

ACCOMMODATION SPACES ON RIVER AND SEA SHIPS – A TOURIST ALTERNATIVE IN THE TULCEA AREA

REZMUVEȘ ROBERTA-NICOLETA¹, TRĂILĂ MARIAN-OCTAVIAN¹, ENACHE DANIEL-LUCIAN¹, MĂNESCU CAMELIA¹, SICOE-MURG, OANA MARIA^{1*}

¹University of Life Sciences "King Mihai I" from Timisoara, Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Romania

*Corresponding author's e-mail: oana.sicoe-murg@usvt.ro

Abstract: The study aims to highlight aspects of the use of cruise ships and small vessels as innovative forms of accommodation and tourist experience in the Danube Delta and the coastal area of Tulcea County. In the context of the development of sustainable tourism and the diversification of the Romanian tourist offer, the study presents aspects of these accommodation structures, but also the competitive advantages of this form of tourism compared to traditional accommodation structures, by integrating mobility, direct contact with the natural environment and the valorization of the local natural and cultural heritage. The use of SWOT analysis allows a complex assessment of the potential of this form of accommodation.

Key words: accommodation, alternative tourism, river ships, SWOT

INTRODUCTION

The development of tourism in Tulcea area, the gateway to the Danube Delta, requires the diversification of accommodation forms and the orientation towards unconventional solutions, adapted to the natural and cultural specifics of the region. In this context, accommodation spaces arranged on river or sea ships represent an innovative alternative, which combines mobility, authentic experience on the water and the valorization of natural heritage [10].

This type of tourist infrastructure offers significant advantages: harmonious integration into the aquatic environment, flexibility of routes and the possibility of attracting segments of tourists interested in ecotourism, short cruises and personalized experiences.

At the same time, these spaces can contribute to the extension of the tourist season and to the reduction of pressure on traditional accommodation structures in the Danube Delta [8,10].

Tulcea is located in Northern Dobrogea, in the South-Eastern Region of Romania, on the right bank of the Tulcea arm, halfway between Ceatalul Chilia and Ceatalul Sf. Gheorghe, 8 km downstream of the first bifurcation of the Danube, at 45 degrees 11' north latitude and 28 degrees 48' east longitude [7].



Figure 1. Tulcea - geographic positioning

Source: Google maps, Wikipedia[14, 15]

The water resource in the Tulcea area is one of the most important resources in the analyzed area. In Tulcea County, the waters are grouped into two hydrographic basins - Danube and Litoral, which occupy 71% and 29% of the county's surface area, respectively[15].

Due to its strategic positioning, the area has a very good potential for niche tourism: cruises, eco-tourism, fishing tourism, cultural tourism. Accommodation on river and maritime ships offers flexibility (mobility, unique experience) and can extend the tourist seasons.

The Tulcea area is a regional hub of excellence for river and maritime tourism, offering safe, sustainable and integrated ship accommodation experiences with the local economy, thus increasing the number of tourists, the average length of stay and local income[3,6].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research on accommodation structures on sea and river ships in the Tulcea area, as a tourism alternative, was based on a mixed approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to obtain an integrated perspective on the tourism and infrastructural potential of the region [4,8].

Primary and secondary documentary sources were used, including: statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, Tulcea County Directorate and the Romanian Naval Authority; strategic documents and local tourism development plans (Sustainable Development Strategy of Tulcea County, County Territorial Development Plan, etc.) and online databases on floating accommodation units [9,11,13].

RESEARCH RESULTS

Sea and river ships, including floating pontoons, used to accommodate tourists during the trip or as floating hotels anchored in ports, are classified by star rating (from 1 to 5) depending on the quality of the facilities and services they offer [1].

The classification criteria for hotels are also applied accordingly to accommodation spaces on ships and pontoons, except for those relating to:

1. the dimensions of the accommodation spaces, which may be reduced by up to 50% compared to those in hotels of the same category;
2. the dimensions of the beds, which may be 0.80/2.00 m for single beds and 1.20/2.00 m for double beds; the provision of furniture (chairs, tables, etc.) will be within the limits of the space, provided that the functionality and use of the accommodation space is ensured as comfortably as possible. Provisions with folding furniture are also permitted [2,8].

In the 1 and 2 star categories, bunk beds can also be used. The structure of the accommodation spaces on ships is similar to that in hotels. The catering spaces for serving tourists are classified separately, according to the specific criteria of the units of the same profile.

On ships of higher category (4 and 5 stars) it is mandatory to ensure the possibilities for leisure, sports and banquets, festivities, etc.

The area under study includes the following localities near Tulcea: Sulina, Chilia Veche, Crisan, Mahmudia, Maliuc, Murighiol, Nufaru and Turcoaia, which have such types of accommodation. In some localities, such as Chilia Veche, Nufaru and Turcoaia, these types of structures are more recent [7,10].

Most of the accommodation spaces are river ships anchored / stationary in the Tulcea area or in ports in Tulcea, used as accommodation units. The accommodation capacities are not very large, usually between 18-21 places.

The facilities in these accommodation spaces vary, some have only accommodation and basic services, others offer a restaurant, terrace, bar, etc. Most of the structures are appropriately classified (4 stars) for comfort, which suggests that they are not at the hostel/simple level, the standards being decent [5, 10].

International cruise tourism - is a form of tourism resumed after decades of interruption, mainly by tour operators from Central Europe. It is a consequence of the special position of Sulina in the Danube and European space in general.

River cruise ships arrive in the port of Sulina and stay for a few hours, during which tourists visit the cliff, the museum and the C.E.D. Lighthouse building, the international marine cemetery and the Black Sea beach [10].

Aspects related to the total number of reception structures with the function of accommodation on river and sea vessels in the area under study are highlighted in the figure below, in the period 2010-2024 (Figure 2.).

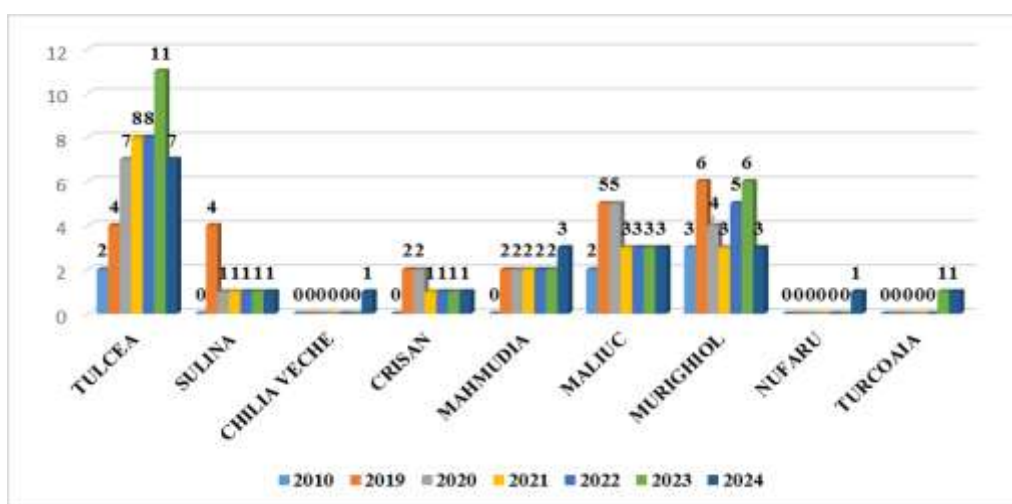


Figure 2. Total reception structures in the studied area (number)

Source: Authors' processing based on Tempo online data [12]

Following the centralization of the data, we observe that, during the period under study, these accommodation structures in the analyzed area recorded fluctuating developments (Figure 3.).

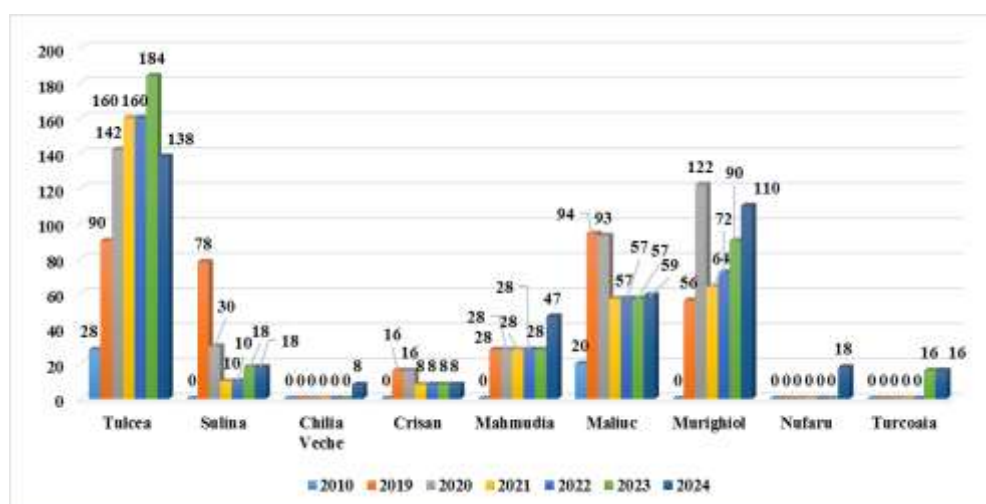


Figure 3. Existing accommodation capacity within the analyzed structure (number)

Source: Authors' processing based on Tempo online data [12]

The data presented reflect the evolution of the existing tourist accommodation capacity in the main localities of Tulcea County, during the period 2010–2024, highlighting a process of significant and uneven development of the tourist infrastructure in the Danube Delta area and its surroundings.

A sharp increase in the total accommodation capacity is observed in the analyzed interval, especially in the localities of Tulcea, Murighiol and Maliuc, which are becoming dominant tourist centers in the region.

Tulcea, as the main urban node and gateway to the Danube Delta, records a constant and sustained growth — from 28 places in 2010 to a maximum of 184 in 2023, followed by a slight decrease in 2024 (138 places), possibly determined by seasonal adjustments or restructuring of the offer.

The tourist localities inside the Delta (Sulina, Crisan, Mahmudia, Murighiol, Maliuc) show variable dynamics, influenced by accessibility, private investments and regional development programs.

Murighiol, for example, goes from the absence of infrastructure in 2010 to 110 accommodation places in 2024, indicating a clear consolidation of its tourist function. Mahmudia follows a similar evolution, from 0 to 47 places, which confirms the orientation towards sustainable tourism and ecotourism [8,10].

In contrast, localities such as Chilia Veche and Nufăru have recorded low values, only in recent years (8 and, respectively, 18 places in 2024), which suggests an incipient tourism development. Turcoaia appears only after 2022, with a modest capacity (16 places), reflecting a recent expansion of the tourist offer towards the peripheral areas of the county.

Overall, the data illustrate a general trend of increasing tourist accommodation capacity in Tulcea County, associated with the exploitation of the natural potential of the Danube Delta and the diversification of local destinations, but the development remains uneven, concentrated mainly in a few localities with easy access and consolidated infrastructure.

The data on arrivals in the analyzed area highlight a fluctuating dynamics of tourist activity in the period 2010–2024, with notable differences between localities.

Overall, there is a significant increase in the number of arrivals between 2010 and 2019, followed by a sharp decrease in 2020, amid the restrictions imposed by the pandemic (Table 1.).

Tabel 1.

Arrivals situation within the analyzed accommodation structure

	2010	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Tulcea	0	1562	2216	2479	1569	966	1410
Sulina	0	937	679	0	407	170	162
Chilia Veche	0	0	0	0	0	0	167
Crișan	0	204	188	122	122	366	182
Mahmudia	162	1043	328	0	0	0	783
Maliuc	0	1351	1672	501	152	353	103
Murighiol	0	0	0	0	0	25	113
Nufăru	0	1562	2216	2479	1569	966	1410
Turcoaia	0	937	679	0	407	170	162

Source: Centralized by Tempo online data [12]

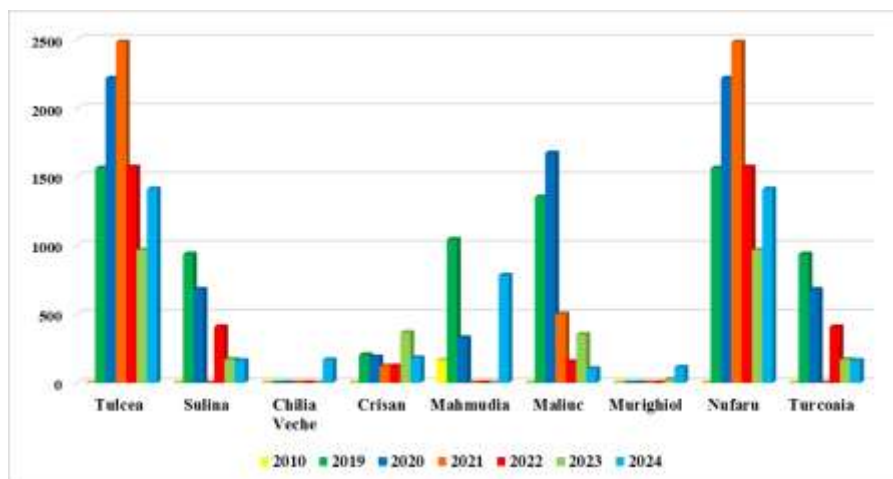


Figure 4. Situation of tourist arrivals within the analyzed accommodation structure (number)

Source: Authors' processing based on Tempo online data [12]

After 2021, the evolution is uneven: some localities (Tulcea and Mahmudia) record a gradual return of tourist flows until 2024, while others (Sulina, Maliuc, Murighiol) show a decreasing trend or low values, indicating a redirection of flows to areas with more developed tourist infrastructure (Figure 4.).

The appearance of positive values only in 2024 for localities such as Chilia Veche and Murighiol suggests the recent expansion of the accommodation offer or the relaunch of tourist activity. Overall, the data reflect a process of slow adaptation of the regional tourism sector to the new economic and social conditions post-pandemic.

The analysis of the evolution of the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation structures in the analyzed area highlights a fluctuating dynamic, influenced by economic, social and health factors, but also by the degree of development of the local tourist infrastructure (Table 2.).

Table 2.

Record of overnight stays within the analyzed structure (number)

	2010	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Tulcea	0	3637	5302	5286	3941	2060	2952
Sulina	0	2715	1814	0	1083	460	356
Chilia Veche	0	0	0	0	0	0	454
Crisan	0	672	686	347	381	1174	474
Mahmudia	352	4267	998	0	0	0	3433
Maliuc	0	3894	5017	1667	379	741	243
Murighiol	0	0	0	0	0	50	307
Nufaru	0	3637	5302	5286	3941	2060	2952
Turcoia	0	2715	1814	0	1083	460	356

Source: Centralized by Tempo online data [12]

During the analyzed period (2010–2024), a significant increase in tourism activity is observed after 2010, with the consolidation of the ecotourism sector in the Danube Delta. The localities of Tulcea, Mahmudia, Maliuc and Crișan record the highest values of the number of overnight stays, which suggests a concentration of tourist flows in areas with easy access to the main canals and natural attractions.

After 2019, a sharp decline is observed in 2020, probably correlated with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mobility and domestic tourism, followed by a gradual recovery in the period 2021–2024.

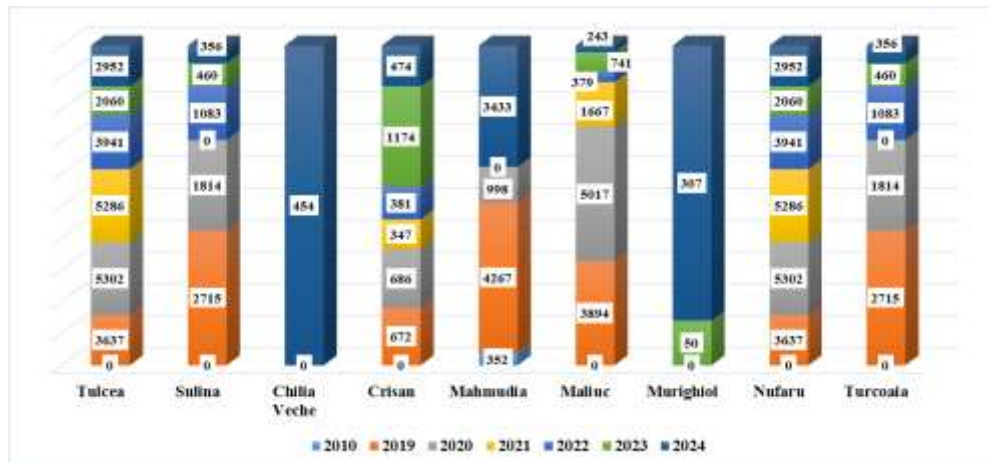


Figure 5. Overnight stays within the analyzed structure (number)

Source: Authors' processing based on Tempo online data [12]

In particular, in the localities of Tulcea, Mahmudia and Nufaru, a significant return of tourist demand is observed in 2024, which reflects the capacity of these destinations to adapt to the new trends of sustainable and proximity tourism (Figure 5.).

The appearance of the locality of Chilia Veche in the statistics of 2024, after a total absence in previous years, can be interpreted as a result of the diversification of the tourist offer and the expansion of the accommodation infrastructure in previously less exploited areas.

In contrast, the localities of Sulina and Murighiol show large variations from one year to another, which indicates a strong dependence on seasonality and accessibility [10].

Overall, the evolution of the number of overnight stays confirms that tourism in the Danube Delta is a dynamic sector, but vulnerable to external factors, requiring sustainable development strategies focused on diversifying services, modernizing infrastructure and promoting a unified image of the destination.

The comparative analysis of the number of foreign tourists who opted for the type of accommodation analyzed highlights a significant decrease in 2024 compared to 2019, for the entire period April–October. In 2019, high values are observed in the summer months, with a peak in May (245) and a second maximum in September (223), which indicates a seasonality specific to peak tourist periods.

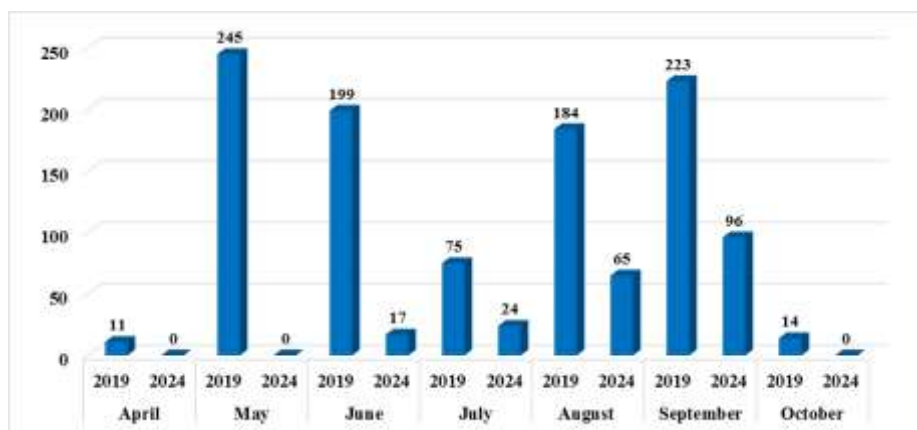


Figure 6. Situation of foreigners who opted for this type of accommodation (number)

Source: Authors' processing based on Tempo online data [12]

In contrast, in 2024, the number of foreigners is very low, with zero values recorded in April, May and October, respectively modest values in the summer months (maximum of 96 in September, Figure 6.).

The use of SWOT analysis allows for a comprehensive assessment of the potential of this form of accommodation. We have further developed this type of analysis for the studied area [2,6].

Strengths

1. Unique tourist experience – Accommodation on ships offers a unique, authentic experience, in direct contact with the aquatic environment and nature of the Danube Delta.
2. Mobility and flexibility – The possibility of moving ships to different areas of the Delta offers tourist diversity.
3. Strategic location – Ships are anchored in key points (Tulcea cliff, Delta channels, tourist ports), with quick access to excursion routes.
4. Comfort and modern facilities – Most ships are modernized, offering conditions similar to 3–4 star hotels (rooms with private bathroom, air conditioning, restaurant, bar, terrace).
5. Attraction for foreign tourists – These spaces have a high potential for international tourism, due to their exoticism and local specificity.

Weaknesses

1. Low accommodation capacity – Most ships only offer 10–20 places, limiting tourist flow during peak periods.
2. High maintenance and operating costs – Ship maintenance (engine, installations, safety) is more expensive than in the case of land-based guesthouses.
3. Dependence on weather and river conditions – Water level, currents and weather can limit tourist activity.
4. Insufficiently developed port infrastructure – The lack of modern facilities in some berths or ports affects the attractiveness and comfort of tourists.
5. Insufficient promotion – Many of these units are not well promoted online or internationally, reducing their visibility on the market.

Opportunities

1. Increasing interest in ecological and experiential tourism – More and more tourists are looking for authentic experiences in nature, which favors this type of accommodation.
2. Access to European funds for the development of sustainable tourism – Funding can be attracted for the modernization of ships and the expansion of accommodation capacity.
3. Local partnerships – Collaboration with travel agents, local fishermen, guides and traditional restaurants can enrich the tourist offer.
4. Diversification of services – Possibility of offering thematic cruises, photo excursions, birdwatching, local gastronomy.
5. Promotion of the Danube Delta as a UNESCO destination – It can be a strong vector of image and international attraction.

Threats

1. Climate change and hydrological variations – Lower Danube levels or extreme events can affect navigability and safety.

2. Competition with guesthouses and resorts in the area – These may offer lower prices or additional services.
3. Strict maritime and environmental regulations – May limit the expansion or operation of tourist vessels.
4. Strong seasonality – Activity is concentrated in the warm months (May–September), leading to long periods of inactivity.
5. Skilled personnel issues – Finding qualified crew and service personnel can be difficult in the Delta area.

CONCLUSIONS

Tourism in the Tulcea area, closely linked to the natural resources and the uniqueness of the Danube Delta, is faced with the need to diversify accommodation services and adapt to modern trends in the tourism market.

In this context, the development of accommodation spaces on sea and river ships is emerging as a viable, sustainable and attractive alternative, capable of meeting the demands of a public interested in authentic experiences and responsible tourism.

The results of the study show that the development of port infrastructure, the adaptation of legislation on accommodation on ships and the promotion of thematic tourism products (ecotourism cruises, cultural and gastronomic tourism, wildlife observation) can transform these spaces into an important vector of economic and sustainable development of the Tulcea area.

It is an advantage to capitalize on this potential, through public-private partnerships, investments in infrastructure and integrated tourism marketing.

Accommodation spaces on river and sea ships can become a strategic element in consolidating the tourism offer of Tulcea County, provided that sustainable planning, compliance with environmental regulations and the involvement of local actors in promoting this form of alternative tourism.

Accommodation spaces on sea and river ships in the area represent a valuable tourist niche, which combines adventure, relaxation and direct contact with nature.

However, for sustainable development, it is necessary: modernization of port infrastructure, coherent international promotion, diversification of services (cruises, gastronomy, ecotourism) and financial support through green tourism programs.

Some proposals for the studied area, which would help the development of this type of tourism on river and sea vessels: controlled development of accommodation spaces on river and sea vessels, as an alternative and sustainable form of tourist exploitation of the natural resources of the Danube Delta; modernization and expansion of port infrastructure, adapted to safety, comfort and environmental protection requirements, creation and promotion of integrated thematic tourist products, oriented towards authentic experiences; stimulation of public-private partnerships and investments in integrated tourist marketing, including at the international level.

In conclusion, accommodation spaces on sea and river ships can represent a valuable tool for consolidating the tourism brand of Tulcea County.

By responsibly exploiting natural resources and adapting the infrastructure to the requirements of sustainable tourism, this form of accommodation can significantly contribute to sustainable development and the diversification of the regional tourism offer.

REFERENCES

- [1]. **ATANASIU-CROITORU ANDREEA**, 2006, The Fluvial and Maritime Traffic in the Romanian Waters and his Importance in the Economical Development of the Romanian Countries, *Analele Universității Ovidius din Constanța - Seria Istorie*, Print ISSN 1841-138X
- [2]. **BORDEAN I., TURTUREANU ANCA, TUREAC CORNELIA, TRANDAFIR MARIAN, FILIP A. C.**, 2010, Strategies to promote the Danube Delta, *Turismul rural românesc în contextul dezvoltării durabile. Actualitate și perspective*, Volumul XXI, ISBN 978-973-702-762-7, Iasi
- [3]. **GHEORGHIȚĂ A.**, 2014, *Geografia Turismului Metode de analiză în turism*, Editura Universitară, București, pag. 228
- [4]. **GRUIA R.**, 2015, *Managementul Activității de Transport în Industria Turismului*, Note de Curs, Universitatea Transilvania, Facultatea Alimentație și Turism, pag. 139
- [5]. **KOZUMPLIKOVA A., SCHIELOVA T.**, 2015, Integrated tourism strategy based on community planning, In: *Public recreation and landscape protection - with man hand in hand!*, Conference proceeding, Mendel University, Brno, Czech Republic, pp. 127-130
- [6]. **POPESCU M., GRUIA R., ȚANE N.**, 2019, The Danube-an instrument for sustainable development of rural tourism. Case study: southern Dobrogea plateau, *Lucrări Științifice Management Agricol*, Vol 21, No 3, ISSN 1453-1410, Timișoara
- [7]. *** *Strategia de Dezvoltare a Municipiului Tulcea 2021-2030*
- [8]. *** *Analiza Potențialului Turistic în Regiunea Sud-Est, 2020*
- [9]. *** *Strategia de Dezvoltare Locală pentru perioada 2021 – 2027*
- [10]. *** *Master Planul pentru turismul national al României 2007 – 2026*
- [11]. *** *Transportul Naval din România – Situație actuală și perspective de dezvoltare, 2023*
- [12]. *** *Tempo online, turism*
- [13]. *** *Institutul Național de Statistică*
- [14]. *** <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Tulcea/>
- [15]. *** https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jude%C8%9Bul_Tulcea