

PhD dissertation theses

**Doctoral School of Earth Sciences**

**Interlinkages of religion and tourism in  
Zakarpattia Oblast in light of tourism product  
development**

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## INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous change of regimes in the region of the current-day Zakarpattia Oblast (particularly in recent history), yet one thing remains unchanged – its peripheral location. The multi-ethnic population typical to the region has remained unchanged and it managed to retain the traits of the various nationalities throughout both easier and more challenging periods: their religion, culture, holidays, customs, nationality and languages, which serve as one of the cornerstones of cultural tourism. As a story fit for an “anecdote”, the locals became the citizens of multiple countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Soviet Union, Ukraine) without ever leaving their homes.

The various powers that happened to reign over the region all recognised the richness of Zakarpattia Oblast in terms of natural beauty, resources and cultural assets. Yet in relation to its peripheral status, the economic development of the region always left something to be desired. Perhaps the sole exception to this were the tourism-related developments, particularly in the Soviet era.

### 1.1. Objectives

The purpose of the scientific treatise is to examine and analyse Zakarpattia Oblast through the key aspects of religiousness and religious tourism and thus contribute to the region’s theoretical results in terms of religious geography and tourism research and to formulate practical opportunities for tourism product development. To this end, we felt it important to:

- examine the current-day supply and, in particular, demand-side aspects of tourism in Zakarpattia Oblast in terms of which would be the most compatible with religious tourism, in order to comprehensively form a complex tourism product;
- present the changes and estimated current situation of the diverse religious structure of the region’s population;
- systematize Zakarpattia Oblast’s religious tourism attractions by architecture and denominations;
- present, based on empirical research, the views/customs of the population of Zakarpattia Oblast in relation to religiousness, religious and general purpose travels as well as religious tourism development and its knowledge of local religious tourism sites;

- additionally, to formulate tourism product suggestions, for functioning as an independent or supplementary element in the range of tourism services available in Zakarpattia Oblast.

Our assumption is that Zakarpattia Oblast is rich in religious tourism assets that can become functional tourism products in the future through the appropriate organisational and marketing activities.

## **1.2. Research methodology**

We have employed various methods of research and processing in order to achieve the identified objectives. Secondary research played an important role in the treatise, which resulted in the compilation, interpretation and analysis of the scientific literature and data belonging to the various chapters. For the sake of establishing the theoretical and methodological foundations of the scientific treatise based on the research of religious tourism as well as confirming its practical significance, I have simultaneously employed various primary and secondary methods, i.e. the research was carried out based on the theory of triangulation (Decrop, 1999; Babbie, 2000; Tomcsányi, 2001).

A significant portion of the treatise consists of the analysis of secondary sources. This primarily consisted of the processing of studies, books, statistical publications and newspaper articles on the theoretical background of religious tourism, Zakarpattia Oblast's indicators of demand, the development of the region's historical churches and the changes in the religious affiliation of the population. I also relied on professional literature when presenting the target area's tourism, and more specifically, religious tourism attractions (Deschmann, 1990; Horváth & Kovács, 2002; Izsák, 2007; Kovács, 2005, 2006,; Kovács & Bakura, 1996; Kovács, 1999; Németh, 1991; Pápai (ed.), 2003; Radvánszky (ed.), 2000; Tarpai (ed.), 2021). Based on the collected data, I prepared an inventory of tourism attractions for Zakarpattia Oblast.

The central research element of the treatise consisted of two questionnaires surveys.

The first was conducted amongst the population of Zakarpattia Oblast, through a Google Forms-based online questionnaire. As a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, a number of citizens are currently not residing in Zakarpattia Oblast and even if they are in the country, their free movement is severely restricted, therefore the chosen manner of query is highly justified. As the province has a highly diverse population both in terms of mother tongue and nationality, I felt it important to prepare the research

questionnaire in two languages, Hungarian and Ukrainian. The Hungarian-language questionnaire is included in Annex no. 1.

A total of 515 valid (usable) responses – 262 in Hungarian and 253 in Ukrainian language – were collected during the survey conducted between 4 July and 18 November 2023. Although it is highly likely that the various language questionnaires were filled out by the representatives of the respective nationalities, I do not wish to devote particular attention to this during the analysis of the results. Naturally, I will do my best to reflect on more significant deviations.

I used multiple channels to distribute the questionnaire:

1. Social media (Facebook):
  - sharing through dedicated media interfaces;
  - sharing through friends and their friends;
  - sharing through various thematic, regional or denominational/congregational groups.
2. Approaching clergymen – digitally contacting the representatives of the Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo, the Reformed Church of Zakarpattia Oblast, the Roman-Catholic Diocese of Mukachevo, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine Diocese of Mukachevo-Ughizhara and Diocese of Khust, and the Uzhhorod Diocese of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

The second questionnaire survey was conducted among tourism stakeholders in Zakarpattia Oblast, also online, via the use of Google Forms, between 3 June and 2 July 2024. Just as in the case of the previous query, a bilingual approach was adopted; the Hungarian-language questionnaire is included in Annex. No. 2. I attempted to reach out to potential respondents online through publicly available e-mail addresses; additionally, I also relied on my own contacts to encourage individuals related to the subject of the query to complete the questionnaire. As a result of this, 33 people completed the questionnaire.

The results of the survey included in the treatise as well as the information and data collected and systematized during the secondary research are displayed with the use of thematic tables, charts and maps. In particular, the use of Microsoft Excel 2016, IBM SPSS 25.0 and ArcGIS 10.1 were of key importance in illustrating the results of the primary research.

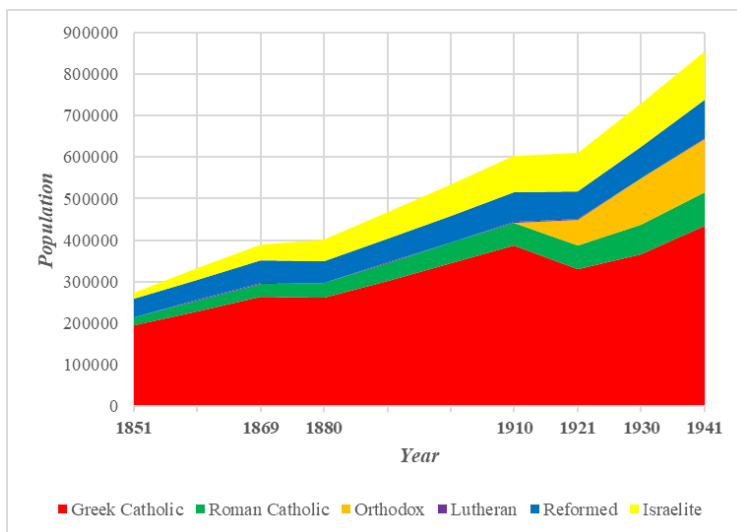
Throughout preparing the treatise, I conducted field trips to acquire additional, mainly practical knowledge on the religious tourism sites of the region. During these trips, the conditions and logistical specifics of the various sites were surveyed while

documenting them with self-made photographs. In addition, while writing the treatise, I initiated personal consultations with local tourism experts (in particular, the members of the Hungarian Tourism Council of Zakarpattia Oblast) as well as with the heads of the various historical churches, which were mainly focused on opportunities for the practical application of the research results.

## Results

### *I. The population of Zakarpattia Oblast is religiously diverse*

During the period under review, the population of the current-day Zakarpattia Oblast has significantly increased. As demonstrated by Figure 1, in 1851, 273,337 people lived in the region, while in 1941 this figure had risen to 856,600, which means that the population of the region tripled over a 90-year period. The upward trend has been steady, although not always even. The sharpest increase is noticeable in the period of 1880-1910, with a growth of 50%.



**Figure 1. Change of population in the area of the current-day Zakarpattia Oblast, 1851-1941**

*Source: Based on Fényes, 1851; Sebők, 2005; KSH, 2000; Tóth et.al., 2023a; Tóth et.al., 2023b; self-developed*

During the period under review, the proportion of people practising Greek Catholic religion steadily declined in the population and by 1941 they no longer constituted the absolute majority of the population. The spread of the Orthodox/Pravoslav faith played an important role in this, particularly amongst the Slavic population.

## II. Zakarpattia Oblast's religious tourism attractions

The religious tourism attractions of Zakarpattia Oblast can be basically divided into three groups:

1. Ruthenian wooden churches: boyko, lemko, hutsul and dolisnyak types.
2. Árpád-era stone churches: These are a part of the “Road of medieval churches” tourism trail, including a total of 15 sites.
3. Religious events: festivals, youth gatherings, quiet days, retreats.

Based on the geographic location (Figure 2) of the sites mentioned in the treatise, in general, the stone churches are clearly concentrated on the plains of the province, while the wooden churches show a more diverse distribution. Dolisnyak-type wooden churches are located in the southern half of the Khust and Tiachiv raion and in the eastern region of the Berehove raion.

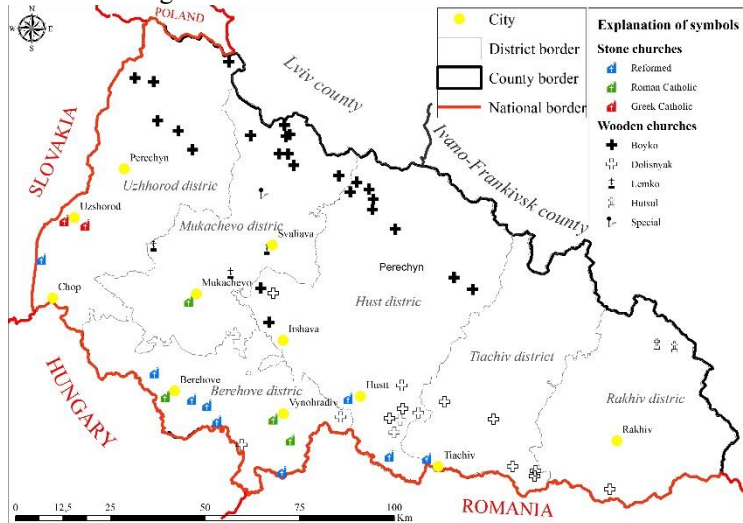
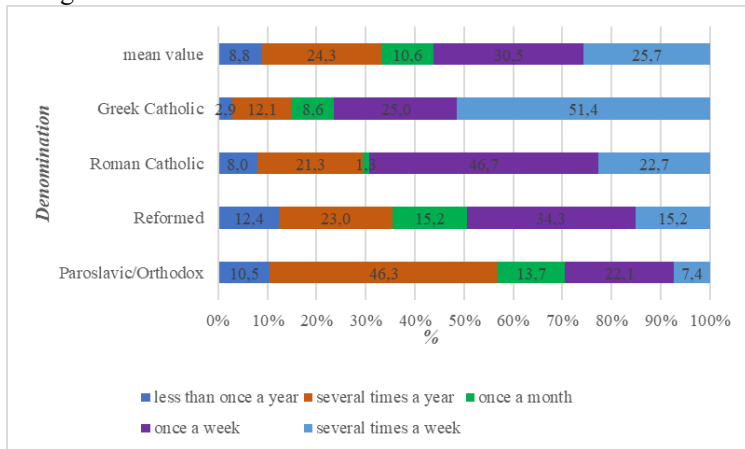


Figure 2. Summary map of surveyed sites

Source: self-developed

### III. Active religious practice of the population of Zakarpattia Oblast

The majority of the individuals participating in the survey considered themselves religious and practice their religion in numerous ways, in particular, through faith, prayer and church attendance. In the latter case, it is important to highlight the faithful of the Romanic Catholic and Greek Orthodox religions as they clearly demonstrated diligence in attending church on a weekly basis. It is a particularly welcome fact that the inhabitants of Zakarpattia Oblast also go on pilgrimages and attend religious events, domestic and foreign alike.



**Figure 3. Frequency of church attendance (N=498)**

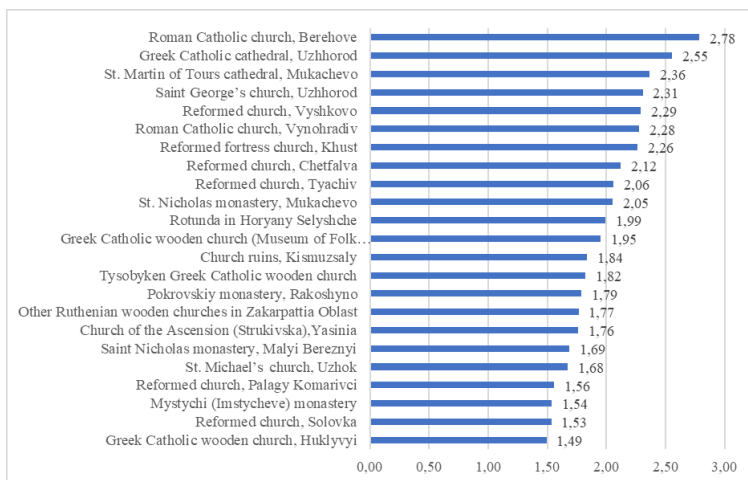
*Source: self-developed*

### IV. The inhabitants of Zakarpattia Oblast have cursory knowledge of religious tourism sites

53.6% of the respondents have taken part in some trip in Zakarpattia Oblast which included visiting religious sites. Additionally, it's important to add that 14.4% of the respondents indicated that although they have yet to attend such trips, they would definitely be interested in doing so.

Overall, we can say that unfortunately only a small portion (1.98%) of the respondents have knowledge of the main religious tourism attractions of Zakarpattia Oblast. Naturally, we have varying overviews in relation to the various sites and languages the survey was completed in. Personally, I was greatly surprised by the near-average

or below-average level of knowledge related to the UNESCO World Heritage sacred sites of Zakarpattia Oblast. While the rate of 1.98 concerning the wooden church of Strukivska in Yasinia can be considered average, the 1.94 rate measured in relation to the wooden church of St. Michael in Uzhok is rather low. Unfortunately, this again mirrors the lack of information and experience related the peripheral location of the sites.



**Figure 4. Evaluation of the knowledge of the key religious tourism sites of Zakarpattia Oblast (N=515)**

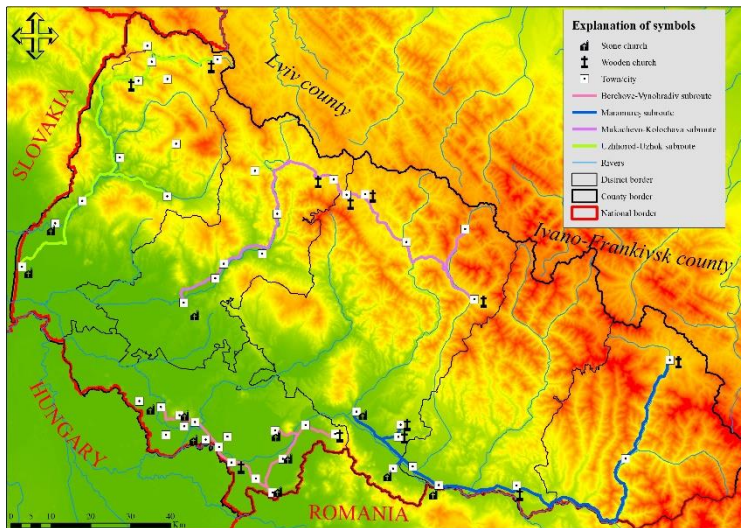
*Source: self-developed*

#### ***V. A thematic route is planned as the starting point of organized religious tourism in Zakarpattia Oblast***

Based on the evaluation of the relevant literature and the religious tourism resources of Zakarpattia Oblast, we can establish that reliance on cultural religious tourism is the most obvious approach in the region. Apart from the religious attractions of the type in question, it is advantageous to include other cultural and/or natural attractions in the product design to a reasonable extent.

I have designed the (sub)rout es of the planned cultural religious tourism trips by taking into consideration the unique transport conditions of Zakarpattia Oblast. The summary of the planned routes is displayed in figure 5.





**Figure 5. Summary map of the religious tourism sub-routes of Zakarpattia Oblast**

*Source: self-developed*

### Summary

Based on the information and data summarised within the limits of the scientific treatise, we can establish that there are prospects for cultural religious tourism in Zakarpattia Oblast that can be practically realised in times of peace. Based on the review of the indicators of demand, the local population and foreign tourists can be identified as the main target groups of religious tourism. In the course of the questionnaire survey, the former category has demonstrated its need for organised religious travel, whilst in the latter case, cultural tourism has previously tipped the scales. A well-planned, targeted marketing strategy should be applied for the sake of attracting domestic tourists, which could begin with the practical implementation of the package outlined in the treatise, during which the draft could be presented to domestic travel agencies in the form of a study tour.

## List of publications

### 1.1. Scientific journal articles, publications, books, chapters of books, etc. closely related to the research topic:

1. Tóth Attila: Az örökségturizmus helyzete a Volóci járásban [Стан спадщинного туризму на території Воловецького району]. in *Scientia Denique VI. évfolyam*. Uzsdruk Kiadó, Ungvár, 2016, o.139-149. ISBN 978-966-2303-03-5
2. Товт Атілла: Порівняння культурно-туристичного потенціалу Виноградівського та Воловецького районів Закарпатської області In *LIMES A II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskola tudományos évkönyve, III. évfolyam*. RIK-U Kiadó, Beregszász-Ungvár, 2016, o. 288-297, ISSN 2411-4081
3. Fodor Gyula – Berghauer Sándor – Tóth Attila: Kárpátalja vallási szerkezete 1915-ben a görögkatolikus egyházmegyei sematizmus alapján [Релігійна структура Закарпаття у 1915 році на основі греко-католицьких шематизмів]. In. Péntes János (szerk.): *Falu - város - periféria: határon innen és túl. Süli-Zakar István professzor emlékére*. DIDAKT Kft., Debrecen, 2018, o. 80-89. ISBN 978-615-5212-60-4
4. Berghauer S. – Fodor Gy. – Karmacsi Z. – Sass E. – Tóth A., 2019: Kárpátalja magyarulakta területeinek turisztikai helyzetfelmérése. Kutatási beszámoló (Sass E. – Berghauer S. (szerk.)). Kárpátaljai Magyar Turisztikai Tanács. Beregszász.
5. Berghauer S. – Fodor Gy. – Gönczy S. – Karmacsi Z. – Lontai-Szilágyi Zs. – Sass E. – Tarpai J. – Tóth A., 2019: A kárpátaljai magyarság turizmusfejlesztési stratégiája (Berghauer S. – Sass E. (szerk.)). Kárpátaljai Magyar Turisztikai Tanács. Beregszász.
6. Sass, E., Berghauer, S., Tóth, A. és Linc, A. (2023) „A Covid-19 hatása a magyar idegenforgalmi vállalkozók turisztikai tevékenységére Kárpátalján”, *Tér és Társadalom*, 37(3), o. 176–201. doi: 10.17649/TET.37.3.3464.
7. Tóth, A., Fodor, G. és Berghauer, S. (2023) „A kárpátaljai görögkatolikusok népességföldrajzi mutatói a Munkácsi Görögkatolikus Egyházmegye 2022-es sematizmusa alapján”, *Tér és Társadalom*, 37(4), o. 100–112. doi: 10.17649/TET.37.4.3506.
8. Фодор, Д. Д., Бергхауер, О. О., & Товт, А. А. (2024). Зміна релігійної структури населення на території сучасного Закарпаття в 1851–1941 роках: основні причини й тенденції. *Acta Academiae Beregsasiensis: Geographica Et Recreatio*, (1), 56–65. <https://doi.org/10.32782/2786-5843/2023-1-6>

**1.2. Conference papers and conference abstracts closely related to the research topic:**

1. Tóth Attila– Gyuricza László, 2021: A kárpátaljai ruszin fatemplomok idegenforgalmi hasznosításának lehetőségei. In: Szalai Katalin – Rátz Tamara – Michalkó Gábor (szerk.) VIII. Magyar Turizmusföldrajzi Szimpózium 2021: Absztrakt kötet. Budapest, Magyarország 2021.09.17.