The Development of Winter Sports Tourism in Romania – A Historical Approach

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to present a historical approach of Romanian winter sports tourism focused on the importance and the future-oriented development of the skiing activity and ski resorts, having as landmarks: the end of the 19th century, the beginning of the communist regime (1948) and the fall of the communism (the Revolution of 1989). Based on a bibliographic documentation and statistical data, the study underlines mainly the development particularities of winter sports tourism for each period of time. Winter sports have been practiced in Romania since the end of 19th century. Many sports associations and clubs from different regions of the country having as objective to promote winter sports appeared at that time. During the communist period ski areas were not a priority. A series of investments was made in order to increase the accommodation capacity. The intense political, social and economic transformation experienced by Romania during the first years following the Revolution of 1989 led to a lower demand of tourism services which affected the development of winter tourism. Romania does huge efforts to develop the ski activity which will positively influence the evolution of winter sports tourism.

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Introduction

Located in the south-eastern part of Central Europe, Romania is a country with a very varied and diverse tourism potential and a landscape consists of 27.91% mountains of total country area, with altitudes between 600 - 2500m, an average height of 840m and 10% of the country's territory above 1500m. The hills and plateaus have altitudes between 200-600m

and the plains under 200 m (Posea, 2005). The development of ski resorts in Romania experienced several stages, each of this having different political, economic and social context. Harnessing tourism potential that this country possesses has not been a priority because of different conjunctures, more or less favourable during the time.

The aim of this study is to present a historical approach of Romanian winter sports tourism focused on emergence and development of skiing and ski resorts over the years, having as landmarks: the end of the 19th century, the beginning of communist regime (1948) and the fall of communism (the Revolution in 1989). Based on a bibliographic documentation (articles, books, Internet sources), statistical data provided by National Institute of Statistics - Romania (NIS) and other sources, the study underlines especially the development particularities of winter sports tourism for each period of time, either we speak about infrastructure, ski resorts, winter sports competitions, legislation, government or European policies. In what follows we will provide a predominantly descriptive evolution of Romanian winter sport tourism over the years from the end of 19th century until now.

Winter sports tourism before 1948

The economic and social development of Romania in the second half of the 19th century had a positive impact on tourism evolution. Winter sports began to develop since the end of 19th century, an important contribution having, on the one hand the royal family and, on the other hand, the tourism associations and clubs founded in different regions of the country.

Prahova Valley, located at about 100 km from Bucharest, rapidly developed thanks to the presence of the transport infrastructure (the road Sinaia – Brasov, 1847, and railway Bucharest – Sinaia, 1879) and the development of some industries in the sub-Carpathian. Several solitary settlements of this valley turned in localities with villas, hotels and restaurants where aristocracy from Bucharest (which had visited the mountain resorts in Switzerland) came to ski, thus contributed to the popularization of this sport.

Once the construction of the royal summer residence started in Sinaia (Peles Castle – 1873) a series of buildings with special architecture raised in the vicinity, turning into a privileged residential area. The royal family, whose members were not only practitioners but also developers of winter sports, had an important role in popularizing them.

The first Romanian touristic association was founded in 1893. Named *The Carpathian Society – Sinaia*, it represented the oldest form of organized tourism in Romania. During the 20 years of activity this society has made an important contribution to the development of mountain tourism infrastructure (construction of mountain shelters, delineating the hiking trails etc.). In 1880 was founded at Sibiu *The Transylvanian Carpathian Association (Siebenbürgischer Karpatenverein - SKV)*, which followed its Western Europe tourism associations example with the main scope to build chalets, mountain shelter, trails and edit a magazine. Several branches were created in some cities of Transylvania, a province of Austro-Hungarian Empire at that time. This association had played an important role on the tourism development. During its activity (1880-1944), the mountain infrastructure experienced a significant increase. The most important achievement were the foundation of Paltinis mountain resort (initially named *Hohe Rinne*) in 1894, where skiing were practiced for the first time in the winter 1915/1916. In 1912 was founded in Bucharest *The Federation of Sports Societies*, where an important role to promote winter sports was played by the Prince Carol, its president. In the same year, the first official sleigh competition designated to the children were organized in Sinaia, on a slope in front of the Peles Castle, the royal residence.

Winter sports activity greatly decreased before and during the First World War. Skiing was introduced to mountain military units. Once they have completed military service, former soldiers continued to practice skiing in their home towns, so after the 1st World War skiing developed rather quickly, being able to speak about a democratization of this sport. A lot of ski competitions were organized especially for them. After the 1st World War the royal family continued to practice winter sports, skiing, sledging and skating being the most popular. Carol the 2nd perpetuated to his children the passion to practice them. The organization of different ski and ski jump competitions during this period helped to popularize this sport by increasing from year to year the number of participants, as well as promoting tourism areas. An international competition was held in 1929, in Predeal and Poiana Brasov, with the

participation of skiers from Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia (Nicu *et al.*, 2002). Since 1936 Romania participated in Olympic skiing competitions almost every time. The first international ski competition took place in 1939 on Carp Valley with competitors from several countries like France, Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia, England and Poland.

Winter sports tourism between 1948–1989

Since 1948 the tourist units existing at that time passed in state ownership, only a part of them being used for tourism. Some social protection measures to the working class (like subsidized prices for tourism services) led to development of the social tourism. A national network of state and cooperative property was created, which covered hotels, restaurants, villas etc. These were used only by certain categories of people like peasants and their families, clerks and workers.

During the communist period ski areas were not a priority. In 1960s and more after 1965 a series of investments were made in order to increase the accommodation capacity and attract a great number of foreign visitors. Also, it notices an augmentation of interest to develop especially the domestic mass tourism which recorded the highest growth at that time (from 1.24 million tourists in 1965 to 12,000,000 in 1987) (Turnock, 1991, cited by Murgescu, 2010). Concerning the foreign tourists, their number increased from 676000 in 1965 to 2.2 million in 1970 while in 1981 were registered 7 million foreign visitors especially from the other socialist countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union (Gavrilescu, 1973; National Commission for Statistics, 1995 cited by Light, 2006).

However, a number of ski resorts were open in different mountain regions. Nevertheless, a number of important winter sports events were organized at that time, among which were the first edition of the “Balkanic Ski Sports” in 1949 and the “World University Winter Sports” in 1951. On this occasion was built a modern hotel for the athletes and the first chair lift in Romania, with a total length of 2150 m (Poiana Brasov – Postavarul). In 1951 Winter World University Games took place in Poiana Brasov resort. On this occasion some improvements

and constructions were achieved and the resort became the most important place for winter sports, able to host large-scale competitions (Alexe *et al.*, 2002, p. 997).

Winter sports tourism after 1990

The intense political, social and economic transformation experienced by Romania during the first years following the Revolution of 1989 led to a lower demand of tourism services which affected the development of winter tourism. Because of the old infrastructure, low quality of services and non-competitive prices, Romania lost an important part of its winter sport market. Although after 1995 the tourism accommodation capacity increased, diversified and modernized, the tourism arrivals continued to decrease until 2000 when the economy experienced revitalization.

Infrastructure

Romania's landscape is divided as follows: 27.91% mountains and depressions, 42.44% hills and plateaus and 29.65% plains. Concerning the mountains 90% of their area is less than 1500m (Posea, 2005). If in 2012 Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism (MRDT) certified 147 ski slopes, now are 63.09% more (233 slopes). This is due to completion of ski infrastructure development projects by Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013 (which has a strategic objective - “to support and promote local sustainable development, both economically and socially, in the regions of Romania, by improving the conditions of infrastructure and business environment, which support economic growth”), investment financed by the state, local budgets, private sources and the European Regional Development Fund. The law no. 526/2003 concerning the National Program for development of mountain tourism “Ski in Romania” focused on tourism for skiing and other winter sports, refers, among others, to “planning, development or rehabilitation of the ski slopes, cableways installations and artificial snow making equipment, preservation of the ski slopes and lighting installations”.

Based on data processed from the website www.romaniaturistica.ro (which among others provides reports concerning ski slopes and snow conditions for all the Romanian winter

resorts), “i-Tour Schi” (a national project to promote certified ski slopes across the country) and the National Authority of Tourism (NAT) (a governmental body coordinated by the Ministry for Economy, Trade, Industry and the Business Environment, in charge of the development and promotion of Romanian tourism), we have created a classification of ski slopes in function of their difficulty level and length.

The most of ski slopes have a medium level (39.48%), while only 6.87% have very easy difficulty level. The biggest total length is registered by the medium level ski slopes (94.572 km), followed by easy slopes (62.77

km) and difficult slopes with 47.791 km) (see Table 1).

In 2016 the total length was 213.093 km, compared to 125.975 km in 2012. The majority of ski slopes (40.77%) have between 501-1000m, for all four levels of difficulty (see Table 2).

Due to low altitudes, 45.92% (107 slopes) are equipped with snow cannons and 33.48% (78 slopes) of them have night lighting, which does not contribute to sustainable development (see Table 3).

Table 1. The difficulty level of ski slopes in 2016.

Level	Total number		Certified		Non-certified		Total length (km)		Certified (km)		Non-certified (km)	
	No	%	No.	%	No	%	No.	%	No	%	No.	%
Very easy	16	6.87	6	3.71	10	14.08	7.96	3.73	4.69	3.07	3.27	5.44
Easy	84	36.05	58	35.80	26	36.62	62.77	29.46	45.483	29.74	17.287	28.75
Medium	92	39.48	70	43.21	22	30.99	94.572	44.38	66.024	43.16	28.548	47.47
Difficult	41	17.6	28	17.28	13	18.31	47.791	22.43	36.759	24.03	11.032	18.34
Total	233	100	162	100	71	100	213.093	100	152.956	100	60.137	100

Source: data processed from www.romaniaturistica.ro and NAT.

Table 2. The number and the length of ski slopes in 2016.

Length (m)	Very easy		Easy		Medium		Difficult		Total	
		%		%		%		%		%
50-500m	11	68.75	33	39.28	21	22.83	10	24.39	75	32.19
501-1000m	3	18.75	32	38.1	43	46.74	17	41.46	95	40.77
1001-1500m	1	6.25	12	14.29	16	17.39	7	17.07	36	15.45
1501-2000m	1	6.25	4	4.76	2	2.17	1	2.44	8	3.43
2001-2500m	0	0	2	2.38	6	6.52	3	7.32	11	4.72
2501-3000m	0	0	1	1.19	2	2.17	1	2.44	4	1.72
3001-3500m	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.44	1	0.43
3501 – 4000m	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4001 – 4500m	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4501 - 5000 m	0	0	0	0	1	1.09	0	0	1	0.43
> 5000m	0	0	0	0	1	1.09	1	2.44	2	0.86
Total	16	100	84	100	92	100	41	100	233	

Source: data processed from www.romaniaturistica.ro and NAT

Table 3. *The distribution of snow cannons and night lightings, in 2016*

	Slopes with snow cannons		Slopes without snow cannons		Slopes with night lighting		Slopes without night lighting		Total slopes	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Certified	80	49.38	82	50.62	57	35.19	105	64.81	162	100
Non certified	27	38.03	44	61.97	21	29.58	50	70.42	71	100
Total	107	45.92	126	54.08	78	33.48	155	66.52	233	100

Source: data processed from www.romaniaturistica.ro and NAT **Figure 1.** *Evolution of tourist arrivals in mountain resorts* (data processed from NIS, Romania)

The cableways are managed by the municipality, private companies or both together. The Government decision 1454/12.11.2008 establishes the conditions of commissioning cableways installations designed to carry persons. Also, by Minister's Order No. 198/13.03.2006 the list of standards relating to cableways installations designed to carry persons has been harmonized with the European one. In Romania, the majority of slopes are equipped with lifts (94.42% - 220 slopes). The 5.58% of slopes without lifts are non-certified by the Ministry.

A small number of the slopes were disposed at less than 50 km from the cities, creating the opportunity for visitors to come back home in the same day, without accommodation costs (example: the slope near Iasi, Cluj-Napoca). Also, in some mountain resorts the offer was diversified, including recreational facilities like:

snow parks (5), toboggan, tubing and sled tracks, carousel for the children etc. The most important mountain resorts with ski areas in Romania are Poiana Brasov, Sinaia, Azuga, Predeal and Busteni in the Prahova Valley, Vatra Dornei and Borsnea in the Eastern Carpathians and Paltinis in the Southern Carpathians.

The majority of tourists (80%) which stay in a Romanian mountain resort during the winter practices alpine skiing. Sports activities like snowboard, skating, cross country skiing, sledge, rock climbing are practiced only by a small part of the tourists (Pisteur project, 2010).

The dynamics of tourists flow

Concerning the arrivals in mountain resorts, The NIS provides data starting with 1993. A continuous decrease was recorded after this year, with a minimum in 2002 (1,808,601

Figure 2. Evolution of tourist arrivals in mountain resorts, by winter months - comparison with the month of maximum tourist arrivals in mountain resorts (data processed from NIS, Romania)

Figure 3. Share of tourists in mountain resorts in the total number of tourists arrivals (data processed from NIS, Romania)

arrivals) and another one in 2010 (1,772,859 arrivals), followed by a fast increase till 2015 (see Figure 1).

The minimum recorded in 2002 and 2010 reflect the changing of customer orientation, from the mountain resorts to other competing destinations, either in Romania (total number of arrivals recorded a small decrease in 2002 but did not reach the minimum, and an increase in 2010) either in other countries involved in the winter sports market like Bulgaria and Austria, which have a diversified offer and a better value for money.

During the winter months, the tourist arrivals in mountain resorts are lower than in the summer, the maximum being in August (see Figure 2).

Considering only 3 months when the weather and snow covering are favourable to practice the winter sports, we observe that in December are registered the most arrivals, with a maximum in 2015 (125,138 arrivals). It should be taken into account that December is the winter holidays month.

Concerning the share of tourists in mountain resorts, in the total number of tourists arrivals during the last 22 years, figure 3 shows a

maximum in 2013 (20.44%), the evolution following the same trend with the total arrivals of tourists after 2010.

If we compare the data of winter months with the previous year (see figures 4,5,6) the biggest decrease of tourist arrivals in mountain resorts was recorded in February 2009 (-21.76%) and the most important increase was in 2013 (45.16%). December is the winter month with less negative variations in the last

years. This growth is mainly due to 11th edition of the European Youth Olympic Winter Festival (17-22 February 2013, Brasov), the first Olympic European event held in Romania, which hosted more than 900 athletes from 45 countries.

There were invested more than 60 million euro for infrastructure development and organization, providing from the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism of Romania, local

Figure 4. Evolution of tourist arrivals in mountain resorts, in December (in % compared to the previous year) (data processed from NIS)

Figure 5. Evolution of tourist arrivals in mountain resorts, in January (in % compared to the previous year) (data processed from NIS)

Figure 6. Evolution of tourist arrivals in mountain resorts, in February (in % compared to the previous year) (data processed from NIS)

Figure 7. Evolution of overnight stays in mountain resorts (data processed from NIS)

Figure 8. The share of overnight stays in mountain resorts in the total number of overnight stays (data processed from NIS)

communities and the sponsorships, to rehabilitate the ski and biathlon slopes, to build 4 ski jumps and 2 skating rinks.

In 1993 was registered the most *overnight stays* in mountain resorts (3,812,136 overnight stays). The continuous decreasing covered the period till 2002 (see Figure 7). Comparative analysis of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in mountain resorts shows a similar evolution with a minimum in 2002 and 2010 which is due

to the same reason: the changing of customer orientation.

Whereas the total overnight stays decreased in 2013 and in mountain resorts increased, follows that the tourists chose these touristic destinations, the share of overnight stays in mountain resorts in the total number of overnight stays being 16.69 compared to 2010 when was recorded a ratio of 8.61, the lowest in the last 21 years (see Figure 8).

Concerning the winter months, the evolution of overnight stays in mountain resorts has similarity with the tourist arrivals, with an increase in December 2007, followed by a decrease till 2009 and a maximum in 2015 (277,923 overnight stays). August is the month with the most overnight stays in the last 10

years (see Figure 9). December is the winter month with less negative variations of overnight stays in the last years (see Figure 10). The most decreases was recorded in January, especial in 2014 compared to 2013 (-23.18%) (see Figure 11).

Figure 9. Evolution of overnight stays in mountain resorts, by winter months - comparison with the month of maximum overnight stays in mountain resorts (data processed from NIS)

Figure 10. Evolution of overnight stays in mountain resorts, in December (in % compared to the previous year) (data processed from INS)

Figure 11. Evolution of overnight stays in mountain resorts, in January (in % compared to the previous year) (data processed from NIS)

In February 2013 we observe the biggest increase (52.02%) compared to the same period of 2012 (see Figure 12). This period was marked by the hosting of European Youth Olympic Winter Festival on the Prahova Valley, which is one of the most famous touristic areas in the country.

According to data from a report realized by L. Vanat (2015) the number of skier visits is 1,200,000, the number of national skiers is 653,714 and the ratio of foreign skiers in Romania mountain resorts is only 5% (the data represent an average of 5 last seasons or estimate). This low percentage is due to the lack of diversification of the tourism infrastructure and ski facilities.

Conclusions

Skiing came in Romania at the end of the 19th century. A number of societies, clubs and associations founded at that time, through its objectives and activities have attracted more and more practitioners of winter sports, focusing on organized tourism. In addition, these institutions and organizations have contributed to the infrastructure development by building chalets and shelters, have developed winter tourism, have organized trainings for monitors and ski competitions, have created maps and have edited magazines. Thanks to them skiing became accessible not only to the bourgeoisie, but also for other social classes. The royal family also played an important role.

The relation with similar structures from Transylvania (part of Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918) and from the western countries has contributed to the popularization and development of winter sports in this country. During the communist period skiing and therefore the equipment of ski resorts were not a priority of the authorities although some high-level competitions were organized, but it was 65 years ago. The investments in accommodation capacity after 1965 led to increase the tourist arrivals, especially the foreigners, their number reaching at 7 million in 1981. The austerity imposed by Ceausescu's regime in 1980s contributed to the diminution of tourists arrivals reaching 4 million in 1985.

The 1989' Revolution was hard supported by the tourism sector. The lack of economic means and the low quality services for too high prices led to a decrease of number of tourists until 2000, when finally, an economic recovery began to be felt. The efforts of tourism policy implementation were influenced by the changes in the organization of the ministries in which Ministry of Tourism were combined with *Transport and Construction, Regional Development, Economy, Trade, Industry and the Business Environment* etc. These associations sometimes led to slowing the tourism development process.

The investment plan developed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013, supported by the state and by The European Union led to a revitalization of winter tourism in

Figure 12. Evolution of overnight stays in mountain resorts, in February (in % compared to the previous year) (data processed from NIS)

the Romanian mountains which now have interesting equipment and new ski resorts. If the tourist arrivals is increased, we feel that the domestic flow is still fragile despite the investment efforts made to diversify the touristic offer and major efforts are still needed to convince foreign customers yet overcautious.

The rehabilitation of the ski slopes, the development of new ski areas according to the international standards, and the development of mountain tourism were necessary and became possible thanks to the State investments, the local budget, the private sources and, above all, the European funds.

Romania is not an important winter sport destination yet. The highest rate of tourism arrivals and tourist nights in Romanian mountain resorts is reached during the summer months, no matter whether we are talking about domestic or foreign tourists. The lack of diversification of the tourism infrastructure and ski facilities which are inferior to the international standard and the lack of tourism service performance are probably some of the main reasons that determine the tourists to choose other destinations. It takes time to change it but, despite the various events that have decided the history of this country, Romania does huge efforts to develop the ski activity which will positively influence the evolution of winter sports tourism. Even if there is no substantial increases in terms of capacity accommodation, ski resorts found solutions to attract visitors just for a few hours, by building ski slopes nearby cities.

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