiences, set apart by their authenticity, which largely rests on the cultural identity characteristics of the community inhabiting the tourist destination.

Due to this renewed form of tourism and its demand, there have been investments, including governmental ones, in culture and art like never before. But also, largely because of this, the tourism system, tourism interests, have permeated the designs and plans that states create, reflecting in the curricular models of formal education, the restoration and habitation processes for public use of monuments, towns, and cities with significant historical relevance, the determination of criteria for enhancing cultural elements, protective measures, revitalization, and the programming of festive events and traditional fairs, etc.

A direct and unintended consequence of this form of tourism-cultural production and its consumption has been its intervention in the reconstruction of both national and local cultural identities (Franklin & Crang, 2001:10), generating a constant process of creation, recreation, and preservation of a sense of belonging, past, place, culture, and ownership. Once again, it is proven that tourism works as a driving force for change, forcing a rereading of the past and present, adapting meanings not so much to supposedly objective facts but to the consideration given to these facts by its permanent users.

Ethnographic tourism in Galați County can be developed due to the existence of a rich cultural heritage and history, reflected and supported by an important local historical and architectural heritage. The opportunities to materialize this potential are:

- 1. Valuation of historical heritage and monuments through conservation and restoration.
- 2. Design of thematic routes/tour circuits in the county.
- 3. Signage of the representative functions that some buildings have housed (palaces, memorial houses, museums, public offices, consulates).
- 4. Introduction of historical monuments into national and international thematic tourist circuits.
- 5. Organization and promotion of cultural events, exhibitions, soirées, debates, and meetings in restored heritage buildings, both in cities and villages.
- 6. Promotion of traditional local clothing through media outlets at the level of the Moldavia province and also nationally.
- 7. Participation of folklore groups in various festivals and traditional events both in Romania and abroad.
- 8. Promotion of local festivals and fairs to attract an increasingly larger number of tourists and organize additional cultural activities aside from these events.
- 9. Identification and activation of local stories and legends (e.g., underground network of helmets, cellars, tunnels) with signage of visit points and access.)

METHODS

Using the survey method for research, I directly asked the 50 citizens of Galați County about their perception of cultural identity, as well as the potential benefits of revitalizing the area as a national tourist destination through the enhancement of cultural tourism resources, particularly ethnography and local folklore, marking their imprint on cultural identity. I will highlight the most important questions and answers.

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the following statement: 'Galați County represents an ancient ethnographic hearth, with



traditions, customs, and a unique folk costume, which gives it a unique cultural identity within Moldova.

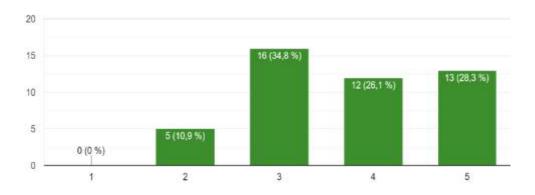


Figure 12. Answers

What type of tourism is predominantly practiced in the municipality of Galati and in the county?

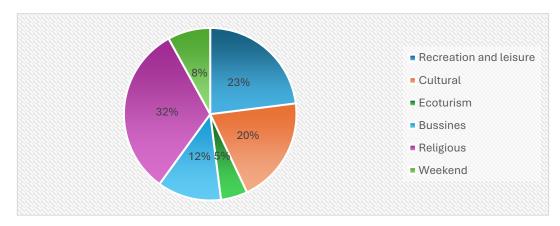


Figure 13. Answers

Do you believe that a large flow of tourists could have a cultural impact with changes in the life of the local community?

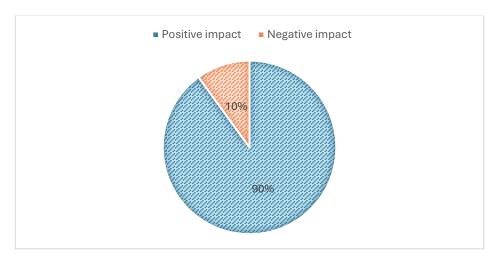


Figure 14. Answers

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume IX Issue VII July 2025

Would you get involved in the development of local tourism (volunteering, specific activities, training courses, etc.)?

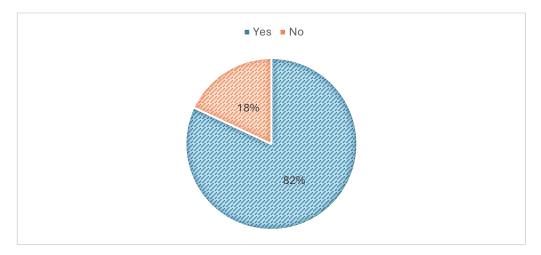


Figure 15. Answers

Do you consider that Galați County (which includes the old Covurlui region), including the municipality, has a distinct cultural identity compared to other regions of the country in today's context?

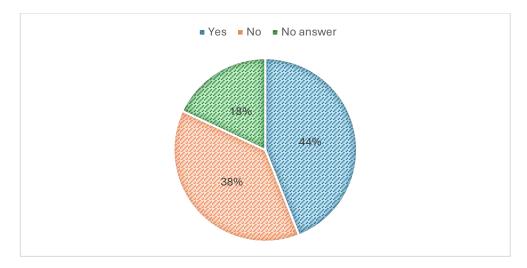


Figure 16. Answers

General objective and specific objectives for the launch of ethnographic tourism

General objective: to improve accessibility and the valorization of historical and cultural heritage	
Specific Objective 1: Restoration and tourist valorization of historical/cultural heritage to increase public access and the number of tourists.	Specific Objective 2: Increase access to cultural and architectural heritage through public investment.
Investment priorities	
Restoration, protection, and conservation of national cultural heritage with significant tourism potential (restoration of buildings with traditional	➤ Improvement of access to tourist attractions, their surroundings, and premises through the

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architectural elements, monuments, historic sites and ensembles, cultural centers, museums, etc.) with a view to their inclusion in tourism circuits;

- Investments for the protection and tourist valorization of archaeological sites;
- Development of integrated plans for the protection of cultural heritage;
- Training at various social levels (national/regional/county/local) to raise awareness about the role of immovable cultural heritage in preserving national and local cultural identity;
- Cooperation with international partners in joint programs and projects for the protection of immovable cultural heritage;
- Supporting the creation of new art museums, giving priority to structures of county importance, dedicated to the most important cultural themes of the area;
- Supporting the creation of public galleries or museums of modern/contemporary art.

renovation of existing roads and enhancement of their safety;

- > Creation of rest and camping areas, as well as parking spaces for visitors wishing to explore county heritage sites;
- Development of small public infrastructures such as restrooms, public gardens, and children's recreational areas, all located near cultural attractions;
- Modernization of communal roads that connect monastic complexes and ethnographic villages, with the aim of creating tourist circuits;
- > Investments in nighttime lighting for historical/cultural heritage sites.

CONCLUSIONS

From everything written in this paper, it becomes evident that the favourable historical conditions have left their marks, which have influenced the cultural identity of the area to varying degrees. The uninterrupted contact with neighbouring regions of the country—particularly with Transylvania through the shepherds who practiced transhumance, a phenomenon of significant cultural importance at the national level, with Bessarabia through trade, and also with the Wallachian population—has, to some extent, influenced folkloric elements such as traditional clothing, folk art, and has introduced certain ancient crafts to the region. All of this has enriched Galați County with immense cultural potential.

Based on the information gathered for this study, it is clear that Galați County has the capacity to develop tourism in countless forms. As a former ethnographic center with significant cultural potential in all its dimensions—archaeological, historical, religious, and, last but not least, folkloric—due to its location at the intersection of ancient trade routes and between major ethnographic regions and subregions, it still preserves an ethno-folkloric heritage. If this is harnessed from a tourism perspective, it can bring both spiritual and material benefits to the local population, helping them identify more deeply with their native places and successfully achieve the touristic valorization of cultural identity in Galați County.

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