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18.

Central Europe's Pilgrim Route: Mary's Route

Content

Foreword

This publication contains the latest scientific publications from Mary's Route. The papers present the Mary's Route network from several scientific perspectives. The Mary's Route theme is presented, in relation to the Council of Europe's European Cultural Routes programme.

Read about the settlement and rural development impacts of the Mary's Route, and the sport and recreation actions of the Mary's Route.

Digitalisation is an important opportunity today, and this topic was not left out of the research.

We thank the academic researchers for their involvement in the work of Mary's Route. We are glad that the authors of this volume from several countries Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia are participating in our research.

Dr. Tamás Szabó
President European Network Association of Mary's Route

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]".

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[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/

The attraction of the shrine also increases the number of visitors to other historical, cultural sites, events and natural attractions, and has a positive impact on tourism yields. However, the experience of El Camino shows that pilgrimage cannot be the basis of the economic life of a region, and that the income from pilgrimage tourism alone is negligible compared with other sectors. Thus, our basic hypothesis is that the economic indicators of pilgrimage are increasing, while the popularity of the *Via Mariæ* is growing, but in terms of direct economic benefits, it cannot be a basic source of livelihood for a municipality.

In the following we try to give a brief overview of the main literature on the subject.

Territorial and rural development in the light of pilgrimages

"The most general aim of spatial development is to create the conditions for spatially balanced (equilibrium) development" (Halmai, 2002:23.).

In economics, development means essentially economic development, which implies social development. If we look at this development in spatial terms, we are talking about spatial development, in which case spatiality is a key aspect. If we are talking about a circumscribed area, we are talking about territorial or regional development, which can also be narrowed down (e.g. urban development). Spatial development can aim at the whole country or part of it, and it involves internal structural changes. Endogenous development is where progress is based on internal resources. In the past, only bottom-up development was included, but now top-down initiatives can also fall into this category. Although exogenous development can also use external technologies, the difference is that integration is faster and the uptake is adapted to local conditions. However, in both cases sustainability is now essential. Today, development is rarely described without the concept of sustainability (Farkas, 2002a). In addition to ecological goals, development can have goals in three other areas (see Figure 1.): social and cultural goals, political goals and economic goals.

Figure 1. Endogenous regional development objectives and the links between them ns
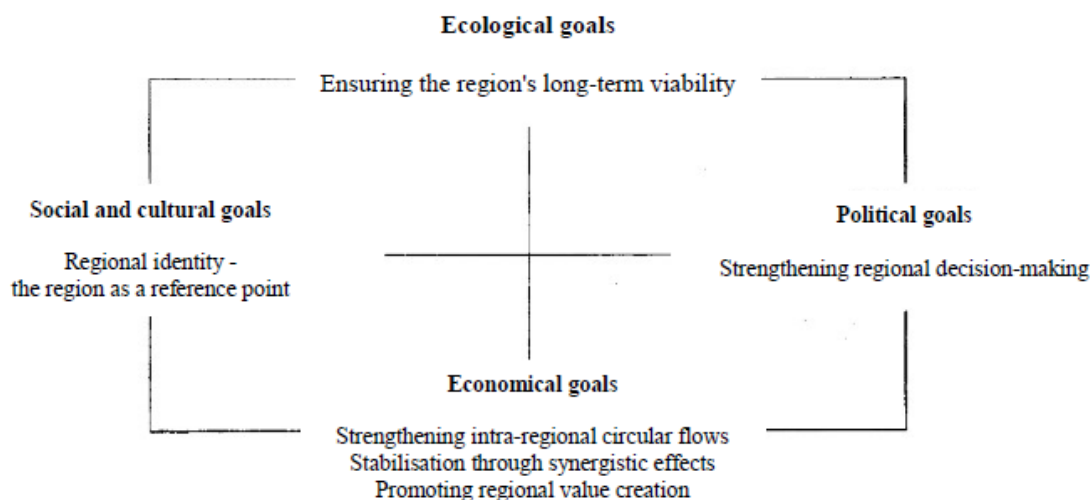
Source: Farkas, 2002a: 14.

The effectiveness of endogenous development requires the use of local economic, natural, human and cultural resources, provides opportunities for the participation of the population and

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 County[3], 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.).

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[3] https://elemzo.hargitamegye.ro/hargita-megye-videkfejlesztesi-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 (%)
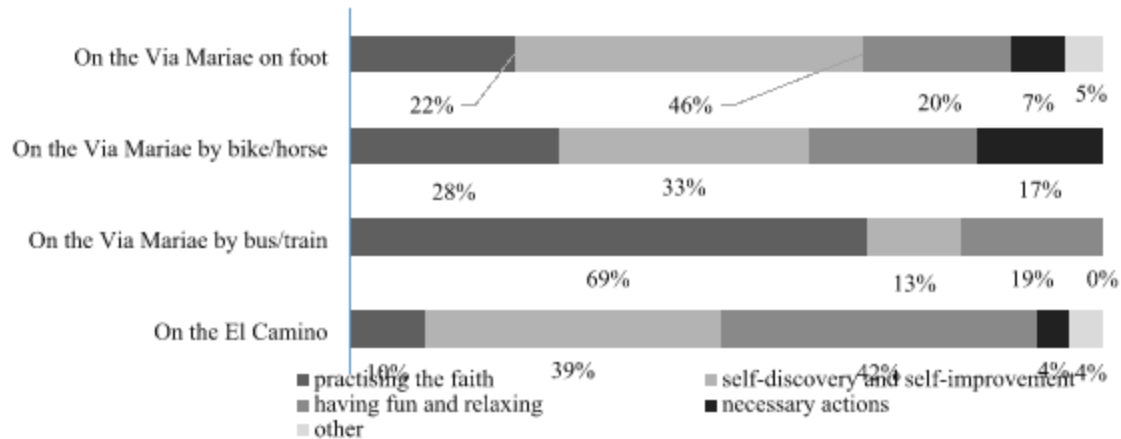
Source: own research and editing, 2024

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 (%)
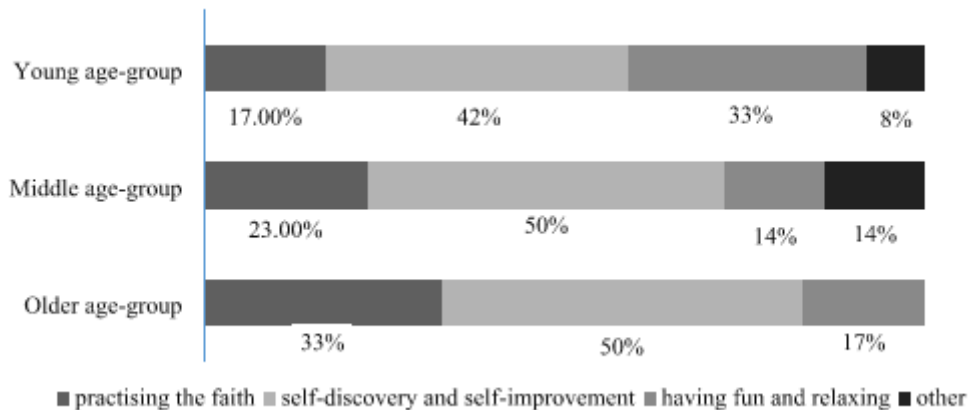
Source: own research and editing, 2024

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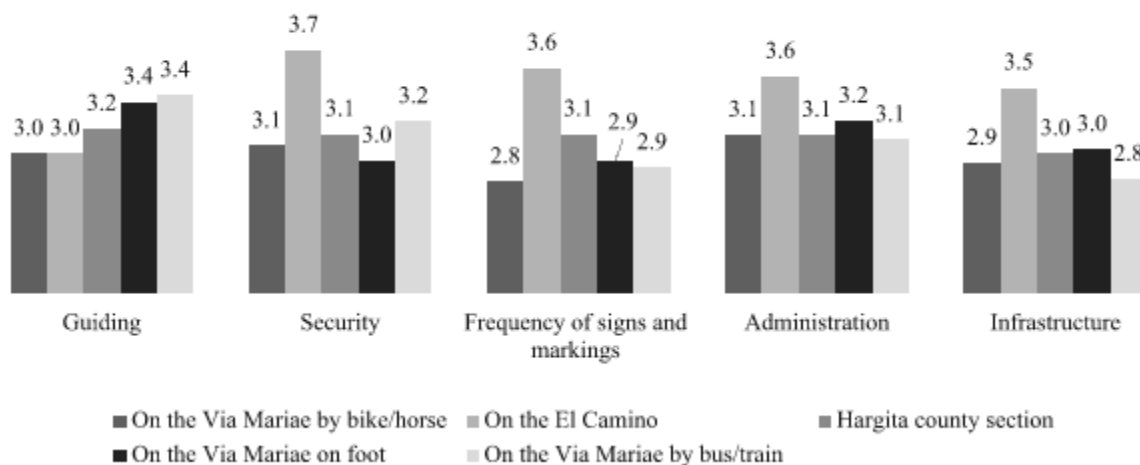
Note: On a scale of 1-4, where 1 = not at all... 4 = completely satisfied

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	
Infrastructure	2,09	*Infrastructure*	3.06	*Cultural programs*	2.00
Leisure time activities	3.00	*Quality and density of catering units*	3.06	*Guiding*	2.25
Quality of accommodations	3.00	*Cultural programs*	3.18	*Administration*	2.50
Quality and density of catering units	3.00	*Opening hours of the churches*	3.24	*Leisure time activities*	2.75
Security	3.00	*Leisure time activities*	3.25	*Quality and density of catering units*	2.75
Frequency of signs and markings	3.09	*Security*	3.25	*Frequency of signs and markings*	2.75
Cultural programs	3.20	*Frequency of signs and markings*	3.25	*Infrastructure*	3.00

Administration	3.20	*Administration*	3.25	*Quality of ac-commodations*	3.00
Opening hours of the churches	3.30	*Guiding*	3.31	*Security*	3.00
Guiding	3.38	*Quality of ac-commodations*	3.37	*Opening hours of the churches*	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 (%)
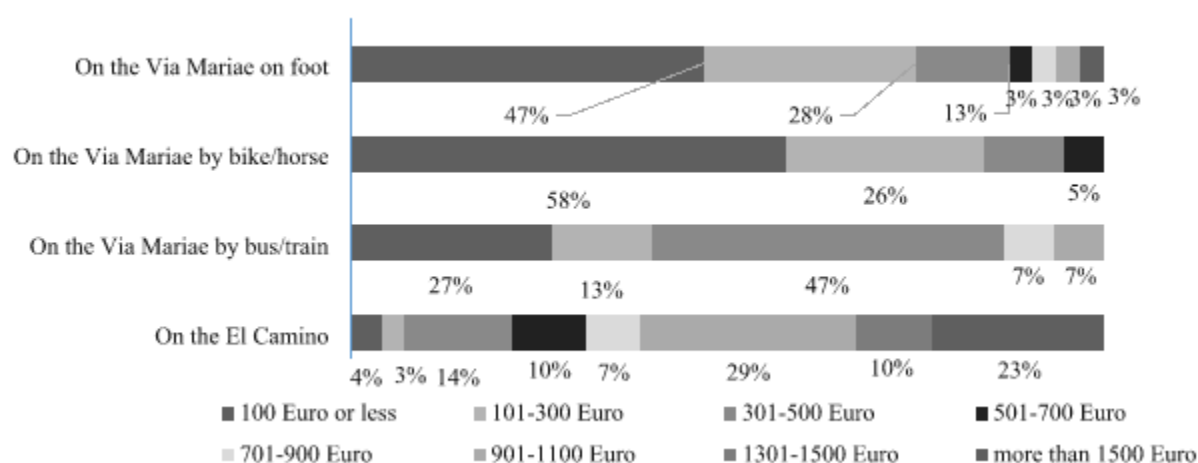
Source: own research and editing, 2024

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 online 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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The Mary's Route as a Possible European Cultural Route

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Introduction

The European Network Association of Mary's Route (Eunam) is a Christian-based cultural and tourist association on a European scale, with the important aim of preserving and strengthening European Christian traditions. The history of the Mary's Route dates back nearly two decades, when a pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó gave rise to the idea of a route linking the Marian shrines across the Carpathian Basin. The ideas were followed by actions, after pilgrimage events, meetings and planning, the route, which is more than 2000 kilometres long, was mapped out. Today, the Mary's Route is still supported by nearly 400 volunteers, and thanks to their sacrifice, the route and signs of the Mary's Route are still visible today. However, the Mary's Route is much more than a marked route through a beautiful natural environment. The Mary's Route carries the faith, history, ethnographic traditions and gastronomy of the Carpathian Basin. It also connects the 15 million Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin and the nations living with them. The Mary's Route is both an instrument of peace and of unity.

In 2021, the organisations that care for the Central European sections of the Mary's Route have joined a renewed alliance, the European Network of the Mary's Route.

The development of the Mary's Route at the Central European level must be pursued in a strategic way, especially as the award of the international trademark of the European Cultural Route will be an important milestone in promoting the international visibility of the Mary's Route in the near future.

Eunam has the important task of conveying values with 1000 years of roots as a sustainable tourism product that can be operated to the standards expected in the 21st century (in particular digitalisation, promotion, marketing, management).

This paper presents the main trends in religious tourism. Since the Way of Mary started its operation in Hungary, the study focuses on the situation of religious tourism in Hungary.

The Council of Europe's European Cultural Routes programme is presented. The Way of Mary would like to participate in this programme. The Way of Mary is active in several Central European countries, represented by an association called the European Network of the Mary's Route. The paper presents the historical background of the Way of Mary and its relation to the European Cultural Routes programme. The European Cultural Routes are categorised by theme. The Route of St Mary has been included as a candidate in the categories.
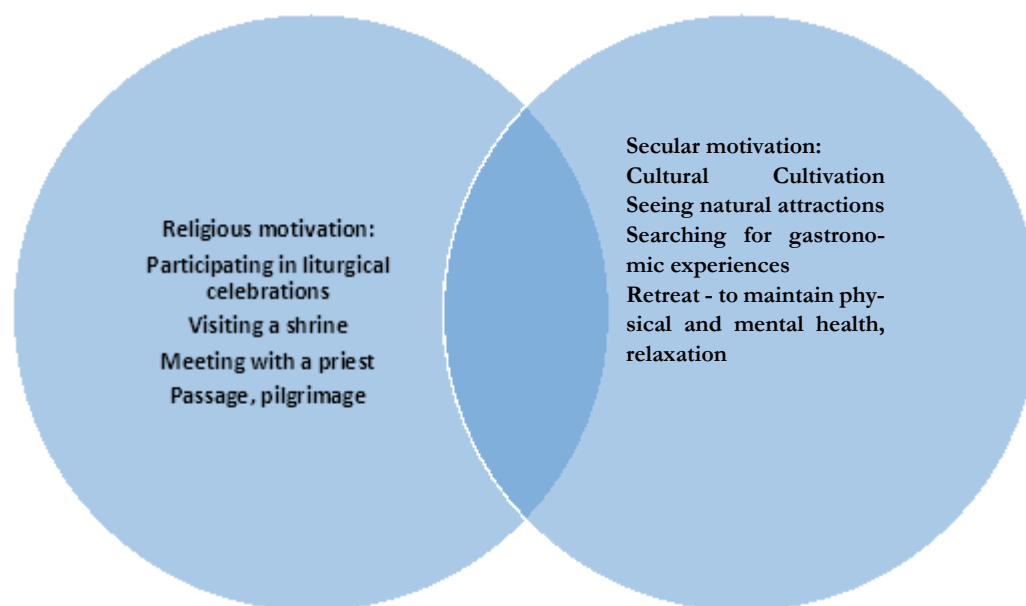
The main trends in religious tourism today

Religious tourism is one of the most dynamically developing sectors of tourism today. Worldwide, religious tourism accounts for more than 300 million trips per year, with more than 600 million trips in 2019 (UNWTO, 2020).

   In terms of their tourism profile, participants in religious tourism can be divided into those with a religious and those with a secular identity. Religious-identity participants are defined as those who are deep believers and travel specifically for religious purposes. The most common motivations are: to travel on a pilgrimage to a liturgical occasion, such as a farewell, to visit religious monuments (there are also many images and statues of Mary in Central Europe). The most important personal encounter is probably with the head of the Roman Catholic Church, which is possible on pilgrimages to the Vatican and on papal visits. An important motivation is to participate in pilgrimages, which is the most relevant of the religious tourism motivations for the Mary's Route.

   Provision of gastronomic experiences and incentives for the preservation of physical and mental health Religious tourism must offer a range of products and services to satisfy the distinctive profiles described above (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Religious tourism motivations

Religious motivation:
Participating in liturgical celebrations
Visiting a shrine
Meeting with a priest
Passage, pilgrimage

Secular motivation:
Cultural   Cultivation
Seeing natural attractions
Searching for gastronomic experiences
Retreat - to maintain physical and mental health, relaxation

Source: Hungarian Tourist Agency

   Religious tourism is an important pillar of tourism in the countries of Central Europe (SULYOK 2013). In Hungary, it was defined by the Hungarian Tourism Agency in 2021. The main directions for the development of tourism in Hungary are set out in the Tourism 2.0 Strategy, a defining framework plan prepared by the Hungarian Tourism Agency in 2021. The document also analyses the changes caused by the pandemic of the coronavirus. From the point of view of religious tourism, the Tourism 2.0 Strategy is of particular importance, as religious tourism has been included among the 4 pillars of the development of Hungarian tourism. In addition to religious tourism, other development pillars are hospitality, health tourism and the MICE segment (Tourism 2.0 Strategy).

The Hungarian Tourism Agency has identified nearly 4,000 sacred sites in the Tourism 2.0 Strategy, which it has narrowed down to a tenth of the number of sites based on tourism criteria.   In the strategy document, the 237 most relevant sites in Hungary from a tourism point of view were identified as religious tourism, with the sites being concentrated in the North-Middle Mountain axis and Lake Balaton. All tourist regions have a number of outstanding sacral treasures, but most of them are concentrated in five tourist regions: Budapest and its surroundings (46), Tokaj and Nyíregyháza (28), Lake Balaton (25), Mátra-Bükk (23), Pécs-Villány (18).

Pilgrimage routes and thematic routes link the treasures. The longest pilgrimage route in Hungary is the Mary's Route, which connects the treasures in both the west-east and north-south directions (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Hungary's sacral treasures based on a restricted database (2021)
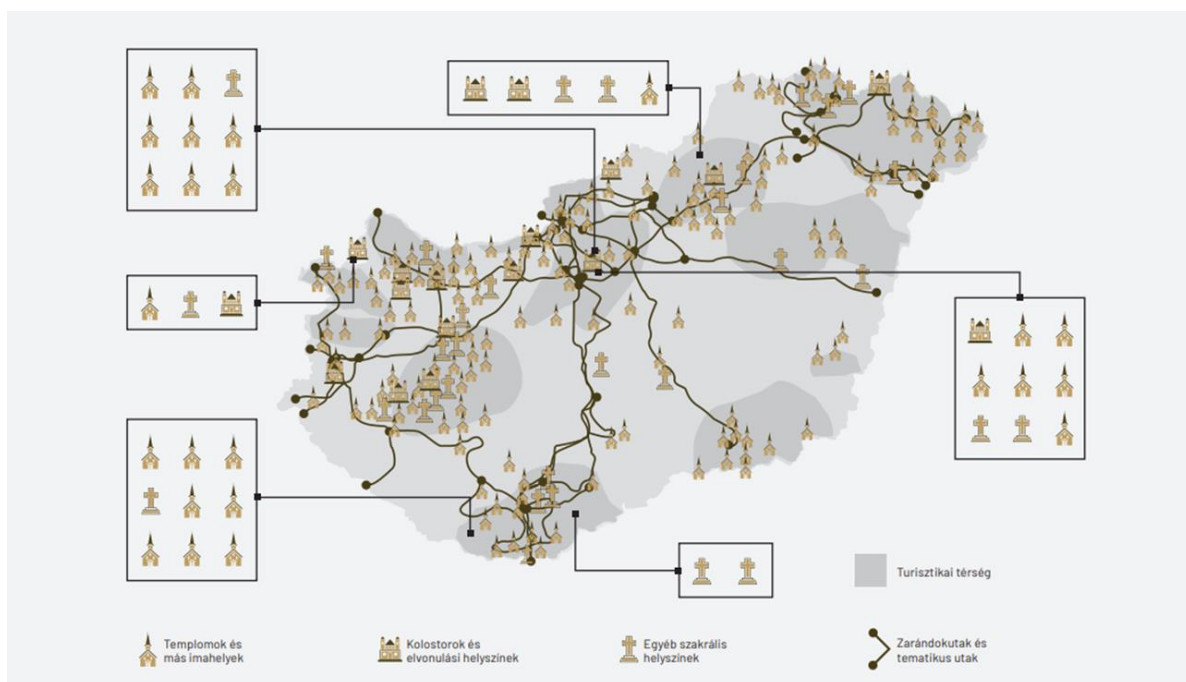
Source: Tourism 2.0 Strategy

The Hungarian Tourism Agency has classified the assets into three main groups: flagship assets, asset enhancers and asset complements. Flagships are those assets which are of tourist attraction in themselves, serving as a destination for visits. The flagship assets are those that make a significant contribution to the tourism offer of a destination and are a key element of the visit. The third category is for asset additions, which are not considered to be a tourist attraction during a trip. In this analogy, the Route of Mary's network of routes in Hungary and internationally includes flagship assets, asset enhancers and asset enrichers.

Our flagship assets fall into four main categories:

− Shrines, pilgrimage sites, churches and other places of worship: 168 sites

− Monasteries and retreats: 20 sites

− Pilgrimage routes and thematic routes: 8 routes

− Other sacred sites: 31 sites.

Source: Tourism 2.0 Strategy

With its several hundred kilometres in Hungary, Mary's Route is one of the most relevant sites of outstanding natural value identified by the Hungarian Tourism Agency. The Mária Út Közhasznú Egyesület (Association for the Public Benefit of the Mária Út) in Hungary is a member of Eunam, the European Network Association of Mary's Route. The Hungarian section of the Mary's Route is also an important part of the European network. In this context, it is particularly important for Eunam to adapt to the trends outlined in the Tourism 2.0 Strategy of the Hungarian Tourism Agency. Furthermore, the networking and the development of the partner network will be carried out along the lines of the guidelines laid down in the Tourism 2.0 Strategy. It is important for us to meet the needs of visitors with a religious and secular profile, to coordinate marketing, to promote pilgrimages to the main sites of interest and to promote the sites of interest widely.

The institutionalised coordinating body for religious tourism is the National Religious Tourism Forum, which brings together the Hungarian Tourism Agency, professional tourism organisations, churches and the most important pilgrimage routes, including the Mary's Route. The Forum is an opportunity for Eunam to engage in a continuous professional dialogue with the religious tourism stakeholders and to participate in the development of religious tourism in Hungary and Central Europe.

European Cultural Routes

Founded in 1949, the Council of Europe is one of the oldest international organisations in Europe, with 47 member states. In 1987, the Council of Europe created the European Cultural Routes programme, which showcases the cultural contribution of each country to Europe's common heritage. The Cultural Routes put into practice the values that the Council of Europe considers important, such as identity, diversity and cultural democracy, as tourist attractions. The European Cultural Routes serve as trademarks which can be awarded to routes through a certification process. Certificates for certified European Cultural Routes must be renewed every three years. Currently 45 European Cultural Routes are certified.

The first certified route was the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route, which was awarded certification in 1987. Although El Camino has a centuries-old tradition, it is a route visited by thousands of pilgrims every year. However, there are many European cultural routes for which the physical route is not the primary link. These routes represent a heritage that does not derive from pilgrim traditions, but rather represents a link between other historical or cultural values. Examples of such routes include the European Historic Spa Towns Route (2010 - year of certification), the Iron Curtain Route (2019), the European Industrial Heritage Route (2019), the European Ceramics Route (2012), Via Habsburg (2014), Napoleon's Destination (2015), the European Route of the V. Charles V's European Route (2015), In the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson (2015), Roman Emperors and the Danube Wine Route (2015) (European Cultural Routes 2021).

The European Network of the Mary's Route Alliance intends to build on both possible models:

It will have both physical signposted routes, similar to the pilgrimage routes with a long tradition, and related and complementary online routes (GPS tracks). It will also bring together tourist, scientific and religious organisations that bring together cultural and historical traditions, beyond the limits of the physical route, in Central Europe and, later, throughout Europe.

The main criteria to be fulfilled by the routes to be certified as European Cultural Routes are as follows.

− Present a theme that represents European values and involves at least three European countries;

- The topic should be the subject of transnational, multidisciplinary scientific research;
- Contribute to the understanding of European memory, history and heritage, and to the understanding of Europe's current diversity;
- Support cultural and educational exchanges of young people;
- Contribute to the development of exemplary and innovative projects in the field of cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development;
- Promote the development of tourism products for different target audiences.

https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes

The aim of the European Network Association of Mary's Route is to promote the development and preservation of the traditions of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin, through the certification of the European Cultural Routes. In addition to its marketing value, the European Cultural Routes label functions as a long-term quality assurance scheme and as an opportunity for Eunam to meet the criteria required by the European Cultural Routes certificate as a key element in defining the network development strategy of the organisation. The guidelines outlined above will be used as a basis for contacting potential cooperation partners.

Presentation of Mary's Route by topic

The Eunam focuses on the tradition of Marian devotion and its living expression today. The concept of the itinerary is to organise the sites of the theme in Central Europe in a coherent system, involving scientific and cultural partners in a networked way, and to transform them into a secular tourism programme.

The Association of the European Network of the Mary's Route is present in several Central European countries (Austria, Croatia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Germany). In these countries, cultural routes with the theme of the Mary's Route are operating under different names, which (Marganska Put, Marieweg, Mary's Route) are being transformed into a single cultural route.

The main destinations of the Eunam network are the largest Marian shrines in Central Europe: Altötting (D), Mariazell (A), Pannonhalma and Mátraverebély-Szentkút (H), Máriapocs (H) Częstochowa (PL), Nikolau and Csíksomlyó (RO) and Medjugorje (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The Central European network of the Mary's Route brings together in a single system nearly 100 settlements and pilgrimage sites still visited today. This theme is still a living tradition, present as an intangible cultural heritage. The spiritual and cultural heritage is not only in buildings, rooms and monuments, but also in the buildings, monuments, paintings and other artefacts, but also in actions and deeds.

In Central Europe, the pilgrimages of Mary still today move tens of millions of people. Częstochowa in Poland attracts 3.2 million people a year, Mariazell in Austria and Csíksomlyó in Romania 1 million to 1 million a year, and Medjugorje in Bosnia attracts at least 3.5 million a year (UNWTO 2021).

It connects places in Central Europe in a networked way with pilgrimage routes on foot and by bike (horseback, water), where the devotion to Mary is a living reality, manifested in local and regional pilgrimages.

The Mary's Route is not only a spiritual and thematic route, but also a cultural and natural route that explores and offers all the historical, architectural and even natural values that the routes touch.

The routes of the Mary's Route are physically linked and can be followed on foot or by bicycle. The main routes of the Way of St. Mary form a criss-cross network across Central Europe. The east-west route runs from Altötting in Germany through Mariazell in Austria to Csíksomlyó in Romania, while the north-south routes weave from Częstochowa in Poland to Medjugorje in Bosnia, through Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia. The main routes are complemented by regional and local routes, including several Shrines of Mary, completing the network

The historical background of the Mary's route, its contribution to Europe's cultural heritage

The pilgrimage of Central Europe in the 21st century, the century-old dedication of the Mary's Route, is a centuries-old historical phenomenon.

Perhaps the first step towards this was taken by the Hungarian king and founder of the state, St Stephen, who opened up what is now Central Europe to pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem around 1030, thus helping to make the movement a reality.

The tradition of a unified spiritual journey organised by the Mary's Route also dates back to the 13th century. Most pilgrimage sites were visited 800 years ago.

The idea of the Mary's Route was conceived in the early 2000s with the aim of linking the great Marian shrines of Central and Eastern Europe: Mariazell with Csíksomlyo, Częstochowa with Medjugorje, and smaller pilgrimage sites such as Máriapócs with Máriaremete (BARNA 2001).

The aim is to make all Marian pilgrimage sites accessible to travellers not only on foot but also by bicycle, horse or, where possible, by water, through a network of pilgrimage routes, a unified pilgrimage system. These holy sites have been welcoming pilgrims from all over the world for centuries (BARNA 2001).

Mariazell has attracted pilgrims since the 12th century and is one of the most important shrines in Central Europe. Csíksomlyó in Romania has been a favourite destination for pilgrims since the mid-15th century.

The Pentecost pilgrimage is particularly well-known, with visitors coming from Hungary and Romania.

Pannonhalma in Hungary has been the spiritual and cultural centre of the region since the 11th century. Częstochowa is the most visited shrine in Poland.

According to legend, the Evangelist Luke created the icon of the Black Madonna, which still attracts millions of visitors to the city. Medjugorje is located in Bosnia and Herzegovina and apparitions since 1981 still attract nearly a million pilgrims a year. The veneration of the Virgin Mary is a bridge between different languages, different arts and sciences, providing an opportunity to bring different cultures closer together (BARNA 2011).

The possibility of a common 'trait', the veneration of Mary, has not only brought younger generations of different nations closer together, but has also brought nations historically portrayed as enemies back together. Young and old, friends and former enemies speak the common language of tradition, expressing the indestructibility of ancient common roots. This experience has been captured in many ways by people from different cultures, and the pilgrimage along the route of the Virgin Mary has inspired many prominent artists.

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Altötting, in Germany, has been visited since the 15th century and is still visited by a million people a year.

The Hungarian Máriapócs and the Romanian Nicolau have been known since the 18th century as places of reconciliation between Greek Catholics and the long-feuding Orthodox.

Máriaradna in Romania has been the intellectual and spiritual centre of the Transylvanian Saxons since the 18th century, following the Turkish occupation. The intellectual role of Doroszlo in Serbia is recorded from the 14th century (Barna 1994).

Marija Bistrica in Croatia has been a well-known destination for the people of the region since the 15th century. Marijanka in Slovakia (near Bratislava) has been a spiritual place shared by the Slovak, German and Hungarian peoples since the 13th century. The above examples (among many others) can be interpreted as the basis for a unified network of cultural routes along the Marijaška route over several centuries.

Lőcse in Slovakia has been a place of pilgrimage since the 13th century. Pope John Paul II visited the site in the 20th century. The prologue of the Mary's Route is the political-cultural changes of the late 20th century, when the spiritual-cultural heritage was revived. The Mary's Route as a network of cultural routes was given an organised form in 2006, when the Mary's Route Association was established in Hungary (as a non-profit NGO). A few years later, the Mary's Way Association was established in Romania and Slovakia. Nowadays, a thematic passport covers more than 2000 km of life in this region (according to the Mary's Route website).

European Council Cultural Routes by theme

The European cultural itineraries are grouped according to their themes. The research identified eight different themes. The European Cultural Routes are presented below by theme.

Historical person

The routes are linked to a historical or mythological person. Among the itineraries linked to a person, we find memorials to artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci or Mozart. Mythical persons include Aenas and Cyrriióll and Method, their lives are not known exactly. Charles V and Napoleon are known as politicians.

Religious themes

European cultural itineraries with a religious theme are based on the centuries-old tradition of European pilgrimages. The first pilgrimage of the European Cultural Routes programme was the

Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes. In the last 30 years, the pilgrim routes of Northern Europe (Route of Saint Olav Ways) and the Via Francigena connecting Western Europe with the Mediterranean countries have become European Cultural Routes. Religious routes are typically connected by a network of paths which tourists can follow on foot.

Historical events

Many European cultural itineraries are based on a series of historical events. The Viking Route, The Hansa, Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route are based on past events. A particular theme is World War II, which is the subject of three European cultural routes.

Historical institutions

European cultural routes linking historical institutions have been identified as a separate category. These institutions are present in most European countries and are still in operation today. Such historical institutions are Cemeteries, Fortified Towns, Historic Gardens, Historic Cafés, Historic Pharmacies, Historic Thermal Towns

Natural Heritage Sites

We find European cultural itineraries that have a natural asset as their primary theme. These include the Olive Tree, Transhumance Trail and Iter Vitis trails. These trails are strongly geographically constrained by the distribution of the plants concerned.

Built heritage

Cultural routes with a built heritage theme are perhaps the most spectacular, with significant geographical coverage. The themes of the routes are the same as for the art history categories, Megalithic Culture, Transromanica.

Works of art

In this category, literary and visual art works are the theme of the routes.

Ethnic groups

Some European cultural routes focus on a particular ethnic group spread throughout Europe, some of which have disappeared from Phoenicia and others which are still alive in Europe today, for example Jewish Heritage (Table 1).

Table. Categorisation of European Cultural Routes by theme

Historical person	Religious themes	Historical event	Historical institutions	Natural Heritage Sites	Built heritage	Work of art	Ethnic groups
Destination Napoleon	Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes	The Hansa	European Cemeteries Route	Routes of the Olive Tree	European Route of Megalithic Culture	Réseau Art Nouveau Network	European Route of Jewish Heritage
European Mozart Ways	Route of Saint Olav Ways	Viking Route	Fortified Towns of	Transhumance trails	Prehistoric Rock Art Trails	Le Corbusier Destinations: Architectural Promenades	Phoenicians' Route

			the Grande Region				
European Routes of Emperor Charles V.	Via Francigena	Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route	European Route of Historic Gardens	Iter Vitis Route	Transromanica	Women Writers Route	Huguenot and Waldensian Trail
Alvar Aalto Route	Via Regia	Iron Curtain Trail - EuroVelo 13	Historic Cafés Route		European Route of Industrial Heritage	European Fairy Tale Route	
European Route d'Artagnan		Liberation Route Europe	European Route of Historic Pharmacies		Cluniac Sites in Europe		
Leonardo Da Vinci Route		Iron Age Danube Route	European Route of Historic Thermal Towns		Iron Route in the Pyrenees		
Aeneas Route		Atrium European Cultural Route					
Cyril and Methodius Route							
In the Footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson							

Source: European Cultural Routes website

The Route of the Marys, one of the European cultural routes, based on the theme

According to the themes, the Way of Mary can be included in the group of European cultural itineraries with a religious theme. Mary does not appear as a person, but as a summary name for pilgrimages in Central Europe. In recent years, the Way of Mary has developed a partnership with other European cultural itineraries with similar themes. The cooperation includes Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes Route of Saint Olav WaysVia Francigena and the Mary's Route. The cooperation has created a common online map to help pilgrims to get to know the significant pilgrims in Europe. The online map is available at rurrallure.com.

Summary

In autumn 2021, the European Network of the Mary's Way Association could officially start its activities and the networking could continue in a formal framework. The development of religious tourism in Hungary along the lines of complex state-level plans is expected to provide a favourable space for pilgrimage routes in the Carpathian Basin as well. The establishment of the

association has already started a number of positive processes in the first half of the year, and we are working to ensure that in the long term the European Network will succeed in achieving results at the international level, similar to the Hungarian Route of Mary. Eunam continues to serve missionary objectives, while aiming to achieve the European Cultural Routes trademark certification, and to create a sustainable religious tourism product. We see it as a mission to promote Christian values on a broad scale, thereby helping to point the way to Europe's Christian roots for as many people as possible. Through our activities we see many people across Europe working to nurture our Christian heritage which strengthens our faith in the future of our Alliance.

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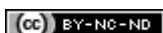
Sport and Spiritual Life – Insights From Survey Research in the Mária Maraton Project

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Introduction

In Hungary, the Mária Maraton is an almost decade-long project. However, like many other community activities, it was non-operational during the COVID pandemic. This study aims to present pilgrimage tourism, primarily from the perspective of its participants. The investigation is facilitated by a comprehensive survey conducted by the Mária Út Association and its partners, who sought new tools to promote pilgrimage and Mary's Route. The survey examined two target groups. First, it focused on those engaged in community and/or personal development as their main occupation or as volunteers. Second, a questionnaire was administered to a target group interested in the topic, through whose opinions we can learn about their general views on the significance of pilgrimages and whether sports, which can appeal to both believers and non-believers, could be a new tool for promoting pilgrimages and sacred sites.

A brief overview of pilgrimage tourism

A pilgrimage is fundamentally a journey undertaken by participants to pray and/or pay homage to a place of special religious significance. The content of pilgrimages has since expanded. The literature on the study of spiritual missions and the tourism built upon them is quite extensive (Sharpley, 1994; Smith, 1992, Adler, 1989, Schlehe, 1999).

Religious sites can be significant players in the local economy (Szente, 2010). In addition to their sacred role, they can provide socio-economic benefits for their communities and regions (Raffay - Lőrincz - Clarke, 2013). Religious sites impact both religious and secular visitors and excellently complement other man-made and natural attractions of destinations. The effects and benefits they generate far exceed the religious purposes provided for congregations (Thurley - Wood, 2010). Religious tourism has long surpassed the strictly religious boundary by presenting religious elements on a commercial basis in many cases (Vukonic, 1998).

To distinguish between the tourist/pilgrim duality, it is useful to consider a motivational (reason for travel) and behavioral (visitor behavior) dimension (Adler, 1989; Smith, 1992), in which the traditional pilgrim is placed at one endpoint and the secular tourist at the other. Between these two endpoints, we can create nearly infinite combinations of pilgrim and tourist, all of which can be uniformly categorized under the term "religious traveler." Thus, in this context, the tourist and the pilgrim can be present simultaneously within an individual. The primary motivation for the journey

determines which of the two endpoints the participant is closer to. The table by Mártonné – Simo-nyi (2018) (Table 1) clearly illustrates the attitudes of the two endpoints (pilgrim and tourist) and the intermediate role (pilgrim-tourist).

Table 1: Attitudes of pilgrims, tourists, and pilgrim-tourists

pilgrim	pilgrim-tourist	tourist
spiritual motivation	intellectual motivation	physical motivation
subjectivity	religious motivation does not appear purely or directly	objectivity
the end of the journey is the goal	the entire process is the goal	the journey is the goal
spiritual profit	self-sustainability	material profit
traditional travel	postmodern tourism	modern tourism
internal consumption stimulation	internal-external consumption stimulation	external consumption stimulation
feeling of not being a tourist	feeling of being a traveler	feeling of being a tourist
sharing with oneself	personal sharing	sharing on social media
parish	thematic accommodation	hotels and other accommodations
spiritual product	mixed product	touristic product
fashion plays no role	fashion is defining	fashion is defining
anyone	mostly single women, married couples, middle-aged intellectuals	anyone
does not spend	spends little	spends
no demand	low demand	can be more demanding
interprets spiritual rejuvenation as a gift	interprets spiritual rejuvenation as a service	interprets spiritual rejuvenation as a service, but it arises from relaxation, not spirituality
faith	internal experience	external experience
difficulties during the journey are important	difficulties during the journey are acceptable	difficulties during the journey are not acceptable

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Mártonné M.K. – Simonyi N. (2018), pp. 48

According to the argument of STANCIULESCU and TÎRCA (2010), it is possible to create a balance in meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders, but the fulfillment of the spiritual mission must be prioritized in religious tourism.

Within the tourism sector, pilgrimage tourism is typically treated as a sub-product of cultural tourism, a kind of "niche" product. It is less documented what the demand and/or supply elements and needs are. In the case of pilgrimage tourism, the journey is often as important, if not more important, than reaching the destination. Considering the time factor, the journey can take up about half to two-thirds of the total time dedicated to the pilgrimage. The time spent at the sacred site is often only a third of the total time allocated for the trip. The pilgrimage tourist has specific motivations.

Sport and Pilgrimage

Our starting point can be that sport in many aspects shows affinity with the religious spirit. Both value perseverance, goal-orientation, and a sense of belonging. It is worth asking why sport is particularly suitable for promoting pilgrimage events. Sport can be a new tool for promoting pilgrimages and sacred sites, capable of attracting both believers and non-believers (Rinschede, 1992). Sport transcends identification problems. Consequently, it is suitable for the socialization of pilgrimage events, regardless of religious or social affiliation.

The fact that the Vatican and Pope Francis himself initiated close collaborations with sports figures in 2015, based on the mutually reinforcing roles of faith and sport, indicates that even the higher hierarchical levels of this sacred institutional system are partners in this effort. The great potential in the possibilities of cooperation between faith and sport is well demonstrated by the fact that in 2016, the Pontifical Council for Culture held an international conference on this topic (http://mariamaraton.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany).

The Mária Maraton

In 2014, the Mary's Route Association and its partners decided to seek new tools to promote pilgrimage and Mary's Route. In Hungary, the Mária Maraton was introduced as a new tool to promote pilgrimage by connecting it with sport. The Mária Maraton set off on its journey in July 2017 (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia, 2024). From the beginning, it was capable of mobilizing large crowds both within and beyond the borders. The cross-border partners of the Mária Maraton projects include the Transylvanian Mary's Route Association, "Természet Szíve" Association, the village of Karva, and Magnus 2008 GmbH, forming an extensively organized network both geographically and socially.

Unfortunately, multi-day large events did not return after the COVID years, but the Mária Maraton still operates today as a one-day program at several locations across the country with shorter distances (Zsombor Kápolnai, 2024). It is worth asking what made the Mária Maraton truly successful in promoting pilgrimage events in Hungary. The Mary's Route Association and its partners engaged in genuine project planning. The initiative's starting point was that a pilgrimage could simultaneously be a faith and sports event, effectively utilizing individual and community development tools. The program organizers ensured that cultural value preservation and spiritual renewal were emphasized in the pilgrimage. One of the unique specialities of pilgrimages based on the connection between faith and sport is that they can have a preventive effect by mutually reinforcing body and soul.

Materials and Methods

To ensure the success of the project, the organizers examined the legitimacy of building on the mutually reinforcing power of physical performance and spiritual practice. A questionnaire survey was conducted to explore this, which took place between January 2017 and the end of June 2017, prior to the first Mária Maraton event. The survey was conducted by the HÉTFA Research Institute and Analytical Center (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia 2024). The survey examined respondents' views on the relationship between faith and sport, the place and role of pilgrimages, and their motivations.

Two questionnaires were prepared. The first was open to anyone, but some questions could only be answered by those who had participated in such an event before. It was an online survey, with the database provided by the pre-registration for the Mária Maraton (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia 2024). The general questionnaire was conducted in two sequences. In the first phase, 260 responses were received from Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia in the first quarter of 2017. In the second round, during the second quarter of 2017, the questionnaire was slightly modified due to emerging new aspects and correction suggestions (Kápolnai Zsombor 2024). An additional 58 responses were collected in this second phase, successfully concluding the planned 300 responses. By the end of June 2017, a total of 315 evaluable questionnaires had been completed.

The other questionnaire was an expert survey, which was completed by those who were involved in either volunteer or professional roles related to community cohesion or individual personal development, and who participated in the organization of the Mária Maraton (Table 2). By interviewing the organizers, the aim was not only to understand how these specialized professionals and volunteers perceive the interaction between physical performance and spiritual practice, but also to gain a deeper insight into their knowledge regarding the personality development effects of pilgrimages and their overall social usefulness. A total of 32 expert questionnaires were completed by June 2017. The expert and general questionnaires overlapped in terms of content (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of the general and expert questionnaires

	general questionnaire	expert questionnaire
individual sporting characteristics	X (detailed)	X
relationship between faith and sports - opinions, insights, usefulness	X	X
the impact of pilgrimages on individual personality development and daily life	X	X (detailed)
the social impact and societal usefulness of pilgrimages	X	X (detailed)
the impact of pilgrimages compared to various group activities		X
knowledge about the events of the Mary's Route	X	
recruitment methods, outreach strategies, motivations	X	
motivations of pilgrims	X	

Source: http://mariamaraton.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany pp. 17.

Findings from the general questionnaire

As for the respondents, slightly more were women (54%) than men (46%). The most typical respondent profile was around 40 years old, living in urban areas, and married with children. On average, 90% of respondents identified themselves as religious, with the proportion notably higher among respondents from across the border in Romania, where this figure reached 96%. The majority identified as Catholic in denomination. The distribution of denominations among respondents reflected the societal positions of the historical churches, with Protestantism being the second most commonly reported denomination.

Respondents provided relatively incomplete responses regarding their involvement in sports activities, particularly noticeable among those from across the border. Only a quarter as many respondents from beyond the border provided answers about their involvement in sports compared to Hungarian respondents. Overall, the majority of respondents engage in sports at least weekly (66%). Approximately 21% exercise on a monthly or less frequent basis, while 13% do not exercise at all. Interestingly, among respondents from across the border, there were no respondents who interpreted exercising on a monthly or less frequent basis, but a higher proportion exercised weekly.

Among those who exercise weekly, cycling, running, and hiking were equally popular activities. Regarding performance, the majority of weekly runners (45%) have not yet completed distances longer than 10 km. For 40% of them, the half marathon was their greatest achievement. Cyclists showed a wide range of performance levels. In the case of hiking, the most significant information pertained not to distance but to the number of hiking days. When discussing preferred lengths of hiking trips in days rather than peak performances, older respondents preferred single-day trips, while the younger preferred two-day trips.

Respondents had the opportunity to provide responses regarding the effects of pilgrimages through both closed and open-ended questions. The majority highlighted physical and spiritual rejuvenation as the most significant impact. This was closely followed by the sense of community experience and the testing nature of pilgrimage. Interestingly, only a fifth of open ended responses contained religious content. According to respondents, spirituality requires three factors: spiritual guidance, testimony, and contemplation. Events that combine faith and sports were considered important by a remarkably high percentage of respondents (90%). Many cited the idea of "a sound mind in a sound body" to explain this perspective. Additionally, they emphasized that such events foster genuine human connections and enable a more meaningful form of physical activity through communal experiences.

84% of respondents reported experiencing their faith while engaging in sports activities. This may manifest in various ways: some pray, recite the rosary, or simply feel the presence of God. However, only 25% of respondents considered sports to be a potential tool for evangelization, meaning that non-believers could be led to faith through the testimony of their peers during these activities. The survey also examined the social impacts of pilgrimages. Responses frequently mentioned community development, youth collaboration, and health preservation. Strengthening connections between Hungarians within and beyond the borders also proved to be significant (Table 3).

Table 3. Contribution of cycling, walking, or running pilgrimages to certain social phenomena

	does not affect		promotes						total	does not know/did not answer	grand total	S average
			to a small extent		to a medium extent		to a large extent					
	frequency N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	N	N	
community development	0	0	3	6	12	24	35	70	**50**	8	58	2,64
youth collaboration	1	2	1	2	12	28	29	67	**43**	15	58	2,60
health preservation	2	4	2	4	12	24	34	68	**50**	8	58	2,56
cooperation between Hungarians within and beyond the borders	0	0	3	6	18	37	28	57	**49**	9	58	2,51
meaningful collaborations	1	2	1	2	19	40	27	56	**48**	10	58	2,50
civil cooperation	1	2	2	4	19	42	23	51	**45**	13	58	2,42
family cohesion	2	4	2	4	18	38	25	53	**47**	11	58	2,40

Source: http://mariamaraton.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany pp. 28.

Expert Questionnaires

The aim of filling out the so-called expert questionnaires was to gain insights into the opinions of those who, as their main occupation or as volunteers, are involved in community and/or personality development. The 32 completed questionnaires were equally divided between volunteers and full-time professionals. Approximately 60% of them were members of a pilgrimage community in some form. Out of the 32 respondents, only one had no program organizing experience. The majority, roughly 2/3 of the respondents, had specific experience in organizing pilgrimages. Most of the expert respondents had previously participated in organizing group work programs and walking pilgrimages (66%), more than a third had organized spiritual events, and a quarter had organized cycling pilgrimages.

The number of programs organized by the respondents averaged 14, with an average group size of 14 participants. This latter is an extremely important question, as the ideal group size for spiritual and traditional sports events is not the same. In spiritual formation, a smaller number of participants is ideal. For therapeutic sessions, even less than 10 participants is appropriate (Table 4).

Table 4: Optimal group size according to the expert questionnaires

	average	minimum	maximum	median	valid response
walking pilgrimage	41	10	300	30	29
running pilgrimage	25	3	100	20	19
cycling pilgrimage	21	8	100	15	22
sports events (without spiritual content)	102	15	300	100	17
spiritual events (without sports content)	45	20	100	50	18
group work programs, group sessions	21	10	60	18	24
competence development sessions	18	5	60	12	17
social group sessions	16	5	40	12	19
therapeutic sessions	9	1	20	10	18

Source: http://mariamaraton.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany pp.30

In the surveys, based on the open-ended responses, it can be concluded that respondents believe pilgrimages have a personality development effect by helping with self-awareness and discovering solutions to problems. In closed response options, it was highlighted that pilgrimages heal mental issues, aid in finding friends, promote health preservation, and facilitate social integration. In terms of skills and abilities, respondents emphasized the development of team spirit, acceptance of others, flexibility, and problem-solving skills as highly important outcomes.

As for the community impacts based on the open-ended questions, it emerges that deeper trust relationships develop within the community during pilgrimages. Tools for this include attentive listening, turning towards each other, and patience. Pilgrimages aid in engaging youth, networking small rural communities, and on a broader territorial scale, they foster collaboration among Hungarians within Hungary and across borders. Overall, they effectively serve to strengthen Christian culture and facilitate authentic, experiential transmission. (Table 5.)

In the last section of the questionnaire, the editors examined how respondents perceive the effects of pilgrimages compared to their main or volunteer activities in various aspects. In terms of societal impacts, the overall result often indicated that pilgrimages contribute more significantly to these aspects compared to the impacts of respondents' primary occupations or volunteer work alone. This was also evident in areas such as networking small communities, youth collaboration, international relations, multiculturalism, and family cohesion.

Table 5: The Social utility of pilgrimages according to expert questionnaires

	does not contribute		contributes to a small extent		contributes to a moderate extent		contributes to a large extent		cannot judge		Total	
											N	S average
community development	0	0%	0	0%	3	11%	25	89%	0	0%	28	2,89
strengthening Christian culture, authentic and experiential transmission	0	0%	0	0%	5	18%	22	79%	1	4%	28	2,81
cooperation between Hungarians from across the border and Hungary	0	0%	0	0%	7	25%	20	71%	1	4%	28	2,74
spread of physical and mental health in society	0	0%	1	4%	6	21%	21	75%	0	0%	28	2,71
networking of small villages	0	0%	1	4%	6	21%	18	64%	3	11%	28	2,68
youth collaborations	0	0%	1	4%	7	25%	19	68%	1	4%	28	2,67
meaningful collaborations	0	0%	1	4%	7	26%	19	70%	0	0%	27	2,67
hospitality, openness to understanding people from different social backgrounds	0	0%	1	4%	8	29%	19	68%	0	0%	28	2,64
civil collaborations	0	0%	0	0%	11	41%	15	56%	1	4%	27	2,58
family cohesion	0	0%	1	4%	11	39%	14	50%	2	7%	28	2,50
other international collaborations	0	0%	1	4%	12	44%	9	33%	5	19%	27	2,36
increasing the sustaining power of small villages	0	0%	3	11%	10	36%	12	43%	3	11%	28	2,36
integration of Roma communities	0	0%	6	22%	8	31%	10	37%	3	11%	27	2,17
social integration, opportunity creation	1	4%	6	22%	10	37%	7	26%	3	11%	27	1,96
preservation of multicultural diversity	0	0%	6	23%	13	50%	4	15%	3	12%	26	1,91

Source: http://mariamaraton.mariaut.hu/cikk/32182/Szakmai_kiadvany pp.39

Conclusions

The introduction of the Mária Maraton as a new initiative to promote religious life was preceded by a deliberate expert study. A questionnaire survey was conducted among those who are professionally or voluntarily involved in community and/or personality development, along with another publicly accessible survey. One of the aims of the questionnaire survey was to explore the opinions of these two target groups regarding the personality and community development effects of pilgrimages. Comparing the responses of the two target groups emphasizes that both consider pilgrimages as important tools for personality development, helping to discover problems and their solutions. Regarding community impacts, a notably important effect highlighted was the development of team spirit and the ability to accept others, which can be attributed to the formation of deeper trust relationships within pilgrimage communities.

Respondents overwhelmingly (90%) indicated that events combining faith and sports are important. This was often explained by the concept of "a sound mind in a sound body." Although a significant proportion of athletic respondents expressed experiencing their faith while exercising,

overall, respondents were relatively less optimistic about whether sports could effectively serve as an evangelization tool—that is, whether it could lead non-believers to faith through the testimony of their peers during the journey. However, no one disputed that physical performance and spiritual practice have a mutually reinforcing effect, and that such events can mobilize target groups who are not religious. Thus, a pilgrimage connected with sports indeed transcends the identification issues that create a barrier between believers and non-believers. Consequently, the Mária Maraton is also suitable for the socialization of pilgrimage events. As Rinschede (1992) stated, this could be a new tool for promoting pilgrimages and holy places, capable of attracting both believers and non-believers (Rinschede, 1992).

Summary

The attractiveness of pilgrimages and pilgrimage sites today naturally lies in their spiritual appeal. However, there are also means through which these can pique the interest of groups who, while valuing community, identity, and faith, do not interpret these concepts on a strictly sacred basis.

The success of the Mária Maraton was significantly aided by the fact that both potential target groups and those involved in community and/or personality development as a primary occupation or as volunteers were surveyed to understand their views on the relationship between faith and sports. This contributed to ensuring that the priorities articulated by the two examined target groups were implemented during the realization of the Mária Maraton. The research not only supported the organization of services provided to participants of the Mária Maraton but also facilitated the production of more targeted communication materials (Galgócziné Szabó Zsófia 2024).

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Kápolnai Zsombor (Mary's Route executive director) May-July 2024

Dr. Zsófia Galgócziné Szabó, Mary's Route Coordinator, July 2024

Analysis of the Digital Communication
of Central European Shrines

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Introduction

Religious tourism and marketing

Over time, the concept of religious tourism has expanded beyond traditional pilgrimages to include a broader range of activities and destinations, encompassing both spiritual and secular motivations. Religious tourism is growing rapidly and is becoming a significant segment of the global tourism industry, attracting millions of visitors annually (Iliev, 2020; Zlatanov & Popesku, 2021). Visitor motivations are multifaceted, including spirituality, faith, piety, cultural and heritage interests, curiosity, discovery, and relaxation. Even religious pilgrims are not a homogeneous group, with varied motivations and experiences (Kim, Kim & King, 2020). This relates to the four evolutionary typecasts of pilgrims suggested by Damari and Mansfeld (2016): traditional self-centered pilgrims, modern pilgrims, postmodern pilgrims, and post-postmodern pilgrims, with an increasing level of individualism, secularism, and more diverse cultural interactions. Triantafillidou et al. (2010) identified the types of travelers to religious destinations in a range from pious pilgrims to secular tourists.

Nowadays, pilgrims, whether frequent or occasional, are not typically ascetics seeking solitude from worldly distractions. While some view hardship as part of the pilgrimage experience, modern pilgrimages have become more accessible and comfortable due to competition and service development. Pilgrims now often seek crowded, lively places rather than solitude (Reader, 2013). Contemporary Christian pilgrims often seek entertaining experiences and spiritual renewal, contrasting with the traditional focus on asceticism and supernatural pursuits. The evolving demands of modern pilgrims pose challenges for sacred site management, necessitating a shift from traditional to modern practices (Enongene & Griffin, 2017).

According to Faq (2022), marketing religious and spiritual tourism requires a holistic approach that integrates market segmentation, relationship marketing, and experiential strategies. The five types of spiritual tourism experiences identified by Norman (2012) are healing, experiment, quest, retreat, and collective. These experiences can be aligned with elements of experiential tourism to create effective relationship marketing strategies. Relationship marketing focuses on trust, promise fulfillment, exchange, and communication among all partners. Key Elements for successful relationship marketing are the following (Faq, 2022):

— *Product:* destination assets and the experiences they offer;

— *People:* individuals interacting with tourists, such as travel agents, guides, and religious leaders;

   – *Collaboration:* both vertical and horizontal partnerships among various stakeholders, including transport companies, hotels, and religious institutions.

Chang, Li, and Vincent (2020) focused on developing a reliable and valid scale to measure the experiences of pilgrimage tourists. They identified five dimensions of pilgrimage experiences: spirituality, learning, physicality, help, and unpleasantness. Pilgrimage marketers should focus on life-changing elements and provide support for coping with negative emotions to enhance tourists' experiences. Additionally, managing unpleasant aspects of the pilgrimage experience can help improve overall satisfaction.

Digital and online marketing

As introduced by Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2017), marketing has evolved through three stages: from product-centered (1.0) to consumer-centered (2.0), and now to human-centered (3.0), where consumers are viewed as whole human beings with mind, heart, and spirit. The future of marketing focuses on products, services, and company cultures that embody human values. Marketing 4.0 integrates online and offline interactions and combines machine-to-machine connectivity with personal touch, aiding marketers in navigating the digital economy. It emphasizes the coexistence of digital and traditional marketing.

The terms digital marketing and internet/online marketing are slightly different (Storm, n.d.). Digital marketing is a broad term that describes a set of marketing strategies that use digital channels to promote your products or services. This term is an umbrella term that describes anything that uses a digital platform for marketing (including TV ads, digital billboards, radio spots, SMS texts, etc.) Internet marketing, also known as online marketing, is a subset of digital marketing that includes strategies to market online. Internet marketing focuses on building a presence on the web.

Online marketing provides an unlimited amount of information and the ability to combine various forms of content, including text, graphics, video, and audio, creating a rich and engaging user experience. One of its significant advantages is the instant update capability, ensuring that information is always current. A key benefit of online marketing is its facilitation of two-way communication, allowing businesses to interact directly with customers, fostering strong relationships. The lack of geographical restrictions and unlimited user access means businesses can reach a global audience without the constraints of time and location. Moreover, expanding the audience incurs no additional costs, making it a cost-effective strategy compared to traditional marketing methods. By securing the goals of both the seller and the buyer, online marketing creates a mutually beneficial environment (Negi & Chaurasia, 2021; Prokopenko et al., 2019).

ICT provides a significant competitive edge to tourism and hospitality businesses. It facilitates better customer relationship management, improves operational efficiency, and enables innovative marketing strategies. ICT innovations bring together various stakeholders within tourism ecosystems, fostering collaboration and enhancing the overall service quality (Law, Buhalis & Cobanoglu, 2014). Buhalis (2019) emphasizes the evolution from traditional tourism to eTourism and smart tourism. eTourism involves the strategic use of ICT to improve the management and marketing of tourism services, enhancing the competitiveness of destinations. Smart tourism leverages technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, and artificial intelligence to create intelligent environments that offer personalized and real-time services to tourists. In the realm of internet marketing communication within the hospitality industry, the key elements can be identified as follows: information technology, such as the internet, online tools, and mobile devices; individuals and organizations like hotels and guesthouses; customers (guests and visitors); and internet users as potential customers. Just like in the physical marketplace, the virtual

market also seeks balance on both supply and demand sides. Therefore, internet marketing messages in the hospitality industry should adhere to these principles, aiming not only to sell products or services but also to adopt a more customer-friendly approach and enhance the online experience for users searching for travel and accommodation information (Semerádová & Vávrová, 2016).

Prats et al. (2015) highlighted the growing, though still limited relationship between new technologies and religion, noting that while religion has not fully embraced the digital age, it is beginning to do so. Six major areas where ICTs can intervene in religious tourism were listed by Amaro, Barroco, and Fonseca (2022):

— *Enhance tourists' experience:* ICTs provide pre-visit and on-site information, improving satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits. Technologies like AR, VR, QR codes, and apps offer interactive and multilingual experiences, and analyzing online reviews helps tailor services to tourist needs.

— *Promote religious tourism:* websites, social media, and other digital tools are cost-effective for marketing religious events, attracting diverse visitors, and obtaining donations for site maintenance.

— *Facilitate accessible tourism:* ICTs facilitate tourism for people with disabilities through specialized apps and virtual tours, enhancing independence and dignity for visitors with special needs.

— *Ensure sustainable tourism:* ICTs reduce signage and paper usage by providing digital information, and virtual tours decrease the physical impact on religious sites affected by overtourism.

— *Provide safety:* technologies like electronic bracelets and cyberpilgrimages enhance safety by providing personal and medical information during emergencies and allowing virtual participation in dangerous locations.

— *Advance religious tourism research:* tracking devices and other tools help researchers and site managers understand tourist behaviors, optimize site management, and prevent overcrowding, though they raise privacy concerns.

Websites

Webpages play a crucial role for religious tourists in planning their trips, serving as the primary source of information about sacred sites. They provide necessary details and images for travel planning, significantly influencing destination choices (Amaro et al., 2022). Additionally, websites enable virtual pilgrimages, allowing individuals to experience the divine and engage with sacred sites interactively from home. This concept, termed "cyberpilgrimage" by Hill-Smith (2009), offers benefits such as 24/7 availability, inclusivity, no cost, unrestricted viewing of shrines, and safety from potential disasters.

Websites are crucial for a company's digital strategy, enhancing connectedness, competitiveness, and global reach. Effective online business management is essential. Website quality, though widely studied, lacks a universally accepted measurement. Herrada-Lores et al. (2022) identified three main dimensions of website quality: service quality, technical/system quality, and content/information quality. (See Table 1.)

Given that most tourists gather information from various online sources, it is crucial to identify their unique characteristics. No and Kim (2015) identified five attributes for tourism-related websites: accessibility, security, information–trust, interaction, and personalization. (See Table 1.)

As outlined by Prokopenko et al. (2019) destination website has two primary goals: to generate initial interest in the destination for potential tourists and to provide comprehensive information for those who decide to travel there. This helps increase the length of stay and the spending of tourists. The site's structure and content should align with the destination's marketing strategy, focusing on target audiences and representing key attractions effectively. See Table 1 for the essential information to include on the site.

For evaluating the satisfaction of online travel information by self-guided tourists, criteria were empirically identified by Li, Wang and Huang (2020). The five most mentioned (31-89.7%) criteria related to information content on the webpage were the following: comprehensive information, accuracy, empirical, conciseness, clarity. The two criteria related to functions on the webpage: convenience, comprehensive function. (See Table 1.)

Based on the questionnaire research of Zywiolek, Rosak-Szyrocka and Santos (2023), the attributes that are relevant for visitor satisfaction of the websites of the places visited by pilgrims and that can be objectively judged can be selected. (See Table 1.)

An important aspect of both the analysis of the design of the websites and the information available about the shrine is accessibility for people with disabilities: websites should be usable by users with different disabilities, e.g. visually impaired, hearing impaired, mentally impaired (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023; Domínguez Vila et al., 2017, 2018; Eusébio et al., 2021; Kołodziejczak, 2019) and should provide detailed information on the physical accessibility of the tourist sites (Michopoulou & Buhalis, 2013; Casais & Castro, 2021; Kołodziejczak, 2019). There are significant gaps in these criteria in the online presence of tourism service providers (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011; Casais & Castro, 2021). See the criteria considered in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples for general and specific criteria relevant for pilgrimage places' webpages by different scholars

Scope & source	Attribute/criterion	Definition/description
Main dimensions of website quality (Herrada-Lores et al., 2022)	Service quality	Assesses the level of service provided from an external, subjective perspective, including user interaction and technical characteristics.
	Technical/system quality	Evaluates content presentation, access speed, ease of use, interface, and navigation from both an internal, objective perspective and an external, perceptual view.
	Content/information quality	Focuses on the relevance, sufficiency, accuracy, and timeliness of information, considering corporate, transactional, and communicational content from both objective and subjective viewpoints.
Attributes for tourism-related websites (No & Kim, 2015)	Accessibility	The extent to which travelers can easily access and use online tourism information sources.
	Security	The extent to which a website can demonstrate itself to be trustworthy regarding the protection of a user's personal information.
	Information–trust	User perception of the level of trust associated with information provided by the sources.
	Interaction	Facilitates immediate actions such as real-time feedback and active communication.
	Personalization	The ability of a user to obtain specific or perfect information to meet their needs.
Essential information to include on destination websites (Prokopenko et al., 2019)	Unique aspects of the destination	main attractions
	Tourist activities available	names, descriptions, visiting conditions, and benefits, addressing tourists' needs
	Transportation options	to reach the destination, with links to relevant transport companies
	Accommodation details	addresses and brief descriptions of hotels
	Useful arrival tips	such as car rentals and currency exchange
Criteria for evaluating the satisfaction of	Comprehensive information	The web page provides a wealth of diverse and complete information that users need.

online travel information by self-guided tourists (Li, Wang & Huang, 2020)	Criteria related to information content on the webpage	Accuracy	The information on the web page is accurate and error-free, which is consistent with the real situation.
		Empirical	The web page provides information related to the author's (sic!) personal experience.
		Conciseness	The information content on the web page is not redundant.
		Clarity	The information content on the web page is clear and easy to read.
	Criteria related to functions on the webpage	Convenience	The functions on the web page are easy to use.
		Comprehensive function	The functions provided on the web page are complete.
Attributes developed by pilgrims as customers (selected) (Zywiolek, Rosak-Szyrocka & Santos, 2023)			Places of worship and pilgrimage should have profiles on social media.
			The site of the place of worship should contain an easy-to-use search engine.
			The site and place of worship should have a map of how to navigate around the site.
			The place of worship prepares information about meeting places and accommodation points.
			The place of worship has other typically tourist attractions.
			The website should contain accurate contact details, a location pin, an access map, and entry markings.
			Information about the services and products offered should be complete and their photos legible.
			It is necessary to indicate the places of purchase of souvenirs, devotional items.
			Pastoral points are marked with function and time.
			The pilgrim should be able to choose from a variety of payment methods.
			Making a donation can take a different form of payment and currency.
Information about accessibility for people with disabilities (required prior to travel) (Buhalis & Michopoulou, 2011)			Outdoor areas of the accommodation/attraction Moving inside the building Common areas of accommodation/attraction Security policy of the accommodation/attraction Accessibility of rooms
Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 – Principles (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023)		Perceivable	Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.
		Operable	User interface components and navigation must be operable.
		Understandable	Information and the operation of user interface must be understandable.
		Robust	Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies.

Source: own editing based on Herrada-Lores et al. (2022), No & Kim (2015), Prokopenko et al. (2019), Li, Wang & Huang (2020), Zywiolek, Rosak-Szyrocka & Santos (2023), Buhalis & Michopoulou (2011), Kirkpatrick et al. (2023)

Social media

Social media can be defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media has a significant impact on businesses and suggests a paradigm shift in marketing (Keegan & Rowley, 2017). Social media marketing is the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software is to create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders (Tuten & Solomon, 2015). To leverage social networking sites effectively, businesses must choose appropriate marketing content to strengthen customer relationships, which in turn drives sustainable performance (Wibowo et al., 2020). Compared to traditional media programs, which are often costly, social media marketing strategies are generally more budget friendly. Regardless of costs, not engaging in social media marketing appears unwise (Silva, Duarte & Almeida, 2020).

According to Wang et al. (2017), an organization's technological, operational, managed, and strategic levels which must be aligned with each other to provide the maximum value from the use of social media to develop marketing activities (Silva, Duarte & Almeida, 2020). Effing and Spil (2016) distinguished three stages of maturity for social media strategy development, which can be considerable for religious site managements too: initiation phase (choosing channels, defining target audience); diffusion phase (establishing policies, setting goals, allocating resources); maturity phase (monitoring, scheduling content activities).

Tourists use social networking sites for various purposes, including gathering travel information, offering travel tips, making social connections, and enjoying the process of sharing their travel experiences with others (An et al., 2022). From the businesses' perspective, social media can assist them in engaging potential tourists and enhancing their online presence (Zlatanov & Popesku, 2021; Amaro et al., 2022). Religious tourism benefits utilizing social media to promote destinations and programs efficiently. Recommendations and reviews on social media significantly influence tourists' travel planning and decisions. In religious tourism, social media serves as a crucial information source and facilitates electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) about sacred sites and events. Religious tourists heavily rely on e-WOM, particularly from previous visitors, making it an essential tool for planning, especially for first-time visitors. (Amaro et al., 2022)

As stated by Peters et al. (2013), to manage social media effectively, managers and researchers must understand how marketing inputs interact with these channels to achieve desired outcomes, following the Stimulus>>Organism>>Response model, where, marketing inputs are stimuli like information and advertising, social media represent the organism, and managerial outcomes are the responses, which include metrics such as customer lifetime value or brand awareness. Social media encompass four key elements: motives, content, network structure, and social roles and interactions. The element of "content" can be categorized into three aspects: (1) content quality, subsuming content characteristics (e.g., interactivity, vividness), content domain (e.g., education, entertainment, information), and narrative styles; (2) content valence, subsuming emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, joy) and tonality (e.g., positive, negative); and (3) content volume, subsuming counts and volumes. This approach is well suited for the (mainly content-based) analysis of social media communication in religious sites.

Material and methods

The aim of the research was to analyze the digital communication of eight Roman Catholic shrines (Figure 1) in Central Europe, mainly from the point of view of serving pilgrimage tourism. As a subset of digital marketing, the focus was on the online marketing of the shrines, i.e. website, social media activity, video sharing (webcams, live streams). The method of the study was content analysis of these online platforms. The set of criteria for analyzing the websites of shrines as the main sources of information was based on the literature, with only objectively judged elements, without subjective criteria. For the websites, the criteria for the information content and services considered desirable were:

1. *History, significance:* history of the shrine, long and recent past, its mission, and its importance as a place of pilgrimage.
2. *Location:* exact address and/or coordinates of the shrine, including a map, if any.
3. *Transport accessibility:* international, regional and local accessibility of the shrine and its surroundings by relevant modes of transport (air, rail, water, road).

4. *Parking:* vehicle (motorcycle, car, bus) parking and bicycle storage facilities, conditions, fees, related services.

5. *Accessibility for the disabled:* information on the accessibility of the shrine's facilities for visitors with different types of impairment (e.g., mobility, visual, hearing, etc.)

6. *Accommodation:* contact details, types and features of accommodations provided by the shrine or available nearby.

7. *Dining options:* contact details and description of the dining facilities (restaurants, canteens, buffets, cafés, etc.) provided by the shrine or available nearby.

8. *Worship options:* the time and place of masses, devotions, prayers, vespers, rosaries, confessions, blessings, farewells and feasts.

9. *Religious services:* optional masses, spiritual exercises, sacraments (baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage, anointing of the sick).

10. *On-site sights, attractions:* the built heritage (e.g. churches, chapels, libraries), artefacts (e.g. altars, statues, paintings) and other religious and cultural attractions (e.g., museums, events) of the shrines.

11. *Other attractions:* natural attractions, architectural sights, cultural and sporting facilities and events around the shrine.

12. *Touristic services:* additional tourist and amenity services such as information points, guided tours, souvenir shops, safekeeping, toilets, etc.

13. *Opening hours:* opening hours of certain facilities of the shrine, office hours for the administrative offices.

14. *Donations and payment:* ways of giving and donating.

15. *News updates:* regularly updated news about the life and events of the shrine.

16. *Program calendar:* scheduling of programs and events by date.

17. *Links to other (social) media:* links to the social media and other content sharing (e.g., video, podcast) profiles of the shrine.

18. *Integration with social media:* one-touch sharing of website content on social media sites, embedding social media and multimedia sharing content on the website, etc.

19. *"Cyberpilgrimage" options:* texts, images, audio, videos, webcams, live broadcasts, virtual tours, interactive features, etc.

20. *Website accessibility for the disabled:* at least partial accessibility, e.g. a high contrast, large font version for the visually impaired, reading aloud for the hearing impaired, etc.

21. *Website availability in other languages:* availability of at least the essential information in another foreign language, and preferably in English.

Based on the above, the study does not deal with the appearance and user experience of the websites, just as it was not possible to verify the accuracy and timeliness of the information. On this basis, the content and services of the websites were analyzed quantitatively using binary variables: if the website at least partially met a certain criterion (i.e. if there were at least traces of the information or service mentioned), it was given a value of 1, otherwise a value of 0. The assessment therefore takes into account the effort to provide information and accessibility rather than its concrete implementation. The numerical results are presented in aggregated form, giving an overall picture of the information content of the websites of shrines in Central Europe, using

distribution ratios and a graphical representation. The above analysis is complemented by a factual descriptive overview of the content of the websites. (The date on which the data were closed was 8th of July, 2024.) The descriptions are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide an overview of easily accessible and/or distinctive content and services. This will be followed by a brief description of the social media sites associated with the shrines as a tool for content sharing, community building and interaction, focusing only on static elements that change not or slowly over time (year of creation, number of followers) and on the activity of the shrine as a content sharer (frequency of posting, content characteristics, originality): it will not therefore address the quantity and nature of user interactivity (likes, shares, comments). Along the lines of the limitations outlined above, recommendations for further research opportunities are made at the end of the article.

**Figure 1. The Central European shrines selected for the examination of their online communication**
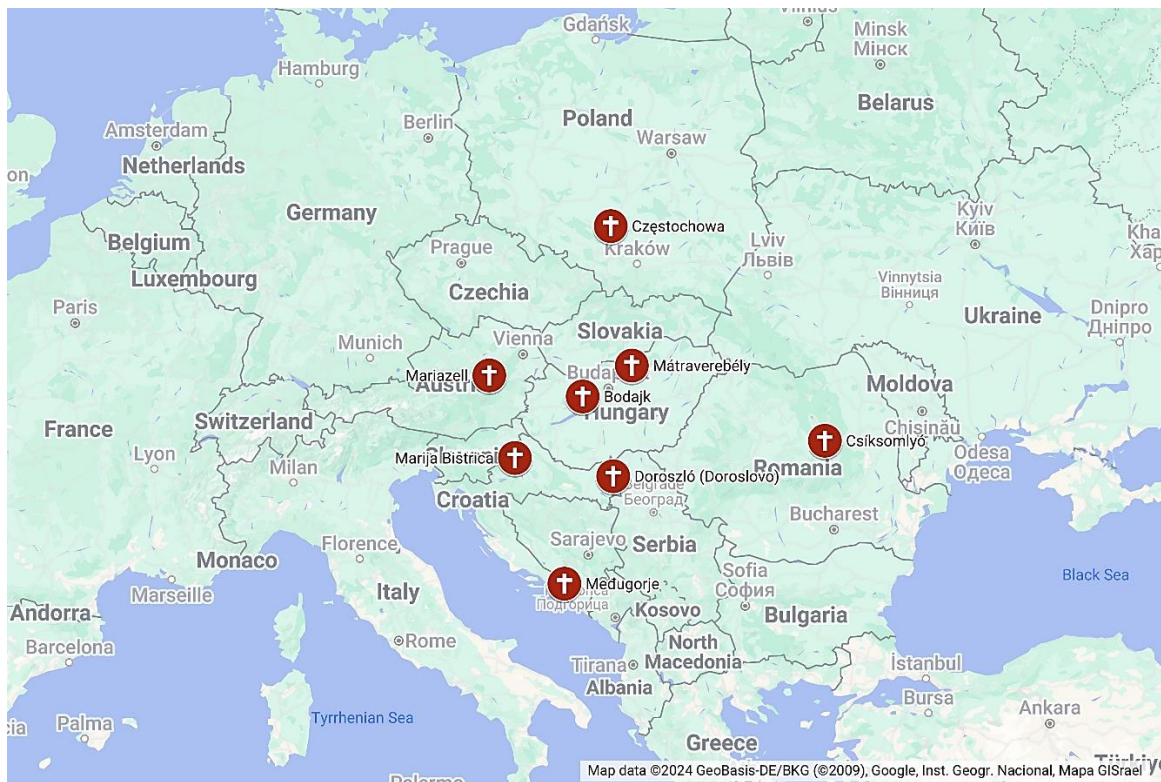
Source: own editing by Google Maps

Results

The content analysis of the websites of the eight selected Central European shrines was based on a total of 21 criteria, as described in the Material and Methods section. The results show that the criteria on information content and services include both those that are mostly met by the online sites studied, those that divide the sites, and those that are mostly not met (Figure 2). The history and location of shrines, religious activities and services, attractions within the shrine, program offer and calendar, social networking sites, 'cyberpilgrimage' options (such as written and multimedia material, livestream or webcam), information on donations, and availability in other

foreign languages are almost universally found in the information and services offered by the websites (with deviations in the level of detail of the information or quality of presentation). The availability of information on accommodation, dining, opening hours, on-site tourist services for pilgrims is present in about half of the websites, as is (some level of) integration of the website and social media interfaces. Transport accessibility, parking, accessibility for people with disabilities, local (secular) tourist attractions as information, and a conscious effort to make websites accessible for people with disabilities (e.g. visually impaired, hearing impaired) are missing in most websites. Overall, out of the possible 21 points awarded by the evaluation, the best performing website scored 19 points and the least performing website scored 6 points. The average score is 13.8, the median 13.5 and the standard deviation 4.5. Although not the subject of the study, there are significant subjective differences in the appearance, architecture, usability and user experience of the websites.

Figure 2. Percentage of shrine websites that actually provide the information and/or services specified in the criteria (status on the 8ᵗʰ of July 2024) [8 = 100%]
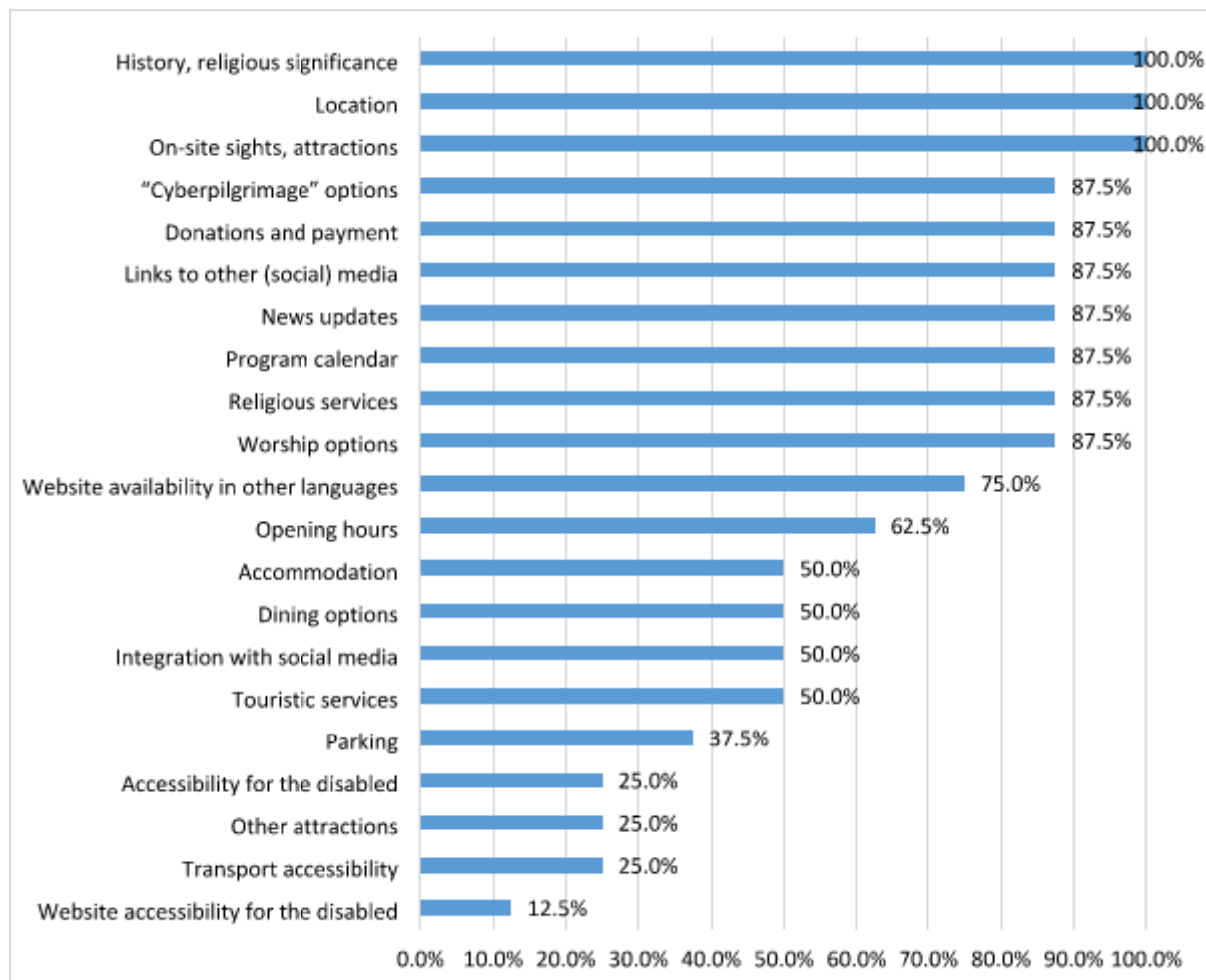
Source: own editing based on content analysis

Jasna Góra – Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Częstochowa (Poland)

The home page of the official website for Jasna Góra, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Częstochowa, features an introduction to the sanctuary, current events, and news updates. It provides foreign

language options in English, Italian, and German, but the richest information is available in Polish. There can be detailed information found about the Miraculous Image of Our Lady, also known as the icon of the Black Madonna. It covers its history and spiritual significance. Additionally, it delves into the history and role of the Pauline Monastery and the monks who manage the sanctuary. Visitors can find practical tips for their visit, including what to see, mass and service times, and how to prepare for their trip. There is information about accommodation options. Additionally, details about parking and dining options are available. The website offers a detailed daily schedule for masses, confessions, and sacraments held at the sanctuary. Instructions on how to request individual, collective, perpetual, or Gregorian masses are provided. There is information on how to support the shrine through donations. Radio Jasna Góra offers live broadcasts and recordings of masses and other religious events. Additionally, there are live streams, particularly from the Chapel of the Miraculous Image. Contact details for various administrative and religious queries are provided. The Press Office of the shrine offers news entries, images, videos, and audio streams. Detailed rules are available for media professionals and event organizers. A rich archive of news and media content can be found at the old webpage, which was actively operational until July 2024.

Jasna Góra's main social media platform is the Facebook page, which is ran by the press office since 2013, and it has 120,000 followers and is liked by 107,000 profiles. It features various posts about events, religious ceremonies, historical information, and news related to the monastery. The language of the posts is Polish. The news sharing is continuous, with multiple posts per day, the content (text and images) is almost entirely their own, with basically no material taken from other sources. The X (Twitter) page, also run by the press office since 2017 with 15,000 followers and Instagram profile with slightly more than 2,000 followers since 2021, displays essentially the same content as the Facebook page, with the same picture material, in Polish, on a daily basis. The shrine also has a YouTube channel with almost 5,300 videos 246,000 subscribers, where the prayer of the Rosary in front of the Miraculous Image of Our Lady is streamed daily, as well as masses, novenas, concerts, educational pieces, and video announcements.

Mariazell Pilgrimage Basilica (Austria)

The homepage of the Mariazell Basilika website features announcements and news, offering information on upcoming events. It also includes a schedule detailing daily and weekly mass timings, special services, and events. Visitors can find guidelines and forms for pilgrim group registration, opening hours and services for various parts of the basilica including the main church, the treasury, and other sites. The website features articles detailing the history of Mariazell, including its founding, Benedictine influence, and evolution over centuries, as well as the affiliate churches and other religious orders being present in Mariazell. Visitors can access reflections and theological discussions by church leaders, particularly focusing on the Benedictine heritage and the significance of Mary in the pilgrimage tradition. There can be found texts of essential prayers, litanies specific to Mariazell, and other devotional materials. There are opportunities for prayers and to light candles online, with virtual candles burning for a specified period. Maps and descriptions of the basilica's layout are available, including facilities for pilgrims, and areas accessible to those with special needs. It also includes information about bicycle stands available around the basilica. There are details on the basilica's treasure chambers, including significant votive offerings and art pieces from different historical periods. Sections include descriptions of key architectural elements and church music. The page also provides links and resources for pilgrims wishing to travel to Mariazell by foot along traditional pilgrimage routes. Visitors can get information about the work of the association "Freunde der Basilika Mariazell", the possibilities

of support and subscribe to the newsletter. The magazine "Gruss Aus Mariazell" can also be downloaded. The renovation projects of the basilica are documented in detail. Connections to other pilgrimage-related websites and resources for further information on routes and spiritual preparation are displayed. In addition to the detailed German main page, the basic information about the basilica is also available in English, French, Italian, Hungarian, Czech, Slovak, Polish and Croatian.

The Basilica of Mariazell has had a Facebook page since 2018, with around 1,400 likes and 1,500 followers. Posts are more frequent during the summer pilgrimage season and less frequent outside of it (except perhaps during Advent), with mostly original content in German language and occasionally content shared from elsewhere. The basilica has been running its Instagram page since 2020, currently with a little over 1,000 followers. Since its launch there have been only 75 posts, and in the first half of the year 2024 (when this paper was finalized) the profile has not shown activity. The majority of the content shared are images and videos of the church itself, as well as re-sharing of Shrines of Europe's advertisements.

Međugorje (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

The Međugorje pilgrimage webpage features the latest news, with updates on events, announcements, and important notices, detailed statistics related to the pilgrimage site, and message highlights, which are regularly updated messages from the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The Međugorje Phenomenon section details the historical background and significance of the apparitions. It provides information about the apparitions and their impact on the community and visitors, an archive of Marian messages over the years. The site outlines the history and development of the Međugorje parish, introducing the pastoral staff too. Spirituality section includes a collection of fundamental prayers for pilgrims and visitors, as well as biblical teachings and extensive theological reflections. Prayer requests can be submitted. Pilgrimage guidelines offer practical advice for pilgrims. Prayer schedule and rules for prayer groups, and information on the sights, praying spaces, meeting points, parking, first aid point, souvenir shop, and institutions connected with the sanctuary is available. The multimedia section features a photo gallery capturing the essence and events of Medjugorje, live streaming feeds from the site, and video content documenting events, testimonies, and other significant happenings. Publishing section offers information about various publications related to Medjugorje, i.e. a catalogue of publications, a bibliography in Croatian and other languages, and access to the "Glasnik Mira", the parish bulletin. The website also hosts comprehensive archives of messages, events, and data available for research and personal edification. A rich collection of links leads to other Međugorje-related websites. In addition to Croatian, the website is accessible in multiple languages such as English, German, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Hungarian, and Arabic.

The website for Radio MIR Medjugorje offers a variety of content. It features sections such as: information about radio programs; updates on Međugorje, church activities, and community; daily biblical messages, spiritual encouragements, sermons, and prayers; articles on different topics by various authors; information on books and other publications; marketing, supporters, and studio information.

Međugorje's media centre, MIR, has a Facebook page for Croatian speaking audience since 2015, with with 155,000 followers and 111,000 likes. (The centre runs Facebook pages in three languages in addition since 2020, with 22,000 followers in Spanish, 17,000 in English and 10,000 in Italian.) Mostly the centre's news entries, articles, pictures/videos, prayers, and live broadcasts are shared on a daily basis. The centre operates 12 YouTube channels, in all the languages in which the website is available as well as in Serbian, Slovakian, and Russian. The main channel

in Croatian has the largest number of followers, 57,700. Among the 4,800 videos on the main channel, there are broadcasts of holy masses, speeches, educational material, interviews and music clips. Since 2018, the centre has been operating its Instagram page in Croatia and since 2020 its international Instagram page, which have 53,900 and 19,400 followers respectively, and share their own images and videos daily. On the international page, the texts of the posts are usually translated into English, Italian, German, Spanish, and Polish. There is a TikTok channel ran by the media centre, with almost 500 followers, but with only a few videos.

Croatian National Shrine of Saint Mary of Marija Bistrica (Croatia)

The website of the shrine in Marija Bistrica includes general information about the shrine, including news updates, event highlights, and quick links to important sections of the site. The website offers a 360° virtual tour of the shrine. Detailed information about the different pilgrimages, including traditional pilgrimage routes and schedules, as well as guidance for pilgrims, is available. History of the shrine, including pictures and basic information on the votive statue, way of the cross, pilgrimages and past rectors can be found. Texts offer prayers, sermons, songs, and records of hearings, graces, intercessions and miracles. Sections are dedicated to the Sisters of Mercy of St. Vinko Paulski and the Carmelite convent associated with the shrine, including contact information and details about their activities. Information about the mass schedules, sacraments, engagement courses offered for couples preparing for marriage, including schedules and registration details, is provided. The section about the parish office's opening hours provides practical information for visitors needing administrative assistance. Options for donating are available. The publications include digital versions of the parish bulletin and the "Milosti Puna" magazine. Radio Marija Bistrica live transmissions masses from the shrine. The site hosts extensive photo and video galleries documenting various events, pilgrimages, and historical moments at the shrine. Fundamental information is available in English, German, Italian, Spanish, French, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovenian.

The shrine has had a Facebook page since 2014, which now has 23,000 followers and 18,000 likes. The activity consists of several postings per week, mostly with original content (news, announcements, events, galleries, quotes etc.) in Croatian. The page is also active in creating and sharing event pages, which - especially since Covid - is not common. The shrine's YouTube channel, created in 2013, with 134 subscribers and only 16 videos, has been inactive since 2016.

Doroszló – The Holy Mother miracle fountain shrine (Serbia)

The home page of the website of Doroszló – Szentkút features a welcome message and recent posts, imported from the shrine's Facebook page. The site offers a detailed historical background of the site. The spirituality section consists of a voluminous article on the theology of pilgrimage. A rich archive of entries sorted by date is available in the side column of the page. The future plans for the renewal of the site can be seen as well. Additionally, the photo albums showcase images categorized by year and general themes, and the videos' section presents multimedia content related to the shrine. Detailed contact information is available.

The shrine has had a Facebook page since 2011, which currently has around 5,000 followers and 3,700 likes. The site contains a more extensive description of the shrine and all the important contact details. The activity sometimes involves multiple posts per day, but usually several posts per week, mostly in Hungarian language, including content reposted from other sources.

Csíksomlyó (Romania)

The Csíksomlyó pilgrimage shrine website offers an introduction to the shrine, providing links to various language versions including Hungarian, English, German, Romanian, Italian, and French. It includes sections for live broadcasts, upcoming events, and current announcements. A separate special section provides access to the (now archived) news and articles related to Pope Francis' visit to Csíksomlyó. The site describes the history and significance of the shrine and monastery and includes information about the Franciscan community that manages the shrine. Detailed information on the architectural and artistic values of the place is provided, including the old gothic and the current baroque style church and its relics, as well as the chapels and the Three Hill Altar on the Somlyó mountain. The site includes the order of masses, a calendar of events, such as ceremonies, pilgrimages, and other activities. Services include live webcam feeds from the shrine. The gallery features photos showcasing the shrine, events, and pilgrimages. There is a (slightly hard to find) sub-page on donation details, in addition to the quick access Pay-Pal donation option. The FAQs answers common questions about visiting the shrine, participating in events, and other inquiries. The "e-Szó" ("e-Word") blog is available from the website, with constantly updated entries.

The Csíksomlyó shrine's Facebook page has been up and running since 2013. At the time of writing, it has 34,000 followers and 31,000 likes. The daily posts are mainly links to live streaming, but there are also event announcements and reports, articles and awareness-raising material, in Hungarian. The site also includes a private group of 18,900 members, where it is possible to find information and share content, opinions and suggestions. Since 2013, the shrine's YouTube channel has attracted 41,100 followers and posted around 2,500 videos. There is daily live coverage of masses and continuous streaming during the Pentecost pilgrimage. Since 2018, Radio Csíksomlyó and a webcam showing the interior of the church have been live-streamed on YouTube.

Mátraverebély-Szentkút National Shrine (Hungary)

The website of the Mátraverebély-Szentkút national shrine features a welcome message from the shrine director, expressing the shrine's mission. Insight into the history and significance of the shrine, managed by the Franciscan community, is also provided. It is possible to find out about the missionary activities of the Franciscan Sisters of Charity. Information is available on the conditions for joining the "Confraternitas Mariana Szentkutiensis" fraternity. Details about participating in mass, confession, and other sacraments and religious activities, including opportunities for personal spiritual guidance and communal prayers, are included, together with guidelines for pilgrim groups. Information on organizing weddings, family events, retreats, and conferences at the shrine is emphasized. In addition to info on donation, there are instructions for sending gratitude boards to the shrine. Instructions for reaching the shrine by car, bus, bicycle, and on foot are included, along with links to transportation schedules. Provisions for elderly and disabled visitors, including parking instructions and availability of wheelchairs, are described. Embedded maps and directions help visitors navigate to and within the shrine's vicinity. There are descriptions of the available accommodations and a restaurant. Details about the on-site store selling souvenirs and religious items are included. The website has sections with photo and video galleries, including image films, drone footage, and recorded interviews, showcasing the shrine and its activities. The issues of the "Szentkút Újság" newspaper, maintained by the shrine, can be downloaded. The shrine's podcast can be listened to, and its blog read. A collection of sermons and lectures related to the shrine and broader Catholic teachings is accessible. Options to view live

streams of events and ceremonies held at the shrine are also available. Essential information is available in English in Slovakian too.

The shrine's Hungarian-language Facebook page, which has been active since 2014, has 66,000 followers and 63,000 likes. In addition to exhaustive contact information, the page's introduction includes a detailed user policy. Content posted in Hungarian every 1-2 days includes news, event announcements and media content, inspirational posts, travel tips, and recently, dedicated posts introducing the shrine staff. The shrine has also had an Instagram account since 2021, currently with 560 followers and 1-2 photo or video posts per week. The X (Twitter) account was active between 2014-2015.

Bodajk – Our Lady of Help shrine (Hungary)

The website for the Shrine of Our Lady of Bodajk offers an introduction to the place, including its historical and spiritual significance. The homepage contains updates on upcoming events and other important notices. Information can be found about regular masses, special religious ceremonies, and other liturgical services held at the shrine. The webpage includes the text of hymns and prayers dedicated to the shrine's patroness, the Helping Virgin Mary of Bodajk. Visitor information includes opening hours and accessibility. Guided tours are available for groups upon prior registration. The surveillance system and alarm system for the safety of visitors and the site itself is also mentioned. There is a permanent exhibition showcasing the history of the shrine, along with an exhibition space operated by the Bodajk Local History Association. Information about booking and facilities, including the option for meals provided by local services, as well as contact details for making reservations and inquiries are available. Parish information describes the administrative structure of the parish, including the clergy and their short introduction. One can find details about the Segítő Kéz Social Foundation and its initiatives, and instructions for making financial contributions or volunteering. The site provides an overview of the columbarium's significance and the process for selecting and redeeming burial niches, and details for arranging visits. The shrine's EU-funded project activities are reported by photos and videos. The site includes information about a religious goods store, including their opening hours and special arrangements for group visits. The social media pages of the shrine can be accessed from all sub-pages of the website with a single click.

The shrine has been running a Facebook page since 2013, which now has 7,800 followers and 5,200 likes. The page covers the most important historical facts, parish functions, responsible persons, office hours, and the mass schedule. Posts several times a week include pastoral notes from the parish priest, event announcements and reports, in Hungarian. The Instagram profile, which has been operating since 2020 and features still-life-style on-site photos with changing frequency, has 140 followers. Created in 2016, the YouTube channel has been active in the year 2023, when it introduced the shrine in several videos. It has 50 subscribers.

Conclusions and recommendations

Webpages are pivotal for religious tourists, offering essential trip planning information and enabling virtual pilgrimages. Website quality lacks a universally accepted measure, though, tourism-related websites must generate interest and provide comprehensive information. Accessibility for people with disabilities is crucial but often inadequate in tourism service providers' online presence.

Most shrine websites are rich in information on the history and significance of the shrine, religious activities, on-site programs and attractions, as well as 'cyberpilgrimage' options such as live streams and virtual tours. However, there are significant gaps in practical visitor information like transport accessibility, parking, local touristic services, and accommodation. Information on accessibility for disabled visitors is largely missing from most shrine websites. Only a few shrines offer detailed guidelines and provisions for visitors with disabilities. While essential information is often available in multiple languages, the depth and breadth of multilingual content vary significantly. Although these aspects were not quantitatively assessed, notable variations in the appearance, architecture, usability, and user experience of the websites were found.

Shrine websites should improve the availability of practical information. The websites should ensure that information is regularly updated and maintained to provide accurate and timely details about events, services, and other relevant aspects. More attention should be given to making websites and physical sites accessible for visitors with disabilities. This includes providing detailed accessibility information online and ensuring facilities are equipped to accommodate all visitors. To cater to an international audience, shrine websites should offer comprehensive multilingual support. Improving the overall user experience of shrine websites can significantly enhance visitor satisfaction. This includes better website architecture, intuitive navigation, and mobile-friendliness.

Social media transforms marketing with cost-effective strategies, crucial for tourism. Tourists utilize it for travel planning and sharing experiences, while destinations use it to engage them.

There are significant differences in the extent of presence on social media platforms and the degree and nature of activity: Facebook is the most common platform, with varying degrees of emphasis on information about upcoming events, reporting on events that have taken place, live streaming, spiritual care, contemplation and prayer, and artistic content. There is variability in the level of engagement and originality of the content posted. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube are used less frequently, and some shrines have inactive or underutilized social media profiles.

Shrines should develop more consistent and engaging social media strategies. This includes regular posting, diversifying content across platforms, and encouraging user interaction.

Based on the research, it is suggested to further investigate how, beyond static content elements, websites and social networking sites perform in meeting the broad needs of believers and tourists (e.g. information, spiritual renewal, community building) in a dynamically changing environment, with accessibility and user experience in mind. This could provide more holistic insights into enhancing digital communication for shrines.

Summary

Religious tourism, rooted in pilgrimages, has expanded beyond traditional practices to include diverse spiritual and secular interests. Visitor motivations range widely, from spiritual fulfillment and cultural exploration to relaxation and curiosity. Today's pilgrims often seek comfort and lively environments over asceticism and solitude. This shift prompts a need for more modern strategies in site management. Online marketing leverages digital platforms for interactive global outreach. ICT supports tourism by improving service quality, enhancing visitor experiences, promoting events, and ensuring safety. The study analyzed the websites of Central European shrines across multiple criteria. Findings indicate varied fulfillment levels among these criteria related to information content and services. Some key areas are generally well-covered (mainly the fundamentals), some aspects are less commonly addressed (mostly extensive touristic information and features related to accessibility for the disabled), but the websites themselves show significant

discrepancies too. Many shrines have integrated social media into their online presence, but there is variability in the level of engagement and originality of the content posted. Future studies could delve deeper into the qualitative aspects of website usability, user experience, and the impact of social media engagement on pilgrimage tourism.

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