

REGIONAL POLICY IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF THE BRASOV METROPOLITAN AREA

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes the implementation of regional policies in practice, by means of a case study conducted on the city of Brasov. Sibiu closed its mandate as the European capital of culture in 2007 successfully. In order to follow Sibiu's path, Brasov looked the future with the following aim in mind: to develop an integrated strategy for a metropolitan area. This area will include 1 city, 5 towns and 8 villages, summing up to about 400,000 inhabitants. Public authorities representing the involved entities have reached the conclusion that their interests concerning economic and social welfare as well as environmental protection converge. As follow, a strategy for the sustainable development of Brasov's metropolitan area for 2007-2013 has been designed. This strategy is supported by means of more than 80 projects, financed through national and EU sources. Due to the strong tourism potential of the area this paper focuses mainly on the tourism section of the strategy and on city marketing. It defines the objectives for tourism development and highlights the current problems associated with tourism in the area. Accordingly, policy recommendations are issued in this field, comprising city branding, promotional activities linked to tourism, quality of tourism services, development of specific attractions and infrastructure, as well as training for employees in tourism. Hopes are that, by stimulating new ideas related to tourism, one of the expected outcomes of the cooperation between public authorities and private firms will improve policy-making in the Brasov metropolitan area².

Key words: regional policy, metropolitan area, tourism, Brasov.

JEL classification: R1, R58

Introduction

In 2007 Sibiu reached an important position among Romanian cities, after hosting 337 projects organized by 301 Romanian and foreign cultural operators summing up to 2,062 artistic events in theatre, painting, music, film, dance, literature, architecture, contemporary art and cooking inside the program: "Sibiu – European Cultural Capital 2007" (Tomozei, 2008). Financing all these projects amounted to 13.4 million euro. It seems that the money was well spent, as Sibiu increased its visibility and awareness at national and international level. The number of

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tourists doubled compared to 2006 and tripled relative to 2005, amounting to almost 800,000, out of which around 40% were foreign visitors (www.sibiu.ro). The program Sibiu - European Cultural Capital 2007 is the most important project that was organized and took place in Romania, regarding both the amplitude and the impact on communication development between cultural, economic and political operators (Suciu and Incze, 2008). As Sibiu, boasted by infrastructural projects initiated during the cultural program, drew the final lines after what had been a busy and rewarding year, other cities in Romania, such as Brasov, aimed to replicate its success and developed an urban strategy for the years to come. As the literature on metropolitan regions suggests, a well-balanced urban system with an even mix of large, medium and small cities and towns, endowed with efficient transport networks, is the ideal territorial system in terms of efficiency and well-being (Capello and Fratesi, 2008). Along these principles, Brasov initiated the development of an integrated strategy for a Metropolitan Area, which will be investigated in detail in the second section of this paper.

Analysis of the Brasov Metropolitan Area

Brasov belongs to the Centre Development Region, one of the 8 development regions of Romania. Brasov County has the largest contribution to the region's GDP and has the highest level of urbanization. Together with other 13 surrounding cities and villages, the proposed Brasov metropolitan area will cover a surface of about 1,400 square km and will comprise an urban agglomeration of 407,187 inhabitants (about 70% of the County's population). Brasov, which has been the third most important centre of industrial development in the communist period, has suffered a lot during the '90s. More than 80,000 workers were laid off due to the decline of large industrial factories, producing mainly tractors, trucks, bearings and fertilizers. During the past few years, the unemployment rate in Brasov has been usually higher than the national average. The social and economic problems of the Brasov area would have become even more severe if part of the unemployed people wouldn't have been absorbed by various activities in service sectors.

When local authorities assessed the city of Brasov main problems prior to 2007, the following four aspects were identified:

- Bad infrastructure, including outdated sewerage systems, lack of sewerage in certain districts, damaged streets all over the outskirts, dirty residential areas, lack of social facilities and faulty local transport, especially in the adjacent areas;
- Economic deficiencies, due to lack of available real estate inside the city, weak state of small business, lack of coordination concerning economic development, insufficient usage of tourism potential (low occupancy rate);
- Social problems of demographic nature, migration of the workforce, quarters with mainly elderly population, burglaries in the outskirts, unemployment;

- Environmental problems due to heavy road and rail traffic, polluted rivers and the unsafe garbage pit outside the city.

Once these problems have been pinpointed, new measures of coordination were designed for the city of Brasov and the neighbouring settlements. Thus, some common objectives of development emerged:

- Rehabilitation of infrastructure (ring-road, highway, airport, sewerage lines);
- Sustaining of economic development and tourism (industrial parks, logistics centres, business environment, tourism as a main priority for sustainable development);
- Improvement of social infrastructure and facilities, training of human resources;
- Environmental protection (integrated waste management, improvement of living conditions through better air quality).

Accordingly, to address the objectives mentioned above, the following planning steps have been undertaken:

- Strategies have been designed for sustainable development, tourism, energy, air quality management and integration of Roma population;
- Annual market surveys (beginning with 2004) have been carried out to identify the perception of Brasov citizens and their needs;
- Digitalization of the maps of the area;
- Initiation of a Strategy for the Development of the Brasov Metropolitan Area (2007) together with a territorial systematisation plan.

So far, several actions have been carried out or are in full swing in each of the four areas identified as problematic at city level:

- Work has begun on the ring-road (two-thirds of its length are finished by now), so as to deflect heavy traffic from the inner part of the city;
- Two of the outskirts have been linked to the central part of Brasov by means of passages and roads;
- Rehabilitation of the street network and creation of parking areas;
- Attracting foreign investments (mainly car-part industry, mainly from Germany);
- Establishment of two tourist information centres (in the main square of the historical part of the city and at the railway station);
- Renovation of the Zoo and arrangement of the Pedestrian Area in the historical centre;
- Modernization of parks and organization of new playgrounds for children in each quarter;
- Construction of a night shelter and of a new shelter for elderly people;
- Initiation of police bureaus in each of the main quarters of the city;
- Drawing up the “noise map” for the city, introduction of air quality monitoring and afforestation programs on the hills and mountains surrounding the city;
- Selective collection of garbage throughout the whole city.

The Brasov Metropolitan Area is relatively compact by geographical standards, fitting into a square of about 37 km length of each side. The idea of the metropolitan area emerged together with an integrated approach for urban development, so as to ensure sustainable development, an optimal coordination between economic, social and environmental issues and a balanced development between central and adjacent parts of the city. As the experience of various EU-countries has shown, integrated approaches to urban problems have generated solid economic growth and solved social problems at the same time. Consultancy in this matter was provided to local authorities by specialists of the EU in the URBACT programme during 2007.

In such a context, an integrated plan for urban development needs to be formulated and then implemented. In charge of the integrated urban development plan for the Brasov area is the Metropolitan Association Brasov (founded January 2006), formed as a non-governmental organization. The board is represented by the mayors of the 14 cities and villages involved. The stakeholders include all public and private entities with which the association has already concluded or will conclude collaboration agreements and finally, the citizens of the Brasov area, by means of public consultation.

The integrated urban development plan will be instrumented by means of a succession of more than 80 individual projects correlated with each other so that they should fit into the general scheme. Projects will amount to some 485 million euro and will be directed towards:

- Rehabilitation of urban infrastructure and building of access roads to the Brasov metropolitan area so as to reduce pollution and improve mobility;
- Introduction of an integrated public transport system, with adequate traffic signalling;
- Restoration of the buildings in the historical centres and introduction of a thematic tour comprising the main tourist objectives of the metropolitan area;
- Construction and modernization of cultural and sports facilities (theatre, seat of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Brasov, multi-sports hall, Olympic ice-skating ground);
- Placing of bicycle tracks in the main cities;
- Organization of two industrial parks nearby Brasov;
- Building of a business and exhibition centre as well as a logistics centre;
- Introduction of a public security system at metropolitan level;
- Closing down outdated warehouses & plants not compliant with environmental norms.

More than half of these projects are funded through the Regional Operational Programme (Priority Axes 2, 3, 4 and 5 – infrastructure, business environment, sustainable development and tourism) and other sources of financing, such as local budgets, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Sector Operational Programme on Environment, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), public-private partnerships and private investments.

Table 1.
Projects managed by the Brasov Metropolitan Agency (EU funding)

Title	Objective	Funding	Amount (€)
LINKS	Maintain vitality of old European cities	URBACT II	n/a
MMOVE	Improving efficiency of mobility policies	INTERREG IV C	1,859,321
Qualicities	Improving professional skills of policy-makers	Leonardo da Vinci	n/a
MobiPLAN	Improving spatial development	Leonardo da Vinci	n/a
SAFELAND	Guidance on crime prevention	European Commission	45,079
Information & Comm. Infrastructure	Improve electronic communication	ERDF	21,150
Jessica for Cities	Urban development	URBACT II	23,536
Integrated services for Community Police	Integrated police network	PHARE 2005	121,868
Integrated unit for emergency situations	Integrated network for emergency intervention	PHARE 2005	121,607
Non Formal Education in Youth Centres	Innovative methods and tools of education	Youth in Action	12,000

Source: data compiled by the author from www.metropolabrasov.ro

The Brasov Metropolitan Agency has been set up at the end of 2005 as the authority to manage projects linked to the metropolitan area. An overview of projects that have been initiated and some already implemented with external funding and with the advisory help of the Agency is listed in Table 1.

The benefits of all the above-mentioned investments, once the projects will be finished, are not difficult to foresee. A better transport system, with reduced waiting times and a more fluent traffic would be an important improvement. All activities included in the projects involve new jobs in construction, various services, tourism. Once the projects will be fully implemented, the region is expected to enjoy a higher level of interest expressed by various investors, with an enhanced awareness at national and international level. This is particularly important for the development of tourism, issue which will be addressed in the third section of this paper.

Measures for Tourism Development in the Brasov Metropolitan Area

Brasov is known as an important tourist city in Romania, especially for mountain tourism, as well as a historical city and an academic and cultural centre. It concentrates the largest number of hotels and restaurants in the region (40.5% out of the total), but is plagued by a very low average occupancy rate – around 33% (Pop et al., 2007).

The general objective of the tourism component of the Strategy for the Development of the Brasov Metropolitan Area is to raise the competitiveness of the area as a tourism location by enhancing the quality of services and the capitalization on the natural and cultural heritage so as to respond to the expectations of citizens, tourists, visitors and business people without adversely affecting the environment.

Specific objectives include:

- Creating a distinct brand for the Brasov Metropolitan Area as a tourist destination adequately promoted through selected channels of communication;
- Introduction of an evaluation system for the quality of tourism services;
- The development of genuine tourist products and services with local features, addressing domestic and foreign tourists;
- Developing leisure alternatives for Brasov citizens and tourists alike;
- The creation of a common and balanced general framework for the development of tourism by correlating the initiatives of different stakeholders in the field of tourism;
- The creation and development of travel packages so as to reduce the seasonality of tourism supply;
- Identification and development of alternative tourism prospects, scarcely existent within the actual offer within the area;
- The development and modernization of tourism infrastructure in accordance with the other initiatives included in the general strategy;
- Improvement of professional training in tourism, through diversification and integration of the educational offer by high-schools and by the universities from the region.

The above-mentioned specific objectives are well-intended, but may never reach their goal if they stick only to vaguely-phrased ideas with no precise application and if proper coordination won't be achieved between public administration and private tourism firms.

Let's take, for instance, the creation of a specific brand for the metropolitan area as a whole in order to launch it as a travel destination. Romania's attempts, during the past few years, in creating a country brand or slogan were all ill-fated, even though they seemed to be good ideas when initiated. What lacked, letting aside the marketing adequacy of the slogan or logo, was solid promotion at national and especially international level. The "stained" image of the country could not be changed just by creating a tourist brand or finding a good slogan.

Of all the country's attractions, the Lonely Planet guidebook recommends Brasov if the whole stay in Romania is intended just for one day. Despite this, Brasov is virtually unknown for the broad public at European level, even if it has a lot of beautiful sights and attractions to offer. Probably one of the largest problems that tourism confronts in Romania is the poor promotion of the country's values. Nobody denies that Romania has a lot to offer regarding tourism assets, but many

agree that it still needs a more open and active promotion. In terms of negative aspects, this area does not have enough trained tourism staff, nor a good image promotion or a good infrastructure (Stefan, 2008). Another significant weakness of Romanian tourism is the lack of communication and cooperation between the public and private sector. If such cooperation could be achieved, tourism would grow on the right path and this would reflect itself in larger numbers of visitors and business development.

Thus, one of the most important measures in marketing the city of Brasov would be to unfold a consistent promotional campaign targeting the most important European tourist outgoing countries. Promoting the city at national and international level should be done by means of a private-public partnership with companies active in the tourism field so as to represent Brasov at all the major international tourism fairs and exhibitions. The big European tour-operators have to be targeted actively if tourism in the area is meant to increase.

The website www.brasov.ro also needs reshuffling, considering the ever-increasing number of tourists that search and book their holiday destination online. The website features extensive information about the city's tourist attractions, the "compulsory" list of accommodation possibilities, restaurants and leisure opportunities, but lacks attractiveness, clarity, live images, interactivity (forum, impressions), as well as niche information for different travellers. The featured map is not very helpful either. A comparison to Sibiu's website (www.sibiu.ro, better from quality point of view) in this respect is more than revealing for a visitor who enters both. The official website should also be updated faster, to include images and links to all the possible leisure activities to be found in Brasov (e.g. the newly opened largest indoor water-park and largest adventure-park in Romania).

A further program should be initiated for the identification, preservation and restoration of all the monuments in Brasov, alongside the renovation of all the old churches and fortified remains of the past and their subsequent inclusion in tours and travel circuits. Architectural lighting should be also part of the program. Popular festivals and events, organized each year, such as the "Days of Brasov", the Tourism Fair and the "Golden Stag" international music festival should remain a continuous tradition. The idea of building an amusement park on the site of a torn-down factory should not be neglected either, taking into account the large effective demand for recreational activities suggested by the citizens of the Brasov area in the case of similar initiatives.

The quality of services is another aspect that needs important improvements. The issue of quality stands out as a long-term criticism expressed by foreign visitors assessing Romanian tourism. In this context, human resources and a continuous improvement of their capabilities will be one of the critical elements for the success of a strategy for the development of tourism. This comes along with a serious commitment towards ensuring a higher quality of services and an orientation of firms towards the customer (Marinescu, 2007). Local authorities could design

specific training programmes for employees and managers involved in tourism activities, which should include taking over of European regulations and norms (Marinescu, 2006).

Conclusions and Recommendations for Policy-Making

Analyzing the whole situation of the Brasov Metropolitan Area and the most troublesome aspects it faces, some recommendations for administrative and regional policy in the Brasov area emerge.

The rehabilitation and modernization of the public road network was and remains a priority for the area. The street network is pretty well developed, but still can't handle the 200,000 vehicles that are driven every day on the city's streets. During the previous year, local authorities have tried all sorts of solutions to ease the traffic, but the efforts seem to be in vain. Even though nine roundabouts have been arranged instead of traffic lights for the big crossings, the streets are crowded as before, causing noise and air pollution.

Once finished, the ring-road will deflect the heavy traffic and other small trucks that transit Brasov city. However, the real problems are still generated by the cars that drive on a daily basis on the streets of Brasov. One solution for the fluency of Brasov's traffic and the significant reduction of pollution would be to build a tangent highway that should enable the access to and from each of the big neighborhoods and should be connected to the outer ring-road of Brasov (Roiu and Oltean, 2008).

Even though a costly initiative, this type of project should be seen as a long-term investment which implies many more outputs than inputs. If considered a feasible and sustainable project, from a financial, logistics and human resources point of view, EU non-refundable grants for the development and consolidation of the infrastructure could be obtained.

Another important issue is environmental protection. Little has been done for refraining people from throwing all kind of waste (including non-biodegradable) in the surroundings of Brasov and in the nearby river courses. This is an old and uncivilized practice and happens mostly because of the lack of a proper sewerage system (Godeanu, 2008). Even if city halls in the villages included in the Metropolitan Area considered laying out warning signs with the following message: "Dumping waste is forbidden and is punished according to the law", most people ignore those signs. The authorities who have installed them in the first place, left them to rust, so that nowadays one can barely read the written message.

The most efficient measure to be taken for a long-term approach on the environment is the introduction of a strict and objective education at every level of Brasov's education system, so that children and students should learn from an early age what nature means and why it is important to maintain the entire natural environment clean and unspoiled. After that, citizens should transform this education into personal consciousness, making each one aware that environmental problems represent in fact our own health and life.

The last of the issues to be addressed here is tourism in the area surrounding Brasov. The magnificent scenery offered by Fagaras County and its majestic mountains is often put under the shadow by infrastructure and environmental problems. Infrastructure is in bad shape: roads are hardly suitable for this name, there is no current water in many villages, there are a lot of unhygienic wells, with a large amount of calcareous concentration, no ecological pit and in some villages there aren't any doctors (Bardasuc and Cristea, 2008). Young people and persons under 40 years old have usually left the area and are currently working abroad in Italy or Spain. Adapting abroad and making more money to satisfy their families' needs that stayed at home isn't easy. Many of them left their kids alone or with grandparents, endured divorces, separations and the families they left behind are far from happy or feeling secure. Some examples of things that can change the grey face of the city and its surroundings concern the tourism alternative. Rural tourism is a form of tourism relatively new to Romania that appeared to be the perfect solution for increasing profits for villagers by capitalizing on their potential, mainly surplus of accommodation as well as genuine goods and services, offered to people seeking relaxation. Religious tourism is also to be considered, with the large number of monasteries located in this region, proudly presenting the icons painted on glass. Lastly, equestrian tourism is a hot newcomer. In Fagaras County, the Sambata de Jos Stud, dating from 1874, is the only stud in Romania where you can find the pure breed of Lipizzaner horses, famous all over the world.

Summing up, the Brasov Metropolitan Area displays a vast array of potential projects for development. It remains to be seen how many of these projects will gather momentum and will receive proper funding. However, their success hinges crucially on the willingness of public and private bodies to cooperate in their initiatives.

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