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## **An overview of the literature on accessible tourism in Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania**

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is the defining factor of our time, both an economic activity and a socio-economic phenomenon that is an integral part of human life. In societies, it is a source of well-being and subjective happiness for a large number of people (Michalkó 2010).

In recent decades, tourism has experienced continuous growth and increasing diversification, making it one of the fastest growing economic sectors worldwide. These dynamic processes have become the main drivers of socio-economic development in some countries of the world. Today, tourism is one of the most important sectors of international trade and a major source of income for many developing countries. Tourism is a means of creating jobs, eradicating poverty, promoting gender equality and preserving and promoting natural and cultural heritage. However, it is not only the development of globalisation that is important, but also the fact that tourism is no longer simply an economic sector, a service activity with a specific offer, but also a social phenomenon that affects the daily lives of people in society, has a significant impact on their quality of life and is closely linked to their standard of living and well-being. Moreover, tourism is an exceptional means of strengthening new personal relationships and fostering family and family ties. It is therefore of the **utmost importance** for us to put into practice the **principle of “tourism for all”**, i.e. equal access; it is important to continue to address the tourism practices of people with disabilities, to identify barriers to the further development of accessible tourism and to present possible good practices (Buhalis et al., 2012; Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

As tourism has become a social phenomenon, the practice of tourism and the science of tourism have evolved. Our knowledge about the laws of tourism is constantly evolving, changing and expanding. **Accessible tourism**, however, is a **relatively under-researched** area of tourism studies in the countries that are subjects of this essay: Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Only in the last few years has this changed, with a few researchers becoming interested and active in this topic. There is still a number of important questions to be addressed when considering accessible tourism. There is a problem of clearly defining the category itself, the target group, the specific motivations and consumption patterns of people with disabilities, with special needs.

For the vast majority of people, tourism is a favoured activity, generally perceived as a “good thing”. However, we must draw attention to the fact that the **practice of tourism is not yet inclusive** and that improvements in social inclusion can and should be made (Raffay & Gonda 2020; Gonda et al. 2019). Accessibility issues should not be neglected by tourist destinations and their service providers.

## 2. Presentation of the global context of the relevant literature

Defining disability is not an easy task, as it takes many forms (Hahn, 1985; Friedman, 2017; Small & Darcy 2010). “We can include not only people with limited mobility, visual and hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, but also those who suffer from other conditions that have a long-term impact on their quality of life, such as allergies” (Zsarnóczky, 2018a, p. 39). According to WHO estimates, **every 6<sup>th</sup> person on Earth suffers from** some kind of **disability**, and this number is continuously increasing (WHO 2011). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations in 2006, obliges States Parties to ensure access for persons with disabilities to sport, recreation and tourism facilities and services (Act XCII of 2007). Any of us can be concerned by this issue, if not for any other reason, because of the progress of our age. This is why the **problem** has taken on **particular importance** today in the context of **ageing societies**. Special needs in older age are common to all, but there are also **many other life situations** that may give rise to **special needs**: e.g. people undergoing rehabilitation after an accident, families with young children (Buhalis et al., 2012; Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) is committed to promoting accessible tourism. In this spirit, it has dedicated World Tourism Day 2016 to this theme. The organisation has made a number of recommendations and published a handbook on the issue (UNWTO, 2016).

Accessibility has been the subject of many efforts throughout human history. It became a widely recognised social issue in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is now widely accepted that everyone, despite a disability, should be able to enjoy the pleasures of travel as much as anyone else, “since the enjoyment of the fullness of life is a right for all” (Végh, 2005, p. 31). The European Parliament’s resolution of 29 October 2015 on European Strategy for the Future and the Challenges of European Tourism emphasises the importance of developing sustainable, responsible and accessible tourism; the principle of “tourism for all”; and that full accessibility and affordability of tourism are key elements for the sustainability of the sector. It proposes that Member States develop a Europe-wide, uniform and transparent labelling scheme for accessible offers and that they make accessibility a criterion for support in the context of economic support programmes for the tourism sector.

As tourism has become a social phenomenon, it has also become an important factor in shaping quality of life (Gonda et al. 2019). Today, it is fortunately accepted that facilitating **travel for people with disabilities** and providing the necessary physical conditions is **not only a human, ethical, moral and legal obligation**, but **also an important economic issue**. At present, this represents an untapped niche in the tourism market, although there have been many positive counter-examples in the recent past (Buhalis et al., 2012). However, this untapped market segment should not be seen as a homogeneous group, as they have different specific needs for services depending on the type and extent of their disability. There are barriers that may affect all travellers and barriers that are insurmountable problems for certain narrow segments, only (Shaw & Coles, 2004, p. 398).

Different tourist destinations have reached different levels of accessibility. Some destinations are developing special offers for people with disabilities, others are making accessibility a distinctive feature – recognising the market opportunity it represents. Unfortunately, there are still places that do not address this issue at all.

The major European countries in the international tourist flows are clearly placing great emphasis on this issue. Thus, the efforts of Spain (Vila, Darcy & González, 2015) and Italy (Agovino et al., 2017) in the field of tourist accessibility deserve special mention. The implementation of **accessible tourism**, however, **is not the same as physical accessibility**. The experience provided by accessible destinations is much more than that: it is the realisation of the principles of independence, equality and human dignity while enjoying the tourism experience. Experiencing the spirit of place is as important for people with disabilities as it is for anyone else.

It is generally accepted that the experience of travelling and holidays enhances subjective happiness (Michalkó 2010; Csapó et al., 2018). This is particularly true for people with disabilities. For them and their family members, the joy of travelling offers the possibility of escaping from their often difficult and problematic everyday lives. In many cases, travel is a celebration for them, and the experiences help them to make contacts and integrate more easily into society (Gálné Kucsák, 2008). Several empirical studies in Hungary have shown that **people with disabilities face significant problems when travelling** and that their disability hinders them in realising their travel plans. This is why many of them choose to “not travel” (Csapó & Gonda, 2019; Csapó, Törőcsik & Nagy, 2019). Half of disabled people with reduced mobility have a disability that prevents them from participating in a tourism programme, and 75% of visually impaired people have the same problem (Motivation Foundation and Revita Foundation Research Workshop, 2009). Providing a high standard of service to disabled guests requires empathy and attention from tourism industry stakeholders.

### 3. The literature on accessible tourism in Croatia

Despite the growing attention paid to the development of **accessible tourism in the Republic of Croatia**, the number of theoretical studies is not in line with this trend. This area **has not yet been sufficiently researched** and there is a need for contemporary and empirical research. The authors analyse the published research on accessible tourism in Croatia, provide an overview of the types of impairments that lead to disabilities and analyse both the age and gender distribution within the population. Based on these findings, the authors point out the research gap and emphasise the need to increase research interest in the field of accessible tourism. Considering that SDG 10 is aimed at reducing inequalities within societies worldwide, inclusion is a priority also in tourism. As Croatia is a strongly tourism-orientated country, it is expected that more attention and research will be devoted to the specifics of the accessible tourism market, especially with regard to the specifics of stakeholder involvement and the technical requirements for the private and public sectors.

#### Introduction

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines inclusion as the act or practise of including and welcoming people who have been excluded in the past (e.g. because of their race, gender, sexuality or ability). A report published by the WHO emphasises that people with disabilities have historically been excluded and in some ways segregated from the general population. However, policies have now shifted towards community and school inclusion, and medicalised solutions have given way to more interactive approaches which recognise that people are disabled by environmental factors as well as their bodies (World Bank, 2011: 6). While the WHO estimates that 1.3 billion people (approximately 16% of the world's population) are affected by a significant disability today, "inaccessible environments create barriers that often hinder the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others" (WHO, n.d.). In addition, the WHO (n.d.) lists several important facts about persons with disabilities, the following of which are closely related to tourism:

- people with disabilities find inaccessible and unaffordable transport 15 times more difficult than people without disabilities;
- health inequalities result from unfair conditions faced by people with disabilities, including stigmatisation, discrimination, poverty, exclusion from education and employment, and barriers in the health system itself.

Since tourism is above all a social phenomenon, Jafari defines it as the study of man (the tourist) outside his usual habitat, the tourist apparatus and the networks that respond to his various needs, as well as the ordinary (where the tourist comes from) and the non-ordinary (where the tourist goes to) world and their dialectical relations (Jafari, 2000). When it comes to people with disabilities, it is important to understand how they can fulfil their tourism needs. The UNWTO defines accessible tourism as "the adaptation of environments and tourism products and services to enable access, use and enjoyment by all users" (UNWTO, 2016: 6). Accessibility should be addressed by all stakeholders involved in tourism, as more and more people are dependent on finding measures for inclusion and ensuring the technical

accessibility of destinations and attractions. All of us require accessible environments, products and services at some point in our lives, whether due to a disability, illness, accident, pregnancy, advanced age or simply because we bring a lot of luggage or do not know our way around the area. These conditions can affect both tourists and local communities (UNWTO, 2016: 6).

As tourism aims to enable people to travel and experience different destinations and environments, accessibility is a growing issue today, challenging destination stakeholders to ensure technical adaptations for different specific needs. The aim of this chapter is therefore to analyse how these requirements are addressed in academic research in Croatia and whether adequate attention is paid to this particular segment of tourism demand, as well as to identify the needs and objectives of future research.

## Overview of theoretical findings

In order to fully understand the goals and scope of accessible tourism, it seems important to first address the concept of disability, which can be defined as a physical, mental, cognitive or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with or limits a person's ability to perform certain tasks or actions or to participate in typical daily activities and interactions (Merriam Webster, n.d.). In the Republic of Croatia, the Croatian Institute of Public Health is responsible for publishing statistical data on people with disabilities. According to the report published by this Institute (2022), there are 624,019 people with disabilities living in the Republic of Croatia, of whom 56.7% are male and 43.3% are female. People with disabilities make up about 16% of the total population of the Republic of Croatia. Most people with disabilities, i.e. 45.7%, belong to the 65+ age group, while 43.1% of people of working age are between 20 and 64 years old. Disabilities are also found among children aged 0-19 years, with a share of 11.2%. The largest number of people with disabilities lives in the city of Zagreb. An overview of the types of impairments that lead to disability or are comorbidity diagnoses related to a person's level of functional impairment, as well as an overview of functional ability impairments in relation to gender and age groups (both on 1 September 2022) are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1:** Overview of the types of impairments that cause disability or as comorbidity diagnoses relate to the degree of functional impairment of a person (state on 1 September 2022)

Type of disability	Total number	Share in the total number of people with disabilities	Prevalence / 10,000 inhabitants
Multiple disabilities	188,182	30.2	484
Damage to the locomotor system	177,547	28.5	457
Damage to other organs and organ systems, chromosomal diseases, congenital anomalies and rare diseases	162,135	26.0	417
Mental disabilities	153,021	24.5	394
Damage to the central nervous system	110,756	17.7	285
Speech-voice communication impairments	51,149	8.2	132



Intellectual disabilities	31,291	5.0	80
Visual impairments	20,526	3.3	53
Hearing impairments	17,679	2.8	45
Damage to the peripheral nervous system	17,642	2.8	45
Autism spectrum disorders	4,177	0.7	11
Deaf blindness	172	0.03	0.4

Source: Benjak, 2022: 6

**Table 2:** Impairments of functional abilities – overview according to gender and age groups (state on 1 September 2022)

Type of disability	Gender	Age groups		
		0 - 19	20 - 64	65 +
Mental illnesses	f	1,485	21,481	22,647
	m	3,684	48,504	27,976
Chronic diseases	f	965	28,059	34,173
	m	1,174	21,494	23,320
Voice, language and speech disorders	f	8,125	6,000	507
	m	14,794	10,758	707
Physical disability	f	855	7,499	12,215
	m	1,050	8,552	7,478
Intellectual difficulties	f	2,762	8,454	1,015
	m	4,133	11,570	949
Visual impairment	f	620	2,892	5,186
	m	779	4,280	4,326
Multiple disabilities	f	3,093	3,150	54
	m	5,488	5,560	41
Chronic diseases in children	f	7,419	/	/
	m	9,079	/	/
Developmental disabilities that are not defined in the list of impairments	f	5,174	/	/
	m	9,064	/	/
Hearing impairment	f	527	2,274	2,797
	m	801	3,862	3,404
Autism spectrum disorders	f	541	239	10
	m	2,264	695	6
Deaf blindness	f	2	12	5
	m	2	12	5

Source: Benjak, 2022: 8

In Croatia, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports is in charge of creating policies for tourism development. Within the program Tourism for all, special emphasis and importance is given to accessible tourism, and the Republic of Croatia has committed to take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access (among other things) to

- tourism services,
- tourism destinations and
- tourism activities (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, n.d.).

In order to achieve equality between children with difficulties and people with disabilities, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports has developed and implemented a series of measures to encourage the Croatian tourism market to enable people with disabilities to enjoy the tourism offer equally, but also to be integrated into the labour market. In order to remove access barriers and obstacles, the Ministry is cooperating with organisations representing people with disabilities, because only through synergetic action can we achieve the set goal – equal opportunities for people with disabilities. The Ministry is the owner of 3 measures in 2 specific objectives (Improving the accessibility of the built environment and transport; and Improving the accessibility of the content of public life and strengthening security in crisis situations) in the Action Plan of the National Strategy for Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities from 2021 to 2024, the adoption of which is underway.

Although **accessible tourism** is **receiving more and more attention in national policy** and is becoming increasingly important in the planning of tourism products and the removal of access barriers, **academic research has not progressed** at the same pace. Indeed, after an extensive search in all relevant databases (the search terms used were “accessible tourism”, “inclusive tourism”, “people with disabilities”, “tourists with disabilities”, “Croatia”, “limitations”, “inclusion”), only six papers were found that deal with this specific topic, all of which have been published since 2019. Their topic and main findings are discussed below.

- 1) Gonda, T. (2021). Travelling habits of people with disabilities. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 37(3), 844-850. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.37315-717>

The author discusses the specifics of the travel demand of people with disabilities, with a special focus on analysing the most popular tourism product from the perspective of people with disabilities. The survey is conducted in Hungary and compared with the results of studies in Germany, Italy, Spain and Croatia. The research results show that people with disabilities are strongly in favour of the policy of inclusion, their frequency of travel is higher than that of the average of the total population and therefore it seems reasonable for tourism stakeholders on the supply side of the market to pay adequate attention to this segment of tourism demand.

The research results also show that there were 32 respondents from Croatia, most of whom were in the 26 to 50 age group. They mainly faced difficulties with transport and finding places of interest, followed by the use of catering facilities and sports activities, while the use of accommodation was the least difficult. Furthermore, their motivation was mainly related to sightseeing and nature, followed by cultural, gastronomic and wellness motives.

Although this study provides a valuable insight into the current level of satisfaction of people with disabilities in Croatia, it should be noted that the sample is quite small and therefore not really representative, as Croatia was only one of four markets analysed for comparison with Hungary. The research results should not be generalised. Future research must therefore include a much larger sample so that it can draw reliable conclusions. However, in terms of gaining much-needed information on the current state of this tourism product, the particular study can be considered as very valuable.

- 2) Gregoric, M., Skryl, T. V., & Drk, K. (2019). Accessibility of Tourist Offer in Republic of Croatia to People with Disabilities. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*, 4(36), 903-915. [https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v10.4\(36\).22](https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v10.4(36).22)

The authors of this study aimed to identify the need for adaptation of tourism facilities for people with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia. The authors emphasise that although tourists and travellers with disabilities want to be equal members of the community and enjoy all tourist facilities without restrictions, they are precisely those tourists who are often restricted due to the inadequacy of tourism facilities. Therefore, the article analyses various tourism services, amenities and infrastructures to assess their level of accommodation for people with disabilities. The research results are based on a sample of 200 people with disabilities from Croatia. The results show that the offer should be significantly improved to meet the needs of tourists with different types of physical disabilities. The authors also make several recommendations for improvement, including creating appropriate plans and knowledge for the management of tourism destinations; focusing on new forms of tourism that are better adapted to the needs of people with any type of disability; encouraging collaboration between health facilities, tourism communities, family businesses, small business owners, apartment renters, who would offer a joint range of resources for people with disabilities; working to remove the so-called mental barriers and training tourism staff about people with disabilities.

As the sample is representative, the results can be considered reliable and development policies should be adapted to these findings. It is important to emphasise that the training of tourism staff is highlighted as an important element in the creation of quality products and services within the accessible tourism offer.

- 3) Pókó, N. (2022). Turizam bez prepreka u Mađarskoj i Hrvatskoj [Barrier-free tourism in Hungary and Croatia]. *Acta Economica Et Turistica*, 8(2), 195-214. <https://doi.org/10.46672/aet.8.2.3>

The author of this study analyses accessible tourism as a new and fast-growing segment of the tourism market. In contrast to previous research, this study is an exploratory study that expands the body of knowledge by highlighting the circumstances and difficulties that people with disabilities face during their travelling experiences. The study is conducted in Hungary and Croatia and identifies the objectives of the motivation of people with disabilities for travelling. Based on online secondary sources, the author shows where tourists with disabilities travel to, whether they are satisfied with the existing offer and content adaptation, and what types of services they use. The contribution of this article lies in emphasising the need for new travel services for people with disabilities at both national and international levels.

In particular, the author makes the following recommendations to improve accessible tourism services: a reliable online database of trips and accessible facilities in neighbouring countries – Croatia and Hungary – would encourage more people to opt for trips and cultural programmes or trips to nature; more products and programmes (gastronomy, concerts, sports) should be accessible in tourism that do not primarily target people with disabilities but also

meet their needs; with more reliable and diverse online information about accessible tourism, about the places that are easily accessible by wheelchair, more people would opt for a trip to nature, sports and extreme sports.

- 4) Popović, D., Slivar, I., & Gonan Božac, M. (2022). Accessible Tourism and Formal Planning: Current State of Istria County in Croatia. *Administrative sciences*, 12, 181. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci12040181>

The authors of this study point out that people with disabilities encounter various challenges when travelling and that many of them do not travel at all. The theoretical framework of this paper provides an overview of the necessary conditions for designing tourism products that are accessible and usable for all. The authors emphasise that, contrary to the popular belief, accessible tourism goes beyond mobility to include people with intellectual, mental, visual, speech and hearing impairments, stroke and other conditions. The paper also includes an analysis of various categories of accessible tourism offer based on the case study of Istria County. The analysis compares the main cities in Istria County and the degree of their adaptation to the needs of this market segment, with possible practical implications. The concept of accessibility is based on three pillars: physical, informational and service-based. This, the removal of physical barriers, the incorporation of the principles of universal design into the design of any new building, and trained staff to formulate and implement strategies and other plans appear to be key factors in creating added tourism value. The authors strongly emphasise that it is essential to include people with disabilities in tourism and in society.

The study covered five towns and municipalities in Istria County – Rovinj, Poreč, Medulin, Umag and Pula, i.e. the five most important tourism destinations in terms of the number of overnight stays. The research shows that the town of Umag is the best adapted for people with disabilities in three categories – accommodation (hotels), beaches and in the restaurants category, which also makes it the best adapted town in Istria with 42.3% accessible facilities. Pula ranks second in the total number of accessible facilities and is the best equipped town in the culture category (museums and galleries). It is followed by the municipality of Medulin, then Poreč and the least adapted town is Rovinj.

The aim of this research was to examine the following elements of destinations in terms of their accessibility:

- a) physical planning and other relevant documents of municipalities;
- b) activities of organisational units or individuals;
- c) participation in projects;
- d) being informed on activities carried out in the city by third parties (collaboration, coordination and networking).

The results have indicated the following: none of the selected cities and municipalities has a study or programme for the purpose of equalising the opportunities of people with disabilities, but activities and measures are an integral part of any town's development strategies, social programmes, spatial plans and health plans, some of which are from past planning periods.

Although this particular study does not include people with disabilities in the sample, it is worth noting that its contribution lies in the fact that it is one of the few papers to look at local government units and their role in accessible tourism. One of the authors' conclusions is that consideration of accessibility should be included as standard in any responsible tourism policy in order to recognise these vulnerable groups and create revenue streams for accessible destinations. Accessible tourism can thus be seen as a means of transformation that enables everyone to enjoy a dignified tourism experience.

- 5) Škaja, L., Bašić, K., Vuk, R., Stiperski, Z., & Horvat, A. (2019). Pristupačnost Zagreba za korisnike motornih invalidskih kolica [Accessibility in Zagreb for power wheelchair users]. *Hrvatski geografski glasnik*, 81(2), 43-68. <https://doi.org/10.21861/HGG.2019.81.02.02>

Even though this particular research is not primarily focused on accessible tourism, it deals with the topic of accessibility in Zagreb for power wheelchair users, with transportation being one of the key elements for people with disabilities when deciding about the destinations which they are going to visit, as pointed out in the previously discussed research by Gonda, 2021. The research conducted by Škaja et al. examines the physical barriers that power wheelchair users encounter while moving around Zagreb. A participatory approach was applied and wheelchair users were included in the part of the research where navigability of the streets was assessed and the barriers which made moving difficult or impossible were also assessed and mapped. Based on the conducted research, accessibility maps were created, and a corresponding interactive GIS map was uploaded online. The results showed that, in the researched areas, power wheelchair users were not able to navigate 22% of total pavement length and 16% of pedestrian crossings by themselves and they required the assistance of more than one person in order to navigate 19% of pavement length and 9% of pedestrian crossings. The most common barriers include inadequate pavements, kerbs and stairs.

In conclusion, the authors believe that the prospects for utilising the work on the issues presented in their study lie both in the further elaboration of the navigation methodology and in the development of a mobile application that would direct wheelchair users to the optimal routes to their desired destination. In addition to information on the accessibility of pavements and the physical barriers on them, it would be very beneficial if the application also included information on the accessibility of public facilities and public transport, thus creating an integral system of support for people in wheelchairs moving around the city of Zagreb. The results of this research could be used for the development of inclusive solutions for transport, that would also be used for tourism purposes to remove the barrier for people with disabilities and enable them to participate in tourism experiences specifically in the city of Zagreb.

- 6) Tubic, D., Vidak, I., & Kovacevic, M. (2022). Accessible tourism in the national parks of the Republic of Croatia. *Proceedings of 89<sup>th</sup> International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development – “Economical, Agricultural and Legal Frameworks of Sustainable Development”*, Novi Sad. 36-44.

In this study, the authors emphasise that the tourism offer must be adapted to people with disabilities, who must be treated as an integral part of tourism demand. An accessible

infrastructure, a multidisciplinary approach to the guest and the understanding of vulnerable groups by all actors involved in tourism are important factors in the creation of a specific tourism offer. Considering that communication in tourism is based on direct access to the guest, it is necessary to use different methods and tools to address people with disabilities. With regard to the necessary adaptation of tourism content for people with disabilities, this paper aims to show to what extent there are tools for easier interpretation of content in the national parks of the Republic of Croatia. The empirical research focuses on identifying and analysing disabled people, lines for easier orientation, tactile digital sensors, adapted mobile applications, audio descriptions in places, adapted sanitary facilities and others. The research instrument was an in-depth interview, and the research was conducted on a convenience sample of directors of Croatian national parks. The contribution of the research is reflected in the overview of the current state of equipment of national parks for the needs of accessible tourism development.

The study carried out shows that accessible tourism in national parks is not yet established and is only in the process of adapting its content to people with disabilities. As there is virtually no statistical monitoring of this segment in national parks, it is difficult to imagine the actual number of people who would need certain assistive technologies to facilitate the interpretation of the tourism content. From the description of the represented assistive technologies, it is clear that there is still a lot of room for improvement in the interpretation of tourism content for this segment, of which the respondents are aware. Considering that the population with disabilities predominantly obtain information from internet sources, it is disappointing that only a small number of respondents have edited websites. This results in the segment being poorly informed and at the same time not deciding to visit the National Park. If the population with disabilities decides to travel, they should first and foremost make a request for the organisation of a tourist tour, while the individual NPs do not even have the possibility to adapt a tour for this segment. The problem continues in the training of staff. It is obvious that the staff is hardly trained to access this segment. Although the interviewees are aware of the fact that there needs to be progress, none of the interviewees indicated where room for such improvements could be found. From the previous findings and this survey, it can be concluded that today's tourism is not ready for this segment. Starting with the training of tourism staff, a proper foundation could be laid for the creation of better-quality tourism content and experiences that are accessible to all. Future research addressing the necessary training is recommended.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

Based on the research conducted, several conclusions can be drawn about the academic research on accessible tourism in Croatia to date:

(a) **the field is still very unexplored** – of the six studies analysed in this paper, one does not directly refer to the topic of accessible tourism but focuses on limiting barriers in transportation, and two are parts of broader studies that include several other countries in the sample in order to conduct a comparative analysis;

b) **the samples are rather small** – only one study is based on a sample of 200 respondents, the others are either based on secondary research or include only a small number of respondents or destinations included in the research. Although these results have almost no statistical relevance, they nevertheless provide an important and useful insight into the current state of development of accessible tourism in Croatia;

c) **there is a need for an analysis of the current state of the accessible tourism offer** – it is not enough to just provide an insight into the theoretical findings on tourism or the supply side of the accessible tourism market in Croatia, there is an urgent need to assess best practises and compare past development with neighbouring and competitive tourism markets;

d) **most of the research on accessible tourism in Croatia is student work** – currently there are at least 10 student theses on accessible tourism in Croatia, which indicates that this area is currently receiving more attention from the perspective of student insights than from the academic research and perspective;

e) besides the need for more academic research on this topic, **the field would greatly benefit from cooperation between academics and practitioners** – based on the results of such research, it would be possible to gain much needed in-depth research and relevant findings on the needs and potentials of this tourism product. It is also about gaining knowledge on the specific needs of this demand segment and adapting the tourism offer accordingly in order to remove any barriers that people with disabilities face at this point;

f) **a great and urgent need for training of tourism staff on the specific needs of people with disabilities** – even though the number of studies on this topic is still small, all studies conducted so far emphasise the importance of training tourism staff on the specificities of this demand segment and on the need for inclusion in tourism that offers all tourists equal opportunities to consume and experience tourism products and services. Training is a first and extremely important step in this process, enabling all stakeholders to create and offer high quality and competitive services to all tourists, regardless of their level of disability.

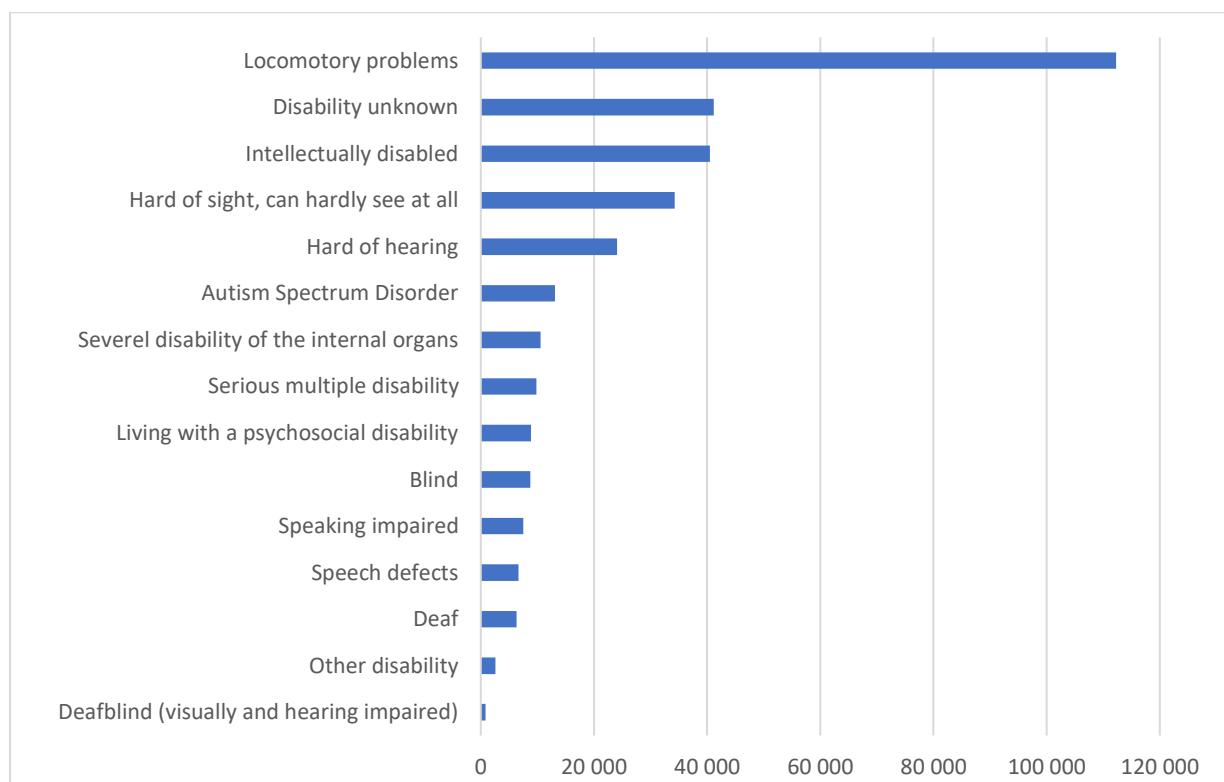
Despite the rather poor quantity of research and the few individual efforts to conduct quality research on accessible tourism in Croatia, there are several examples of good practices in various destinations. In addition, the efforts of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports aim to include people with disabilities in the process of development and consumption of tourism products and services. These efforts are also noteworthy in the area of educating service providers about the specific needs of people with disabilities and possible solutions for adapting tourism infrastructure to this demand segment. This knowledge, combined with the results of academic research, can build on existing findings and provide all people with the much-needed equal opportunities to participate in the exchange of products and services in the tourism market.

#### 4. The literature on accessible tourism in Hungary

At the regulatory level, Hungary is not lagging behind other EU countries in the field of providing accessibility for all. According to Act XXVI of 1998, persons with disabilities have the right to an accessible, perceptible and safe built environment. They must be able to visit cultural, educational and sports facilities and use transport systems and means of transport safely. The new National Disability Programme (2015-2025), adopted in 2015, noted that service providers had not yet recognised the opportunities lying in tourism for people with disabilities. It is therefore important to update existing tourism demand surveys and disseminate them within the tourism profession, as well as to train and sensitise service providers and staff. The Programme stresses the need to apply the principle of universal design. The aim is to encourage the operation of tourism packages for people with disabilities, with a complex accessibility objective. The Programme emphasises the development of accessible websites and accessible electronic services.

According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, HCSO (2022), there were 327,352 people with disabilities in Hungary by the latest census data (registered in 2021). The breakdown by type of disability is shown in Figure 3. The population affected by accessible tourism may be much larger, as it can be assumed that elderly persons in relatively good health would not classify themselves as disabled, but would already require access to accessible facilities when using tourism services.

**Figure 3:** Number of people with disabilities in Hungary by type of disability (persons)



Source: own editing based on <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu>



### **Early stage of accessible tourism research in Hungary (1990-2020)**

From the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot find any study dealing specifically with accessible tourism, and it was only at the end of the first two decades of our century that Hungarian researchers started to deal with this issue more intensively. In 2004, a short study entitled “Tourism opportunities for people with disabilities in Hungary” was published in the pages of the periodical *Turizmus Bulletin*, i.e. *Tourism Bulletin* (Végh, 2005), in which the author makes statements that are still valid today, ranging from the (unfortunately still) unfavourable situation of people with disabilities in Hungary to the fact that their travel needs are basically no different from those of their “healthy” counterparts. The author analyses the needs and problems of those involved in “paratourism” in the areas of transport, accommodation, spas and animators. Also published in the *Turizmus Bulletin* is a study by K. Gálné Kucsák on the situation and opportunities for visually impaired people in tourism in Hungary (Gálné Kucsák, 2008), in which she explains that while more and more places are becoming accessible for the disabled, when thinking about accessibility we tend to forget the visually impaired, perhaps because they are a less “conspicuous” target group, whose vulnerability is a major deterrent to both everyday and leisure travel. The author underlines the positive (beatific) impact of tourism in improving the quality of life of those concerned. For the visually impaired, the study reveals for the first time the problem of accessible tourism in Hungary and points out the directions for essential improvements. The paper examines the accessibility of tourism products in terms of barrier-free transport and tourist superstructure, and analyses the opportunities for visually impaired visitors in active, cultural and health tourism. The study concludes that the main reason why visually impaired people are not offered accessible tourism is the lack of information. One year later, in 2009, Csesznák and her co-authors in their paper entitled “Ensuring fuller access for people with disabilities”, published by the Szentendre Ethnographic Museum, edited by the Centre for Museum Education and Training, discuss the problems of accessibility in a specific area, namely museums (Csesznák et al., 2009). The study describes professional cooperation between institutions for people with disabilities and museums in order to create equal opportunities.

Since 2010, the number of articles on the subject has been increasing. Among them we can find a book (tangentially) dealing with the issue: *Beatific travel – aspects of the relation of tourism and quality of life in Hungary* (Michalkó, 2010); a book (book chapter) written as a research summary: *Accessible Tourism in some European countries – findings and results of an empirical survey, Peer-Act Project* (Raffay & Gonda, 2020); *The Primacy of Technical accessibility in tourism product development* (Farkas, 2019); doctoral theses: *Performance sport for people with disabilities and its impact on different sport arenas* (Dorogi, 2012), *Special needs in tourism – the place, role and potential of people with disabilities in the tourism sector* (Gondos, 2020), *The potential for fulfilment in existential disability – Insights into the meaning of the concept* (Farkas, 2020); university student’s thesis: *The central importance of information accessibility in barrier-free tourism* (Mező, 2019); papers published in Hungarian academic journals: *Paratourism and conflict management in the hotel industry* (Kovács & Kozák, 2016), *The potential of equal opportunities for people with disabilities in*

tourism (Gondos 2019), Innovative good practices in barrier-free tourism (Raffay & Gonda, 2020), Accessibility and parasport tourism opportunities in the European Union (Zsarnóczy, 2018a). A study on a legal approach by the authors Farkas and Nagy, entitled “One possible way to achieve fuller accessibility through the use of trusts”, was published in the journal *Legal Theory Review* (Farkas & Nagy, 2020). The articles of Hungarian authors published in international journals improve the international visibility of Hungarian research on the topic, such as *The Future Challenge of Accessible Tourism in the European Union* (Zsarnóczy, 2018b) in the *Vadyba Journal of Management in Lithuania*, *The impact of tourism on the quality of life* (Gonda, Nagy & Raffay, 2019), *Travelling Habits of People with Disabilities* (Gonda, 2021) published in the *Romanian Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, *The Phenomenon of European Accessibility as a Special Niche in Active Tourism* (Zsarnóczy & Zsarnóczy-Dulházi, 2019), also published in the *Romanian Journal of Tourism Challenges and Trends*. In 2018, the *Polish Journal of Management Studies* published *An empirical study on the influences of management’s attitudes towards employees with disabilities in the hospitality sector* by the trio of authors Sharma, Zsarnóczy & Dunay.

The topic has of course also appeared in conference presentations, more and more frequently towards the end of the decade: *The relationship between tourism and quality of life for people with reduced mobility* (Gondos, 2017), *Accessible tourism in the European Union* (Zsarnóczy, 2017), *The evolution of accessibility, or the path(s) of travel. Tourism security: on the field of practice and theory* (Farkas, 2018), *Can’t make it on my own – an analysis of travel habits of people with disabilities in the light of the results of an international survey* (Gonda & Raffay, 2020b), *Accessibility as a tourism niche opportunity in the European Union* (Zsarnóczy, 2018), *Accessible tourism as a rehabilitation “tool”* (Dulházi & Zsarnóczy, 2018).

Several authors (Gonda, Gondos, Farkas, Raffay, Zsarnóczy) have published a significant part of their works on the issue of accessible tourism in the last five years.

### **More recent research on accessible tourism (2020-2023)**

In recent years, the study of this issue has entered the mainstream of tourism research. One of the triggers for this was the Erasmus+ project called *Peer Act*, which included a major and influential research project (Gonda & Raffay, 2020a; 2021), exploring some good practices of accessible tourism in Hungary and internationally in five countries (Raffay & Gonda, 2020) and conducting a questionnaire survey among people with disabilities. In the course of this, 262 questionnaires were filled in and a small sample of about 30 questionnaires was also surveyed in each of the 4 foreign partners (Croatia, Germany, Italy and Spain). The technical preparation of the questionnaire survey was carried out in Barcelona in December 2018 with the involvement of all partners. There it was decided that the Hungarian partner in charge of the research would carry out the baseline survey on a sample of 200 respondents, which would be compared with the national characteristics, for which the partners undertook to fill in 30 questionnaires each. The questionnaire survey was launched in spring 2019 and due to the low response rate it took 5 months to complete instead of the planned 2 months. It was very difficult to reach disabled stakeholders. The questionnaire was mainly completed through an online filling-in tool, but in some cases face-to-face interviews were also carried out. In this

respect, the Hungarian partner was very successful, as 89 questionnaires were completed in person at the Orfű Accessible Tourism Day in early September 2019, involving university students. A total of 262 completed questionnaires were received from Hungary, which is one of the largest sample numbers in the Hungarian accessible tourism research to our knowledge. To this result, the results were compared to those of the other 4 countries, where the number of fill-outs ranged from 22 to 34. The larger sample was evaluated first, with the results expressed as a percentage. Given the low number of foreign samples, in their case percentages were not calculated but the number of responses was indicated. A short research summary and a workshop paper presenting the full research results (Gonda & Raffay, 2021) were prepared. 47.8% of the Hungarians who completed the questionnaire were male, while 52.2% were female. The results have generated considerable national and international interest. The sample size does not seem very large compared to other studies, but to our knowledge it was the largest sample size in Hungary among studies specifically targeting access for people with disabilities. The importance of the accessibility of tourism supply and, in line with this, the provision of access to tourism services is also underlined by the study. The authors point out that only a small proportion of respondents, 19.1%, prefer to participate in programmes specifically designed for people with disabilities. The proportion of those who prefer inclusion programmes is also small (19.8%). However, almost two-thirds of respondents (61.1%) were of the opinion that they do not prefer to participate in programmes specifically for disabled people, but would like to take advantage of the same supply as everyone else. It is interesting to note that when asked what kind of programmes they like to participate in, no Spanish respondents indicated programmes for people with disabilities: they prefer integrational programmes or programmes not specifically created for people with disabilities. In the other three countries too, programmes for people with disabilities were also the least popular, while tourism programmes not specifically designed for them were the most popular.

Besides the questionnaire survey, an initiative was taken in 2020 to bring together all Hungarian tourism researchers interested in the topic. For this purpose, a scientific conference was organised in September 2020 in Orfű, which was attended by most of the Hungarian researchers working on accessible tourism. The conference speakers were given the opportunity to publish their articles in the first issue of the periodical *Turisztikai és Vidékfejlesztési Tanulmányok*, TVT (Tourism and Rural Development Studies) in 2021. At that time, it was already clear that a wide range of research had begun in the field of accessible tourism. In addition to examining more general issues such as travel frequency (Gonda & Raffay, 2021), the authors also reported on relatively narrow but also important sub-areas. In addition to the study of accessibility of cultural facilities (Angler, 2021; Máté, 2021), for example, the exploration of barrier-free possibilities in enological tourism was presented (Slezák-Bartos et al., 2021) and the issue of river cruise holidays and barrier-free tourism was also addressed (Pókó, 2021). Of course, the study of accommodations, the most important service sector of tourism, was not left out of the scope (Horváth, 2021). The sensitivity of the journal to this topic remained even after the 2021 thematic issue of TVT. The authors Raffay-Danyi & Ernszt (2021) examined the issue from the perspective of Veszprém, European Capital of Culture in 2023, and in 2022 the well-known authors on the topic (Farkas & Raffay, 2022) tried to approach the issue of equal access from a new angle and from new perspectives using

the method of investigation of the discipline of philosophy. It can also be noted that among the Hungarian journals, only TVT has developed a strong workshop on equal access in tourism. After 2020, only one study on the topic was published in the other leading Hungarian tourism journal, *Turizmus Bulletin* (Farkas, Raffay & Dávid, 2022b).

A further result of the Peer Act research mentioned above was that Hungarian researchers were able to make international contacts. In this context, a scientific volume published in Germany was produced, with contributions of several Hungarian authors (Gonda & Raffay, 2020a).

The quality and depth of research results in Hungary has reached a level of international scientific interest. This is also supported by the fact that, in addition to WoS-qualified conference proceedings, several Q1 and Q2 journals have enabled the publication of research results in recent years (Farkas et al., 2023; Farkas, Raffay & Petykó, 2022). Temporary collaborations were created for the better use of synergies between research activity and publications. Among these, the collaboration between colleagues from the Faculty of Business and Economics of the University of Pécs, the BGE Budapest Business School, BGE and the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences is noteworthy, also resulting in prestigious international publications (Farkas et al., 2022b; Farkas et al., 2022).

## **Summary**

The number of people living permanently or temporarily with a disability is growing in the world's population, and in almost every country. In order to live a full life like their non-disabled peers, in addition to ensuring the usability of spaces and buildings used in everyday life, they also need, among other things, to be able to travel, to participate in the “beatific journey” of tourism. This is not only an ethical duty for the profession, but also a well-understood financial interest, because people with disabilities (and in many cases their accompanying persons) represent a significant, and far from fully exploited, market potential for tourism. In order to improve the situation, in addition to complying with the provisions of international conventions and Hungarian legislation on accessibility, it is necessary to sensitise society and change the attitudes of the general public towards people with disabilities, as well as to sensitise and train those working in the travel sector and, of course, to make tourist facilities and services (travel equipment, accommodation, catering facilities, attractions) accessible to all, not only in a physical sense. Research results show that the willingness and frequency of travel among the target group is higher than the average. Their motivation and interests are similar to those of the vast majority in terms of tourist attractions and services. If physical accessibility were to improve significantly in certain areas (public transport, access to extreme sports, accessible tourist routes), demand would increase by leaps and bounds.

Professional interest in accessible tourism is still considerable today. The ACCESSIBELE Erasmus+ international higher education project, be implemented in 2023–2025, will provide additional momentum for research and analysis of the situation in 4 countries (Hungary, Croatia, Poland, Romania). The results are expected to further contribute to the literature on accessible tourism.

## 5. The literature on accessible tourism in Poland

This literature review includes scientific publications and tourist manuals that have been developed mainly in the last ten years, in relation to tourism available in Poland. The selected publications focus primarily on tourism for people with disabilities and the elderly, and, in broader contexts, also on the needs of people traveling with children.

Publications devoted to the tourism of people with disabilities are very diverse, from theoretical approaches (a.o. Zajadacz 2015), review studies (a.o. Lubarska 2018), empirical research (a.o. Popiel 2014; Żbikowski, Siedlecka, Kuźmicki 2019; Magiera 2020; Trybuś 2023) to practical tourist guides addressed to this group of recipients (a.o. Kapusta 2018). The paper: *Evolution of models of disability as a basis for further policy changes in accessible tourism* (Zajadacz 2015) presents a new, critical perspective on the selected models of disability, the key to which is the search for optimal solutions in the development of accessible tourism. The analysis performer indicated the need for a synthesis of paradigms at the core of the conceptualisation of particular models, including those often regarded as being contrary (medical and social). The results of studies would give tourism providers important data on an increasingly competitive tourism market, and also affect changes in how people with disabilities and the elderly are viewed, from the category of “relatively poor” to “attractive, using a wide range of services”.

A. Lubarska (2018) in the chapter entitled *Overview of the classification of barriers and constraints to tourism for people with disabilities* attempted to answer the question what classifications of barriers to tourism for people with disabilities are used by researchers. The author “described the differences in classification to determine the most frequently used ones. For this purpose, the classifications of barriers to tourism for people with disabilities proposed and used by Polish and foreign researchers have been included. This was done by analysing the available classifications from the 1980s to the 2018, in the case of expressions in foreign languages – also translating them into Polish for comparison. The result is a summary of classifications of barriers used by different researchers. The results suggest that the majority of authors base their research on similar classifications” (Lubarska 2018: 71).

M. Popiel (2014) referred to one of the most **popular tourist cities** in Poland: Krakow. Their results are presented in the article under the title *Paving the way to accessible tourism on the example of Krakow*. This paper generated relevant knowledge about the travel needs and barriers of people with disabilities, in order to assess the current level of accessibility in the tourism sector in Krakow, especially in accommodation options, museums, offered services on selected examples. “The research was carried out based on literature review and a questionnaire and interviews with disability tourists in Krakow. Most the tourist were satisfied with the level of customization of services and attractions to their needs, however they also drew attention to the lack of common regulations regarding accessibility, especially in the private sector”. (Popiel 2014: 55)

J. Żbikowski, A. Siedlecka and M. Kuźmicki (2019) in turn, focused their research on **rural areas** and discussed their results in a paper titled *Determinants of tourist activity of people with disabilities living in rural areas*. The aim of the conducted research and analyses was the

attempt to assess the impact of selected factors over tourist activity of people with disabilities and factors related to the immediate environment of people with disabilities. A total of 5,000 respondents were subjected to the quantitative research. Participants of the research were adults with legally recognised disabilities. In the research, the method used was a diagnostic survey. In the conclusions, the authors presented that “tourist activity of disabled people living in rural areas in Poland concerns only about 50% of respondents. Leaving the place of permanent residence in a free time is the most often declared by young and middle-aged people with higher, secondary and postsecondary education, professionally active, married people with mental and sensory disabilities. Factors stimulating participation in tourism are the level of education and professional activity of respondents. In the assessment of respondents the important factor is also a general family situation” (Żbikowski, Siedlecka, Kuźmicki (2019: 401).

A. Magiera (2020) in the paper *Leisure time of people with disabilities* presented a broader context of the determinants of tourism for people with disabilities, which is free time. The purpose of this study was to identify forms of free time and the possibility of their use in terms of the needs and preferences of people with disabilities. It was important to show the forms of leisure time, which are used and willingly chosen by people with disabilities, as well as the important role of tourism and theatre in the lives of people with disablements. “The goals were achieved by: literature review, statistical data, and the research results based on the author’s survey addressed to the disabled people from the Nursing Home Care in Poraj. The attention was paid to the importance of popularizing the concept of leisure, as well as making more effective use of it.” (Magiera 2020: 68)

K. Trybuś (2023) also referred to the broad context of determining the tourism of people with disabilities in her article under the title *The Influence of Personal Qualities of Disabled People on Their Tourist Activity*. “The purpose of the study conducted by the author was to determine the impact of a group of selected characteristics on the tourist activity presented by people with disabilities. The method of a diagnostic survey and the technique of distributed and electronic questionnaire were used in the study. The analysis of the research questionnaire content allowed selecting questions (X variables) describing the specific aspect of tourism activity performed by the disabled for which a procedure based on analysing correlations between these variables and the characteristics of the respondents will be carried out.” (Trybuś 2023: 162)

**Tourism of people with sensory disabilities (including deaf people, blind people)** was the subject of research. Its results can be found in publications such as (Manczak, Bajak 2020; Zajadacz 2012; Zajadacz 2014; Zajadacz, Szmaj 2017, Zajadacz, Lubarska 2019).

I. Manczak and M. Bajak (2020) presented the results of their **research on deaf and blind** people in an article entitled *Beacons in museums: the case of people with disabilities sensory*. The authors emphasised that “access to culture of the people with disability is an important issue that may determine the directions of development of the museum institutions. These institutions play an important role in the process of shaping cognitive and aesthetic sensitivity as also the dissemination of the values of history, culture and science. These tasks should be performed regardless of the degree of efficiency of the person

interested in their activity. Modern technologies which, combined with the development of the competences of museum staff and activities adjusting the actual museum space, can play a fundamental role in the process of equalizing opportunities for disabled recipients of culture with a perspective of the importance in this area” (Manczak, Bajak 2020: 83). The authors have identified the importance of beacons in the market communication of the Museum of King Jan III’s Palace at Wilanów and the Princes Czartoryski Museum in Krakow with people with sight and hearing impairment. In-depth interviews were carried out in the listed museums using the analysed solution. The authors confirmed the accepted thesis “that beacons support the process of market communication with sensorically disabled tourists visiting museums” (Manczak, Bajak 2020: 83).

A. Zajadacz presented the results of her ten-year research<sup>1</sup> in a monograph entitled *Tourism of Deaf People. A Geographical Perspective* (2012) and the issues of tourist information adapted to the needs of **deaf people** are discussed in detail in the articles *Sources of tourist information used by Deaf people. Case study: the Polish Deaf community* (2014) and *Accessible Tourism for Deaf People in Poland: The SITur and SITex Programs as Proposals for Accessible Urban Information* (Zajadacz, Szmaj 2017). From the theoretical, cognitive and practical aspect, the book (Zajadacz 2012) deals with the issue of accessibility of tourism to deaf people using sign language. It presents the results of the author’s research into particular traits of tourist activity of deaf people, analysed against the background of the reference group of hearing individuals in Poland, with the social model of disability taken into consideration.

From the theoretical perspective (Zajadacz 2012), an attempt was made to (1) identify the nature of the phenomenon of tourism viewed as an object of multi- and interdisciplinary research; and (2) develop a model for actions aimed to stimulate tourism activity of deaf individuals. From the cognitive point of view, the subject of the research was the characteristics of tourism of deaf people in Poland. To date, no thorough research into this area has been carried out in Poland, and practitioners have repeatedly proposed that this gap should be filled. Filling this gap is a prerequisite for creating an accessible and satisfactory tourist offer meeting the expectations of individuals with a particular kind of disability. Such research has also been long-awaited by the community of deaf individuals, whose representatives have frequently asked a very important (in the age of universal design) question: why are not the needs of people constituting a language minority included in the Tourism Information System, or taken into account when designing tourist facilities and tourist services? The main research problems addressed by the author involved providing answers to the following questions: Q1: Is tourism activity (participation in tourism) of deaf people in Poland similar to that of hearing individuals? Q2: Do the characteristics of tourist activity of deaf people differ from those of hearing individuals? If yes, in what respects? Q3: How to prepare a tourist offer and how to provide tourist information so that the needs of deaf tourists are satisfied?

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<sup>1</sup> Research study financed from resources allocated for scientific purposes in the years 2008–2010, carried out as part of the “Tourism of Deaf People and possibilities of its stimulation through a multimedia Tourism Information System” project grant (N N114 208334).

From the cognitive aspect, the main aim of the study (Zajadacz 2012) was to identify the specificity of tourist activity of deaf people against the background of the pattern of tourist activity of hearing Poles. The specific goals included: G1: identifying the characteristics of tourist behaviour of Poles in the period between 2004 and 2010 on the basis of secondary sources, such as data obtained from the Institute of Tourism (IT) in Warsaw, the Central Statistical Office (GUS), and the Social Opinion Research Centre (CBOS); G2: identifying the similarities and differences between tourist behaviour of the deaf and hearing sections of the Polish population (including tourist activities pursued at weekends, on public and religious holidays, and during a vacation) on the basis of questionnaire-based interviews whose results were submitted to quantitative statistical analysis. The following hypotheses were formulated: H1: Participation of deaf people in tourism is not different from that of the whole of society. H2: The main factor preventing deaf people from participation in tourist activity is communication barriers. The research was carried out between 2004 and 2010. The main tools for data collection were questionnaire-based interviews carried out concurrently in both the deaf individuals (n=292) and hearing ones (n=1780) in Poland. To analyse the data, the following statistical methods were employed: statistical significance level ( $p$ ), cluster analysis, regression analysis (odds ratio), and Pearson's Chi-square test for two proportions (structure indices). Calculations were made using STATISTICA software.

From the practical aspect, the book (Zajadacz 2012) is intended for tourism organisers, tourist accommodation managers and institutions responsible for the development of tourism (local, regional, and national ones) as a source of knowledge about the specificity of the segment of tourism comprised of sign language users; it also offers guidelines for creating Tourist Information Systems adapted to the needs of this particular group of tourists. Furthermore, it attempts to encourage deaf individuals to actively participate in creating Tourist Information Systems and preparing tourist offers aimed specifically at sign language users.

The final conclusions refer to the theoretical, cognitive and practical aspects of tourism of deaf people discussed in the book. The various views presented in the book point to the fact that, although tourism is a very fast developing branch of industry (both quantitatively and in terms of diversity of its forms), the very nature of this phenomenon has not changed. The central elements of the system of tourism delineating the scope of research are: (1) man (an individual or a group of people) – the subject of tourist activity; (2) the object of tourist activity – tourist destination or tourist destinations, determining the tourist route; (3) interactions between the subject and the object of tourist activity, occurring in the process of travelling; (4) tourist infrastructure, which may or must support the process of travelling, as well as facilities and tourist and paratourist services adequate for the character of the trip; (5) tourist information essential for planning trips and during trips (Zajadacz 2012: 256, 2014).

The author has shown that “the development of tourism, its importance for the quality of man's life and for the economy, has stimulated the progress of research conducted by representatives of numerous scientific disciplines. Initially, this research was of multidisciplinary character, but with time, as it developed and the relevant terminology and methodology became more uniform, the interdisciplinary approach began to prevail, and it is still the dominant one. Further development of interdisciplinary research aimed at



consolidating the theory and methodology of studies on tourism may secure full autonomy for the science/sciences of tourism as a separate scientific discipline. Undoubtedly, this autonomy would, to a large extent, help solve problems requiring complex research, connected, among other things, with planning and managing tourism development in various spatial scales, as well as with tourism of the disabled” (Zajadacz 2012: 256).

In addition, the results of the research on the characteristics of tourist behaviour of deaf people were used as a basis for developing a model of a system of actions aimed to stimulate tourism activity of deaf individuals (Zajadacz 2012: 219), which points to the need to take action in three areas. The first one, in keeping with the social model of disability, includes: changes intended to adapt the environment to the needs of disabled people, equalizing opportunities for access to education and the labour market, and social integration. The second area concerns the very essence of tourism – adapting tourist offer and tourist information to the specific needs of sign language users. The third area (the central point of the model) is connected with the stimulation of the community of deaf people aimed at improving their situation with regard to the level of education and economic status, better social integration, more involvement in the process of preparing tourist offer, and, in providing tourist information. The importance of adapting a Tourist Information System to the needs of deaf tourists led the author to develop a model of the structure of a database in a Tourist Information System (Zajadacz 2012: 222; Zajadacz 2014; Zajadacz, Szmaj 2017) adapted to the needs of sign language users, based on the idea of a cooperation network, whose important link is the community of deaf people, as well as on the potential of Information Communications Technologies (ICTs). In the cognitive dimension, the comparative analysis of the traits of tourist behaviour of deaf and hearing people (including tourist activities pursued at weekends, on public and religious holidays, and during a vacation) shows that tourist activity (participation in tourism) of deaf Poles is not significantly different from that of the hearing section of the society.

The findings (Zajadacz 2012) revealed both differences and similarities between the characteristics of tourist behaviour of both groups. The unique traits of tourist behaviour of deaf people include: (1) greater popularity of: trips to visit one’s family and friends; trips with friends; trips made in spring and autumn, i.e. beyond the peak (summer) season; two-week trips; means of transport such as train; accommodation at one’s family, friends, spa hotels, hostels; forms of recreation involving visiting exhibitions and art galleries; (2) greater: importance of such factors as easy access and good opportunities for improving one’s health when choosing a tourist destination; interest in places of religious worship, going on pilgrimages, taking part in rallies and hikes, rehabilitation stays; focus on domestic destinations; pursuing – beyond one’s place of residence – the same kind of leisure activities as those pursued at home; barriers preventing deaf people from going on tourist trips, such as: lack of interesting offers available at travel agencies or lack of reliable information enabling deaf individuals to plan trips on their own; (3) less favourable attitude to social integration during tourist trips with hearing individuals (consequently, recreation in public places is less popular among deaf people).

The traits of tourist behaviour common to both deaf and hearing people, identified also on the basis of data on tourist activity of Poles obtained from IT, GUS and CBOS, and encompassing the period between 2004 and 2010, include: considerable influence of variables such as age, education and professional activity on the choice of tourist destinations; predominance of individual trips or trips with family and friends; use of sources of tourist information, of which the most popular ones are the Internet and the opinions of close-ones and friends; predominance of trips made in the summer season, with seaside being the most popular destination; financial problems pointed out as the main factor preventing deaf individuals from going on trips.

A major problem when performing a comparative analysis using statistical data obtained from IT, GUS and CBOS is the heterogeneous research methodology employed by these institutions, as well as a lack of information on whether the surveyed samples (representing the whole Polish society) included disabled individuals. Information on the degree and kind of disability ought to be included in the group of those basic variables (such as age, education and income) which are taken into account in the analysis of tourist activity and in the segmentation of the tourist market. The scope of the study makes it possible to corroborate the initial hypothesis (H1): "participation of deaf people in tourism is not different from that of the whole of society", the similarity lying in the very fact of going on tourist trips. As regards the traits, however, this participation, apart from common attributes, is also characterised by traits which are unique to the community of deaf people, which makes it possible to identify the needs of this group with regard to creating an accessible and satisfactory tourist offer meeting its expectations. Hypothesis H2, "the main factors preventing deaf people from participation in tourist activity are communication barriers", was not directly confirmed. Just like the hearing section of the population, also deaf people pointed to financial problems as the main hindrance. However, it was shown that the specificity of this kind of disability may affect the economic status of deaf people, who are worse off than hearing individuals.

The data on deaf tourists using sign language ought to find practical application since it may help (1) improve the quality of life of deaf individuals; (2) tourism managers win over a new group of clients; (3) create a universal tourist offer and a universal Tourist Information System thanks to a cooperation network based on the idea of stimulating tourist activity, as well as the resourcefulness of deaf people and changing mentality of tourism and leisure organisers (perceiving deaf people as both clients and competent workers or partners, particularly in the field of providing services for individuals and groups of people using sign language). A quantitative approach was adopted in the study. The comparative analysis included a set of traits common to both studied groups. To identify factors determining the behaviour of deaf people during their free time also other characteristics should be taken into account, e.g. the type of their immediate social environment (among other things, whether there are any hearing people in their immediate family).

Additional qualitative research should be done on issues relating to tourist satisfaction, which are only rarely brought up in the context of disabled people. Furthermore, the model of the structure of a database in a Tourist Information System adapted to the needs of sign language users should be tested in experimental conditions in cooperation with

representatives of (1) scientific centres conducting studies on tourism with particular focus on information and communications technologies; (2) the Polish Tourist Organisation; (3) deaf people and institutions for deaf individuals, e.g. the Polish Association for the Deaf; (4) entrepreneurs and providers of tourist services. The results of such experiments and tests might help define optimal rules for the practical application of the proposed solutions (Zajadacz 2012).

**Tourism and recreation of the blind** was the subject of research of, among others, A. Zajadacz, A. Lubarska, the results of which are published in the monograph entitled *Sensory gardens as universal places of recreation adapted to the needs of blind people in the context of human-environment relations* (Zajadacz, Lubarska, 2020). Its main conclusions are also presented in the article *Sensory gardens in the context of promoting well-being of people with visual impairments in the outdoor sites* (Zajadacz, Lubarska 2019). The aim of the study was to define the conditions that have to be met to ensure that a sensory path or a sensory garden is a universal space, which supports well-being in the outdoor sites to the blind and partially sighted. There were two methods used: field inventory of parks as well as interviews with blind and partially sighted people. The research was carried out in 2018 in 16 locations in Poland. The study confirmed the usability of previous recommendations in the field, especially regarding stimulation of the senses of hearing, smell and touch. The access to the place and the composition of the garden as well as the choice of plants must be planned in a way that allows the independent usage of the blind and partially sighted, which includes contrasting colours and elevated elements. Basic facilities in terms of spatial orientation, safety and information must be provided. However, the attractiveness of the garden in terms of entertainment and the well-being of visitors is also of great importance (Zajadacz, Lubarska, 2019: 1).

Tourism of **older people** has been presented in numerous studies (Bąk 2012; Grzelak-Kostulska, Hołowiecka 2012; Kunysz et al. 2017, Markiewicz-Patkowska, 2018; Żmuda-Pańska, Siwek 2019, Borzyszkowski, Michalczak 2021).

I. Bąk (2012) in the article entitled “Tourism in the face of an aging society” drew attention to the demographic changes taking place in European society and their consequences on the tourism services market. The author identified the specific characteristics of tourism of elderly people. In her conclusions she emphasised that the increasing number of elderly people in the population structure is not only a challenge for economic and social policies, but also a powerful new challenge for market of goods and services. “Growing in its own mass the buyer power of the participants in this age group will increasingly affect the market of goods and services related to daily life and non-routine goods and services particularly in healthcare, catering and tourism. Moreover, the article analyses tourism activity in Poland. The basis of the study were statistics on tourist travel for people aged 65 and more.” (Bąk, 2012: 23)

E. Grzelak-Kostulska and B. Hołowiecka, (2012) also analysed “*Senior tourism in Poland – socio-demographic conditions*”. The authors have attempted to analyse the factors which significantly influence tourist activity of the elderly in Poland. “The scope of the analysis included the selected conditions, both of a global character (demographic modernization,

social modernization, globalization and technological progress) and individual determinants of tourist activity (age, health, professional activity and financial situation)". (Grzelak-Kostulska, Hołowiecka 2012: 108)

P. Kunysz et al. (2017) conducted detailed research on a local scale among the inhabitants of the city of Rzeszów, located in the eastern part of Poland. Their results were discussed in the article entitled *Participation in Tourism and Physical Recreation of Elderly People Rzeszów Inhabitants*. The authors focused on to show participation of elderly people in tourism and physical recreation as well as the motivations affecting their behaviour at one's leisure. The conducted research showed that "pensioners are most often motivated to exercise physical recreation by the desire to rest in the contact with nature and to improve one's health. Through movement they feel joy, relax and peace of mind as well as, what is very important, they matter an effective spending their free time and regeneration of their psychophysical strengths. Practical implications: analysing the research findings one may conclude which forms of physical activity and tourist trips are preferred by seniors from Rzeszów" (Kunysz et al. (2017: 217). The authors emphasised that "exercising tourism and recreation also contributes to the seniors' participation in the society's life that positively affects their psychophysical frame of mind and, what is related thereto, contributes to an increase in the quality of their life" (Kunysz et al. (2017: 217).

Markiewicz-Patkowska et al. (2018) in her article entitled *Senior tourism in the context of the economic status of the retired in Poland* defined the notion of a senior, presented the changing forms of tourist activity undertaken by seniors in various periods of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the context of their economic situation. The conclusions stated that one should expect that the conviction of the seniors with reference to the benefits of active recreation and tourism will translate into the popularisation of the healthy, active lifestyle (Markiewicz-Patkowska et al. 2018: 106).

M. Żmuda-Pałka and M. Siwek (2019) presented the results of their research in the publication entitled *Senior Tourism – Opportunity and Challenges of Accommodation Facilities in the Context of an Aging Population, Based on the Example of Krynica-Zdrój in Poland*. The article noted that "demographic changes related to the aging of the population affect many aspects of our lives. The prolonged life expectancy, the decreasing number of births and the development of medicine and universal access to medical services mean that the age structure of the population is changing. A wide group of recipients is a chance for development for many enterprises connected with senior and spa tourism" (Żmuda-Pałka, Siwek 2019: 177). The purpose of the research was to show perspective of the development of the senior tourism in a spa town Krynica- Zdrój. The work involved the analysis of Internet offers of accommodation facilities in terms of the specially prepared, dedicated programmes for seniors (the types of supply, discount packages, possibilities of activity and leisure, as well as facilities and accommodation facilities for the elderly). Taking into account the entire accommodation base in Krynica-Zdrój the analysis concerned: accommodation facilities including 4-star hotels, 3-star hotels, guesthouses, sanatoriums, holiday resorts, wooden houses, private accommodation, shelters, and a hostel. "The research shows that the market for senior tourism is not yet fully formed. Senior tourism has been surpassed by health tourism, well-

developed in Krynica-Zdrój. Owners of facilities should, however, pay attention to and specify a diverse number of offers for seniors. By expanding the company's range of services addressed to seniors, it is possible to improve the promotion of the accommodation facility, thus increase the sale of accommodation." (Żmuda-Pałka, Siwek 2019: 177)

J. Borzyszkowski and W. Michalczak (2021) in the article entitled *Tourism policy for seniors. An overview of selected practices* analysed models of impacting the senior tourism market. The article contains a review of activities resulting from tourism policy that have been undertaken at various levels and by different entities. "In particular, the authors describe selected activities aimed at increasing tourist activity of seniors in Europe in order to determine to what extent these experiences can be useful in other settings and why such initiatives should be implemented in Poland. Based on the results of their desk research, the authors formulate recommendations for tourism policy in Poland." (Borzyszkowski, Michalczak 2021: 81)

The topic of accessible tourism in a broad context relating to the needs of **people with disabilities, the elderly, and those visiting with children** has been addressed in many publications (a.o. Zajadacz 2017; Zajadacz, Lubarska 2019; Szał, Terlecka, Zajadacz, Lubarska, Minkwitz, 2021). A. Zajadacz A (2017) in the paper *Attitudes of Future Tourism Sector Employees Towards Organise Accessible Tourism* drew attention to the very important role of the tourist services sector in the implementation of the principles of the development of accessible tourism. The aim of the paper was to show a theoretical approach to the evolution of concepts perceiving disability, taking into account the medical, social, and geographical models, as the basis for the development of principles concerning the organisation of accessible tourism for people with disabilities (PwD). The main research objective was to identify the current attitudes of future, potential employees in the tourism (tourism and recreation students at the time of the study) towards accessible tourism. "The study was based on surveys performed in May 2013 at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (UAM, Poland) and the State University in Irkutsk (ИГУ, Russia), a total sample of 216 people. The main section of the survey contained four questions regarding issues such as: optimal ways to organise tourism products for people with a disability; attitudes towards spending leisure time together with people with a disability; and specific requirements concerning the introduction of various types of improvements in tourism products aimed at people with a disability. In all cases, the results revealed that future tourism employees hold attitudes which are prevalingly open and positive towards the needs of tourists with disabilities. However, the hypothesis that the main factor influencing a reluctance to enter into contact with PwD is a lack of experience in this area, resulting in insufficient knowledge of what conditions the behaviour of PwD, was also confirmed. This is a highly significant conclusion which should consider if mandatory educational programmes in the field of tourism and recreation studies are to be improved" (Zajadacz 2017: 49).

Several articles, including one titled as *Development of a Catalogue of Criteria for Assessing the Accessibility of Cultural Heritage Sites* (Zajadacz, Lubarska 2019) and another *Assessment of the adaptation of tourism supply of cultural heritage objects for the elderly in the context of accessible tourism* (Szał, Terlecka, Zajadacz, Lubarska, Minkwitz, 2021) also

present the criteria for assessing the accessibility of cultural heritage sites as tourist attractions from the point of view of the needs of several social groups: persons with disabilities, elderly people and visitors with children. In this catalogue three basic components are of key importance: physical/technical preparation, tourist information system and the skills and competences of the staff serving guests. The first part of the article is a review, discussing the concept of accessibility as well as the barriers and constraints that may exist in cultural heritage sites from the perspective of the groups of visitors concerned. The second part focuses on the presentation of the postulates for the development of a catalogue of criteria for the assessment of accessibility on the example of the case study of the Piast Trail – main historical thematic route in the Wielkopolska region. The contents of the article constitute a knowledge base useful in the process of equal opportunities in access to historical and cultural heritage. They also serve as guidelines for improving the quality of services in tourist facilities. The catalogue of these criteria was used in practice to prepare an audit of the accessibility of tourist attractions on the main cultural tourism route in Wielkopolska, which is the Piast Route. The audit results in the form of information cards for individual objects are posted on the website: <https://szlakpiastowski.pl/dostepnosc><sup>2</sup>.

For many places, towns and regions, tourist guides addressed to the environment of people with disabilities have been developed. An example is the author's guide P. Kapusta *Guide to Krakow for disabled tourists* (2018), updated many times.

Recently, many textbooks, collections of good practices in the field of social accessible tourism, addressed to the tourism industry, have also been published. Examples include monographs edited by Z. Głąbiński (2020): *Efficiently for the disabled*, A. Zajadacz (2020): *Accessible tourism. Recommendations for the tourist services sector* (2020) or A. Stasiak (2021): *Social tourism in Poland. Good practice guide*. These publications are most often the effects of projects financed from public funds or regional tourist organisations.

## Summary

The publications are of a diverse nature, ranging from theoretical approaches, through presentations of the results of empirical research of cognitive and applied importance, to guides to good practices and tourist guides addressed to the tourism industry and tourists themselves.

Over the last decade, a change in nomenclature has been observed, related to the evolution of the perception of the needs of people with disabilities. Availability has become a common term in Polish language in the context of meeting these needs. In relation to tourism, there was also an adaptation of the term taken from English “accessible tourism”, in favour of previously used names such as “tourism without barriers”, “tourism for disabled people” or “tourism for all”.

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<sup>2</sup> Access: 10.09.2023

## **6. The literature on accessible tourism in Romania**

Accessible tourism, often referred to as inclusive or disability-friendly tourism, has emerged as a significant focus within the global travel industry, aiming to provide equal travel opportunities for individuals with disabilities. In Romania, a country rich in natural beauty, historical sites and cultural treasures, the accessibility of travel and tourism services for disabled persons has gained increasing attention. This introduction delves into the situation of disabled individuals in Romania concerning their access to travel and tourism services, shedding light on the challenges they face and the efforts being made to enhance their travel experiences.

Romania boasts a diverse array of attractions, from the picturesque landscapes of the Carpathian Mountains to the medieval castles and fortified churches that dot its countryside. However, the realization of the potential of Romanian tourism lies not just in its attractions but in the inclusive nature of its travel services. The ability to explore and enjoy these destinations should be open to all, regardless of their physical abilities.

Despite the beauty and allure of Romanian destinations, disabled individuals often encounter obstacles when seeking to engage in travel and tourism activities. Inadequate infrastructure, lack of accessible accommodations, limited transportation options, and insufficient awareness of the needs of disabled travellers contribute to these challenges. Such barriers not only restrict disabled individuals' ability to experience the country's cultural and natural wonders but also hinder the growth of an inclusive tourism industry.

## **1. Research papers published in Romania about the situation of access of disabled persons to tourism services**

Paşcalău-Vrabete and Băban (2018) focus on the experiences of individuals with mobility impairments in terms of disability and inclusion/exclusion, as well as their identity formation and efforts to challenge disabling societal constructs in the context of post-socialist Romania. The research involved a phenomenological analysis of 11 semi-structured interviews, leading to the identification of five major themes: feeling different, redefining normality, being perceived as part of a “different regnum”, facing physical barriers, and grappling with the impact of the past while envisioning a desired future.

The participants’ narratives emphasise the urgency of challenging medical-productivist perspectives of disability at social, individual, and institutional levels. The study underscores the crucial role people with disabilities play in promoting such transformative social changes.

The prevailing medical model of disability and the influence of capitalist pressures for productivity have led to concerning disparities between the legal framework in Romania concerning the inclusion of people with disabilities and the actual social and architectural reality. Additionally, the perceptions and experiences of people with disabilities in this context remain largely unexplored. Despite legislation promising protection against discrimination and ensuring unrestricted access to education, employment, and participation, the people with mobility impairments they interviewed shared a different reality. The participants described facing a situation where they are reduced to their perceived “defective” bodies, marginalised, and misunderstood due to negative social attitudes and physical barriers in the environment.

This study underscores the urgency of examining, comprehending, and embracing the discourses put forth by the social model of disability and the independent living movement within Romanian society and institutions. There is a crucial need to further explore and incorporate these perspectives to drive positive changes and promote inclusivity for individuals with disabilities.

Oreian and Rebeleanu (2016) present a comprehensive examination of the social economy’s role in facilitating the socio-professional integration of individuals with disabilities. Their study analyses an institution that has successfully established social economy structures, with a particular emphasis on the functioning of its protected units. Moreover, it delves into the gender-specific aspects of employability for individuals with mental disabilities, while also highlighting the influence of the institution’s services on their ability to secure and retain employment.

The initiatives carried out in the field of social economy leverage the resources and skills of individuals with special needs within an organised setting. In Romania, the most notable social economy entities for disabled individuals are the protected units, where income and financial independence are generated through the sale of goods and services. Furthermore, the profits earned are reinvested within these units to enhance product and service quality and create new job opportunities for beneficiaries.



In essence, the social economy serves as a complement to the efforts made by duty bearers in facilitating the professional integration of people with disabilities. It enables their access to the job market by adapting workplaces to accommodate their specific needs and abilities.

### **Social tourism and accessibility**

The new tourism market of the future is a market segment called social tourism. Social tourism has been created to make travel tourism accessible to consumer groups such as disadvantaged people and people with disabilities. The aim is to improve accessibility and barrier-free use of travel options, which in fact creates opportunities for new business development (Mihaela, 2019).

The aim of social tourism is to make tourism activities accessible to the most disadvantaged groups, so one of its important branches is tourism for people with disabilities. In this way, social tourism actually represents a humanistic approach to tourism. The existence of social tourism in a country is also closely related to economic development, thus the attitude towards people with disabilities in a country is closely related to social and economic development (Simon et al., 2017).

In Romania, since the early 2000s, a number of social tourism programmes have appeared, which are also closely linked to social policies at the national level (Simon et al., 2017). According to a study by Simon et al. (2017), it can be generally stated that social tourism, including tourism for people with disabilities, is at a low level in Romania. This mainly means that the pool of tourism opportunities in the country are under-dimensioned compared to the real needs of the population categories that benefit from tourism activities at lower prices. At the same time, statistically there is a lack of complete information on social tourism, including tourism data for the disadvantaged. The tourism associations that run social tourism programmes do not have annual analyses of participation data, participating businesses, accommodation, venues, number of tourists, etc., so we cannot get a realistic picture of how many people from disadvantaged groups are currently benefitting from existing but scarce opportunities at national level (Simon et al., 2017).

James Bowtell, in his study (Bowtell, 2015, pp. 203-204), points out that Europe is expected to see a large increase in demand for accessible tourism. This means that we need to be prepared for this growing demand, as only a very small proportion of the market currently meets the needs of accessible tourism. The UNWTO, a specialised agency of the United Nations, has been working in recent years to transform tourist destinations into accessible destinations (Mihaela, 2019).

A study by D. Mihaela (2019) provides a detailed overview of accessibility tourism efforts in Romania in recent years. Since 2013, Motivation Foundation Romania has been providing certified training courses for professionals based on the curricula developed by the World Health Organization (WHO). At the same time, it has created the first online platform, a national map of accessible places, where public institutions, places of entertainment and leisure, accommodation and facilities and their surroundings can be found. The map is

available at [www.accesibil.org](http://www.accesibil.org) and is designed for people with disabilities. The map can also be used by tourism operators who want to develop tourism services for people with disabilities (Mihaela, 2019). Another initiative of Motivation Foundation Romania is the assessment of the accessibility of buildings, which allows a building to obtain an accessibility mark from the State Office of Inventories and Trademarks. Among the few tourism and hospitality service providers, it is worth highlighting that the Băile Felix complex and the Royal Courtyard in Piatra Neamţon meet the accessibility criteria (Mihaela, 2019).

There are now 2 phone apps for people with disabilities in Romania, one of which is a map of accessible places to access via the phone app. The app is called Accessibility Map. The other phone app is MotivActiv, which provides up-to-date information for people with disabilities by publishing articles and news.

Nowadays, the number of people with disabilities is increasing in Romania (and worldwide), which is reason enough for people with disabilities to be given special attention by different segments of society, such as service providers (including tourism), entrepreneurs and researchers. Babaita (2014) researched the specific field of tourism in Romania that deals with the issue of tourism for people with disabilities. In her research, she highlights the need to develop a social model for people with disabilities, which has not yet been formulated in the tourism literature. The aim of her questionnaire survey was to find out whether Romanian society is open and ready to accept this new segment, i.e. whether the needs of consumers with special needs are taken into account in the tourism market. The research examined the attitudes of Romanian society towards this issue, namely the attitudes and behaviour of people without disabilities towards people with disabilities. In addition, the research was aimed at exploring the reasons that lead to negative feelings towards persons with disabilities (reticence or indifference) (Babaita, 2014).

The main conclusion of her research is that the majority of people with disabilities are accepted in Romanian society and support the integration process. In addition, respondents believe that, as in all modern societies, there should exist in Romania a system that provides certain material benefits and psychosocial assistance to these persons. It also highlights the fact that, although progress has been made in removing certain barriers to transport, there is still much to be done in terms of access to accommodation, restaurants and attractions, and that the participation of people with disabilities in tourism programmes is limited. According to research participants, there is a need to promote the participation of people with disabilities in tourism (Babaita, 2014).

In another article on social tourism, by Dumitru and Negricea (2011), we can read about the evolution and the definition of social tourism, the international organisations of social tourism, the specificities of social tourism in general and, finally, the main advantages of the development of this type of tourism.

Erdeli et al. (2011) summarises the difficulties and changes over time in Romanian spa tourism. The study delves into how the industry has transformed from its communist roots to the post-communist era. Despite being significantly impacted by the major political and socio-economic changes following the 1989 Revolution, this industry continues to thrive alongside

emerging forms of tourism that cater to the preferences of modern leisure consumers. They emphasise that the National Pension and Other Social Insurance Funds have a vital role in facilitating social tourism by providing subsidised or complimentary spa treatment vouchers to retired individuals and disabled adults. The special Spa Social Tourism Programme, run by the national pension fund and the social insurance fund for individuals affected by work accidents and occupational diseases, caters to retired and disabled people. The programme distributes “free vouchers” for retired individuals with disabilities and “subsidised vouchers” for other retired individuals.

### **Responsible tourism and the access of disabled persons**

Văduva et al. (2021) analysed the main obstacles that exist today by studying the international literature on accessible tourism, and made some suggestions for improving this tourism activity, taking into account the recommendations of the World Tourism Organization. In their study, they highlight the need to raise awareness of the need for accessibility at world level.

As already mentioned in the previous literature references, the study by Văduvã et al. (2021) shows that the demand for accessible tourism services is increasing, mainly due to the growing number of people with disabilities (reaching 1 billion people worldwide in 2019). This has led to the creation of international symbols, but there are still many problems in the field of accessible tourism. These may be environmental (participation in activities in tourist destinations, lack of communication), infrastructural (accessibility of buildings, transport, booking facilities) or social (attitudinal barriers, low level of specific training for accessible tourism) (Văduva et al., 2021).

The World Tourism Organization’s guide “Inclusive recovery guide to the socio-cultural impacts of Covid-19 on people with disabilities” highlights the dissatisfaction of travellers with disabilities with official tourism information on accessibility. A study by Văduva et al. (2021) on the specific circumstances of tourists with disabilities also shows that tourism in this area is still in its infancy, with much to be done to make more tourism services accessible to people with disabilities. However, advocates of accessible tourism believe that it can be done by improving accessibility of facilities, improving transport, accessibility of attractions and destinations, and cooperation between stakeholders (Văduva et al., 2021).

The study by Văduva et al. (2021) makes recommendations for better implementation of accessible, inclusive tourism. These recommendations include: the creation of public-private partnerships, international cooperation, human resources training, improving accessibility to destinations by diversifying transport systems, adapting transport modes, and diversifying attractions and destinations. They also stress the importance of making more destinations accessible to people with disabilities and of promoting this type of niche tourism (Văduva et al., 2021).

The main objective of the article by Butnaru (2010) is to identify the challenges faced by customers, especially those with disabilities, when choosing a tourist accommodation. In

addition, the article seeks to highlight measures and solutions aimed at eliminating these obstacles. The author addresses the following issues:

- mentality – a barrier in dealing with clients with disabilities;
- physical – architectural barriers encountered in a tourist accommodation structure;
- welcoming guests with locomotor disabilities;
- meeting clients with hearing disabilities;
- meeting visually impaired customers;
- removing barriers to customer service. standards for increasing quality services of a tourist accommodation;
- architectural requirements to accommodate people with disabilities.

As it is well noticed in the study mentioned above, unfortunately these barriers exist in rural tourism, some are independent of the tourism industry, being the effect of the policy of the respective country, others depend on the perception of the manager of the accommodation tourist agency, tourist area, hospitality facility.

Tudorache et al. (2017) presented the challenges encountered in applying European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS) in the context of Brasov County, situated mostly in the Romanian Carpathians. ETIS was configured initially with a total of 27 core indicators and 40 additional (optional) indicators. There are four indicators within group C Inclusion / Accessibility, dealing with the problem of the inclusion of disabled persons in tourism:

1. C.3.1 Percentage of commercial accommodation establishments accessible for people with disabilities/participating in recognised accessibility information schemes;
2. C.3.1.1 Percentage of destinations served by public transport that is accessible to people with disabilities and people with specific access requirements;
3. C.3.2 Percentage of tourist attractions that are accessible to people with disabilities and/or participating in recognised accessibility information schemes;
4. C.3.2.1 Percentage of visitors satisfied with the accessibility of the destination for those with disabilities or specific access requirements.

The study of Tudorache et al. (2017) reveals that the process of selecting ETIS indicators is adaptable and should align with each destination's unique characteristics, considering stakeholders' needs, relevant information, and the availability of data. Implementing the ETIS system in a tourist destination not only serves as a valuable tool for monitoring economic, social, and environmental performance at the destination level but also provides responsible actors with an effective management tool.

### **The accessibility infrastructure and services for disabled persons in Romania**

Tecau et al. (2019) wrote about issues regarding the intention of responsible tourism to increase the accessibility of tourist destinations for children with disabilities and their families. The aim was to identify and analyse the obstacles encountered by families with disabled children during their tourism experiences. They carried out qualitative research via focus group

interviews, with a total of 32 participants, specialised in the education of disabled children and regular schools where these children are studying (managers, specialists and parents/foster parents). Among the very valuable results, we can highlight the following:

In Romania, according to all the participants, typical tourists, authorities, and tourism employees are not adequately prepared to exhibit ideal behaviour towards people with disabilities and their families. This emphasises the necessity for increased sensitivity in their interactions with these groups, as well as the need for specialised training for the staff involved. The respondents consider that the main cause of this behaviour resides in the fact that Romanian people are not used to seeing people with disabilities in the public space. All the research participants agreed that families with disabled children do not feel comfortable in public spaces, and their children are avoided by the other children.

The participants in this study expressed that Romania has some hotel chains that have taken measures to eliminate physical barriers by providing access ramps, adapted rooms, and bathrooms for people with disabilities. However, the costs of staying in these hotels often surpass the financial means of families with disabled children. Only a limited number of budget-friendly hotels offer suitable accessibility and accommodations for these families. According to the participants, the most challenging aspect is ensuring easy access to tourist attractions for children with disabilities. One instance shared by a mother with a child having multiple diseases highlighted the issue. During a family vacation organised for families with disabled children at a seaside hotel, although the hotel provided proper facilities for the group, reaching the beach posed a major challenge. The 500-meter pathway leading to the beach was unsuitable for smooth movement, making it nearly impossible for families to access the beach. Consequently, many families ended up spending their entire holiday confined to the hotel premises.

Regarding the possibilities of diminishing the attitude barriers, the participants in the sample stated that a society's level of civilisation is reflected in its treatment of individuals with special needs. The process of inclusion depends on both the mindset of those facing difficulties and the attitudes of others. Thus, negative attitudes and mentalities can be transformed through the dissemination of information.

When asked whether they think that others should be educated about certain aspects to foster acceptance of people with disabilities, the respondents shared numerous ideas, which can be categorised into three groups: rational appeals, emotional appeals, and appeals related to human rights. Some participants argued that rational arguments should be emphasised, as people need to understand that not having a disability presently does not guarantee the same situation in the future.

The final question of the study was finding opportunities to use virtual reality (VR) in order to help families with disabled children to identify and to avoid physical barriers in tourism activities. All respondents mentioned that they use the Internet, including tools like Google maps, touristic forums, and websites, to plan their travels. The specialists unanimously agreed that Virtual Reality (VR) technology could provide more accurate visual details about various locations, which aligns with the findings from the group of parents. The use of VR platforms

benefits people with special needs and their families, as it offers precise information about different destinations. The potential applications of VR technology in benefitting children with special needs were identified as follows: simulating travel by car, train, or airplane to help them get accustomed to the sensations of these transportation means and the experience of being in a crowd beforehand, and allowing them to become familiar with tourist destinations before their actual visit, which can reduce stress caused by unknown situations. Regarding accommodations, respondents indicated that the most essential information to be tested using VR includes accessibility to the accommodation, the condition of the accommodation itself, access to bathrooms, and accessibility to various tourist attractions. All participants agreed that accommodations offering the option to test conditions through VR are preferred over those that do not offer this possibility.

The primary finding of this study is that in Romania there is a lack of sufficient preparation among authorities, tourists, and employees to include atypical tourists, such as disabled children and their families, in tourism activities. Comparing the results to previous studies mentioned in the analysis, this research unveiled that the participation of families with disabled children in tourism activities is limited in Romania. Cultural and economic factors, such as low family income, are considered the main reasons behind this limitation.

In Romania, attitudinal barriers pose significant challenges, arising from both individuals with disabilities (where having a disabled child is still perceived as a source of shame for many families) and society at large. The society is not adequately prepared, educated, or empathetic towards accommodating individuals with disabilities, contributing to the difficulties they face in engaging in tourism activities.

Regarding physical barriers, the findings indicate that although there have been improvements in accessibility, the sample members still perceive the presence of such barriers for disabled individuals.

The authors also concluded that genuine change in societal attitudes towards people with disabilities can only be achieved through education. Consequently, incorporating topics aimed at improving attitudes towards disabled individuals in the primary school curriculum could serve as an impetus for attaining the UN's sustainable development goals.

Regarding the use of VR technology, it has the potential to bridge the gap between pre-visit perceptions of a tourist destination and the actual experience on-site. VR can assist children and parents in immersing themselves in the destination, identifying facilities and obstacles, and gaining a more accurate representation of the places they plan to visit.

Munteanu et al. (2014) investigate competitive strategies that can be adopted by hotel managers in resorts on the Black Sea coast of Mamaia, Romania, taking into account consumer expectations and best practices in the tourism industry. Among other important infrastructure and service elements, they pointed out that facilities for tourists with disabilities can be found in four sampled hotels as follows: either the rooms are adequately equipped for these people, or there is adequate wheelchair access in the hotel surroundings and public areas, and there is ramp access to different buildings of the hotel complex. Iaki is the only Romanian hotel in the sample with facilities for people with disabilities.

About the accessibility of tourism in Romania, there is another article treating this problem, written by Rabontu (2018). It claims to examine the level of development of tourist facilities catering to individuals with disabilities in both accommodation and catering establishments, considering the growth of inclusive tourism on a national and international scale. It employs research methods to analyse the existing statistical data pertaining to this topic. After a statistical data analysis, the author concludes that in Romanian tourism the accessibility of people with disabilities is at very low level. The limited number of rooms designated for individuals with disabilities in Romania indicates the lack of interest among tourist accommodation units in catering to this steadily expanding population segment. The main reason for this is the substantial investments required to adequately equip accommodation, restaurant, and entertainment facilities, as well as the need to upgrade infrastructure and transportation means. Only few places have the necessary facilities to ensure access for people with disabilities.

A research was conducted (Tecău, 2017) with the primary aim of confirming the need for a software platform in Romania to help people with disabilities to navigate accessible and safe tourist routes and facilities. Using a focus group method, the research sought to identify safety issues that may affect persons with disabilities or their companions while travelling. According to the opinion of the interviewed subjects, people with disabilities would like to go on excursions, and the majority of them have a greater need for such experiences, so a software product could help to ensure travel safety and information communication. The respondents highlighted the need to organise an information campaign for the members of the society to raise awareness of the problems faced by people with disabilities when travelling, thus sensitising people to this issue.

The group discussion method was also used to highlight the safety fears that people with disabilities may have when travelling: the main fears are related to transport and travel (conditions of transport, reliability of timetables, lack of street lighting, ramps, asphalt markings, audible street signs), lack of adequate accommodation, access to first aid points, access to different places to eat, access to shopping points, including certain tourist attractions. However, again in this research, the lack of trained professional staff emerges as one of the real sources of fear. In addition, it is important to mention that in Romania today, most people with disabilities cannot afford expensive travel, as their standard of living is generally lower (Tecău, 2017).

According to the research article published by Tecău (2017), a gathering platform could help a lot in encouraging people with disabilities to travel by showing them the spaces available to them in safe conditions, thus excluding destinations that are inaccessible or that could be dangerous for tourists with special needs. The concept should involve a range of organisations, such as government departments, ministries, public administrations, educational establishments, hotels and restaurants.

The study by Cernaianu-Sobry (2011) focuses on people with disabilities, including sports tourism, in two countries, Romania and France. In the study published in 2011, the authors' research revealed that in Romania the majority of hotels, transport, facilities and tourist sites are not accessible to people with disabilities. At the same time, the law is quite different,

according to Article 21 of the Romanian Law 448/2006: “The competent authorities of the public administration are obliged to facilitate access for people with disabilities to cultural values, heritage and tourism, sports and leisure activities”.

The study also reveals that one of the main problems in Romania is that tourism workers do not have adequate knowledge in this field and, as a consequence, do not provide appropriate services for people with disabilities. The main conclusion of the study, published in 2011, is that there is a lack of government policies and strategies to promote accessible tourism, a lack of qualified staff and a lack of services and programmes for people with disabilities and persons with disabilities. In addition, it is important to note that there is a lack of official information in Romania on holiday opportunities for people with disabilities. At the same time, the authors stress that insufficient financial resources limit access to tourism and sports activities for people with disabilities (Cernaianu-Sobry, 2011).

Despite Romania’s abundant natural and anthropogenic resources, if the Romanian tourism infrastructure is not adapted to people with disabilities, this market segment and business opportunity will remain untapped (Cernaianu-Sobry, 2011).

The study by Simon et al. (2018) assesses the existence of camps for students in Romania, including facilities for people with disabilities. The data of the study show that there is basically a shortage of places for such camps at the national level (4,600 boarding places in 2017), while there were 1,600 boarding places registered for children with disabilities.

For example, on the coast, in the county of Constanta, there were only 236 boarding places in camps for children with disabilities in 2017 (Simon et al., 2018).

Epuran et al. (2020) conducted qualitative research to identify the main barriers faced by people with disabilities in Romania when travelling, especially when travelling for tourism. The results of the research showed that people with disabilities like to and do travel for tourism purposes, but that they usually inevitably encounter obstacles during their trips. The majority of the respondents in the survey prefer the Romanian coast (the destination visited by more than half of the respondents).

The short survey conducted in Brasov County shows that the problems of people with disabilities are still not given much attention. The research also highlights that people accompanying disabled people also face difficulties due to a lack of information about tourist destinations. Accessibility problems are particularly faced by people with physical and mobility impairments, such as location, accessibility of different tourist attractions and access to public transport (e.g. lack of space for wheelchairs or lack of ramps) (Epuran et al., 2020).

Their results show, which is also clear from many other studies, that people with disabilities in Romania need better information before visiting and that it would be worthwhile to introduce new technologies to help better inform the target group about the accessibility and description of potential tourist destinations. The importance of providing adequate and detailed information is also underlined by the need to prepare and inform people with disabilities in advance before travelling, which could be helped in the future by introducing new



technologies at the planning stage of the trip, so that they can be better informed in advance (Epuran et al.,2020).

Another very important element is the fear of people with disabilities when travelling, which is due to the lack of knowledge of people working in tourism units and the attitudes of non-disabled people towards people with disabilities. At the societal level, the lack of tolerance in Romania creates security fears, which seems to be a real problem in this country. Therefore, there is a need for education of the whole population in order to promote tolerance towards people with disabilities, which is also often found in the literature (Epuran et al.,2020).

Brătucu and colleagues (2016) conducted a study on tourists' perceptions of tourist destinations in Brasov County in terms of accessibility for people with disabilities. The respondents in this study also mentioned the following as the biggest problems: accessibility of destinations for people with disabilities, access to transport, inadequate infrastructure, and problems with facilities.

In their previous research, Bratucu and co-authors (2015) already highlighted that it would be recommended to improve accessibility for people with disabilities in destinations, such as the introduction of bus services that allow wheelchair access and easier access to tourist attractions and accommodations (Brătucu, Chițu and Demeter 2015).

The study by Babaita (2012) reveals, through a survey of 60 sample hotels (in the cities of Arad and Timisoara), the extent to which the infrastructure of hotels is adapted to the needs of tourists with disabilities, and insights into the opinion of hotel managers on the travel opportunities for people with disabilities.

The hotel managers interviewed were not familiar with this market segment and most of them do not adapt their services to this target group. The majority of hotel managers believe that their staff are not sufficiently prepared for this market. According to the survey, more than 50% of managers believe that governmental and non-governmental organisations do not sufficiently cater for these individuals. In terms of infrastructure, the research highlighted that the majority of hotels have designated special parking spaces and entrance ramps for people with disabilities, but there are gaps in other infrastructure (Babaita, 2012).

Babaita et al. (2011), examining the barriers to tourism for people with disabilities in Romania, state that Romanian society does not provide sufficient assistance to people with disabilities in Romania, but there is also a problem with respect for fundamental rights.

Yet, from their questionnaire research, when asked whether it is important to integrate people with disabilities into society, the majority of respondents agree.

However, the research also shows that more than 90% of respondents would not be bothered by the presence of people with disabilities in hotels, so there is an openness on the part of society to allow this segment to benefit from tourism services (Babaita et al., 2011).

Crismariu's (2017) study highlights the growing interest in accessible tourism in Romania in recent years and the growing importance of this market. However, for the time being, awareness raising and early stages are taking place in the country. In fact, the aim of the

awareness phase is to raise awareness of the importance of accessible tourism in the relevant sectors among businesses and public administration. In the early phase, the aim is to lay the groundwork in this area, such as training the right staff and formulating the principles and actions that will be needed in the development phase.

The analysis (Crismariu, 2017) also shows that the first organisations interested in the development of accessible tourism in Romania have started to appear. In Romania, the study mentions 3 key actors registered in ENAT (European Network for Accessible Tourism): the Motivation Romania Foundation, ADR – Regional Development Agency, and Sano Touring travel agency. Sano Touring is a Romanian travel agency specialised in accessible tourism that has been operating since 2015 and aims to attract foreign tourists with special needs to the country.

The services offered by the agency are as follows: selected and tested tourist programmes, tours, medical treatments (spas, which are important for tourism for all) and recreational programmes. For these programmes, the travel agency will provide suitable transport, accommodation, guides, public transport, restaurants with such facilities, and qualified staff who are familiar with the needs. In Romania, the main places contributing to the provision of accessible tourism in the category of spas are Félix Baths, Covasna Baths, Spa of Covasna, Spa of Sovata, Eforie Nord resort of the Black Sea.

Accessibility in tourism is an important pillar of sustainable transport and is now central to tourism policy (Bordeianu, 2015). In his study, Bordeianu (2015) found that in Romania, legislation on disability is not well understood, and the legislation is uncertain and not well enforced in practice. It can be said that the majority of people working in the tourism sector are unaware of accessibility. In fact, this means that even today in East-Central Europe, the majority of tourism workers and tourism enterprises have a superficial knowledge of how to develop accessibility for their business (Bordeianu, 2015), but on the other hand, they do not consider it important enough.

To make progress on this issue, Romania would need real measures for people with disabilities and people with reduced mobility in everything related to tourism, public buildings and transport (Bordeianu, 2015).

The Motivation Foundation Romania aims not only to inform people with disabilities, but also to develop a system to control buildings. For this purpose, they created the so-called Motivation Accessibility Brand. This accessibility audit, which is divided into three parts: controlling access to outdoor spaces (parking, driveways and entrances), controlling access to indoor spaces (indoor movement, space for wheelchair manoeuvring, toilets) and other facilities available according to the specificities of each site. Based on this, the assessment is basically divided into three categories: accessible, moderately accessible and inaccessible. As of June 2013, Motivation Foundation Romania assessed 796 buildings in Romania (60% of which are hotels, restaurants, cultural or entertainment venues). Of these, only 205 were accessible, 229 partially accessible and 362 inaccessible (Bordeianu, 2015, pp. 47). Considering that there are thousands of accommodation facilities in Romania, the above statistics suggest that around half of them are completely inaccessible for wheelchair users.

In 2016, the Sano Touring association launched the website [AccessibleRomania.com](http://AccessibleRomania.com), which provides information on accessible accommodation, food and beverage services and tourist sites for people with special needs in Romania and abroad (Visionary Analytics, 2021). However, according to a study by the European Commission (2021), the actual conditions should be carefully checked for each destination because, as the study says, “for example, hotels marked as accessible on Booking.com are often in reality only partially adapted for wheelchair users, and in the case of restaurants the most common problem is lack of space in the restrooms. Museums and cultural venues need to adapt to all types of disability, not only in terms of infrastructure (parking spaces, ramps, flooring) but also in terms of the activities on offer (descriptions, adapted lighting, special programmes for the mentally disabled, etc.)”. In order to overcome these problems, the Sano Touring agency carries out careful field surveys and, on the basis of these surveys, produces accessible guides such as the “Accessible Romania” and “Accessible Bucharest” publications.

Recognising the importance of accessible tourism and the empowerment of disabled individuals, Romania has started taking steps to improve the situation. Efforts include the development of accessible accommodations, transportation services, and the promotion of inclusive travel experiences. Various organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, are working to raise awareness, provide training, and advocate for policy changes that support the rights and needs of disabled travellers.

The accessibility of travel and tourism services for disabled individuals in Romania remains a work in progress. By addressing the challenges and investing in accessible infrastructure, Romania has the potential to become a more inclusive and welcoming destination for travellers of all abilities. This exploration of accessible tourism literature in Romania sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the current situation and the ongoing efforts to ensure that disabled individuals can explore and enjoy the country’s treasures with ease and dignity.

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