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MINORITIES AS DRIVERS OF REGIONAL TOURISM DYNAMICS

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***Purpose of the article**: Minorities constitute a source of dynamism within their communities, both historically and in contemporary contexts. This paper explores the relevance of historical minority communities in shaping regional tourism development, with a particular focus on Romania and the Republic of Moldova.*

***Methodology**: Using a desk research approach, the study analyses how cultural heritage and community identity linked to minorities contribute to the diversification and sustainability of tourism. Special attention is given to projects aimed at restoring major minority-related attractions, which not only preserve cultural assets but also stimulate local economies.*

***Conclusions:** Regions or areas with a higher share of ethnic minorities may develop niche forms of ethnic cultural tourism. For these areas, there are more feasible arguments for obtaining project funding. Despite its potential, ethnic tourism remains marginal in most tourism development strategies.*

***Originality:** The paper further highlights the main forms of tourism associated with minorities, emphasizing their role in enhancing regional competitiveness and fostering cross-cultural understanding.*

***Keywords:** minorities, regional tourism, cultural heritage, ethnic marketing.*
JEL Classifications: Z23, Z10, R58

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of the tourism sector represent an undeniable characteristic. The number and diversity of tourist attractions are continuously increasing, and the hospitality sector is striving to adapt to this paradigm. Forms of tourism are becoming increasingly niche-oriented, and regions that are not among the top tourist destinations are considering the valorisation of any niche, provided that tourism development is included in their strategic objectives. In Eastern European countries, the tourism potential is still far from being fully capitalized. Relatively few destinations - mostly urban ones - are confronted with the phenomenon of over-tourism, which is prevalent in Western European regions. Consequently, the creativity of tourism stakeholders constitutes a valuable resource for identifying and developing new tourism products tailored to different types of tourists. As a particular feature, many Eastern European countries represent a crucible of historical minorities, and this characteristic has the potential to add a distinctive nuance to the region's tourism offer.

As research premises, we can mention the increasing frequency of associating a major tourist attraction with references to historical ethnic minorities, both in Romania and in the Republic of Moldova. Furthermore, a significant research gap has been identified - there are very few published works in the field that refer to the studied area.

This paper explores the relevance of historical minority communities in shaping regional tourism development, with a particular focus on Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Using a desk research approach, the study analyses how cultural heritage, traditions, and community identity linked to minorities contribute to the diversification and sustainability of tourism. Special attention is given to projects aimed at restoring major minority-related attractions, which not only preserve cultural assets but also stimulate local economies. Moreover, considerable attention is devoted to the strategies through which tourist destinations associated with minority-related attractions are promoted. In this context, ethno-marketing emerges as a key instrument, enabling the design and promotion of tourism products that authentically reflect the cultural identity of minorities while fostering sustainable community development. The paper further highlights the main forms of tourism associated with minorities - such as cultural, educational, heritage, roots and religious tourism - emphasizing their role in enhancing regional competitiveness and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

The paper has the following structure related to minorities in tourism: theoretical construct and key dimensions; typology and connection with tourism forms; operational and applied approach, with reference to Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Minorities represent a complex subject, difficult to interpret and define at both the conceptual and operational levels (Goldmann, 2001; Caraman & Mîndru, 2017). The general definition refers to a minority as a social category composed of individuals with distinct characteristics that differentiate them from the majority group within society. The fundamental characteristic is therefore the majority–minority dichotomy, with most research focusing on issues related to the protection of minority rights at the societal level.

In this study, the focus is placed on the valorisation of the specific characteristics of minority groups within the field of tourism. Minorities can be defined at several levels: individual (ethnicity, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, personality, way of thinking, disability, etc.), organizational (managerial status, workplace, seniority, union affiliation, etc.), and social/ cultural (nationality, education, language, customs, geographical location, socio-economic background, income, marital/parental status, etc.). This latter level of analysis - social/cultural - is the most relevant for the tourism sector.

Research indicates that multicultural and multi-ethnic societies generate numerous advantages (Table 1). Over time, immigrants have played an essential role in innovation and job creation, while public policies can significantly influence this phenomenon (Carney, 2007; Chodavadia et al., 2025; World Tourism Organization, 2018).

Table 1. Advantages brought by minorities at the societal level

Dimension	***Associated advantages***
Identity and cultural	• represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of a society. • contribute to cultural pluralism - offering different models of life, traditions, and values. • preserve intangible heritage (language, dances, gastronomy, crafts). • enrich creativity and artistic expression (music, literature, architecture). • can become intercultural bridges between different nations or regions.
Economic	• can be active economic actors (artisans, entrepreneurs, merchants). • in tourism - bring authenticity and local specificity, increasing the attractiveness of destinations. • can develop niche products (traditional gastronomy, ethnic tourism, handicrafts). • contribute to the sustainable development of rural and multicultural communities. • through migration and diaspora - stimulate the transfer of capital and know-how.
Political and legal	• reflect the degree of democracy and tolerance within a society. • require mechanisms for the protection of rights (education in the mother tongue, political representation). • can play a role in multicultural and social inclusion public policies. • can influence international relations, especially in border regions. • provide a test of social cohesion and respect for diversity.

Educational and social	• promote intercultural education and the learning of respect for differences. • contribute to interethnic dialogue and the reduction of stereotypes. • can be integrated into the school curriculum to help form global citizens. • support community cohesion through joint cultural projects. • can offer alternative models of social and family organization.
Historical and geopolitical	• represent traces of history - colonization, migration, empires, changing borders. • can act as factors of stability or tension, depending on the political context. • contribute to the plural national identity characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe. • in tourism, the history of minorities becomes part of the collective memory and historical narrative.
Symbolic and value-based	• embody the values of tolerance, solidarity, and social justice. • can serve as indicators of a society's openness to globalization and multiculturalism. • represent the necessary "otherness" for defining the majority identity. • function as a critical mirror - revealing a society's limits or achievements in terms of inclusion.

Source: *authors' own compilation based on the literature reviewed.*

Although minorities contribute diversity and cultural value (Dench, 2017), in certain contexts they may also become sources of tension or triggers of conflict (Table 2), particularly when they are politically instrumentalized or when intercultural dialogue is lacking. Minorities can be viewed as a barometer of societal maturity (Smith, 1987): where dialogue, legal protection, and inclusion are present, minorities become resources for social cohesion and cultural innovation; where they are marginalized or politically instrumentalized, they may become sources of conflict.

Table 2. Challenges associated with the existence of minorities at the societal level

Dimension	Associated challenges
Political tensions and ethnic conflicts	• political manipulation of ethnic identity – parties or leaders may exploit differences for electoral gain. • historical revisionism or ethnically motivated territorial claims. • discriminatory policies can lead to radicalization or separatism.
Using minorities as a pretext for wars	• minorities can be used as a "pretext" for external interventions – under the guise of "protecting compatriots". • hybrid wars may arise based on ethnic and cultural rhetoric. • interethnic tensions can be amplified through propaganda and media manipulation.
Social division and lack of cohesion	• without integration policies, isolated communities (cultural ghettos) may form. • stereotypes and mutual prejudices lead to distrust and exclusion. • the majority may perceive minorities as a "threat" to national identity. • educational segregation or economic inequality may emerge.
Communication and representation issues	• lack of interethnic dialogue generates cultural and social misunderstandings. • minorities may be underrepresented in media, politics, and administration. • conversely, they may be overrepresented in a negative way (stigmatization, exoticization). • lack of an authentic voice leads to marginalization and cultural alienation.
Unbalanced economic and social impact	• in certain contexts, minorities may become dependent on external aid or economically isolated. • massive migration among minorities can lead to local depopulation and loss of traditions. • economic inequalities between ethnic groups can create resentment and social tensions.
Identity and cultural conflicts	• in times of crisis, cultural differences may be perceived as a threat to national unity. • a "defensive identity" may arise in both majority and minority groups. • forced assimilation or, conversely, voluntary ethnic isolation weakens social cohesion.
Sensitive geopolitical dimension	• regions with mixed ethnic composition can be vulnerable to external influence. • cross-border minorities can become subjects of diplomatic disputes. • in unstable areas, ethnic pluralism may be perceived as a risk of territorial fragmentation.

Source: *authors' own compilation based on the literature reviewed.*

The distinctive element contributed by minorities to the tourism sector is authenticity, which represents a central component of the tourist experience. Interest in intangible heritage is increasing, as tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences and direct contact with the living culture of local communities (Lonardi, 2022). Two types of authenticity can be distinguished: place-bound authenticity, related to geographical origin and certification, and heritage-framed authenticity, based on traditions, history, and established brands. The theoretical implications of this typology highlight that authenticity is not universal, but rather socially and culturally negotiated (Cheng et al., 2024).

By analysing the advantages brought by minorities to society (Table 1), it is possible to identify elements with a direct relevance to tourism, although the sector both influences and is influenced by multiple socio-economic factors. Accordingly, the main advantages contributed by minorities to tourism include:

- providing authenticity, diversity, and originality in tourism;
- transforming minority cultural heritage into an identity-based tourism product;
- stimulating local development and responsible tourism;
- contributing to the multicultural branding of a region or a country;
- encouraging intercultural dialogue through direct experiences between tourists and local communities.

Social and cultural factors (such as family involvement and youth migration) are essential for tourism entrepreneurship (Neculăesei et al., 2012; Manalu et al., 2024; García-Soto et al., 2024). Members of minority groups use cultural heritage to access funding, initiate development projects, and revitalize local culture (Fraser, 2020; Manolescu & Neculăesei, 2014; Talmaciu et al., 2020).

The main potentially conflictual elements (Table 2) with a direct impact on tourism are:

- superficial promotion of minorities may lead to excessive commercialization of culture ("kitsch folklore");
- minorities may be symbolically exploited without generating real benefits for the community;
- tourists may perpetuate stereotypes if appropriate cultural mediation is lacking;
- in the absence of an ethical approach, tourism may distort traditions or even damage minority heritage.

Tourism can both reduce and amplify ethnic tensions, depending on the conditions of interaction (Fan, 2024). Collaboration becomes possible when common objectives exist (e.g., tourism development), power relations are balanced, and institutional support is provided.

The relationship between tourism and minority identity is therefore complex. The impact of tourism on the preservation or transformation of cultural identity is not always positive, revealing the dilemma between authenticity and commercialization of minority culture. The dynamics of intercultural relations between majority and minority groups in a tourism context may follow a win–win model, through the use of complementarity and the competitive advantages of the stakeholders involved.

Public policies and programs aimed at promoting social inclusion in tourism, at both national and European levels, are aligned with sustainable development strategies and cultural diversity objectives. At the European and international levels, there are concrete goals and measures for the protection of minorities and multicultural heritage (Manolescu et al., 2019), although their implementation shows varying degrees of success. Effective solutions increasingly rely on multi-stakeholder models (Abdikarimova et al., 2025; Talmaciu & Manolescu, 2023), both at the programmatic level and in the implementation of tourism projects that valorise minorities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a desk research methodology, relying on a systematic review of the academic literature related to minority valorisation in tourism.

This paper is based on an analysis of the academic literature, starting from the research gap identified in studies addressing the valorisation of minorities in tourism, particularly in Romania and

the Republic of Moldova. A limited number of sources referring to minority-based tourism were identified in the Web of Science (WoS) database, although an upward trend in publications on this topic can be observed over time. Only eleven publications were found to directly address Romania and the Republic of Moldova (Table 3).

Table 3. Number of publications in the field over time in WOS

Period	*Average and range of the number of publications (Tourism + minorities)*	*No. of papers (Tourism + minorities + Romania / Moldova)*
1995 - 2008	4 (between 1-16)	11
2009 - 2019	35 (between 24-54)	
2020 - 2024	66 (between 64-70)	

Source: *Authors' own analysis.*

Consequently, scientific works from additional databases were included in the analysis in order to ensure broader coverage of the topic. The analysis is complemented by the examination of national and regional tourism portals in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, which are used to identify illustrative examples and representative case studies. Secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and institutional tourism websites are synthesized to highlight prevailing trends and approaches to minority-based tourism development (https://www.romania.travel/ro/category/regiuni; https://turism.gov.md/ro/).

The results are presented in the form of synthesizing tables, which summarize key findings across studies, as well as selected case studies that exemplify good practices in minority tourism valorisation. A comparative analytical framework is employed to examine similarities and differences between Romania and the Republic of Moldova with regard to the role of minorities in tourism development. This methodological approach enables a structured comparison of national contexts while providing qualitative insights into how minority identities are integrated into tourism strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the academic literature and the examples identified in the two countries analysed, a correlation was established between minority-specific aspects, the types of tourism that are impacted or can be further developed, the description of the mechanisms involved, and selected examples from the studied areas (Table 4). The forms of tourism related to ethnic communities include cultural tourism, heritage tourism, anthropological tourism, historical tourism, and ethno-tourism (indigenous tourism). In addition, more niche forms may also be identified, such as event tourism, diaspora or roots tourism, and social tourism.

At the level of the two regions studied, several tensions of ethnic tourism were identified (Yang & Wall, 2009). The first major issue concerns state regulation versus ethnic autonomy, which occurs especially in areas with special regimes regarding granted or self-declared autonomy.

The contradiction between cultural exoticism and modernity emerges from the tension between tourists' desire for cultural exoticism and ethnic communities' aspiration for modernity, being particularly prevalent in rural areas. The tension between economic development and cultural preservation reflects the fact that tourism is often promoted as an effective strategy for regional economic development, yet it can also lead to dramatic changes within ethnic communities. In this context, the preservation of culture becomes a critical issue. This contradiction is especially evident in areas characterized by strong migration flows, a phenomenon observed in both Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Finally, another major contradiction is that between authenticity and cultural commodification. Cultural commodification may induce local people to alter their behaviours, resulting in the loss of traditional activities and other authentic aspects of cultural expression (Guţuţui & Andronic, 2024; Talmaciu, 2022).

Table 4. Relationship between minority-related aspects and different forms of tourism

Minority-related aspect	*Associated tourism type / form*	*Description & examples*
Ethnic identity and cultural heritage	Ethnic / Cultural Tourism	Tourists seek authentic experiences of minority life - traditions, crafts, music, cuisine. Examples: Saxon villages in Transylvania, Gagauz cultural festivals.
Traditional crafts and local livelihoods	Rural / Community-based Tourism	Minority groups host visitors, share local lifestyles, and benefit economically. Examples: Secui pottery workshops in Corund; Ukrainian villages in Maramureș.
Historical and religious monuments	Heritage / Religious Tourism	Visits to synagogues, mosques, old churches, and historical districts. Examples: Jewish Heritage Routes.
Preservation of minority traditions and performing arts	Festival / Event Tourism	Promotion of minority culture through festivals, music, dance, gastronomy. Examples: Haferland Week (Saxon culture), Romani Kultura Festival, Gagauz Wine Festival.
Diaspora and identity reconnection	Diaspora Tourism / Roots Tourism	Members of ethnic minorities visit ancestral homelands or heritage sites. Examples: German Saxons returning to Transylvania; Moldovan Bulgarians visiting Taraclia.
Minority inclusion and intercultural dialogue	Educational / Intercultural Tourism	Programs and study tours promoting diversity awareness and tolerance. Examples: NGO-led intercultural workshops in multicultural regions (Dobrogea, Moldova).
Discrimination, accessibility, representation issues	Inclusive / Social Tourism	Ensuring tourism participation for marginalized minority groups (ethnic, religious, LGBTQ+, disabled). Examples: Accessible tourism projects; LGBTQ+ travel initiatives in urban centers.
Minority entrepreneurship in tourism	Creative / Experiential Tourism	Minority artisans and guides develop creative tourism products (cooking classes, crafts, storytelling). Examples: Roma jewelry-making workshops, Lipovan fishing experiences.
Cross-border ethnic and cultural links	Transnational / Cross-border Tourism	Routes connecting related minorities across countries. Examples: "Danube Cultural Route", "Carpathian Multiethnic Route".

Source: *authors' own compilation based on the literature reviewed and institutional tourism websites.*

For sustainable tourism development, managers must identify inter-ethnic threats (Fan, 2024) and create favourable conditions for collaboration, including fair regulations, shared objectives, and the reduction of power imbalances.

Three main approaches to minority involvement in tourism can be distinguished: minorities as a tourism resource (ethnic and cultural tourism), minorities as actors in the tourism industry, and tourism of minorities (tourists belonging to minority groups).

Minorities as a tourism resource (ethnic and cultural tourism) represent the most frequently encountered approach, both in the academic literature and in regional development programs (Văduva et al., 2021).

This approach is based on the development of ethnic or identity-based tourism, which involves the valorisation of the culture, traditions, gastronomy, and crafts of minority communities. Another important component is the intangible heritage of minorities, which includes fundamental elements such as music, dance, costumes, festivals, and gastronomy. Minority languages are of particular importance as a tourism resource, as they can differentiate destinations and provide uniqueness. Four key themes have been identified in relation to this component (Lonardi, 2022): authenticity (minority languages are perceived as authentic and local); promotion (languages are used in destination

branding, signage, events, and tourism products); sustainability (tourism can support the preservation of minority languages by providing economic and social value to communities); and the risk of commercialization (the superficial use of language for tourism purposes may lead to a loss of authenticity and even language extinction). The impact of tourism can therefore be positive (cultural revitalization and identity pride) or negative (standardization, stereotyping, and pressure to use global languages). Finally, thematic cultural routes, defined as itineraries that highlight minority communities, represent integrated tourism products with high attractiveness, which can also be developed at a cross-border level (Buchko, 2021; Cyargeenka, 2023; Manolescu & Talmaciu, 2021). The net advantages of ethnic tourism are the increased attractiveness for residents as well, which contributes to the resilience of this form of tourism (Talmaciu & Manolescu, 2021.

Minorities as actors in the tourism industry represent a less developed research strand, albeit one with a positive trend, particularly in the context of growing entrepreneurship and labour shortages in the tourism sector - phenomena specific to both regions analysed. This approach refers to the participation of minority groups as entrepreneurs, guides, artisans, or hosts in rural and cultural tourism. The main challenges relate to issues of economic access and social capital in tourism development, as well as to the application of community-based and participatory tourism models. Practical implications (Cheng et al., 2024) include the design and implementation of tourism policies that valorise local products and culinary traditions, collaboration with local producers, and the use of storytelling, certifications, and participatory experiences to enhance tourism attractiveness (Kushniruk & Rutynskyi, 2022; Tahiri et al., 2020).

The third approach is particularly important for both Romania and the Republic of Moldova, as it concerns the tourism of minorities (tourists belonging to minority groups). Relevant for the two regions are ethnic groups that have experienced significant emigration but continue to return to the regions to which they remain emotionally and culturally connected. It is essential to identify the travel behaviours and motivations of minorities (ethnic, religious, sexual, or linguistic) and to assess issues of accessibility and discrimination within the tourism experience. In this context, diaspora tourism represents an alternative perspective, referring to visits to places of origin by minority groups dispersed globally.

A comparative analysis (Table 5) highlights several essential aspects related to the valorisation of minorities in tourism in the two countries under study.

The representative case studies identified can be grouped into four main findings: both countries possess significant potential with regard to minority-related tourism; good practices are already in place; integrated multi-ethnic destinations represent successful examples; and the hospitality industry can incorporate ethnic elements in order to achieve better community integration and increased attractiveness.

Table 5. Comparative analysis of minority valorisation in tourism: Romania and the Republic of Moldova

Dimension / Analyzed aspect	***Romania***	***Republic of Moldova***
Ethnic and cultural tourism	Saxons, Székelys, Lipovans, Roma	Gagauz, Bulgarians, Jews
Public policies	Regional strategies (e.g. multicultural Transylvania)	Promotion of ethnic tourism in Gagauzia
UNESCO heritage / potential	Fortified churches, Danube Delta	Ethnographic sites in southern Moldova
Minority gastronomy	Tourism-recognized diversity	Insufficiently valorised resource
Community-based tourism	Transylvania, Maramureș	Gagauzia, Taraclia

***Source**: Authors' own compilation based on the literature reviewed and institutional tourism websites.*

The significant potential can be illustrated by the large number of manors located in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, many of which are associated with prominent historical figures from abroad. An illustrative example is the Manuc-Bey Mansion in Hîncești, Republic of Moldova, which has been recently renovated and has become a driver of tourism growth in the quasi-rural area to which it belongs.

Good practices in the field can be exemplified by the creation and promotion of the Jewish Heritage Route in Iași, Romania, which includes authentic elements and reflects openness and recognition of the Jewish community's contribution to local development.

Ethnic-combination destinations are best represented by Viscri, Romania, which integrates Saxon historical heritage with the international appeal generated by visits of the King of the United Kingdom to the residence he purchased and restored in the region. Tourism in the area has grown exponentially as a result of this combination of elements.

Influences on the hospitality industry are illustrated by the Breb Village Hotel, Maramureș, Romania, which offers accommodation in wooden houses built in traditional Maramureș architecture, complemented by specific facilities and interior designs. This approach provides an authentic experience not only through local attractions but also through supporting services.

Research on minorities in tourism in Romania and the Republic of Moldova highlights ethnic diversity as a competitive advantage in cultural tourism and demonstrates how intangible heritage (gastronomy, dance, festivals) becomes a key driver of tourism promotion.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there is potential for cultural, ethnic, or local tourism (e.g., rural, spa, or ecotourism), the counties with significant ethnic minority groups are not among the main national tourism engines.

Regions or areas with a higher share of ethnic minorities may, however, develop niche forms of ethnic cultural tourism (e.g., festivals, museums, crafts, gastronomy). For these areas, there are more feasible arguments for obtaining project funding. Community-based tourism models and cross-border multicultural routes can be proposed as integrated tourism products, capable of gaining recognition among both international and domestic tourists.

Despite its potential, ethnic tourism remains marginal in most tourism development strategies.

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