

Mary's Route – The Settlement and Regional Development Aspects of Pilgrimage Tourism

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Introduction

In this paper, we examine the situation of pilgrimages, their impact on the related rural area, their economic and tourism role and their future.¹

The pilgrimage has a centuries-old tradition in the Csík region in Romania and the surrounding villages. It is part of the local culture and has been gaining ground in recent decades, with an ever-widening circle of interested people.

The Pentecost Feast of Csíksomlyó and the pilgrimages have a great impact on the cultural and religious life of the county, but it is also a question of the pull it has on the economic and tourist life of the region.

Hundreds of thousands of people make the pilgrimage to Pentecost, but compared to the pilgrimages of past centuries, there is no longer a predominance of abstinence and withdrawal, but rather the emergence of pilgrimage tourism, which includes the spiritual experiences of pilgrimage, but also the needs of tourists, which is an exploitable source of income for local people.

In addition, the infrastructure of the Mary's Route has been greatly improved and promoted in recent years, which has led to an increasing number of pilgrims travelling along the route.

The history of pilgrimages dates back to the time of Jesus, who, according to the Bible, was already a regular pilgrim to Bethlehem *“His parents went up to Jerusalem every year for the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast”* (Revelation 2:41-42).

The Route that we are studying leads to another popular pilgrimage site in Christianity, Csíksomlyó.

The Mary's Route is the second largest and most popular pilgrimage route in Europe, after El Camino.

“The Mary's Route - Via Mariæ is a pilgrimage route that builds on the devotion to Mary of the peoples of Central Europe, but also links the Marian shrines and the historical and cultural values along the route, regardless of religion. (...) The route draws a large cross on the map of Central Europe (Austria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Bosnia), thus creating a network of pilgrimage routes similar to El Camino, based on local traditions”².

¹ This article is an abbreviated version of Emese Hosszú's previous MSc thesis (see Hosszú, 2023, supervisor: Dr. habil Krisztián Ritter).

² Source : <https://mariaut.ro/>

takes into account local initiatives, and allows for linkages with regional and global networks (Ritter, 2019).

In terms of regional development, in addition to sustainability, several principles have been formulated to ensure effectiveness. Based on Buday (2001), the principles of regional development defined by the European Union are as follows:

- An integrated approach;
- Sustainability;
- Subsidiarity;
- Management;
- Evaluation;
- Monitoring.

The lack of information, representation and the means to advocate for these principles is a major obstacle to their implementation. They are therefore often unable to participate in the design, implementation or monitoring of programmes, but the involvement of all stakeholders is necessary for development to be successful.

Improving the quality of life is the overriding objective of sustainable development. Which is different from the growth-oriented development that currently exists. If, however, the elements of sustainable development were to prevail, population migration between regions would decrease and the importance of local development would increase (Farkas, 2002a).

Successful developments require a bottom-up approach, shared motivation and action, active participation of the population and solidarity (G. Fekete, 2013). In the case of the Romanian Harghita County section of the *Via Mariæ*, all the above mentioned conditions are present. In the development of the Mary's Route and in its further initiatives, local volunteers are very often the basis of its initiatives, who usually come up with new and improving ideas.

Inequalities arise during development, which is taken for granted in spatial sciences. "*Inequality can be both a bearer of values and a source of diversity*" (Farkas, 2002b:15.). In the course of territorial processes, rural areas are typically disadvantaged.

Harghita County in Romania is a predominantly rural area due to its territorial and economic structure (lack of large cities, mountainous areas, low population density). According to the Rural Development Strategy of Harghita County³, 59.55% of the county's territory is agricultural land, another 35.78% is forest. As a result, the economy of the county is determined by the exploitation of these areas. However, new perspectives suggest that rural areas should also be partly divorced from agriculture and that emphasis should be placed on other sectors of rural development and other uses of land and resources.

More prominent in our theme is rural development. "*Rural development can be understood as a conscious, planned intervention in the development of changes in rural areas (...) The European Charter for Rural Areas considers the attraction of economic activities that protect and develop rural cultural heritage in order to preserve and develop human capital to be the essence of rural development*" (G. Fekete, 2013:11.). Its aim is "*to preserve the rural population, improve its quality of life and ensure its employment opportunities*" (Buday, 2001:372.).

³ <https://elemzo.hargitamegye.ro/hargita-megye-vidékfejlesztési-strategiaja-2021-2030/>

In another formulation, “*local economic development in rural small areas can be understood as rural development*” (Ritter, 2019:15.). Thus, development in the Csík region is rural development. The development of the Mary's Route has a reciprocal impact on a number of sectors, the impact of which is felt more intensively in rural areas.

Tourism as a tool for rural development

Rural economies are diverse and complex systems with different development potentials, determined by the characteristics and resources of an area. They respond differently to change, thus increasing diversity (Ritter, 2019). Rural development resources include human resources, natural resources, landscape and scenic resources, settlements and other resources (White, 2005). The exploitation of these resources used to be mainly limited to the agricultural sector, but now it is becoming increasingly popular to put into practice other uses of resources, such as tourism. “*In the European model of agriculture, multifunctional agriculture and the countryside in which it is located fulfil not only food production but also ecological-environmental, social, economic, social and cultural functions. These include, among others, the creation of conditions for recreation and tourism*” (Ritter, 2019:30.). In the countryside, regional or national traditions belonging to the culture are more strongly preserved than in urban environments, and tourism and pilgrimage support both the preservation and the exploitation of these traditions.

Tourism is part of both the economic and social system. “*It interacts with elements of the social, cultural, political, economic, natural and technological environment. A system of interdependencies has developed between tourism and its environment*” (Rátz, 1990:15.). Thus, there is a back-and-forth effect: the development of other areas develops tourism, but if tourism booms, it also has a positive effect on the environment and other sectors of the economy. At the same time, the above mentioned interaction is also true in the case of decline, and a decline in one area will have negative effects in other areas.

As prosperity increases, tourism is gaining ground, which can have a strong impact in an area with popular tourist destinations. Tourism can affect both the quality of life and the situation of natural and cultural assets, and can therefore be a tool for territorial development. In tourism-related developments, it is essential that initiatives have a positive impact on the quality of life of the population (Strack, 2022).

The World Trade Organization defines sustainable tourism development as “*meeting the needs of today's tourists and destinations while protecting and enhancing the opportunities of tomorrow. It is envisioned to enable the management of resources in such a way that, while meeting the economic, social and aesthetic needs of humanity, it also preserves basic ecological processes, biodiversity and life-support systems, and the cultural integrity of different peoples and groups*” (Vargáné et al. 2022:6.).

Natural attractions and cultural values are the cornerstones of tourism in Harghita County. Tourism based on these can ensure both sustainable development and economic growth, as well as an increase in the well-being of the local population.

In their book, Puczkó and Rátz describe tourism as a catalyst for development, leading to economic growth and improved quality. In regions that lack the resources needed for a primary sector economy, tourism could be the solution. Tourism has the potential to trigger development quickly, bringing with it the expansion and development of other sectors. This is because meeting the needs generated by tourism has potential for all participants in the local economy and provides jobs and income for local people and businesses, thereby increasing the revenue of local governments and reducing social sector expenditure (Puczkó and Rátz, 1998).

As the pilgrimage under study is part of tourism, but still retains its religious character, it is also important to briefly examine the concepts of tourism and religion.

Tourism and religion

In our everyday lives, we often use terms whose meaning is only partially known, and in some cases have a completely different meaning from the one we find in the literature. There are also cases where the same concept has different meanings. It is therefore important to understand the meaning of the terms used in this chapter.

The concept of tourism has evolved over time, but its constant element is mobility. Fekete uses the following definition as a summary of the earlier meaning of tourism: “*Tourism is a voluntary, mass, regular and peaceful movement of people, whose subjects temporarily travel from their permanent residence to a non-seeking activity elsewhere and spend their money there*” (Fekete, 2006:12.). In our opinion, it is important to underline that it is *not for gainful employment*, since if this part is not considered, tourism would be the same as employment abroad, but also occupational mobility outside the workplace can be considered tourism. Ele, in his study, describes tourism in a similar way, but also defines the duration of the movement of persons, which cannot be more than one year (Ele, 2017).

Slightly differently from the above definition, Lengyel defines tourism as follows: “Tourism is understood to mean, on the one hand, all movements and activities of people outside their permanent living and working arrangements (home and workplace), whatever their specific motive, duration and destination. Tourism is, on the other hand, the set of material, technical and organisational conditions and services created to meet the needs of tourism” (Lengyel, 1986 cited in Fekete, 2006:15.).

This definition also highlights the “other side” of tourism. It also emphasises the need to meet needs and the services that go with them.

The pilgrimage has become an increasingly important factor in meeting needs over time, but its religious aspect has remained.

In the 21st century, travel for religious and tourist purposes are very much intertwined, and it is therefore worth exploring the relationship between these two concepts in the case of pilgrimages.

Defining the concept of religion and understanding the relationship and interrelationship between faith and religion is not an easy task, as it is not a fixed concept, but has evolved over the centuries, and nations, societies and cultures may have completely different interpretations of it. Therefore, we would like to clarify what we mean by the two concepts.

According to Giddens, “religion is a special activity of believers that identifies them as part of a community” (Giddens, 2008). Durkheim states that “religion is a system of ideas and beliefs, born of ritual, and a social act of a communal character” (Durkheim, 2003 cited in Korpics, 2014:26.). In his book, Giddens understands religion as a similarly social concept: “*Religion is a form of culture. Culture is a set of shared beliefs, values, norms, and ideas that give a group of people a common identity*” (Giddens, 2008:415.). Andorka defines several dimensions of faith, which are belief, ritual and religious experience. A believer does not necessarily adhere to the specific norms prescribed by religion, but can still be considered a religious person (Andorka, 1997). Based on the above, we do not fully identify a believer with a religious person, there is overlap between the two concepts, but different meanings of the two are possible. While faith is a personal thing, an inner conviction, religion is a collective process, one cannot be religious except as a member of a community. On the other hand, pilgrimage routes and religious tourism activities target both believers and religious people, so the concept of religious tourism can be multifaceted.

Religious tourism

Based on Okobia's study, religious tourism as faith-based tourism can be described as a unique type of tourism where people travel individually or in groups to different places for pilgrimage, missionary work, congress, conference to satisfy their spiritual desire. Religious tourism is also travel to see religious monuments, artifacts, worship, and to gain more spiritual powers (Okobia, 2022). Similar views were expressed by Ele, who also considers missionary work as religious tourism. Christian tourists include missionaries who travel for church planting (*plantatio Ecclesiae*), taking the church to places where it has not yet taken root (*missio ad gentes*), pastoral work, humanitarian services and charitable organizations (Ele, 2017).

Understanding tourism and the characteristics of the tourist in itself also contributes to understanding religious tourism.

“As tourists, we escape from the drabness and dreariness of everyday life for a short period of vacation” (Szijártó, 2000:7.). In other words, Szijártó calls everyone a tourist who leaves home for entertainment and recreation, without specifying the exact time period and leisure activities involved. Several types of tourism can be defined along these lines and several categories have been identified, including religious tourism, which is similar in characteristics but is not a pilgrimage. Pusztai, following Smith, identifies five categories of visitors to places of worship and sacred sites in his book. The traveller who is wholly religiously motivated, conforming to religious expectations and rules, is the pilgrim, at one extreme, whose lifestyle during the pilgrimage is characterised by abstinence, and who performs regular rituals and prayers. He is not considered a tourist and does not use the services provided by the tourism sector. The other extreme is the profane tourist, who has no religious motivation, does not pray, shows no interest in any religious ritual, and if he does visit holy places and temples, he does so only as a tourist and sees them as a tourist attraction. In between these two extremes are the “more pilgrim” and the “more tourist”, both possessing some of the characteristics of both extreme types, the difference between the two being the proportion in which they are shared. In the case where the characteristics of both the tourist and the pilgrim are equally shared, we speak of “pilgrim-tourist” (Smith, 1992 cited by Pusztai, 1998).

In the light of the above, we wanted our research to produce results that would be useful and useful not only for us, but also for the community of the Mary's Route area, the municipalities and the stakeholders living in the municipalities.

Material and method

The aim of our research is to examine the future of pilgrimage routes and their development potential. We are looking at the match between pilgrims' needs and the existing infrastructure, through an on-line questionnaire survey for pilgrims and in-depth interviews with local stakeholders and professionals. The results of the two methods are presented simultaneously, because supply and demand are interlinked and interact with each other, and the development of pilgrim routes must be based on the needs of pilgrims.

Since the questionnaire is “the best method available to the social scientist who wants to collect original data to describe a population too large for direct observation” (see Babbie, 1995:278.), and since, given our chosen topic, we can receive responses from a wide range, we found the on-line questionnaire to be the ideal tool.

The target population for the questionnaire is all pilgrims who have already been on a pilgrimage, and people who are planning a pilgrimage in the near future could also fill in the questionnaire. Experience has shown that pilgrims walk more than one route and path, so we assumed that those who have walked El Camino are more likely to visit the Mary's Route, and their views are important. Furthermore, the El Camino experience can be used to improve the Via Mariae.

The questionnaire was shared in several Hungarian language Facebook groups to which access was granted. One of the largest is the Mária út Facebook group, which has more than 15,000 members, and the El Camino de Santiago Club in Budapest, which has more than 5,000 members. Responses were accepted between 12/02/2023 and 11/04/2023.

The aim of the questionnaire survey was to assess the needs and satisfaction of pilgrims, to find out how satisfied they are with the current situation of the pilgrim routes and what improvements and improvements they would like to see. We also compared attitudes towards El Camino and the Via Mariae. We looked for correlations between demographic indicators and opinions about the route.

In order to fully explore the research topic, we also wanted to ask the "other side", i.e. the organisers and leaders of the pilgrimages. The main focus of the paper was on the Harghita County section of the Mary's Route, for two reasons. The first is that it is a multi-country and multi-regional route, so we don't have access to data for the whole route. The second is that Harghita County is the location of the Shrine of Csíksomlyó, one of the main sites of the pilgrimage of the Virgin Mary.

For this reason, we have selected four people who we believe have a good insight into the situation and difficulties of the pilgrimage routes and Harghita County and have a vision for the future. They are:

Sándor Molnár, Executive Director of the Mária Út (Mary's Route) Association of Transylvania;
Zsombor Kápolnai, Project Manager of the Mária Út Public Benefit Association;
Ernő Márton, tour guide and active volunteer of the Mary's Route;
Szabolcs Király, Deputy Mayor of Gheorgheni.

They were asked about the difficulties of the Via Mariae, the current situation and future plans. They were also asked about the financial background of the pilgrimage and how difficult it is to raise the necessary funds.

In the course of the research, we aim to verify the following hypotheses, which are based on the literature, previous research and our own personal practical experience:

1. Although the income from pilgrimage is increasing in the settlements, in the current situation it cannot be expected to become the main source of livelihood for a settlement or a household.
2. The needs and expectations of pilgrims and pilgrimage tourists are growing and expanding, which represents a tourist and economic opportunity for the local population. It could lead to the emergence of new sectors and services in the market.
3. Pilgrimages also have a positive impact on the range of cultural and leisure activities on offer.
4. The pilgrimage strengthens the events organised by joining forces across the borders of municipalities and countries.

Research results

The questionnaire survey was designed to target a geographically dispersed, age and educationally diverse population by promoting the idea on multiple platforms. In 2 months, 170 responses were received, which are not verifiably representative of the population, but which, based on our experience, are useful for drawing conclusions. As the development of pilgrimage routes and the needs for them are interlinked, the information received during the interviews will be analysed together with the results of the questionnaire.

64% of respondents were women and 36% were men. By age group, most people, more than half of the respondents, are middle-aged. 28% of respondents are young and 19% of respondents are older. Here, young people are defined as those aged 40 and under. We consider respondents aged 41 to 60 as middle-aged, and the older age group as those aged 60 and over.

60% of respondents are employed, 16% are retired and 18% are self-employed. The other category included 6% of respondents. They are students, unemployed and people on parental leave.

Almost two thirds of the respondents who are employed are intellectuals, 16% are in managerial positions and 16% are skilled workers.

In terms of denominational affiliation, Roman Catholics are overwhelmingly in the majority, with 77% of respondents indicating this. 10% are Reformed, while 6% consider themselves atheist or non-religious. 6% indicated other religions, such as Unitarian or Greek Catholic.

Although the previous question was related to denominational affiliation, the extent to which people consider themselves religious, regardless of denomination, is also an essential parameter for this topic. Half of the respondents claim to be religious but do not follow the teachings of the Church, and one third claim to follow the teachings of the Church. 15% do not consider themselves religious, while 3% cannot clearly answer this question.

31% of respondents never go to church or only very rarely. A quarter of them go to church on religious holidays, and almost half of respondents say they go to church at least once a month, and half of them go weekly.

As pilgrimages in the 21st century can also be a major financial burden, respondents were also asked about their financial situation.

Nearly two thirds of those surveyed think they live on average. Just over a quarter think they live slightly better than average. And 5% live much better than average. Only 5% think they live below average.

Respondents' pilgrim experiences so far

82% of the respondents had been on a pilgrimage, and more than half of the pilgrims who filled in the questionnaire had been on El Camino, 44% had been on the Mary's Route and 35% had also been on the Harghita County section. The responses show that the majority of pilgrims have been on the road several times, and those who have made only one pilgrimage are planning to make more in the future. 11% of respondents have also been on the Mary's Route and El Camino.

Since the route and services used by those who walk the Mary's Route are often very different from those who travel on horseback or by bicycle, or even those who take part in a bus pilgrimage, we also asked those who have made the pilgrimage on the Mary's Route how they made the pilgrimage. Of the respondents, 71% had made the pilgrimage on foot, 16% on horseback, 16% by bicycle and 24% by bus or train. 10% of respondents have made at least two types of pilgrimage, with one respondent who has made a pilgrimage by all the methods we listed. This

means that they have gone on pilgrimage on foot, they have been on a pilgrimage on horseback, they have made it by bicycle, and they have also taken the bus and the train.

Among the respondents who have taken the Mary's Route, the most popular route is towards Csíksomlyó. 90% of the pilgrims have made a pilgrimage along this route, followed by Máriapócs, where a quarter of the responding pilgrims have been. Both among respondents from Hungary and Romania, the most visited route is the Mary's Route towards Csíksomlyó. For El Camino, the French route.

86% of the respondents who made the pilgrimage on foot on the Mary's Route did so in a group or with someone. A further 2% usually walked with someone but not always, and only 9% who walked alone for the whole pilgrimage. The distribution is similar for pilgrims on bicycles.

On El Camino, twice as many people have already made the pilgrimage alone. It can be seen that more than half of the respondents have made the pilgrimage alone or mostly alone, which we believe is due to a greater sense of security.

The above is confirmed by the distribution of respondents using the services of tour guides. Almost half of the people who travelled on foot on the Mary's Route used the services of the guides. Also on the Mary's Route, but a quarter of pilgrims on horseback or by bicycle had a guide. On El Camino, on the other hand, almost all (97%) were without a guide and, in retrospect, think that they would not have needed one.

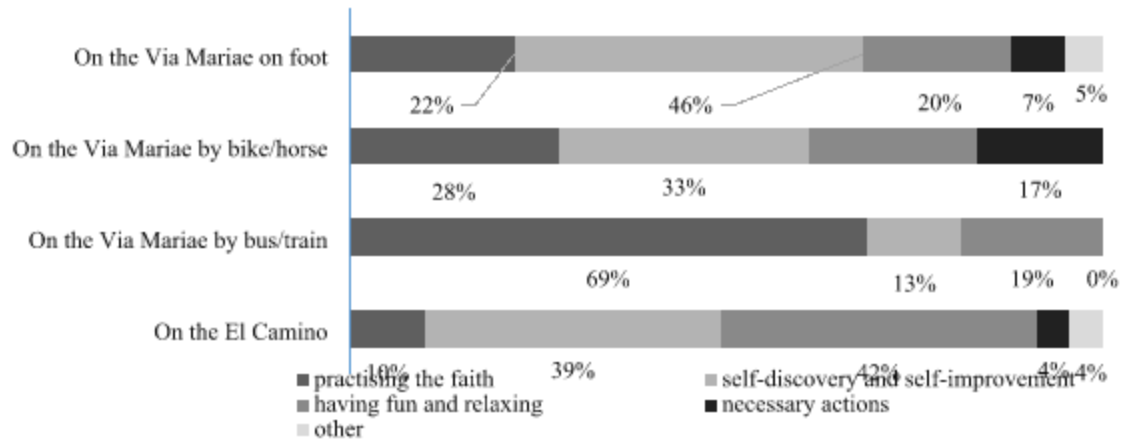
The in-depth interviews also show that the Mary's Route is different from El Camino, in many cases requiring the presence of a guide, otherwise pilgrims will not go. In Sándor Molnár's experience, the Mary's Route is "wilder". For those who are not afraid, it is exciting and they like the silence of the woods, but many people are limited in their departure by the fear of bears, shepherds and getting lost in the mountains. The vast majority of registered pilgrims require organisation and escorts. The accommodation is not booked by the pilgrims themselves, but by the person "in charge" of the trip.

The vast majority of respondents stayed in pilgrimage accommodation during their pilgrimage. In addition, respondents for the Via Mariae also mention staying in private houses in rented rooms, while this is not the case for El Camino. Guesthouses/hostels/ were used on both routes, but only to a minor extent. Some people took tents with them on the journey and there were cases on both routes of churches providing overnight accommodation for pilgrims. There were also cases of last-minute accommodation being found, with some unusual solutions (e.g. garages, haylofts, etc.).

The in-depth interviews revealed that the choice of accommodation on El Camino is much greater than on the Via Mariae. On the Spanish route there is the possibility of staying in all-comfort accommodation, but on the María Road there is not much choice, with accommodation in roughly the same price range. The in-depth interviews revealed that pilgrims often prefer/use more comfortable and more expensive accommodation, depending on their financial situation. However, there are also differences in this respect: some pilgrims prefer all-comfort facilities, some prefer cheaper options and some pilgrims are more adventurous.

In terms of leisure time, almost half of the pilgrims on foot on the Mary's Route spent their leisure time on self-discovery and self-improvement (see Figure 2.). The distribution was similar for pilgrims on horseback and by bicycle. For bus and train pilgrimages, the proportion of those who spent their time practising their faith was much higher. This is thought to be explained by the fact that these are organisational groups with similar themes of leisure activities and that the bus and train pilgrimages are attended by members of the older age group. In case of the El Camino, only 10% of respondents said that they spent most of their time practising their faith, but many more spent their time having fun and relaxing.

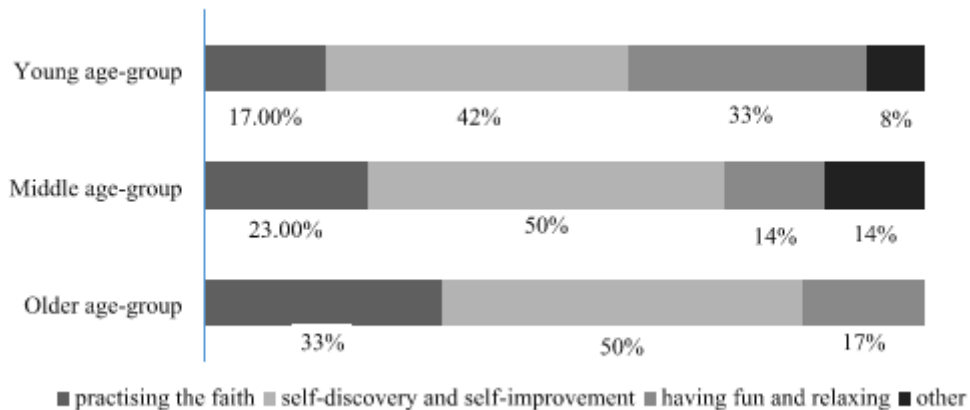
Figure 2: Distribution of leisure activities among respondents (%)



Source: own research and editing, 2024

We looked in more detail at the data on pilgrimage participants on the Mary's Route, and as shown in Figure 3., the older age group spent the most time in faith practice, while the younger age group spent less time.

Figure 3: Breakdown of leisure activities by age group in case of the Via Mariae (%)



Source: own research and editing, 2024

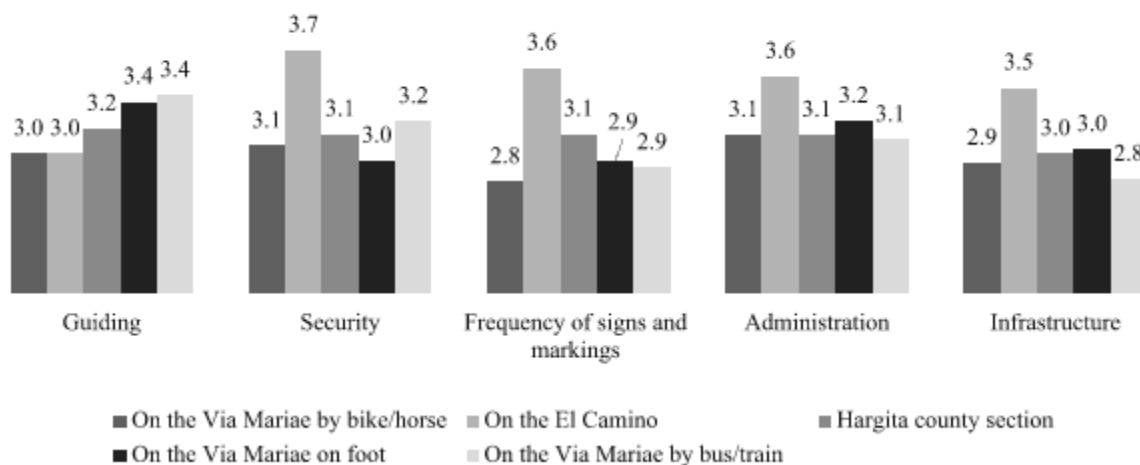
So, when designing leisure activities, it should be borne in mind that self-development programmes and performances are more likely to attract the interest of all ages. If a particular age group is to be targeted, then greater emphasis should be placed on entertainment and recreational opportunities for younger people, while older people should be given the opportunity to practice their faith and religion.

The in-depth interviews show that the development of programmes and community cohesion is more important than the expansion of accommodation and catering facilities. Those who want a community experience have more expectations in terms of community organisation. There is a demand to have a local organiser, to provide programmes and leisure activities based on local specificities.

Satisfaction with the infrastructure of the pilgrim routes

As the route on the Mary's Route does not always coincide with the route for pilgrims on foot or on horseback, we asked in each case how satisfied they were with the infrastructure on the Mary's Route. This required respondents to indicate their opinion on a scale of one to four, and the graphs below (Figure 4.) show the average of the responses received to each question. Compared to El Camino, respondents were less satisfied with the Mary's Route. The exception is the guided tour, but similar services are not very popular on El Camino.

Figure 4: Respondents' average satisfaction with the infrastructure of the Via Maria and El Camino, compared by area and the way of transport



Note: On a scale of 1-4, where 1 = not at all... 4 = completely satisfied

Source: own research and editing, 2024

Overall, respondents were more satisfied with infrastructure, safety and signage, but there were several responses regarding signage where roadside signs were considered insufficient. From the open questions, it is clear that for people on foot and on horseback/bicycle, the most feared phenomenon is the presence of stray dogs, herding dogs and bears.

Those who have made the pilgrimage on foot or on horseback find both the dogs and the lack of signs a problem. In the case of pilgrims on horseback, several reported that signs are not always visible and it is often not clear where to go next.

Overall, pilgrims are slightly more dissatisfied with the lack of signs and markings on the Mary's Route, but are satisfied with the guided tours that also serve as "substitutes" for the signs.

Several respondents to the open-ended questions said that pilgrims do not and should not have high expectations, and that inconveniences on the way are part of the pilgrimage.

Respondents are satisfied with the quality of accommodation. Satisfaction is lowest in the Harghita County section, but the difference is not outstanding. Satisfaction is also lowest in Harghita County, where there are several stretches where there is no restaurant for hours. As the executive director of the Maria Road Association puts it, "*this road is much wilder and wilder than the El Camino*", with the positive side of unspoilt scenery and proximity to nature, but the disadvantage of less accessible services.

There is a high level of satisfaction with the opening hours of the churches on the Mary's Route among those who come by bus/train, also due to the fact that these are largely organised pilgrimages and the church managers are aware of their arrival. Even if a church is closed on a particular date, it will be opened for that occasion.

Overall, respondents are most satisfied with cultural and leisure activities and programmes, but the average satisfaction is slightly lower in the Harghita County section, with some exceptions. As regards the beauty of the landscape, there was a unanimous positive opinion, which could not be said for the local population. There were some pilgrims who found the locals helpful and friendly, but there were also some who had a negative experience. The results suggest that one explanation for this may be that locals had never heard of the Mary's Pilgrimage and in more closed communities they were seen as "intruders".

Looking at the Harghita County section, it can be said that in this part of the region, pilgrims are most satisfied with the opening hours of the churches as well. This is followed by the quality of accommodation, then the guided tours. They are least satisfied with the density and quality of the catering facilities, which is also due to the fact that the route often passes through forests and mountains, where no similar services are available to pilgrims. If they wish to spend more time in a mountain environment, perhaps even an overnight stay, they must provide the necessary food and often drinking water themselves. Accommodation in the forests and mountain areas is possible in built shelters or in tents, but shelters are few and far between. They are suitable if necessary, but not always enough to allow the use of similar accommodation after each day's walk, and in this case the pilgrim must provide the necessary sleeping equipment (e.g. sleeping bag, etc.).

Satisfaction with the Harghita County section was also analysed by age group, as the needs and opinions of different age groups may differ. Our results show that the older age group also finds shortcomings in cultural programmes, while the younger age group is much more satisfied (see Table 1). Overall, the older age group is the least satisfied. As can be seen in the table below, the young and middle-aged are very satisfied with the guided tours, while the older age group is less satisfied.

Table 1: Average satisfaction of the respondents who have also made a pilgrimage in Harghita County with the Harghita County section, by age group

Young age group		Middle age group		Older age group	
<i>Infrastructure</i>	2,09	<i>Infrastructure</i>	3.06	<i>Cultural programs</i>	2.00
<i>Leisure time activities</i>	3.00	<i>Quality and density of catering units</i>	3.06	<i>Guiding</i>	2.25
<i>Quality of accommodations</i>	3.00	<i>Cultural programs</i>	3.18	<i>Administration</i>	2.50
<i>Quality and density of catering units</i>	3.00	<i>Opening hours of the churches</i>	3.24	<i>Leisure time activities</i>	2.75
<i>Security</i>	3.00	<i>Leisure time activities</i>	3.25	<i>Quality and density of catering units</i>	2.75
<i>Frequency of signs and markings</i>	3.09	<i>Security</i>	3.25	<i>Frequency of signs and markings</i>	2.75
<i>Cultural programs</i>	3.20	<i>Frequency of signs and markings</i>	3.25	<i>Infrastructure</i>	3.00

<i>Administration</i>	3.20	<i>Administration</i>	3.25	<i>Quality of accommodations</i>	3.00
<i>Opening hours of the churches</i>	3.30	<i>Guiding</i>	3.31	<i>Security</i>	3.00
<i>Guiding</i>	3.38	<i>Quality of accommodations</i>	3.37	<i>Opening hours of the churches</i>	3.00

Source: own research and editing, 2024

According to Ernő Márton, the tourist guide system in Harghita County works relatively well, but it is no longer possible with a larger number of pilgrims, so it is essential to expand the signposting. However, at the moment, many pilgrims require the services of a guide, some because they are afraid of getting lost, others because they are afraid of bears and dogs. Foreign tourists often use the services of guides.

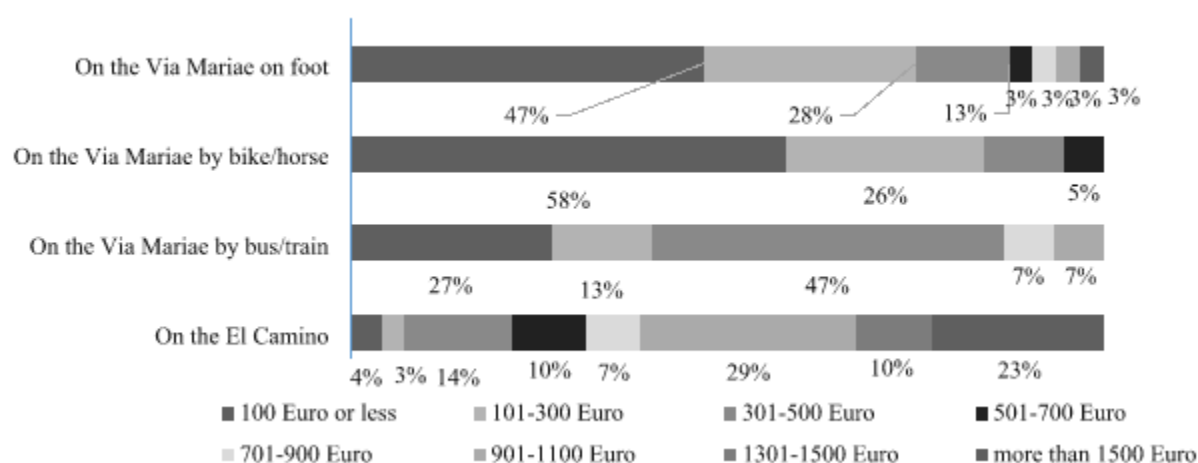
The financial expenditure of pilgrims on pilgrimages

An important aspect of the development and sustainability of the road is the financial investment made by pilgrims, since the routes are also subsidised by the municipalities, and if the income of the region and the population from pilgrimage increases, then presumably greater subsidies will be provided to the associations that run the routes.

According to our results, the pilgrimages on the Mary's Route are not really financially burdensome for pilgrims, in this case also due to the fact that most of the respondents on the Mary's Route only did shorter sections at a time, and on El Camino they were in most cases on pilgrimages of at least two weeks.

However, how burdensome an expense is for someone is largely influenced by their income and the amount of money they have available for travel-related expenses. Therefore, we further asked about the specific expenditure incurred on pilgrimages (Figure 5.).

Figure 5: Pilgrimage expenditure by type of pilgrimage (%)



Source: own research and editing, 2024

Over €1500 was spent only on walking pilgrimages. This is 3% of responding pilgrims on the Mary's Route, compared to 23% of respondents on El Camino. Half of pilgrims on the Mary's Route who cycle, ride or walk spend €100 or less. Half of pilgrims by bus and train spend between €300 and €500 on pilgrimages.

The resources spent on pilgrimages are obviously very much in line with the number of days a pilgrimage lasts. Expenditure on Mary's passengers is lower because the pilgrimages are also much shorter than on El Camino. While 36% of pilgrimages on foot are one day on the Maria route and 23% are 1-3 days, the proportion of pilgrimages on El Camino that are 3 days or less is only 2% of respondents.

On the Mary's Route, everyone who embarked on a 42-day pilgrimage spent between €500 and €1100. While on El Camino, 22% spent under €500 and 32% spent over €1100. Based on our personal experience, we believe that the reason for such a large difference between the expenditure of two pilgrims on El Camino is that El Camino is more often visited by pilgrims whose pilgrimage is characterised by deprivation, and that the Camino is also more often visited by "backpackers" who have limited financial resources and rely on "neighbourly kindness". And the high expenditure is not only due to the exchange rate difference, but also to the fact that Camino offers a wider range of services and products, so that those who want better quality and more comfort can get it at a higher price.

In contrast, the Harghita County section of the Maria Road has less choice in terms of accommodation, restaurants and other services, so pilgrims have to choose from a narrower list of offers, regardless of their different needs.

Overall, pilgrims spend on average less than €20 a day on the Mary's Route. As most pilgrims are in groups, and as there are several people per room in the accommodation and many meals are shared, this is a realistic figure. If you are travelling alone and choose to pay for accommodation, your costs will be higher.

Development opportunities on the Mary's Route in the light of in-depth interviews

Based on the responses to the questionnaire and the in-depth interviews, it can be said that there is a continuous development on the Mária road, but there is no specific strategy or target group to focus on. In the case of the Mary's Route in Harghita County, the current infrastructure is more suited to the more adventurous and authentic pilgrims, with a focus on human resources who make up for the lack of investment. Road maintenance and guiding is often done by volunteers, but the volunteer system has its difficulties. Some tasks and responsibilities require permanent and paid staff.

In the light of the above, the most important step in the current situation of the Harghita County section of the Mária road is to promote it and develop the functioning of the voluntary system, but the biggest obstacle is the lack of manpower.

So the Mary's Route has tourism potential, but it will inevitably require greater financial resources.

Conclusions

The development of the Maria road and the expansion of its infrastructure requires continuous and constant work, but the popularity and visibility of the road is low, and this is even more noticeable on the Romanian and Harghita County sections of the Maria road. It is often the case that even the locals are not aware of it. However, it can be said that the interest and demand for pilgrimages is increasing, so there is a potential and a tourist potential in the Via Mariae. There is also interest in pilgrimages on foot, on horseback, by bicycle, bus and train.

The horse pilgrimages currently attract mostly riders from the surrounding villages, while the bus and train pilgrimages attract pilgrims from abroad. Walking tourists are both foreigners and locals. Understandably, locals are most likely to take part in pilgrimages of 1-3 days, while foreign tourists are more likely to target pilgrimages of 3-4 weeks, with Budapest being the most popular starting point.

Two types of pilgrimage are common on multi-day trips:

- Tourists who want to experience the closeness of nature and who are willing to take the difficulties and dangers that come with it. This group is a smaller target group of more “extreme” people.
- Pilgrims in groups, with a guide, who are well organised and have the necessary ties to adapt to the group and guide.

However, these are two “extreme” categories with a smaller target group. In the middle are the pilgrims, who do not want to fit in with others during the pilgrimage, but would not want to risk being alone on the forest and mountain trails. The largest group of pilgrims is of the same type, but there is not yet an adequate infrastructure for them on some stretches of the Mary's Route, including the Harghita County section. Thus, they more often choose El Camino as a destination. So, along with promotion, there is a need to improve the road and infrastructure.

Based on our findings, the following improvements and extensions are proposed:

- the continued installation of signs and markings,
- solving the problem of herding dogs,
- information on the physiology and characteristics of bears (the chances of encountering one are minimal if the instructions are followed, but if they are, what to do if they do),
- the publication of a guidebook with all the accommodation and catering facilities, shops and drinking water sources available during the trip,
- the development of a digital map specifically for people who are hiking or walking alone in the mountains,
- however, it is also necessary to develop a well-directed marketing for both local and foreign pilgrims/tourists, promoting the area both as a tourist destination and as a pilgrim destination,
- the promotion should also focus on getting the local population to know and get closer to the Maria Road, as one of the big differences between the Maria Road and El Camino is the community experience. The hospitality of the locals is important and the voluntary contribution of the population can be a great help in the maintenance of the infrastructure.

Due to the nature of the trip, the first period is aimed at “extreme” and experienced hikers. For them, a targeted marketing campaign should be developed to attract the attention of those who want to go trekking.

Another area where there is a big gap for the Romanian section of the Maria road is administration and registration. At present, no one has even approximate statistics on pilgrims. There is no data on how many pilgrims there are each year, which section of the route they walk, how they make their pilgrimage. However, knowing the current situation would greatly help further improvements. This would require the development of a registration system whereby everyone can register when they arrive at Csíksomlyó and the development of a motivation system whereby the vast majority of pilgrims would register.

Overall, pilgrimages are growing in popularity, but are not yet expected to become a self-sustaining sector. The number of pilgrims is increasing year by year, but the interviews revealed that the income they generate will not be sufficient to maintain the Mary's Route or to run a catering facility in the near future, but it can have a number of positive effects on the development of the settlements and the quality of life of the population. The Pentecost pilgrimage is a prime example of the organisation of international events that build long-term relationships between countries.

So we believe that the hypotheses set out at the beginning of the research were confirmed by the surveys.

Summary

The topic of our paper is the pilgrimage route of the Mary's Route, including the economic and development potential of the Harghita County section. To this end, we have also studied attitudes and opinions towards pilgrimages in general and El Camino in particular, in order to compare them.

In addition to the literature review, an own research was presented. The first survey was an on-line questionnaire survey to analyse pilgrims' opinions and experiences of pilgrimages. We targeted people who had already participated in pilgrimages either on the Mary's Route or on El Camino.

There are several explanations for the inclusion of El Camino pilgrimages in the research. Firstly, the expectations and needs for pilgrimages are generalizable. Secondly, experience shows that the vast majority of pilgrims do not choose just one route, but constantly set themselves new destinations as far as they are able. Furthermore, it is also worth examining why those who choose only El Camino do not also consider the Mary's Route.

The main result of the questionnaire survey is that the popularity of pilgrimages is growing, whether on foot, on horseback, by bike, bus or train.

However, there is much less interest in the direction of the Mária road, mainly due to the lack of infrastructure and the presence of dogs and bears on the road. At the same time, there is much greater satisfaction with the recreational and cultural programmes.

The following conclusions have been drawn from the analysis of the development options and priorities for the Mary's Route:

The expansion of the infrastructure should also take into account the needs of people going on 3-4 week pilgrimages, but it is important to bear in mind that, in terms of developments and programmes, there are two types of pilgrims with completely different needs and expectations: those who go on group pilgrimages and/or with a guide, and the "extreme" pilgrims who go on their own.

The Mary's Route is not known to any type of pilgrim, either locally or internationally. It is therefore necessary to promote the Route and launch a marketing campaign.

Of the four interviews conducted during the qualitative research, three were with professionals related to the Maria Road and one with the head of a municipality in Harghita County.

The interviews show that one of the biggest difficulties for the organisers is the bureaucracy of the Romanian legal system and the lack of financial resources, but they see potential in the Maria Road. They also believe that the popularity of pilgrimages is growing, but that the right infrastructure needs to be put in place to encourage pilgrims to take the Mary's Route. One of the big differences between the Via Mariae and El Camino is the community experience. The hospitality of the locals is important and the voluntary contribution of the population can be of great help in maintaining the infrastructure. So, in many cases, community cohesion and the strengthening of community programmes are more important than the infrastructure itself.

At the beginning of the research, four hypotheses were put forward, which were confirmed by the surveys.

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